

## ISRAEL REJECTS THEIR MESSIAH

The decision of Jesus g decision to visit the sea-coast cities of Tyre and Sidon round to the Ten Cities of the Decapolis and back to Capernaum surprised the Apostles, until he explained that it would give them a period of quiet to discuss many of the issues which troubled them. They were like people who had climbed to the top of the first range of hills above the plains, and then discovered that there were other higher ridges and lower valleys ahead before they could reach the summit. Only from there would all the geography of the spiritual kingdom of God be clear to them.

Those looking on, either observing or participating in the developing drama of events, would think of them as tragic accidental circumstances arising out of an inevitable clash of religious differences of opinion over Judaism, and political differences over nationalism. But the central paradox—the *crux criticorum*, the mystery—of his necessary death had been predetermined before the foundation of the world, when the Godhead manifestation of Father, Son and Holy Spirit in heaven had prepared the redemption of a fallen creation through his incarnation

and vicarious death on their behalf. Behind all the complexity of events, of human plotting and performance, of interactions and repercussions between Rome and Judea, would be his final personal confrontation with Satan to decide the fate of the world for time and eternity. All previous history led forward to that momentous issue, and all later history would emerge from it. The spectacle—already delineated prophetically by God in the Scriptures—would be God’s paradigm for eternity, a microcosm of redemption, a Lamb slain on behalf of the world’s sins.

It would give the professional religionists great pleasure to be able to apprehend him in some way in his native Galilee, and to take him bound and humiliated to Jerusalem in order to demonstrate their own power to handle and overcome all religious rivals—much as Herod Antipas had done with John the Baptist. But when the time came for his eventual confrontation, and subsequent death, his Apostles and followers must be equipped as much as possible to face the presently inexplicable circumstances and the consequences. Until his later resurrection convinced them they would be unable to comprehend his divine power, and would be ground into failure between the looming upper and nether millstones of supernatural and natural pressures. The combination of these antagonistic forces would see to it that he was discredited and humiliated in every way possible, in order to ensure—they would assume—his total elimination from the minds of people everywhere as well as his immediate followers.

So, on the journey north-west from Capernaum to Tyre and Sidon in the summer of 29 A.D. Jesus expounded on the truths he wanted them to learn. The intermediate territory was the frontier of Israel’s “*Promised Land*”, the former appointed portion of the Tribe of Dan. The air was cool and fresh compared with the heat of the Plain of Esdraelon, as it flowed from the Great Sea and over the snows of the Mount Hermon range of mountains. Numerous small rivers and streams, falling in tossing frothing cascades, wound their way through valleys and forests. Almond trees, fig trees, oleanders, poplars, and willows grew everywhere and provided welcome shade. Jesus showed them how his teachings were taken from the Scriptures delivered by God to the prophets of the past; how they

were presented in a variety of forms—events, types, allegories, symbols—to speak about the Servant of God who would come in the future and who in his person would fulfill all that God had said.

When they reached the beautiful Syrian-Phoenicia city of Sidon Jesus and his companions were recognized by many who had previously traveled to either Capernaum or Jerusalem. A woman of Greek descent, living in the non-Jewish section of the city, followed them, requesting the women followers to ask Jesus to cure her daughter suffering from demon possession. Jesus, to the surprise of his followers paid her no attention. The exasperated disciples said to Jesus when they returned to the house, “Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us.” Eventually the woman had followed the Apostles to the house, and she now burst into the room where they were sitting with Jesus. She threw herself at Jesus’ feet. “Lord, help me!” she pleaded humbly.

Jesus looked down at her bent head, weighing her words and his actions, and what they would mean to his present followers and to the world beyond. Unlike the woman at the well in Samaria, who in her Jewish ancestry came within the promises of God to Israel, this woman was a pagan foreigner. Yet she, too, like the Roman centurion, had addressed him as Messiah, with the most distinctive of Jewish descriptions of the Messiah, “*Son of David*”—and God’s promise to and through David was that he would be “*a blessing to the nations*”. Her faith was indeed remarkable, and an example for his Apostles and all other who heard of the incident.

“In a family children are treated first,” Jesus said to her sternly, “and it isn’t right to take the children’s bread and toss it to their dogs.” The Apostles were watching and listening with interest.

“Yes, Lord,” the woman answered him respectfully, “but even the dogs eat the children’s crumbs that fall from their master’s table.”

He nodded his head approvingly. “My dear woman, you have great faith! For such a reply, you may go. Your request is granted; the demon has left your daughter.”

The woman’s face lit up with joy, and she thanked Jesus profusely, leaving the room running. When she reached home, she found her daughter cured.

Jesus with his Apostles and accompanying followers slipped away quietly from Sidon and made their way to the wooded foothills of the Mount Hermon range. This was the country of the Greek cities of the Decapolis, stretching from Philadelphia—the ancient Rabbath-Ammon, so defiant of the army of David and Joab—in the north, to Hippos in the south, including also the territory of Herod Philip. Here Jesus and his disciples were recognized and, once more, they were overwhelmed with crowds bringing lame, blind, crippled, dumb, demon-possessed, and paralyzed, to be cured—and he healed them all. The mixed peoples of the Decapolis region were amazed that such miracles could be performed away from the “holy land” of Judea, and in what were predominantly Gentile inhabited cities.

Caesarea Philippi, where they visited next, was situated over a thousand feet above sea level, nestling on a sloping ridge above the confluence of three steep valleys. It was surrounded by stands of fig-trees, mulberry trees, groves of vines and olives, foaming rivers, bubbling fountains and cascades of water. On the western side of a nearby steep mountain ridge, out of an immense cavern, a spout of water gushed which was the source of the River Jordan. The cave was an ancient heathen sanctuary of the god Pan, which gave its name to the nearby old town of Paneas, where Herod the Great had built one of his magnificent temples to Caesar Augustus. In this historic and pagan region Jesus took his Apostles aside from the other followers and expanded their instruction in the kingdom of God with the challenging question. “Who do people say I, the Son of Man, am?”

After some hesitation one volunteered, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, that Jeremiah or one of the prophets of long ago has come back to life.”

“What about *you*?” Jesus demanded, looking at each one. “Who do *you* say I am?”

It was Simon Peter who answered: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God,” he said firmly.

Jesus smiled in satisfaction. “Bless you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you from human sources, but by my Father

in heaven. And now I tell you, Peter, that on this rock of your confession of me as God's Messiah I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

Jesus knew that a great mountain had been crossed—at least, in Peter's mind, with Peter's confession. He had seen them struggle with his earlier statements—such as, "Before Abraham was, I AM," and others like it—as they remembered growing up with him in Nazareth. He had watched them struggle to understand the supernatural powers he had communicated to them to use in their evangelistic missions. They had personally experienced the supernatural powers they had exercised through him, but it was his vision and message of the kingdom of God requiring his sacrificial death that caused their continuing doubts.

To look at him, as Peter had just done, and state, "*You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God*", was to step outside all human criteria into the realm of the Spirit of God, the Eternal God manifested in human flesh like they were. Moses had not identified himself with Yahweh, even although he spoke for him, as well as with him. The Greek Zeus had not identified himself with God; the Indian Buddha had not identified himself with Brahma, or the Persian Zoroaster with Ormuz. Yet he, Jesus, had come and identified himself to them - most of them known from his childhood—and declared he was God, and they had believed he was indeed the Messiah of God. This conviction only had to be consolidated by his resurrection from death and they would be ready to change the world.

Jesus had known from the beginning that once Peter, or Simon as he was now commonly known, saw the vision of the kingdom and committed himself to it, he would be the one around whom the others would gather, for he had the strength and courage to carry them forward. That was why he had so dramatically changed his name from Simon to Peter—meaning a "*stone*", or "*rock*"—at their first meeting; for he knew that Peter would ask himself why Jesus

had done that and respond to it. He was telling him in established allegorical fashion that, although he might be a “stone” now, he would be a “rock” later; and that the message of the truth of the kingdom of God incorporating all nations in a Spiritual Body known as “the Church” would be his responsibility when he, Jesus, was no longer with them. But he had yet another difficult lesson for them—the most difficult of all, his imminent death, burial and resurrection in Jerusalem, to open the door into all the treasures of a personal relationship with God as children of their heavenly Father, rather than just servants in an earthly kingdom. The key to that treasure was his imminent death on behalf of sinful men and women in order to reconcile them with a holy God.

“The Son of Man,” he said with slow deliberation to his silent followers, “must be rejected and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the *Law*, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.” He went on to point out the Scriptures which indicated that his death was essential, and would not be just a temporal political event like John the Baptist’s death. The divine nature of his death would be revealed in the fact that after three days he would rise again. He reminded them of what he had said when he had cleansed the Temple of the money-lenders, that the Temple would be destroyed but in three days raised again. By that he meant his body from the dead, and as a consequence a Spiritual Body—“*my Church*”—to replace the material Temple and its rituals.

Peter had been silent and thoughtful with the others as Jesus spoke, but when he had finished he drew Jesus aside from the Apostles to speak with him alone. Jesus’ selection of him as leader had thrilled him, and he took it as being due to their early association and friendship. This public deputizing by Jesus, he reasoned, gave him the authority to challenge Jesus’ interpretation of both the Scriptures and inevitability of his death. “Never, Lord!” he said now to Jesus, confidently. “This shall never happen to you!” He was confident that between them they could work out an easier way than death for what had to be done.

In a cold and measured voice Jesus said to Peter harshly, “Get out

of my sight, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."

Taking the stunned Peter by the arm Jesus strode over to where the other Apostles were standing talking together. Now was the time to destroy any more deceitful machinations by Satan to subvert his followers. The attacks would multiply and be more deadly the closer Satan could make them originate from Jesus' family and friends. The Scriptures had clearly warned: "*A man's foes shall be they of his own household.*"

Jesus said emphatically, "If anyone wants to follow me he must give up all thoughts of himself and take up his personal cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it in putting to death self-interests; but whoever loses his self-centered life for me and for the gospel will save it eternally. What good is it for a man if he gains the whole world in his lifetime, and yet loses his undying soul for ever? What can a person give in exchange for his soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this corrupted generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory and in the glory of his Father and of the holy angels. Then he will reward each person according to what he has done".

He sought to make it clearer to them by reminding them of other occasions when he had said that he would only be known for who he truly was when he was lifted up from the earth, just as Moses had lifted up the serpent on a pole in the wilderness to separate believers from unbelievers. His own anticipated death, he warned them, would be made to look political by the Jewish religionists, and this would mean death by crucifixion, the Roman method of punishing criminals, which in turn would make him anathema to all Jews as "cursed by God". By the same token, however, it was with this demonstration of the suffering Son of Man and his ultimate triumph over death and Satan that the kingdom of God, hitherto subject to limitations and still virtually hidden despite his many miraculous works, would burst forth upon them and the world "*with power,*" and the mystery of the kingdom of God would be revealed in all its grandeur through the Spiritual Body of the "Church".

The Apostles were shocked. Each time they thought they had

grasped the elements of the vision being communicated by Jesus he said something that pushed the boundaries further away, leaving them to stumble blindly after him in the hope that one day they would fully understand as Jesus had promised they would. In the light of the rising moon drifting clouds passed slowly overhead, casting dark shadows on the ground. When they had eaten around the fire in a clearing, and the others were making preparations to sleep there for the night, Jesus took Peter, James and John with him further on for prayer together. Then he left them, and went aside to pray by himself.

The three disciples were drowsily dozing when they gradually became aware that the night was lightening around them. At first they thought that the moon had come out from behind the clouds, but it intensified above the brightness of the moon. Then, in the eye-blinding intensity of the blaze, there stood a transformed Jesus, his clothes a dazzling white and his features gleaming gold. To their astonishment he was talking with two individuals whom, somehow, they immediately identified as Moses and Elijah, dressed in the same heavenly-robed splendor as Jesus.

The awed Apostles watched them speaking until they saw Moses and Elijah prepare to leave, and then Peter—dry-mouthed and almost incoherent in awesome fear—interjected, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shrines—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.” It was apparent that Peter thought the erection of three shrines to commemorate such a heavenly visitation would serve to give their message of the kingdom of God more credibility.

Unknown to Peter, Jesus had been talking with Moses and Elijah about his imminent death and resurrection in Jerusalem, and his departure from earth back to heaven, with its eternal consequences. Significantly, both Moses and Elijah, in their different times historically, had been uniquely transported from earth to heaven by God in different ways—Moses buried by God on a mountain, and Elijah carried away by a chariot of fire. Jesus turned to look at the three Apostles and a cloud passed between them from which a sonorous voice issued, declaring, “*This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!*”

As they watched and listened in overwhelming astonishment, eventually the radiant cloud lifted, the light dimmed, and Jesus stood alone and normal in front of them, telling them not be afraid. He cautioned them against telling anyone of the experience “until the Son of Man is risen from the dead”. Only in equally dramatic circumstances of his resurrection and ascension would such an experience be appreciated. They were now in a more receptive frame of mind to discuss the possibilities of resurrection, having just seen the transformed Moses and Elijah with their own eyes! One question they did have for Jesus: “Why do the teachers of the *Law* say that Elijah must come first?”

Jesus nodded his head in agreement. “I tell you, Elijah has already come in the person of John the Baptist, and they didn’t recognize him as such, but they treated him according to their own standards just as the Scriptures said. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands.”

They went back down the mountain to where the other Apostles and followers were waiting patiently for them, with the inevitable deputation of religionists trying to entrap Jesus with their questions. When Jesus and the three Apostles arrived the others were arguing some point of doctrine.

“What are you arguing so violently about?” Jesus asked them mildly.

Before they could reply a man said to Jesus urgently, pushing his way through the crush of people, “Rabbi, please look at my only child is possessed by a spirit that has made him dumb. He has seizures, and whenever the spirit seizes him he suddenly screams and is thrown to the ground with convulsions. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes paralysed. It happens all the time and is destroying him. I brought him and begged your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they couldn’t.”

Jesus shook his head despairingly. “Why are you all so stubborn and unbelieving?” he said “How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy here to me.” He knew it was not the fault of Peter, James and John, for they had been up in the mountain with him, but the others had also been with him for a long time and

should have known what to do in such circumstances.

As the boy came forward within sight of Jesus the demon in him threw him into convulsions, and he rolled about on the ground, foaming at the mouth.

“How long has he been like this?” Jesus asked the father.

“From childhood”, he replied. “It has often thrown him into fire or water to destroy him. If you can do anything, please help us”.

“*If you can!*” Jesus repeated the man’s words incredulously, then asserted firmly, “Everything is possible for him who believes.”

The man responded promptly, “I do believe; help me get rid of my unbelief.”

Jesus turned to the boy and said, “You deaf and mute spirit, I command you to come out of him and never enter him again.”

The demon gave a tortured shriek, convulsed the boy violently, and left him silent, pale and inert. Those around thought he was dead. But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up. Jesus led him over to his father, and the watching crowd praised God for his goodness.

When they had gone indoors the Apostles who had been unsuccessful asked Jesus, “Why couldn’t we drive out the spirit?”

“Because you have so little faith,” Jesus told them, “and you thought it was enough for you to do it without first seeking God’s power. If you had faith as small as a mustard seed you could say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there’, and it will move. There will be nothing impossible for you. But this kind can come out only by prayer that is energized by God and not in words. You thought that by offering a prayer to God the demon would depart, but true prayer is a means of finding out what *God* wants, and is not a form of words to move God to do what *you* want.”



Jesus with his Apostles-and followers left the region of Mount Hermon, traveling by the eastern highway southwards to Lake Galilee. As they neared Capernaum, Jesus performed another miracle feeding of thousands of people. On this occasion, the four

thousand men, plus women and children, had been following him for three days without eating, and Jesus took pity on them. Using the same procedure as before, but with seven loaves and a few small fish, he and the disciples fed the crowd until they were satisfied; and then they gathered seven baskets of leftovers instead of the previous twelve. With this publicly repeated miracle of mass feeding the work of Jesus among the Gentiles in northern Galilee ended. It had begun, in apparent reluctance, in Sidon with the healing of the Syro-Phoenician woman's daughter, and ended with compassion and spontaneous generosity in the feeding of over four thousand mostly Gentiles in the same manner as with five thousand Jews. It had begun with a Gentile woman persuading Jesus to give her "crumbs" from his Davidic royal table, and ended with him lavishly providing Gentiles with Messianic bread and fish.

His work among the Gentiles finished, Jesus and his Apostles went to Magdala, near the fishing port of Tarichaea. They had no sooner arrived there than they were confronted by a delegation of religious leaders whose primary purpose was to entrap Jesus into making some claim that would justify them in seeking his death. They were no longer interested in scoring points in a Judaic theological debate; their mission was to encompass his death and a confrontation in the notorious Magdala would provide a significant reason. They presented their allegations to Jesus in a public place so that everyone would know they were serious in their intentions to indict Jesus. They stated that several supposed miracles were claimed to have been done by Jesus, and he had associated these works with claims which were inconsistent with the true faith of Israel in the accepted view of the religious leaders; namely, according to the accepted *Traditions*, he preached a different kind of kingdom to accepted Jewish expectancy; that he was a known violator of Jewish customs, and a breaker of Jewish *Law* in its most important commandments, including forbidden discussions with spirits such as he had manifested in a previous visit to Magdala. Finally, according to *Deuteronomy* chapter thirteen<sup>6</sup> he was a demonstrable "*false prophet*" — unless he could provide an irrefutable sign of his claimed God-approved Messiahship.

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<sup>6</sup> ("If a prophet, or one who foretells by dreams, appears among you and announces to you a miraculous sign or wonder, and if the sign or wonder of which he has spoken takes place, and he says, 'Let us follow other gods' — gods you have not known — and let us worship them', you must not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer.")

Jesus knew that what they were attempting in their public challenge was a variation of Satan's own tactics in the desert confrontation, when he had sought to get Jesus to use power for his own purposes rather than for God's glory. The verses they had used from *Deuteronomy* chapter thirteen: "*That prophet or dreamer must be put to death because he preached rebellion against the Lord your God*"<sup>7</sup> were followed by others. Like Satan, they did not want him to prove he was Creator, but rather to demonstrate he was a fallible creature like themselves. It was a well-known rabbinical teaching that the Messiah's coming should be tested by demanding from him an unanswerable "*sign from heaven*"—such as, for example, water flowing backwards, or a tree moving on its own impetus from one spot to another.

Jesus addressed them solemnly, for he wanted this moment, and his words, to be remembered: "When evening comes, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red'; and in the morning, 'Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast'. You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, yet you cannot interpret the signs of the times! It is a wicked and adulterous generation that looks for miraculous signs, but none will be given to it—except the sign of the prophet Jonah. Do you still not see or understand what is happening around you? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? Don't you remember anything? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces were left over?"

"Twelve," someone replied.

"And when I broke the seven loaves for the four thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces were left over?"

"Seven," was the reply.

"Do you still not understand?" Jesus demanded impatiently. The continuing reluctance of his close companions to grasp the principles of faith and power in the kingdom was almost as bad as the deliberate blindness of the professional religionists in refusing to admit God's presence in the miracles. His followers believed the power came from God, but could not relate it to God's purpose in the circumstances; while the religionists did not believe the power came

from God, and believed God's purposes could be derived from the circumstances. It was not the power to produce bread miraculously that was important, but the fact that God was present any time to meet the need of anyone in any way.

As they returned to Capernaum Jesus prepared his followers for the critical circumstances which were now building up to their inevitable climax. This time alone with them would probably be the last opportunity to instruct them in what would be the most shocking experience they would ever know. Jesus explained what he meant by providing an example from his own recent experiences in Galilee.

"If the miracles that were performed recently in Korazin and Bethsaida had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, but I tell you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon on the coming Day of Judgment than for them. As for Capernaum, it will not be exalted to heaven because of what has been done there, but will go down to the depths of hell because they ignored the signs. If the miracles that were performed there had been performed in Sodom, it would not have been destroyed; but I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the Day of Judgment than for Capernaum. Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you", he concluded emphatically. "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of ungodly men. They will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised to life."

He could not be more explicit. He had told them this before, but somehow their minds were unable to grasp what he was saying, thinking that he was still talking in parables or symbols. They understood the words, but the meaning—his imminent death by brutal crucifixion, his resurrection from death on the third day—was beyond their comprehension. They grieved over the apparently inevitable fact of his statement, but were bewildered by its supernatural implications. Only the incontrovertible fact of his visible resurrection and ascension would convince and inspire them.

When they arrived in Capernaum they found the official collectors of the annual Temple tribute were in the city. It had been commanded in the *Law* of Moses that every male in Israel, from

twenty years old and upwards, had to pay every year a half-shekel to the Sanctuary as an offering to God. Over the centuries, as the nation grew and then was dispersed abroad, it was agreed that this need not wait to be paid at the Feast of the Passover in the Temple in person but could be paid at certain outlying approved centers, of which Capernaum was one.

Jesus had not attended the Feast of the Passover the previous year, and this had not escaped the attention of the professional religionists—especially against the background of his increased attacks against the established religious system. No-one knew for certain what Jesus thought about the oppressive tax problems of the Jewish people in general, and the Temple tax in particular, but it seemed to those seeking to incriminate him that it was an excellent topic with which to entrap him. One of them spoke to Peter about it, asking if his master had paid the Temple tax as required by Scripture.

“Yes, he does,” Peter replied quickly, trying to remember if he did, and when. When he returned home he asked Jesus about it.

“What do you think, Simon?” Jesus asked him interestedly, a gleam of amusement in his eyes. “From whom do you think the kings of the earth collect duty and taxes - from their own family or from others?”

“From others,” Peter stated promptly, from his own experience.

“Then the family is exempt,” Jesus stated. Peter knew what Jesus meant. A king at that time did not tax his own family, but other people, in order to pay for the governing of the country. The reference to the Temple tax was obvious: as children of the kingdom of God, with Jesus as Son of God, they were free from such tax. While Peter was still digesting the implications of what he had just been told, Jesus continued: “However, so that we don’t offend them needlessly go to the Lake and throw out your line. Take the first fish you catch, open its mouth and you will find a four-drachma coin. Take it to them and give it to them for my tax and yours.”

Peter’s face was a study of confused bewilderment, amusement and astonishment. He had been preparing himself for a reply from Jesus involving confrontation, and here Jesus was agreeing mildly to

pay “so as not to cause needless offence.” But, at the same time, he was sending Peter on a trip to the Lake to catch a certain fish, which would have a certain coin in its mouth, in order to pay the Temple tax to cynical religionists! Why not just ask Judas to take it from their common purse? Peter had a sudden thought: this was between him and Jesus alone, none of the others were present, or were involved. In effect, what Jesus was doing was sending him to get it from God - for only God could know of a certain coin in the mouth of a certain fish to be caught at a certain time by a certain person! This would be the greatest fish story ever told!

Meanwhile, the other disciples returned to the house, and Jesus could see from their expressions that they had been quarrelling among themselves.

“What were you arguing about on the road?” he asked them. They were too embarrassed to answer, for they had been arguing about who among them would be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. It was a topic which dominated quite a bit of their thinking and conversation, as they speculated about the structure and substance of the Messianic mission of Jesus. Jesus had shown preference for certain individuals over others, as when he chose Peter, James and John to be with him, while leaving the others, or when he chose and sent out the Twelve on their mission; and there were the others who went with them on different journeys at different times. If this was true now, what would be the form, and individual responsibilities, in the future kingdom of God?

Jesus was aware of the controversy and the associated tensions, and the time had come to make the matter clear to all of them. The kingdom of heaven was not a pale spiritual imitation of an earthly kingdom, with its privileges of inheritance and status and association and power groupings. There was nothing on earth to which the kingdom of heaven could properly be compared. It could only be described in different ways, such as he had done in allusive parables, so that human creatures could comprehend divine truths by spiritual insight gifted by God.

Jesus called over a young child who was playing near them and, standing him in the midst of the disciples, he addressed the Apostles:

“If anyone wants to be the first in the kingdom of God, he must be the very last, and the servant of all. I am telling you now, unless you change your present way of thinking and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. So, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven; and also, whoever responds to a little child like this in my name will respond to me; and whoever responds to me does not welcome me alone but the Father who sent me. For he who is least among you all – the most childlike – he is the greatest.”

Jesus could see from the bemused expression on the disciples' faces that they did not really understand what he was saying to them. This was confirmed when John blurted, “Master, we saw a man driving out demons *in your name*, and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.” John obviously thought that Jesus was emphasizing the talismanic superiority of his “name”, and those associated with him as a formula for the benefit of initiates like the pagan Mystery cults, and had missed the whole point of childlike humility and trust as basic values of the kingdom of heaven.

“Don't stop him,” Jesus declared peremptorily, addressing John's digression. “No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us. Anyone who does a kind act like giving you a cup of water in my name, because you belong to the Messiah, will certainly not lose his reward.”

His voice rose in an intensity of anger that his Apostles had not seen in him before: “On the other hand, if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, by instruction or persuasion or whatever, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and thrown into the sea to be drowned in the depths. Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin! Such things must come because of human nature, but woe to the individual through whom they come into existence. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into eternal hell, where the fire never goes out. If your foot causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and to be

thrown into hell. If your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell, where the worm of remorse does not die, and the fire of guilt is not quenched.

“If your brother or neighbor sins against you go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you will have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that *‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses’*. If he or they refuse to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the guilty party refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. I assure you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Also, if two or three believers on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I with them.”

Peter interrupted Jesus’ discourse with the question: “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me—seven times?” Peter knew, as they all did, that the rabbinical practice was to teach that forgiveness for an offender should not be extended more than three times. By stretching this to seven Peter was making allowance for a measure of magnanimity. He was wrong.

Jesus answered him: “Not seven times, but seventy-seven times”. He went on to tell them that forgiveness was not quantitative, as the rabbis taught, but qualitative. It was not the number of times that one forgave that was important, but the mercy and love demonstrated in the act of forgiveness. He had not just come to forgive a universal number of sins, but to forgive sin itself— whoever experienced such forgiveness must extend the same gift to others.

“The kingdom of heaven”, Jesus continued, “is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the

debt. The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, and cancelled the debt and let him go. But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred *denarii*. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back'. But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. Then the master called the servant in. 'You rogue', he said, 'I cancelled all that debt of yours because you asked me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger the master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive each other from your heart."

Jesus knew that with the time of his presence among them being shortened by the mounting antagonism of the professional religionists, and the increasing difficulty in finding enough quiet times to teach the principles of the kingdom, it was unlikely that there would be many more occasions to do this. There was still a wide gap between his expectation of imminent death and the disciples' acceptance of this possibility. They viewed him as the miracle-working Messiah, able to do all things, including raising others from the dead, and so their expectation was for a miracle to deliver himself from the possibility of death rather than the finality of his removal from them. They did not see themselves yet as founders of a new spiritual kingdom, articulators of a new divine covenant. They saw themselves as privileged companions of a Messiah combating overwhelming religious and political forces. Their expectations were as varied as their personalities. Before he left them they would have to be prepared as a united instrument of God's purposes on earth to change the world forever.

## THE KINGDOM OF GOD VERSUS THE RELIGIONISTS

The Twelve Apostles noticed a new urgency in Jesus as he told them of his decision to travel to Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles. He reiterated former lessons and taught new lessons with an emphasis that he would not be long with them. He warned them of the machinations of the professional religionists, but even more of the devious intentions of Satan himself in his destructive purposes as political events built to a national and cosmic climax. This was apparent in the attitudes and actions of his family when his step-brothers came from Nazareth to visit him. They were deeply concerned with the reports about Jesus, his teaching and works and claims, and they confronted him regarding with what they saw as his family and Messianic responsibilities.

“You ought to get out of Galilee and go to Judea for the Feasts,” they advised him, “so that your followers there may see the miracles you do. Nobody who wants to become a public figure acts in secret. Since you are doing these things, show yourself to the world.”

Jesus looked at them and shook his head, thinking “*A man's foes*

*will be those of his own household,*“ the words of Micah the prophet. It was harder for them as his family to accept him as the Messiah than for others. He would be gone from them before they would believe. The Messiah they knew was a royal personage, a modern David, a military genius, a world statesman, a poet and musician as well as builder and administrator. To his family, he was still only “little Yeshua”, with unacceptable religious ideas arising from the unusual circumstances surrounding his birth.

“The right time for me hasn’t yet come” he told them mildly; “for you, any time is right. The world can’t hate you, but it hates me because I affirm that what it is doing is evil. You go to the Feast. I am not yet going to this Feast, because for me the right time has not yet come”.

Jesus did not wish to make public his decision to be in Jerusalem, for he knew that the Jewish leaders were planning to have him arrested in Judea when he visited there. It was his intention to go to the Feast of Tabernacles prior to the Passover Feast, but not in company with his family. When his time came, he would confront the authorities in his own way, and in his own ordered circumstances. Every act of the divine drama to take place was known to his Father from eternity past to eternity future, but only when it came to be enacted, and later written about, would men and women be aware of this.

The Jewish nation was in a terminal state because of its unending and irreconcilable national-religious conflicts with imperial Rome. When Rome had a more active Caesar than the aging and dissolute Tiberius it would impose its rule on Palestine ruthlessly, and the Jews as a nation would be destroyed. God’s universal and cosmic purposes would be fulfilled in the subsequent scattered Jewish faithful remnant and the Gentiles who would believe in his gospel. The present generation of Jewish professional religionists, together with the nationalist politicians—and even the powerful Roman administrators - would be swept away like figures in the sand when the ocean tide rises and falls. Only the kingdom of God would survive, arising with indescribable beauty and majesty from the apparently disastrous circumstances multiplying around them, as

his disciples grasped the true vision of what he had been teaching them, and incorporated that into a worldwide spiritual movement of God.

Jesus now carefully selected Seventy-Two of his followers to go into the towns and villages of Galilee and Samaria ahead of him on his way to Jerusalem. It would be their last campaign while he was still on earth with them; they would remember it when he was gone, and repeat it again and again in ever-widening geographical circles over the years ahead until the whole world was informed of the gospel of Jesus, the Messiah of God. He divided the Seventy-Two into pairs and gave to them much the same commitment that he had given earlier to the Twelve Apostles when he had sent them out on their own campaign. The Twelve's commission was to confirm them as "*Apostles*", or his personally "*sent ones*" and, in their exclusive commitment to Israelis only, they were also representatives of the Twelve Tribes of Israel in their faithfulness to God. Their purpose had been evangelistic and missionary; to demonstrate the spiritual power and divine authority he had communicated to them, and to declare the coming of the kingdom of God.

The mission of the Seventy-Two, although in many ways the same, was different in emphasis and intention; their message was not so much the earlier emphasis on repentance in view of the coming of the kingdom of God into the world, but rather the imminent arrival of the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, in the immediate vicinities. They were to restrict their activities to the towns and villages of Judea and Peraea, between Galilee and Jerusalem. There were to be no lengthy discussions, no delays even for ordinary courtesies; simply to announce his imminent appearance, and the kingdom of God he represented, then pass on to the next place to do the same. He told them, "When you enter a town and are welcomed, eat what is set before you. Heal the sick there and tell them, '*The kingdom of God is near you.*' But when you enter a town and are not welcomed, go in to its streets and say, '*Even the dust of your town that sticks to our feet we wipe off against you. Yet be sure of this: The kingdom of God is near.*' I tell you, it will be more bearable on that day for Sodom than for that town."

When the Seventy-Two had left on their mission in the south of the country, following a rough itinerary of the places he proposed to visit later, Jesus chose his original Twelve Apostles to accompany him to Jerusalem by the more direct, but less popular, route through Samaria. Samaria had become even more dangerous than usual for travelers, because Pilate had ordered extra Roman legions into the region to put a stop to mass pilgrimages which the Samaritans had been organizing to their places of worship on Mount Gerizim. When Pilate intervened militarily to control them the Samaritans had responded by armed protests against the Roman soldiers, claiming religious discrimination.

Jesus went with the Twelve Apostles to the first Samaritan village and they were informed roughly that any Jew going to Jerusalem was not welcome to hospitality in the village, and they could go elsewhere. The Apostles were angry at this breach of hospitality, especially James and John - who were known to the group as "sons of thunder", because of their violent tendencies—and they said to Jesus, "Lord, do you want us to call down fire from heaven to destroy them?"

So much for their conception of him as Messiah, Jesus thought ruefully. He had taught them forgiveness, gentleness, soft response to violence, blessing those who curse you, and here they were crying out for fire and brimstone from heaven! "You don't know what kind of spirit you are made of," he informed them curtly. "The Son of Man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them." Among the many who rejected them there would be those who would receive them. Find them, and let their blessing be on them.

For the next few months Jesus and his Twelve Apostles slowly worked and preached their way southward through Samaria into Judea and Peraea, and eventually met up with the Seventy-Two at the place and time he had agreed with them before going on to Jerusalem. They were excited and enthusiastic about their mission. "Lord", they reported to him, "even the demons submit to us in your name."

Jesus looked at their excited faces. He had deliberately not mentioned to them "casting out demons" in telling them to heal the

sick, because they had not had the experienced instruction he had given to the Twelve Apostles. Their successes in preaching and healing had probably drawn them into casting out demons, but they needed to be cautioned.

“I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven,” he said to them somberly, giving them an insight into the awesome cosmic conflict of which they were only a small part. “I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy, and nothing will harm you. However, don’t rejoice in the fact that the spirits submit to you, but rather rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”

Jesus did not wish to dampen their enthusiasm, for it would help them in the dark days ahead, but anything involving direct contact with the supernatural without sufficient spiritual preparation was a dangerous intrusion into the realm of Satan, who would use his considerable terrors to destroy them. He was encouraged by their response to their mission, however, and so he prayed to God for them: “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children, because this, Father, was your good pleasure. All things have been committed to me by you, my Father. No-one knows who the Son is but the Father, and no-one knows who the Father is except the Son, and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him.”

Ending his prayer, with its deliberate emphasis on his Father, he said to them, “Happy are the eyes that see what you see, for I tell you that many prophets and kings wanted to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.”

While Jesus was talking with his disciples he was accosted by a lawyer considered expert in the *Law*. “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” he enquired with scarcely concealed condescension.

Jesus, aware of the attempt at legal entrapment, replied, “What is written in the *Law*? How do you read it?”

The lawyer was ready with his answer: “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and*

*with all your mind*; and, *'Love our neighbor as yourself.'*"

To the lawyer's amazement, Jesus nodded his head affirmatively, "You have answered correctly. Do this and you will live."

The lawyer was visibly disconcerted. Jesus' reply seemed to contradict all that he had heard about Jesus' teachings regarding being "born again", and "repentance" and "forgiveness". His mind quickly ran over what he had just said to Jesus, and he saw where a totally committed love for God would incorporate all these divine commandments; but to cover his confusion and guilt he said superciliously, "But who is my neighbor?"

Jesus noted the attempt at evasion, and said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A Pharisee happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. A Sadducee also, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan traveler came where the man was; and he took pity on him, bandaging his wounds, and pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to a nearby inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him', he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.' Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

The expert in the *Law* replied confidently, "The one who had mercy on him."

"Go", Jesus said to the lawyer pointedly, "and do the same."



Jesus now told his followers that they were to make their own arrangements for the Feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem, because he intended to spend some days with his good friends Martha, Mary and their brother Lazarus, in Bethany, outside Jerusalem. He always loved their company in the peace and loveliness of the village after the pressures of Jerusalem. As he approached the doorway of the

courtyard into the family house he heard the sound of a lyre and a voice singing quietly as if composing words to music. He stopped outside the door into the courtyard to listen to the singer and, when the song finished, he entered the courtyard and smiled at the confused Mary while she recovered her composure. Then he said to her, "Who do you think I am?"

She hesitated, frowning as she considered her reply to the unexpected question as she adjusted from her emotional confusion. Then she replied slowly in almost the same words as Peter had done: "The Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Jesus paused for some time before he began speaking again, and Mary breathed deeply in thankfulness as her all-consuming agony of the past few months eased, and she waited tensely for what she knew would be the solution to her dilemma.

"There is nothing sinful in your love for me. I am speaking now of its physical aspects, including the sexual. The desire for union, even in its most intense form, is inherent in the act provided by God, so your desire for union with me is not sinful. Your guilt lies in the conflict which Satan has introduced into your mind that your desire for me is to have *union with God*—so that your sin would be that of Satan's and Eve's '*to be like God*'. That is the core of your problem. Do I love you? Yes, because that is inherent in my nature as God. But I am uncreated Spirit, and you are created flesh. I am what the Greek language calls *zoé*, uncreated, or eternal, life; you are what is called *bios*, or natural life, inherited from the first human creatures and tainted by their sin, so there cannot be any physical union between the two. I am of a different essence, a different existence, a different destiny, that you cannot share. But *spiritually* you have unrestricted communion with me here on earth, and after your death for all eternity. That is why Adam and Eve were created, to open a way to be like God while carrying out His purposes on earth. What they forfeited through sin I have come to restore, by paying the divinely required price through my death on behalf of all who sin so that they with me can live eternally in perfect union".

Mary closed her eyes in a silent prayer of gratitude as her fear disappeared. Now that the cause had been identified, and the cure

provided, she was free to love Jesus as much as she wanted. Just at that moment Martha came out of the house and she suddenly stopped, flustered, as she saw Mary sitting at the feet of Jesus. She was surprised by his arrival, but also concerned by the implications of their proximity and un-chaperoned intimacy, and she said reproachfully to Jesus, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

Jesus smiled at the disturbed older sister. "Martha, Martha," he rebuked her gently, for he knew her generous and loving nature, "you are worried and upset about many things. But, only one thing is needed, love. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

Jesus knew the private hell that Mary had been through before experiencing the peace and joy of having her sins forgiven. The serene world of love and companionship that she now enjoyed filled her whole life. Martha, who had never left home, nor been tortured by sin and guilt, and probably had no thought of his early death, was only troubled by domestic problems and was inclined to consider social observances more important than spiritual values. Mary now knew the kind of love that existed between himself and His Father in heaven.

Bethany was only about two miles to the south east of Jerusalem, reached through the Damascus Gate at the bottom of the Mount Olivet slope. Opposite the Damascus Gate the olive groves of the Mount of Olives grew in their delicate grey-green abundance. It was located over a shoulder of the Mount away from Jerusalem, in a dip of the Mount overlooking a small but delightful valley, with outcrops of flat limestone beds showing themselves like giant steps, on which sheep and goats were feeding. Among the limestone outcrops were caves sheltering lepers and other outcasts. The village itself was small, set in the middle of clusters of fig, almond and olive trees. The road from Bethany to Jerusalem wound through the olive groves and vineyards on the upper slopes of the Mount, dropping downwards through the imposing houses of the wealthy Roman officials and Jewish merchants who lived in the suburbs of Jerusalem, with their splashing fountains and colorful gardens.

As Jesus walked slowly along the Bethany path to Jerusalem he savored the quiet and cool of the autumn loveliness. The time of harvesting was past, the grapes had been gathered and crushed and put in jars and skins; the olive trees had been beaten and the fruit pressed with mill-stones, the air was fragrant with flower perfumes, and there was time and money for the people to enjoy them. This was *Chol ma Hoed*, the non-sacred part of the festive week. The streets of Jerusalem were crowded as usual with Jewish pilgrims from distant lands, and the many merchants, diplomats, traders, soldiers and others who lived in or visited the city. Above them gleamed the white marble-and-gold Temple, the smoke of the sacrifices climbing lazily into the deep blue of the sky; the scents of the incense and anointing oils, and the sounds of the organ, the flutes and trumpets mingled with the distant chants of the priests and the noises of the unique city. Jesus walked through the streets anonymously, observing and pondering everything in the light of his own mission. All of this busy and peaceful activity was about to end in a holocaust of blood and destruction, brought on by the blindness and disobedience of God's own chosen and privileged people, Israel. From the ashes there would rise a purged remnant New Israel, no longer in bondage to the rituals of the Temple and the rabbinical *Traditions*, who would serve and share in the glories of the kingdom of God. Even now the message was being carried into the cities, towns and villages of Judea, and into the surrounding nations by those who had heard during their visits to Jerusalem.

For two days Jesus went about the city, revealing himself to none of his friends or acquaintances, except those at Bethany—a solitary rabbi, with his features partly hidden by the customary headscarf, a common sight. He listened to the conversations around him about the prophet from Nazareth, and the excited speculations as to whether he was likely to attend the coming Passover Feast in the city. He heard the grumbled complaints of the citizens regarding the iniquities of Pilate in plundering the sacred Temple treasury, the perfidy of the high priest Caiaphas in colluding with the Roman procurator for personal gain, the superstitious fears when eighteen people died in the collapse of one of Pilate's aqueducts. There was a

restlessness, a brooding menace, a sense of rising frustrated resentment, an undercurrent of reckless defiance of all authority, Roman and Jewish.

Jesus recalled the prophet Jeremiah walking these same streets with his *Lamentations* message of imminent doom from the Babylonian armies besieging the city walls, and the same careless disregard of the Jewish people at their impending fate:

*"How deserted lies the city, once so full of people!  
How like a widow is she, who once was great among the nations!  
She who was queen among the provinces has now become a slave.  
Bitterly she weeps at night, tears are upon her cheeks.  
Among all her lovers there are none to comfort her.  
All her friends have betrayed her;  
They have become her enemies . . ."*



On the last day but one of the Feast of Tabernacles Jesus made his way to the Temple, pushing through the crowds to get to what was popularly known as "*Solomon's Porch*", the eastern colonnade of which faced "*the Beautiful Gate*", the principal entrance into the Court of the Women, and so into the Holy Place. The colonnades provided quiet places for walking and talking in the shade, with benches for sitting, and it was a popular gathering place. Reaching a prominent spot at the top of the steps Jesus began to speak quietly to the people there, and soon the news spread rapidly that the prophet from Nazareth was teaching in the Temple and people began to crowd into the Court. Lifting his voice to reach them, Jesus preached the truths he had been presenting in Galilee.

"How did this man get such learning without having studied?" somebody asked his neighbor near Jesus.

Overhearing the words, Jesus answered. "My teaching is not my own. It comes from Him who sent me. If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own. He who speaks on his own does so to gain honor for himself, but he who works for the honor of the One

who sent him is a man of truth. Has not Moses given you the *Law*? Yet not one of you keeps the *Law*.”

Looking around the large crowd, with the professional religionists prominent among them, he demanded in a challenging voice: “Why are you trying to kill me?”

There was a sudden silence, the religionists embarrassed and flustered by the direct question in front of so many people, and there was a rising clamor of excited speculation in the crowd. A voice in the crowd shouted, “You are demon-possessed. Who is trying to kill you?”

Jesus ignored the comment, and said, “I do one miracle, and you are all astonished. Yet, because Moses taught you circumcision (though actually it did not come from Moses, but the patriarchs) you feel free to circumcise a child on the Sabbath. Now if a child can be circumcised on a Sabbath so that the *Law* of Moses may not be broken, why are you angry with me for healing the whole man on the Sabbath? Stop judging by mere appearances, and make a right judgment.”

This was a provocative challenge to the professional religionists present, but they said nothing. Someone in the crowd said, “Is this the man they are trying to kill? Here he is, speaking publicly, and they are not saying a word to him. Have the authorities really concluded that he is the Messiah? But we know where this man comes from; when the Messiah comes, no one will know where he is from.”

“Yes, you know me,” Jesus said, “and you know where I am from. I am not here on my own, but he who sent me is true. You do not know him, but I know him because I am from him and he sent me.”

This flat statement of his divine origin could not be allowed to pass unchallenged by the professional religionists and in their fury they struggled to reach him, but the crowds were too great around Jesus—and too sympathetic. “When the Messiah comes, will he do more miraculous signs than this man?” they demanded.

The chief priests saw that there could be an ugly scene, so they sent for the Temple guards to come and make a legal arrest for disturbance of the Temple peace.

Jesus was undismayed. "I am with you for only a short time", he told the crowd, "and then I go to the One who sent me. You will look for me, but you will not find me; and where I am you cannot come."

There was widespread debate over what Jesus meant by these words. "Where does this man intend to go that we cannot find him?" someone asked. "Will he go to where our Jewish people live scattered among the Greeks, and teach the Greeks? What did he mean when he said, 'You will look for me, but you will not find me', and 'Where I am, you cannot come'?"

In the hubbub Jesus quietly mixed with the crowd and disappeared, for the time was not yet ripe for his final challenge. Now that he had emerged into public view and debate his Apostles knew to go to Bethany to be with him.

On the last day of the Feast Jesus went to the Temple again, with his Apostles. All around them the pilgrims were carrying the celebratory *lulabh*, or "palm-branch", although some were of myrtle and some of willow, and the *ethrog*, a kind of citrus fruit. They went in cheerful, shouting procession to three points of observance in the city: to the Temple itself; to a place called *Moza*, where they made a leafy canopy, accompanied by the priests playing trumpets; and to the "Fountain Gate" at the Pool of Siloam, led by a priest carrying a golden pitcher to be filled with water from the Pool to carry it back to the Court of the Priests in the Temple.

On the return journey the *Great Hallel*—*Psalms* 103 to 118—were sung by the Levitical singers, with responses from the people. At the close of the festive services, after the offering of the sacrifices, there were the "drink-offerings"—the pouring out of the wine and water—and the final benediction amid the waving of branches and the triumphant blasts of trumpets. As the crowds of celebrants poured out of the Temple, shouting and cheering, Jesus, with his disciples beside him, stood on a prominent platform and addressed them in ringing tones: "If a man is thirsty let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him."

As he had said to the woman at the well in Samaria so he now told the listening crowd that all the rituals in the world would not be

enough to satisfy their innermost spiritual desires. When he was gone those who believed on him as the true Messiah would receive the Spirit of God to satisfy every spiritual need and they would need no more of these rituals. The crowd, still imbued with the excitements of the day of celebration, was thrilled at the sight of the commanding presence of Jesus and his Apostles and a murmur of approbation arose when someone called out, "Surely this man is the Prophet!" Another shouted, "He is the Messiah!" There was a roar of agreement. But then someone demanded, "How can the Messiah come from Galilee? Doesn't the Scripture say that he will come from David's family, and from Bethlehem, the town where David lived?" They seemed ignorant of the fact that Jesus came from both, born in Bethlehem and raised in Nazareth in Galilee . . .

There were others among the crowd who wanted to seize Jesus, but they were too few to be significant. The Temple guards had arrived, and were watching closely, but they took no action when they saw that the majority of the crowd favored Jesus. When they reported back to the Jewish religious leaders they demanded an explanation from the guards for not arresting Jesus.

"Because no-one ever spoke the way this man does," one of the guards admitted with more honesty than tact.

"You mean he has deceived you also," the chief priest sneered. "Have any of the rulers of the Pharisees believed in him? No! But this mob knows nothing of the *Law*—there is a curse on them."

The ruler of the Temple, Nicodemus, who had been listening to his fellow-religionists, interrupted them now: "Does our *Law* condemn a man without first hearing him to find out what he is doing?"

Nicodemus was still playing his role as religious statesman, and his mild intervention was the acceptable rabbinical position in the *Law*. But the Jewish leaders were aware of his political *nous* and they dismissed his objection with contempt.

"Are you from Galilee, too," they mocked both his intellectual and political pretensions with their ignorant claims that nothing good could come out of Galilee. "Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee." They were also ignorant

apparently of Isaiah's prophecy regarding the coming of the "*great light*" from "*Galilee of the Gentiles*."

Early next morning, when the first blasts from the Temple's silver trumpets told the faithful that a new God-worshipping day was starting, Jesus again walked into the city from Bethany to the Temple. He had arranged to meet his disciples outside the Temple and while he waited for them he sat quietly on a low step outside the entrance. The early morning worshippers who recognized him did not trouble him but, after greeting him respectfully as a rabbi, passed into the Temple still talking about him and his teachings. Jesus was still there when there was a disturbance, people shouting, a woman screaming, crowds spilling into the streets. They came towards Jesus, led by Scribes and Pharisees, several men dragging a woman between them, her hair and clothes in disarray. They stopped in front of Jesus, who watched them noncommittally.

The religious leaders waved to the crowd to be silent, and addressed Jesus triumphantly and mockingly. "Rabbi, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the *Law* Moses commanded us to stone such a woman. Now what do *you* say?"

Jesus was consumed by a deep revulsion and anger. These professional religionists would stop at nothing to keep their positions and privileges, and to cover their overweening pride. Everything about this incident was wrong: the public humiliation of the woman, the lack of a proper trial with all its Mosaic *Law* safeguards, the absence of the man involved, the disregard of witnesses, the choosing of a public spectacle involving him as well as the woman.

As he looked from the sneering, leering faces of the Scribes and Pharisees to the bowed head of the shamed woman, and the lascivious curious faces of the watching crowd, Jesus considered shaming exposure of the religionists in an equally public way. They had probably even arranged the incident the night before in order to set the scene—preparing an adulterous trap for the unsuspecting woman. It was possibly one of themselves who was the adulterer in the incident, certainly someone selected by them with an assurance that he would not be punished. But the *Law* of Moses was clearly

stated in the *Book of Leviticus*: “If a man commits adultery with another man’s wife—with the wife of his neighbour—both the adulterer and the adulteress must be put to death.”

Jesus leaned forward and, still saying nothing, wrote the Scripture with his finger in the dust of the street, and the crowd near him strained to see what it was that he was writing. The Scribes and Pharisees, thinking that the silent writing was simply a delaying ruse to avoid committing himself, demanded that Jesus speak up and give his judgment on this serious matter. Where were the witnesses? was the silent reply in the mind of Jesus. The *Law* was clear: “*In the mouth of two witnesses everything shall be established.*” But that would still leave them with the satisfaction of a theological argument, prolonging the woman’s shame, while they paraded their rabbinical casuistical expertise.

He straightened up and said to them: “If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.” And again he stooped to write the Scripture on the ground, without looking at the woman or her accusers.

There was a sudden silence as their voices stilled, then there was a shuffling movement in the crowd, starting with those near him and spreading as they gazed with embarrassment at each other in guilty admission that none of them was without sin. Soon there was nobody left except the woman herself.

Jesus stood up, and looked at her for the first time; “Woman,” he said gently, “where are they? Has no-one condemned you?”

“No-one, sir,” she answered in a low voice, eyes lowered.

“Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus said to her, aware that the woman from her kneeling position could see what he had been writing and would know his reasons. “Go now, and leave your life of sin.”

He could not acquit her, for she had sinned against the *Law* and God in the act of adultery if not in the connivance, and had not repented or asked for forgiveness; but neither did he condemn. He could not pass judgment, for there were no witnesses. She had been a pawn in the hands of evil men, but these same men had chosen her no doubt because they knew her practices. Her hope lay in

learning from the incident and not sinning again.

Later that day Jesus and his Apostles went to the "*Porches*" on the outside of the Temple's sacred Courts. With the end of the formal festivities the many lights and torches were taken down and stored, but the Court of the Women was kept brilliantly lit to the end of the Feasts. It was the custom for the chief religious leaders to gather there to answer questions from the people, entering the Court in full regalia from the offices of the Sanhedrin behind.

As the sun set in the brilliantly lit Court the crowd saw the familiar figure of Jesus, surrounded by his well-known Apostles and followers, make their way to the Porch terrace from where the speakers taught. The hubbub died away as he reached the terrace and, ignoring the massed ranks of the religious leaders, he swept his hand to include the many lights and declared in ringing tones, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

There was no doubt in the minds of the many thousands listening what Jesus meant. Again he was using the well-known symbols around him to make his point: in this instance, that the so-called illuminating "lights" of the posturing ecclesiastical displays of the rabbis in this Temple were inadequate, and would be supplanted by the divine light in himself. One of the religious leaders standing near him challenged Jesus. "Here you are, appearing as your own witness, so your testimony is not valid." His sneering comment was probably caused by the morning's incident of the adulterous woman when Jesus used the Mosaic *Law's* commandment regarding a witness being essential.

Jesus, still facing the crowd, took up the remark: "Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid, for I know where I came from and where I am going. You judge by human standards; I pass judgment on no one. But if I do judge, my decisions are right, because I am not alone. I stand with the Father who sent me."

Another religious leader asked mockingly, "Where is your father?", and there was a burst of raucous laughter. It was common knowledge that Jesus' mother, Mary, claimed that Jesus was not born of Joseph but by the Holy Spirit; and there were many ribald jokes

regarding this told by the professional religionists. Jesus ignored the scurrilous innuendo, and answered the remark as if made with serious intent. "You do not know me or my Father," he declared categorically. "If you knew me, you would know my Father also,"

The crowds were silent at this open confrontation with the leading Jewish authorities. Yet none of the Sanhedrin officials demanded his arrest for his apparently blasphemous remarks. There was no doubt in anybody's mind that Jesus was claiming to come from, and to speak, for his Father—God. Jesus was the only person present who knew that it would not happen until God's clearly appointed time.

"I am going away," Jesus now declared, "and you will look for me, and you will die in your sin. Where I go, you cannot come."

There was a murmur of surprised speculation. "Will he kill himself? Is that why he says, 'Where I go, you cannot come'?"

Jesus ignored the questions. These posturing religionists with their ritualistic rubbish must be totally discredited as worthless deceivers: "You are from earth, I am from heaven. Your theories are of this world; my words are divinely provided. If you do not believe that I am the one that I claim to be, you will indeed die in your sins."

"Who are you?" someone shouted.

"Who I have been asserting from the first day," Jesus replied. "He who sent me is Truth personified, and what I have heard from Him I tell the world. When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know who I am and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me. The One who sent me is with me; He has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases Him. If you believe my teaching, you are truly my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free from the bondage of sin."

It was difficult to get this aspect of his teaching across to them. They had been conditioned by centuries of false precepts and practices by the casuistical rabbis, and any explicit statement he might make, such as "I am the Son of God" or "I am the Messiah", as they wanted, would merely serve to confirm their own prejudices and false convictions. They had to learn a different God's Son and the Son's Father from their rabbinical indoctrination, a spiritual

instead of a national Messiah, and they had no foundation for this other than he gave them. Their shouted response confirmed this:

“We are Abraham’s descendants and have never been the slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free,” they said stubbornly, as if that proved something. The truth was that the Babylonian captivity had destroyed all their genealogical records and introduced foreigners into the former lands of Israel, and since then they had no true proofs of descent. How easily they forgot Egypt bondage, or the Midianites, or Moabites, or the Philistines, or the Assyrians, or the Babylonian experience - even the past century of Roman oppression! Their whole history was one of slavery — and all because of their disobedience, rebellion and stubbornness. All the prophets God had sent to them had tried to free them from their various bondages, but they had just stoned the prophets!

Jesus told them, “I am telling you the truth when I say everyone who sins is a slave to sin. A slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it for ever. So, if the Son of God sets you free, you will be free indeed. I know you are Abraham’s descendants. Yet you are ready to kill me, because you have no belief in my word. I am telling you what I have seen in the Father’s presence. Therefore, do what you have heard from the Father God.”

“Abraham is our father,” they repeated stubbornly.

“If you were Abraham’s children,” said Jesus, “then you would do the things Abraham did. As it is, you are determined to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. Abraham did not do the things you do. You are just repeating the things your own father does.”

“We are not illegitimate children”, they shouted sarcastically, recalling the innuendoes of the Pharisees. “The only Father we have is God himself.”

“If God were your Father,” the voice of Jesus told them relentlessly, “you would love me, for I came from God and am now here. I have not come on my own; but He sent me. Why is what I am saying not clear to you?” His voice rose in a challenge, and he continued: “Because you are unable to hear what I say. You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s

desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, and not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. Yet because I tell you the truth, you do not believe me! Can any of you prove me guilty of sin? If I am telling you the truth, why don't you believe me? He who belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God."

The argument was unanswerable and the Jewish leaders knew it. If he was not sent from God, then he was a madman; if he was sent from God, they as God's chosen people should recognize and acknowledge him.

"Aren't we right in saying that you are demon-possessed?" they countered furiously.

"I am not possessed by any demon," Jesus answered patiently, "I honor my Father but you dishonor me. I am not seeking glory for myself; but there is One who seeks it, and He is the judge. I tell you the truth, if a man keeps my word, he will never see death."

The Jewish leaders exploded into blind rage. "Now we know that you are demon-possessed! Abraham died and so did the prophets, yet you say if a man keeps your word he will never taste death. Are you greater than our father Abraham? He died, and so did the prophets. Who do you think you are?"

Jesus shook his head sadly at them. They had either seen, or heard of, his miraculous works; they had either seen or heard about, his raising individuals from the dead, which Abraham and few prophets ever did. But they were beyond reason. "If I boast about myself," he told them firmly, "my boasting means nothing. My Father, whom you claim as your God, is the one who praises me. Though you do not know Him, I know Him. If I said I did not, I would be a liar like you, but I do know Him and keep His word. Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad."

"You are not yet fifty years old," the religionists replied mockingly, "and you claim to have seen Abraham!"

"I tell you the truth," Jesus insisted. "Before Abraham was born, **I AM.**"

At this use of an expression that went beyond the assertion of existence to an allusion to be the One who was revealed as the divine “*I AM*” to Moses, the professional religionists rushed from the Porch to the Court of the Gentiles to pick up stones to stone Jesus for what they saw as his heresy, and blasphemy. But before they returned, Jesus had left the Porch by one of the many other exits. He had made his point: they could either accept him on his clearly stated presentation as God become Son of Man, sent by God himself; or they could persist in their blind hatred and prejudice and put him to death as blind-tool instruments of the “*prince of the world*”, Satan himself. The ultimate issue could not be made clearer.



The Apostles of Jesus were deeply troubled at the rising tempo of the public confrontations, and the repeated insistence by Jesus of his imminent murder and later disappearance. To them, it looked as if he were deliberately precipitating and courting it for reasons they could not comprehend. Yet each time death seemed inevitable, Jesus somehow managed to avoid it—as he had just done—by moving away from it in some fashion. At the same time he gave no evidence of fear or stealth, for almost immediately he was back in public view, preaching, teaching and challenging as strongly as ever, apparently serenely confident in the protection and support of his heavenly Father. There was no bravado, no hint of mysterious esoteric powers, but rather an assurance of some appointment with destiny, of being immortal until his work was completed. But the declared inevitability and manner of his death confused them, because it conflicted with all that they thought should characterize a Messiah.

The next day Jesus went out as usual, and his Apostles noted with resignation and yet a rising excitement that once more he was making for the Temple. It was the Sabbath, and at the entrance to the Temple where the poor and sick usually gathered seeking alms or healing from some saintly rabbi there should have been no-one there, it being forbidden by the rabbis. But Jesus stopped to look at a blind man who, evidently in defiance of the rabbinical *Traditions*,

was sitting sightlessly and silent at the gate. The people making their way into the Temple slowly stopped as they recognized Jesus and his disciples, waiting to see if he would once again publicly violate the Sabbath by healing the blind man.

“Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?” one of them asked Jesus. It was a common belief among the Jews that sickness was caused by some sin, and it was a common theological debate among the rabbis, when an individual was born with some disablement, who was responsible for the “sin” that caused it—father, mother or offspring?

“Neither the man nor his parents,” Jesus replied, stopping in front of the blind man. “This happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life. As long as it is day I must do the work of Him who sent me. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”

A crowd had quickly gathered for it was widely known that the man had been born without eyeballs, so there was nothing there for him to see with and they assumed that Jesus was teaching them something relating to this with his remarks. Everything was “night” to this man, with no possibility of “light”. His only hope lay in meeting his creator who would provide him with what he never had, eyes. This man must know that if he ever saw anybody it must be God who gave the sight.

Jesus spat on the ground, and, stooping down, he mixed the saliva with the dust. This was a breach of the Sabbath, too, the rabbis declaring such an act “building”: to mix clay and liquid spittle was intent to “make a brick”. Jesus put the clay on the man’s eyes and then—to the incredulity of those watching—he said to the blind man with clay-smearred eyes, “Go and wash in the Pool of Siloam.”

If ever there was a test of faith this was it. Only the day before thousands had gone to the Pool of Siloam for water for the ritual festive drink-offerings; today a solitary blind man, in defiance of the Sabbath ritual and all physical laws, would walk, wash and be provided with eyes and sight.

When he returned, seeing, to his home his neighbors could not believe it. “Isn’t this the same man who used to sit and beg?” they

demanded of each other. Some confirmed that it was, while others said that it was someone who just looked like him. It was the blind man himself who insisted he was the same blind man they had known.

“How then are your eyes opened?” they asked him curiously. They knew that he had no eyes to see, for they had lived beside him for years.

“The man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes,” he told them. “He told me to go to Siloam and wash. So I went and washed, and then I could see.”

They gazed at him in astonishment. “Where is this man?” they asked him skeptically.

“I don’t know,” he confessed.

An argument broke out among the people listening as to the legitimacy of someone who was born blind, and therefore a sinner, being able to be healed, and that on the Sabbath. They took the man to the Pharisees to have it settled. The Pharisees asked the man for an explanation, and who had “healed” him. The man was not going to get the person who had healed him into trouble, and so he did not mention the name of Jesus. “He put mud on my eyes, and I washed, and now I see,” he told them.

The professional religionists debated among themselves with inflated pomposity, for the benefit of those listening to them. This was a manifest breach of their rabbinical Sabbath laws, which provided that only certain diseases could be healed on a holy day: such as, diseases of the internal organs, or those from the throat downwards, except when danger to life or loss of an organ was involved. It was all right to apply wine to the outside of an eyelid, for that was just washing, but it was sinful to apply it—and especially spittle and clay which was viewed as “building”—to the outside of the eye. Therefore, the one who healed the blind man was in breach of the Sabbath law. “This man is not from God,” one of the senior rabbis concluded, “because he does not keep the Sabbath.”

“How can a sinner do such miraculous signs?” someone asked.

This started another argument amongst the religionists. Finally, they turned to the former blind man and said to him, “What have

you to say about this? It was your eyes he opened.”

“He is a prophet,” the man said promptly and emphatically.

The rabbis were incensed at this assertion and sent for the man’s parents and, when they arrived, they asked “Is this your son? Is this the one you say was born blind? How is it that now he can see?”

The elderly couple trembled with fear, because they knew that in such unusual circumstances they were likely to be charged with dealing with Beelzebub, Satan himself, in addition to violation of the Sabbath. They could be excommunicated from the synagogue.

“We know he is our son”, they confirmed fearfully, “and we know he was born blind. But how he can see now, or who opened his eyes, we don’t know. Ask him, he is of age. He will speak for himself.”

Meanwhile, the rabbis had been informed that it was Jesus who had healed the man, and they were determined to formulate a charge against him. “Give glory to God,” they now told the former blind man in a blatant attempt to destroy his testimony. “We know that this Jesus is a sinner.”

“Whether this man is a sinner or not, I don’t know,” the man said sardonically, aware of the devious maneuvering of the rabbis. “One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!”

The religious leaders were livid with frustrated rage. “What did he do to you,” they demanded of the man irately. “How did he open your eyes?”

The former blind man enjoyed their obvious discomfiture, and he said unrepentantly and provocatively, “I have told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples, too?”

His impertinent reply was too much for the discredited rabbis and, completely losing their temper, they shouted insultingly at him, “You are this fellow’s disciple! We are disciples of Moses! We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we don’t even know where he comes from.”

“Now that is remarkable!” the man taunted them. “You don’t know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly man who does his will. Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born

blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.”

“You were steeped in sin from birth,” a Pharisee snarled at him; “how dare you lecture us!” And they had the Temple guards thrown him out of the Temple Court.

Later, the man was found wandering through the Temple looking for “Jesus of Nazareth.”

“Do you believe in the Son of Man?” Jesus asked the man when he introduced himself.

“Who is he, sir,” the man asked forthrightly, sensing a purpose in the question. “Tell me, so that I may believe in him.”

“You have already seen him,” Jesus replied meaningfully. “In fact, he is the one speaking with you.”

The man looked at Jesus gratefully and knelt down at the feet of Jesus. “Lord, I believe,” he said confidently.

“I am come into this world as judge,” Jesus said, “so that the blind will see, and those who see will become blind.”

“Are you saying that we are blind, too?” a nearby Pharisee asked sarcastically.

“If you were blind,” Jesus retorted, “you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim to see, your guilt is established.”

Jesus was aware that the unrelenting intensity of his teachings regarding the divine requirements for living spiritual lives in the kingdom of God was a cause of some dismay as well as inspiration to his followers. He had to emphasize, with repetition, that God through him desired nothing less than perfect people in that heavenly kingdom. That aspiration was not possible without divine help, and so they had also to be taught that God in his grace had provided spiritual power to be perfect as their Father in heaven was perfect.

When a demonized man was brought to him for healing, and once again the religionists tried to accuse him of using Satanic methods of healing, Jesus pointed out the implacability of Satan with his demonic kingdom in seeking to frustrate the beneficent purposes of God. “Any kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and a house divided against itself will fall. If Satan is divided against himself, how can his kingdom stand? I say this because you claim

that I drive out demons with the help of Satan. If I drive out demons by Satan, by whom do your followers drive them out? So then, they will be your judges when you are called to account. But if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then be assured the kingdom of God has come to you."

A woman in the crowd called out, "Blessed is the mother who bore and nursed you."

But Jesus would not be a party to gender, family or ancestor worship. He had already made it clear on several occasions that he disapproved of his family seeking to impose a natural authority above the spiritual—including his mother. He now rebuked the women. "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it. This is a wicked generation. It asks for a miraculous sign, but none will be given to it except the sign of Jonah. For as Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so also will the Son of Man be to this generation. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here."

For the next two months Jesus traveled the villages and towns of Perea to the east of Jerusalem, giving the Apostles more responsibilities in teaching and healing while he was with them, and reminding them at every opportunity that his time with them was diminishing. To the silent and engrossed crowd of listeners, believers and unbelievers alike, he spoke slowly and solemnly: "I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism to undergo, and I am passionately committed to see it completed! Do you think I came to bring peace on the earth? No, I tell you, I came to bring division. From now on, there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

This was an astonishing declaration by any known standard. John the Baptist had prophesied that the coming Messiah would "*baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire*", and Jesus had demonstrated the positive

blessings and power of the Holy Spirit by both his words and actions; but now Jesus was affirming the Holy Spirit as “a consuming fire” destroying all negative aspects of human relationships in order to produce a perfect relationship with God and each other through his sacrificial death and subsequent Spiritual Body of the Church of the Messiah.

Jesus knew that it was difficult enough for them to accept at this time and in their midst a “*Suffering Servant*” *Messiah* offering himself as a vicarious sacrifice in atonement for the sins of the world. How much more difficult to grasp what the prophets in the Scriptures had foretold with such dramatic imagery, that his present appearance among them was not just “*a sign of the end times,*” not the prophesied “*Day of the Lord.*” The signs of divine judgment were all around them in the circumstances of the time. Caesar Tiberius, Sejanus and the Roman Senate had declared the Jews to be anathema; Pilate had been sent to Judea with greater powers to control them, and if he was too lenient another and more ruthless procurator would be sent. A great national calamity was unfolding ahead of them, and the leaders of the Jewish people were playing ecclesiastical games like children in the market-places.

Jesus continued in sorrowful anger: “When you see a cloud rising in the west you say, ‘It’s going to rain,’ and it does. And when the south wind blows, you say, ‘It’s going to be hot’ . and it is. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and sky. How is it you don’t know how to interpret the signs of the present time? Why don’t you judge for yourselves what is right? Do you think that the Galileans whose blood Pilate mingled with their sacrifices recently were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered in this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all eternally perish.”

Jesus wanted those listening to him to understand that these were not just an example of divine judgment for gross wickedness by specific individuals, but were inevitable punishments arising out of the consequences of their self-interested decisions. God would hold every person guilty for individual sin. God would hold each one of them responsible for not obeying His clearly stated word. The

“baptism of fire” was as inevitable as “the baptism of the Holy Spirit.” Those with understanding would realize he was speaking of himself coming to look for divine fruit from the nation of Israel in the past three years of his ministry on earth, and finding no divinely acceptable response from the nation’s leaders. God’s judgment for such uninterested neglect or deliberate rejection was to cut the nation off from its divine roots; but God’s grace would permit it to flourish for another year or period of time before removing it from its potential source of blessing and turning to the Gentiles.

He told them of the supper provided by the host, of the feeble excuses of those who claimed they had more important things to do than accept the generous invitation, and of those who replaced them at the feast. He told them of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son, and how they were recovered in their different ways because they were important to the searcher. He told them of the better inheritance of the elder son who “was always with his father and enjoyed all the family privileges.” He told them of the rewards and punishments of the unjust steward, the debtor, and of the rich man and poor man in hell.

Regarding the last example, he made it clear it was not just a parable but a real event: “*There was a rich man* who, during his lifetime lived in self-indulgent luxury. At the same time, *there was a poor man*, called Lazarus, covered with sores, who begged outside the door of the rich man’s house every day, hoping for cast-off food. When the poor man died he went straight to heaven with its many treasures; but when the rich man died he went to hell with its torments. In hell the rich man was aware of heaven and its delights as part of his torment, made more acute by seeing Lazarus enjoying them. He pleaded with God to have pity for him and to send Lazarus with some water for his unbearable thirst and pain. He was told that in his lifetime he had had a surfeit of good things while Lazarus had nothing but bad experiences. Now the roles were reversed. Between them there was a great unbridgeable gulf which could not be crossed from either side. When the rich man in desperation pleaded that someone be sent to warn his family about the realities of hell, God told him that if his family did not believe what Moses had written in

the Scriptures they would not believe even if anyone returned from death.”

Peter had noticed that Jesus had used an individual's name for the first time in his account of Lazarus and the rich man, and also introduced the subject of hell, so he asked Jesus, “Lord, tell us about hell.”

Jesus explained: “*Hades* is the immediate spirit-state following death, and is both Hell and Paradise. For example, Lazarus was a poor man covered with sores in this life but died prepared for the hereafter. Then there was the rich man who died with no thought of the hereafter. **Both** arrived in Hades: Lazarus in Paradise, because he believed God's “*law of unavoidable consequences*”; that is, “*You reap whatever you sow*”; but the rich man arrived in Hell because he ignored that irrevocable law of God in his lifetime. The rich man then pleaded with God to send someone from the dead so that they would believe and repent. God replied, ‘They would not believe even if someone rose from the dead to tell them.’ That is their tragedy.”

When Jesus had finished with the parables, the teachings, and their applications, his work with the Apostles was effectively ended. Only the final lessons in Jerusalem remained, as he went to his death and resurrection there. It was three months since he had been last in Jerusalem, at the time of the Feast of Tabernacles, and it was now approaching the Feast of *Hannukah*, or “*Dedication*”. This Feast of “*Lights*” (because celebratory lights were placed in the Temple and private homes), had been instituted almost a hundred years before by Judas Maccabaeus when the Temple had been reclaimed and re-sanctified after its desecration by the Syrian despot Antiochus Epiphanes IV, “*the Desolator*”. Although thousands still responded to the teaching of Jesus wherever he went, many others left because the expanded teachings of “baptism of fire” were too hard for them. Salvation from sin was attractive, but subsequent sanctification of the spirit was too much for them. So it was a constant source of speculation that the stringent spiritual discipline of the gospel preached by Jesus meant that few would enter the kingdom of God.

During the Feast of Dedication Jesus was walking in the Porch of

the Temple, as was his custom when not actually teaching there, when he was approached by a group of religionists who demanded truculently, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly."

Jesus looked at them sardonically. He was aware that there was not an ounce of sincerity in their question; just another attempt to intimidate and trap him. But it provided an opportunity for a lesson to those listening. "I did tell you," he said to them, "but you didn't believe. The miracles I do in my Father's name they speak for me, but you do not believe because you are not my followers. My followers hear my voice, I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father who has given them to me, He is greater than all; so no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and my Father are one and the same."

The infuriated religionists, hearing the categorical statement of Jesus' oneness with God, rushed to get stones to stone Jesus to death for the blasphemy. This time Jesus did not disappear, but watched them calmly. They were like intemperate children enraged at not getting their own way. "I have shown you many great miracles from the Father", he said to them. "For which of these do you stone me?"

"We are not stoning you for any of these," they said sullenly, "but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God."

"Is it not written in your *Law*," said Jesus, "*I have said you are gods*?' If He called them '*gods*', to whom the word of God came—and the Scripture cannot be broken—what about the one whom the Father set apart as his very own and sent into the world? Why then do you accuse me of blasphemy because I said, 'I am God's Son'? Do not believe me unless I do what the Father does. But, if I do it, even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father."

The reasonable tone did not assuage their outraged fury and they tried to push their way through the crowd to get to Jesus. But his followers closed around him and they moved safely out of the Temple.

With the Feast of Dedication ended, Jesus left Jerusalem again to

go to Bethabara, where he had been baptized by John the Baptist. With the news of his arrival there many thousands of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. To the fury of the religionists many said, "Though John never performed a miracle, all that John said about this man was true."

While Jesus was in Bethabara the news was brought to him that Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, was sick. When Jesus was told about it his mild reaction surprised his Apostles: He added further to their confusion, saying, "This sickness will not end in death. It is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it". Then he stayed on in Bethabara for another two days. Finally, he said to his disciples, "Let us return to Judea."

They looked at him in consternation. "But, rabbi," they said, "a short while ago the Jews there tried to stone you, and yet you are going back there?"

"Are there not twelve hours of daylight?" Jesus said in his teaching manner, and the Apostles knew that he meant there was an appointed time for work. "A man who walks by day will not stumble, for he sees by this world's light. It is when he walks by night that he stumbles, for he has no light. Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep and I am going there to awaken him."

Jesus was walking by heaven's calendar, and by heaven's timing, and all who would understand must walk in that same light. They must learn that the body was only a temporary shell, that the spirit lived forever.

The Apostles were puzzled at the remark. "Lord, if he sleeps he'll get better", they said, thinking that Jesus meant natural sleep, not divining that he meant the body of Lazarus was dead. But, as Creator he, Jesus, held the keys of death and hell.

"Lazarus is dead," he repeated "and for your sake I am glad that I wasn't there so that you may really believe. Let us go to him."

The Apostles looked at each other in bemusement. If Lazarus was dead in Bethany, it was too late to do anything about it now. The Apostle Thomas "the Doubter", always pessimistic, shrugged his shoulders fatalistically and said, "Let us all go that we may die with him/"

By the time they arrived at the outskirts of Bethany they heard the news that Lazarus had been dead four days already, and was buried in the family tomb in a garden enclosure. Some had run ahead to tell the grieving sisters that Jesus was on his way and Martha slipped away from the crowd of mourners to run and meet Jesus.

“Lord,” she said to him reproachfully, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.”

Those around Jesus noted the implied petition from Martha. On the one hand, Lazarus was dead four days and beyond hope; on the other hand, Jesus was the master of life and death who had already raised others from death—but not four days’ dead.

Jesus saw her confusion—and the hope and restraint. “Your brother will rise again,” he told her gently.

Martha nodded her agreement. She knew from the Scriptures that there was a resurrection of the righteous to eternal life, so she answered Jesus confidently, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.”

“I am the resurrection,” Jesus stated emphatically, “and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

Martha—and those nearby hearing the words—was startled. This was beyond anything the prophets had written in the Scriptures. Jesus was actually claiming to *be* the resurrection in person, and not just expounding a phenomenon.

Martha smiled at Jesus through her tears. “Yes, Lord,” she said firmly, “I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.”

Jesus nodded his acknowledgement of her equivocal admission then sent her to call Mary from among the many mourners in the house, and to meet him at the burial place outside the town. When Mary heard the message from Martha she left quickly, with the mourners streaming after her. When she saw Jesus she knelt at his feet and said, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

Seeing Mary weeping, and the people around also sharing her grief, Jesus was deeply moved and wept in sympathy with her grief. It was not that he simply identified with their sorrow at Lazarus' death, for he knew that he was about to raise him from the dead and restore him to his grateful family. His grief had a deeper cause, partly the sorrow at their continuing unbelief in him as Lord of life and death, but also with their grief at the separation of death and his own imminent separation from his heavenly Father—not just by a natural death, but through being made a vicarious sinful sacrifice on behalf of others.

“Where have you laid him?” he asked Mary, helping her to rise to her feet.

She led him to where Lazarus had been placed in a garden tomb, with a large circular stone rolled across the entrance. They were followed by a crowd who had gathered on being told of Jesus' arrival, and the rumored possibility that the prophet from Galilee was going to raise Lazarus from the dead.

When Jesus commanded, “Take away the stone,” Martha protested, “Lord, by this time he stinks. He has been dead four days.”

“Did I not tell you,” Jesus reproved her gently, “that if you believed you would see the glory of God?”

Martha remained silent, and some of the men mourners moved forward to roll back the stone from the entrance to the tomb. Jesus tilted his face heavenward, and prayed: “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I know that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.” Then, taking a deep breath, Jesus declared in a loud voice, “*Lazarus, come out!*”

The ensuing silence was broken by a rising murmur from the crowd; then a startled cry of astonishment arose as the figure of Lazarus appeared, his body still wrapped with strips of embalmed linen and a cloth around his face. The murmurs of astonishment died into silence as their minds sought to grasp what their eyes were seeing.

“Take off the grave clothes,” Jesus commanded, “and let him go.”

He and the family were quickly surrounded by the wondering and excited spectators, as everybody sought to ask Lazarus questions about his momentous experience.

When the news of the raising of Lazarus reached Jerusalem, and then spread throughout the country, it caused the greatest controversy of all the acts of Jesus. On the one hand, it led many to become believers on the spot, because of the manifestation of divine power; but, on the other hand, it was an intolerable affront to the professional religionists. If Jesus were allowed to get away with public actions like these in support of his claims to be the Messiah at the very gates of Jerusalem—each act more provocatively supernatural than its predecessor it seemed—then what might he not do next? Not only Jews in Judea but those scattered throughout the world would believe in him. The day following the raising of Lazarus, while Jesus was quietly celebrating the event with the family in Bethany, a meeting of the powerful Great Sanhedrin was convened to decide finally what was to be done about him.

### Chapter 13

**will be available on this site on the 1st April 2010**