

THE KINGDOM, THE POWER AND THE GLORY

It was the day before Sabbath, a busy market-day, when Jesus returned to Capernaum. He made his way through the crowds to the lakeside where he knew he would find some of his disciples working at their nets, or on their boats at nearby Bethsaida. For fishermen, there was always some work to be done on their nets or boats.

Jesus was recognized as he passed through the streets and market-places and he soon had a large crowd of eager, shouting people following him. He shook his head negatively to their urgent requests to stop and talk, heal the sick, or do a miracle. For the present he had to attend to more specifically important matters. As he had anticipated he found his disciples at work around their boats at the lake-side, and he quickly called them together and told them that the time had come for them to break with their past altogether. From now until his work was completed they would be fishers of men with him.

A huge crowd had gathered as he talked with his disciples, pushing them ever closer to the water. Jesus, seeing this, called for a

boat to be brought near and he and his disciples got in and pushed it away from the shore to a point where he could address the crowd comfortably. With the only background sounds the wavelets rippling against the sides of the boat, and on the shore, and the call of the birds overhead, Jesus outlined his new instructions concerning the expanded kingdom of God; with a renewed, urgent demand for commitment from those who wished to experience more than just a tickling of the ears from a different kind of teacher. The sermons of the rabbis were usually short, given with simple illustrations drawn from everyday life, so that the listeners could grasp the substance and then go away and reflect on the meaning. Jesus did the same, only he extemporized more than did the rabbis, illuminating the Scriptures with divine significance from incidents in the daily lives of the people.

For the first time, to the murmured surprise of the crowd on the shore, Jesus used the intimate expression for God, *abba*, which the children used when speaking of their fathers. No-one had ever heard it used of God before, especially since the rabbis had replaced the use of "God" with euphemisms such as "*the Blessed One*." Obviously, Jesus told them, his heavenly Father would not indulge their selfish hungers, but if they asked for bread He would not give them a stone, or if they asked for fish He would not give them a snake. The fathers among them, he said, knew how it was with their own children; they did not give them all they wanted, but only what was good for them. How much more would their Father in heaven give good gifts to those who asked Him. "Ask, and it will be given to you," he encouraged them; "seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you."

He was not making the way into the kingdom easy, as they would find when they tried to keep the principles of the kingdom. The kingdom of God was not like any system of government which could be programmed, and developed, and imposed, at a given time. It was amongst them right now as a spiritual community, here on this sea-shore; and some would enter it gently, while others, like John the Baptist's followers, would enter by forceful means. It would never be pointed out like a piece of architecture, for it would be

growing among them as yeast grows in bread while each one individually displayed the words and works of God in their lives. Just as he embodied in his own person and life the principles of the kingdom, so they, too, must learn daily to do this. They did not need any man to teach them, for they would have the Spirit of God to teach them all things, to guide them into all truth, to take the things of God and reveal them to each listening heart. But it was a narrow entrance into the kingdom of light, and a wide entrance into the kingdom of darkness. Many chose that large entrance for self-interested reasons of their own, while only a few chose the narrow entrance that led to the permanent glories of eternal life.

When he had finished he dismissed the crowd, telling them that he expected to address them in the synagogue on the Sabbath. Then he turned to his disciples and, to their surprise, told them to take their boats into the deeper waters of the Lake and to let down their nets for fish. They had already informed him that they had an unsuccessful night because of an unexpected storm, and they knew that Jesus was aware of the problems—and the best times—for fishing. But they accepted that he must have reasons of his own for proposing that they go now. James and John returned to launch their own boat, and when they caught up with Simon Peter and Andrew they found them already struggling with full nets of fish which they had to help them to land.

This demonstration of power over creation in his own life-craft had a dramatic effect upon Peter. He had listened to Jesus with his usual—more than usual—interest, and had been exalted as always by the majesty of the vision proclaimed by Jesus. But he had been privately skeptical about the apparent ease of asking God for things and getting them, which Jesus had proposed. In his experience the rabbis were always saying these kind of things—“*givers of smooth interpretations*”, it was called by a cynical public—but it had never worked for him or others like him; it only seemed to work for the rabbis. When Jesus had told them to push out the boats and fish it was only his respect for Jesus that kept him from one of his outspoken jeers.

With the evidence of the fish spilling into the boat knew as a

fisherman it was not luck that did it. Fish moved and swarmed according to well-known laws of water and wind that all fishermen learned from daily experience over years and he was conscious of his abysmal inadequacy, and the divine potential of Jesus. They had never had such a catch, and it looked as if the boat would go under with the weight of fish at the single direction of Jesus. He dropped to his knees in the boat and said humbly, "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man."

Jesus smiled at the bowed head of his friend understandingly as he acknowledged his divinity in the title. This was the impulsive but passionately committed Simon he knew so well. "Don't be afraid," he told him; "from now on you will catch men."

Next morning was the Sabbath and the synagogue was crowded, with hundreds outside unable to get in, anxious to see if the Galilean rabbi would be present. In the front sat the usual local rabbis, with the visiting notable rabbis from Jerusalem beside them. Behind them were the elders, then the public—with the women behind their screens, separated from the men. The reader recited the Eighteen Prayers, and the congregation responded with their "Amen" of approval. This was followed by the lesson for the day, the people turning reverently towards the shrine containing the scrolled Scriptures, chanting the words after the reader. Another lesson followed, then the reader called on Jesus.

In the charged silence, with eloquence and authority, Jesus expounded the good news of the arrival of the kingdom, which, he asserted forcefully, his heavenly Father had given to him to establish on earth. With vivid illustration, intellectual clarity, spiritual insight and power he presented the Scriptures known to them all, but with his entirely new interpretation given on his own authority. But he validated this claim to personal authority by stating that it was the authority of a Son authorized by a Father. "I can do nothing on my own authority," he affirmed. "As I hear, I judge. My judgement is true because I do not seek my own will, but the will of Him who sent me."

Among those who had gone to the synagogue that morning was a well-known man, said locally "to be possessed by a spirit of an

unclean demon.“ The condition was a source of great dispute among the rabbis and scribes, especially the Sadducees who did not believe in angels or demons. The more superstitious believed that all sickness was “*of the devil*”, and classified everyone afflicted as “*demonized.*” The Sadducees considered it a form of incurable epilepsy. The afflicted person was known to haunt unclean burial-places, have superhuman powers, and was uncontrollable. What was surprising was that he was there at all and it was suspected that it had been arranged by the visiting rabbis to entrap Jesus into healing on the Sabbath.

Whether by accident or design this man now stood up and interrupted Jesus. “What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth”, he shouted in his demented voice, his eyes rolling wildly and foam spitting from his lips. “Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God.”

There was a stunned silence, because this public protest had never occurred before. But Jesus knew it was not a normal protest by the man’s plural use of “*us*”; it was a confrontation by demonic spirits from Satan possessing the man. The popular belief about such a condition was that if one used the precise name or true identity of an individual it gave power over the one named. But Jesus knew that this incident was not just a demonstration of a superstition, but a direct intervention by Satan in the use of the phrase “*I know* who you are,” and then by declaring “the Holy One of God” challenging not just the Messiahship of Jesus but his divine origin by naming it contemptuously.

The response of Jesus was swift and incisive. “*Be quiet!*” or colloquially “*Shut your mouth!*” The man’s body shuddered with a convulsing paroxysm, and then stood quiet and calm, looking confused. The congregation looked from the man to Jesus and back again in utter amazement as they tried to assimilate and understand what was taking place before their eyes. They had never seen such a demonstration of a single command silencing an evil spirit, and it had taken place in the synagogue and on the Sabbath! But they were still more impressed by the authority of Jesus than in the significance of the evil spirits’ specious confirmation of the deity of Jesus. They

had just been witnesses of an actual conversation between a man claiming to be the Creator and evil spirits from the Abyss—according to Jesus even Satan himself in the personal use of “*I know you*”. Only Satan could make that claim. What the congregation could comprehend was that they had just had demonstrated a new form of healing, and a new power over Satanic forces, and they crowded around Jesus with a barrage of questions when he left the synagogue with his disciples.

Jesus was satisfied with what had happened. It was a sign that Satan was concerned about the inroads being made into his own domain as “*prince of the world*”. From now on the distinction between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan would become increasingly more defined as the issues became greater between them and satanic defeats multiplied with each miracle of deliverance and divine power. He anticipated increased opposition from the national religious leaders when they heard that the healing had taken place on the Sabbath—and in the synagogue witnessed by the leading Jerusalem rabbis.

The end of the Sabbath was signaled by the setting of the sun, when it was then considered lawful to travel more than the restricted two thousand cubits, or steps, and to carry whatever burdens one pleased. With news of Jesus’ return to Capernaum people from the neighborhood and countryside around came crowding round the doors of his mother’s home near Simon Peter’s house, where Jesus was staying, seeking healing for their ailments. The child leading a blind father, the father carrying a sick wife, the helpless being carried by relatives on pallets, the depressed being escorted by companions, were brought to Jesus, and he healed them all.

Most of the time he did it with a word of power in support of the gospel which he preached, and only occasionally did he touch them. Also, it was significant that he placed the onus of healing on the sick individual, for them to decide whether they, or God, wanted them to be healed. Sometimes he would ask them whether they believed he could heal them before he declared them healed, so that the individual’s faith in him as Messiah was involved in the process. They knew from the Scriptures that all healing was from God. They

repeated every week in the synagogue the account of the deliverance from Egypt, and how God had not allowed their forefathers to fall sick in forty years in the wilderness. They knew of the healings of leprosy, the curing of plagues, even of the raising of the dead. by the prophets of the past. That Elijah or Elisha could do those things was not surprising—but these two former prophets had addressed God in heaven, and now this prophet from Galilee was asking them to believe in him as God on earth in order to be cured or to enter the kingdom of God.

Meanwhile, the rabbis watched the incidents with mounting concern and frustration. Apart from the violation of the Sabbath in the healing of the demon-possessed man, they had discovered nothing with which they could effectively accuse Jesus and discredit him before the applauding crowds. Even the healing of the demon-possessed man, they were aware, could be excused—and Jesus would know it—in that he was “unclean” in the sacred house of God, and Jesus had stopped an unsanctified disturbance there by rebuking the evil spirit.

They observed the blind leaving the presence of Jesus with their sight restored, the dumb singing his praises, the sick of all kinds recovering health, the possessed leaving with sound minds. It was an awesome demonstration of the Galilean prophet’s spiritual power, and the less prejudiced among the rabbis were impressed. But they were quickly silenced by the political arguments of their colleagues who said that such a man with these powers was a threat to “*the real interests*” of the nation, and that he must be stopped before he could do irreparable even if well-meaning harm.

Then Peter’s mother-in-law fell sick with a mysterious fever when Jesus was living with Peter’s family in Capernaum, and he took hold of her hand and “*rebuked*” the fever, in the same way as he had “*rebuked*” the spirit in the demon-possessed man. It seemed to Peter that Jesus was involved increasingly in a war with a Satanic demon-populated kingdom determined to oppose his every action, and that he was equally determined to triumph over these messengers of destruction.



The news of the miraculous healings by Jesus, and his teachings, about the kingdom of God, had already spread from Jerusalem and Capernaum through the cities, towns, and even the villages of Galilee, and their arrival brought out crowds wherever they visited. Nothing, it seemed, was impossible for the prophet from Nazareth. He entered the cities, towns and villages accompanied by large numbers of those he had healed and who had become his followers anxious to see and learn more, and he left with even greater numbers added to them. It was a triumphal procession such as no-one had ever witnessed. People were coming from Syria and Persia outside Palestine, and from even further away where the news of his activities had been carried by the Jews of the Dispersion. The name of Jesus now dominated almost every conversation from market-places to Sanhedrin.

But the controversies were given an even greater dimension outside one of the towns when he was confronted suddenly by a leper in a very advanced state of the disease. Leprosy was the most dreaded disease of the time, the infection beginning with little specks on the eyelids and palms of the hands, and gradually spreading over different parts of the body, crusting the affected parts with a scaly substance, bleaching the hair white, and causing loathsome swellings and sores until the whole body was covered and slowly rotted away. The sufferers were social outcasts, whatever their standing in society, and they were isolated from homes and populated areas as "unclean". They lived together in leprous groups outside the villages, towns and cities, usually in the stinking rubbish dumps, and moving around with heads and mouths covered, hand-bells ringing in warning to others, never speaking to or greeting anyone on pain of receiving forty stripes of the whip. Among all the remedies of the rabbis—medical, magic and sympathetic—leprosy was not included, except to state that the afflicted must be cut off from all contact with the living and take on the appearance of the mourner of death.

The leper confronting Jesus was risking all forms of punishment, both from the crowds immediately following Jesus—who had drawn away in repulsion and fear—and from the rabbis and

authorities. The leper paid no attention to the protesting shouts of the crowds; he had heard that this was the Messiah who had come to make all things new. He threw himself at the feet of Jesus, calling out, "Lord, if you will, you can make me clean."

Without hesitation Jesus leaned forward and, to the consternation of those watching, he placed his hand on the man, and said, "I will, be clean." Deliberately laying hands on the leper was forbidden by custom, forbidden by the *Traditions*, forbidden by the *Law*, forbidden by common sense. Jesus remained unperturbed, speaking quietly with the obviously healed leper, his skin as normal as others around them. Only his filthy and stinking garments indicated what he had been, but he had the required acknowledgement of Jesus as Messiah and the faith to believe he could be healed by him . . .

"Don't talk about this to anyone," Jesus told him quietly. "Go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them." Jesus did not want public sensationalism, especially the possibility of having every leper in the country turning up for healing of their disease. He had come to bring salvation for the spiritually diseased, for the many more soul-lepers of the world, and not just be a miracle-performing rabbi with a healing system. But this admonition to keep quiet about his dramatic healing was too much for the leper. After keeping the sanctifying observances laid down by Moses in the *Law* he went about everywhere, especially among his outcast leper friends, and told them of what had happened. What Jesus feared took place. He was besieged by so many pleading for healing that he was unable to move around, and he had to withdraw into remote places to get away from them for prayer and the companionship of his Father.

The rabbis and scribes sought to discredit the work he had been doing, pointing out the violation of the *Law* as well as the *Traditions* in the activities of Jesus touching a leper. They were highly skilled plotters, and their experience had shown how they could provoke and divide and eventually overcome any factions with aspirations to power. In their plotting they usually could count on the support of the Romans so long as they confined

themselves to the religious circumstances.

When Jesus returned, refreshed, from his time alone with his Father he confronted the challenge of the professional religionists. He was scathing about their public displays of religion and their private personal weaknesses. "Do not be like the Pharisees and scribes who do acts of righteousness before people to be seen by them," he admonished the crowds, with the trouble-making rabbis and scribes now prominent among them. "When you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your heavenly Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. When you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. This is how you should pray:

*"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Forgive us our debts to you, as we also have forgiven debtors to us.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one."*

"If you forgive people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."

This open attack by Jesus on the most public practices of the professional religionists, and especially the deliberate castigating of them as "hypocrites", intensified the animosity of the rabbis and scribes to incoherent rage. Eventually, when Jesus and his disciples returned from the preaching and teaching tour of Galilee, and were known to be residing once more in Capernaum, scores of incensed scribes arrived from Jerusalem and other parts of the country to challenge Jesus, like vultures gathering around the prey. Their bearded, dark-robed and menacing presence in synagogues and public gatherings as they waited for Jesus to make a mistake flustered many people, and occasionally the disciples, but never troubled Jesus.

He was staying in the home of Simon Peter's family, a large home with a covered gallery that encircled the courtyard and individual rooms leading from it; other common rooms were approached by steps connected to the courtyard by a loggia. The members of the family, and guests, lived in the single rooms, and shared the facilities of the common rooms. The flat roof was approached by an outside stair and by wooden steps from inside the courtyard.

It was the custom of Jesus to speak from the wooden corridor of the gallery on the first floor, overlooking the courtyard and sheltered by the overhang of the roof, when people crowded into the courtyard and spilled out into the streets. Therefore, he did not see the four men approaching on the street and climbing the outside staircase to the roof. They had come with a sick friend on a pallet, hoping to see Jesus, but when they arrived and saw the crowds around the doorway, they decided to try the roof. From there they could hear, but not see, Jesus talking underneath the overhang. Determined to talk with Jesus, they removed the wooden slats of the overhang above Jesus and lowered their friend through the opening beside Jesus.

Jesus stopped talking to the crowd in the courtyard and gazed at the helpless man on the pallet, immobilized by paralysis, unable even to speak, and discerned the agony of a man tortured by guilt over his sick condition—for it was a common belief, taught by the rabbis, that the extent of one's sickness indicated the sin of the individual and the disapproval of God—greater than his physical disability.

Jesus looked from the sick man to where his four friends stood on the roof above him, waiting confidently for Jesus to act now that they had done all they could to help their friend. This, thought Jesus, was the work of the kingdom of God: a faith that brooked no obstacles, that waited quietly for the impossible when all that could be done had been done. The leper had seen it. All the cured sick had seen it. And now the paralytic and his friends had seen it. But they had not yet seen it all.

"Son", Jesus said in a voice loud enough for all in the courtyard to hear, "your sins are forgiven."

There was an audible gasp from the crowd, and Jesus could see from the sudden alert looks on the faces of the watching rabbis and scribes that they thought at last they had their issue against him. One of them addressed the crowd around him angrily: "Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God?"

Jesus knew that their ritualistic religion blinded them to the obvious purpose of his action, that he was indeed God, and also that he would have to act quickly to put a stop to their trouble-making before they could stir up the crowd against him. If they could sustain a charge of blasphemy they were capable of having him hauled out of the house on to the streets and be stoned to death without waiting for any formal judgment.

"Why are you thinking these things?" he challenged them openly. "Why do you entertain such evil thoughts in your hearts? Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven', or to say, 'Get up, take your pallet and walk?' But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins—"

Jesus stopped speaking and turned to the sick man. The rabbis and scribes knew that it was easy to *say* both of these things; false prophets said them regularly. It was ability to *do* them that made the difference between a false and a true prophet, between a man and the Son of Man. In order to demonstrate that the man's sins had been forgiven by him on the authority of God, he would now show them that the man's impossible physical condition was cured from the same source.

"Stand on your feet," he said to the paralyzed man, "take your pallet, and go home."

The man stood up as easily as if he had just been resting for a few moments instead of being paralyzed for many years, picked up his pallet and joined his four friends. As they pushed their way through the crowds outside the house the watching people in the courtyard exclaimed, "We have never seen anything like this! It was truly a miracle".

The professional religionists were livid with fury. They thought they had been so close to defeating Jesus for his public blasphemy,

and instead they had been made to look ridiculous before the watching crowd by not answering Jesus's public claims to divine authority to forgive sins. They had sought to undermine his claim to divine nature and authority, and not just his ability to heal, but Jesus had publicly demonstrated his moral authority as God's representative on earth, validating his claim to Messiahship—Savior, Redeemer, and Remitter of Sins.

The crowd and the disciples were also aware that a great barrier had just been crossed in the incident. They knew that only God could forgive sins, as the rabbis had said. They knew that even the Angel of the Covenant, who had been appointed by God to accompany their forefathers in their wilderness exodus from Egypt, had not been able to forgive sins. This had always been God's prerogative, and Jesus had just taken it upon himself, with calmness and assurance, as his right. In other words, he had just declared himself the Messiah before them—and the rabbis and scribes had to walk silently away!

One of the Pharisees who had been listening to Jesus invited him to come and eat with him at his home. His name was Simon of Magdala a large and wealthy town on the western shores of the Lake of Galilee—notorious for its hedonism, sorcery and corruption—a center for a thriving dyeing trade and manufacture of woolen textiles. Simon was from a wealthy family and in the custom of the time the meal, served in the open terrace, was not only attended by invited guests but by friends and even passing strangers, who were welcome to stand around the open courtyard and listen to the conversation. The invited guests were reclining around the table, the body resting on the couch with the feet away from the table, while the elbow rested on the table. As the chief guest Jesus was seated at the head of the table beside Simon, so that all could hear what he was saying.

Suddenly, amid the polite exchanges at the start of the meal, there was a flurry of pushing at the door, voices raised in compliant followed by cries of surprise, as a woman pushed her way on to the terrace. The noises died away as the woman was recognized as a notorious local Jewish courtesan and medium known as Deborah.

The silence following the appearance of the sorceress was compounded with shock that a woman—any woman other than family—should be present on her own in public, and with uninvited intrusion to the feast, brought outraged looks at Simon to see how he was reacting to such a disreputable situation. Her beauty, skills, dissolute and provocative manner of life, had made her notorious in social circles throughout the country. Her intelligence was both admired and feared, but unknown to those present her life had become a living hell.

The woman herself, like Jesus, seemed oblivious to the surrounding displeasure. She moved forward swiftly to where he was reclining beside Simon and, without a word, produced an alabaster phial of perfume of spikenard and—to gasps and murmurs of astonishment and outrage—proceeded to anoint Jesus' feet with it. Had the woman been a known virgin her action would still have elicited a surprised response, for the perfume she was using was extremely rare, expensive and used sparingly. This woman poured it all lavishly on the feet of Jesus, unbound her hair—another violation of propriety for any woman in public—and, sobbing but still silent, dried both her tears and perfume on the feet of Jesus. In the protracted and shocked silence Simon and the other guests looked from the kneeling figure to the composed and thoughtful face of Jesus gazing at her bowed head. If this Galilean were really a prophet, the host and guests were thinking, he would know all about this woman's reputation and deal with her appropriately.

"Simon," Jesus said pointedly, "I have something to say to you".

"Tell me, rabbi," Simon stressed the title, with a thin edge of sarcasm.

"Two men owed money to a certain money-lender", Jesus continued mildly. "One owed him five hundred *denarii*, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he cancelled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?"

Simon was cautious, sensing a trap, but finally said, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt cancelled." It was the known theological position of the rabbis: if there is much benefit, there is

much love; if there is little benefit, there is little love.

He was relieved when Jesus confirmed this. “You have judged correctly,” Jesus said. But then he turned to where the woman was still kneeling at his feet, sobbing quietly, her face hidden by her unbound hair. “Do you see this woman? I came into your house and you gave me no water for my feet, although that is common courtesy, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss of greeting, also customary, but this woman has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, as is often done, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little”.

Jesus then spoke to the kneeling woman directly: “Your sins are forgiven; your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

As the woman rose to her feet and walked quickly from the room Jesus made it clear to the silent guests that she had not been cleansed from sin because of her love—she was cleansed by her faith in his person and power which had brought her there expecting forgiveness for her many sins because she believed he was God’s Messiah in the face of all opposition. She had been forgiven because her love for him was such that she knew her public commitment would not be rejected by him. Simon, the Pharisee host, had evidenced no such insight or commitment, and so his reward would be commensurate with his beliefs.

The woman whose debt was so great that she could say nothing to Jesus, who could only seek love and understanding and give the most precious thing she possessed—her silent, vulnerable, public, worship (the perfume was only a symbol)—was given the greatest gift Jesus had to bestow: forgiveness of sins. To know all was to forgive all. She left the house with joy unspeakable to become one of the growing number of women who were now following Jesus, publicly supporting him and his disciples in their public ministry. This new diversion from accepted rabbinical practice—the public discipleship of women—further incensed the rabbis in their campaign to discredit Jesus. With this, and his other, teaching, Jesus was not only opening up windows through which great gales were

blowing away the enmeshing webs of rabbinical “hedges” around the *Law* of Moses, he was relentlessly exposing them as self-serving hypocrites.

On one occasion, when Jesus and his disciples were walking through the fields, followed as usual by interested crowds, the disciples plucked some handfuls of grain. Immediately, the strict Pharisees in the crowd following said to Jesus, “Why are your disciples doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath.” In the Levitical *Law* of Moses it was permissible for the poor to help themselves to standing crops to meet their immediate need, so Jesus knew they were not alleging theft. But, as always, the professional religionists seemed to know more about their own *Traditions* than the *Law*. It was true that the *Law* gave great importance to the Sabbath—it was, said God, a symbol of God’s covenant relationship with Israel, the violation of which was punishable by death. But it was instigated, God made clear, for the benefit of humankind, a “*day of rest from labor*.” But the rabbis and doctors of the *Law* had so elevated its importance with ridiculous minutiae that it had become a ludicrous unacceptable observance. They had worked out a code of thirty-nine kinds of forbidden activity that had made God—and themselves—a laughingstock with the absurdities. It was forbidden to tie or untie a knot, write two letters of the alphabet, eat an egg which a hen had laid on Sabbath, kill a louse (its legs could be broken, and the insect killed next day!). The professional religionists were an intolerable incubus on the backs of God’s people.

“Haven’t you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need?” Jesus demanded in response. “He ate the consecrated Tabernacle bread which is only lawful for priests to eat. Or haven’t you read in the *Law* that on the Sabbath the priests in the Temple violate the day and yet are innocent. I tell you that One greater than the Temple is here. If you had known what these words mean, ‘*I desire mercy, not sacrifice*’, you would not have condemned the innocent. The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.”

He was teaching in the synagogue on a later Sabbath, with the religionists crowded around the speaker’s rostrum, when a man

with a shriveled right hand stood up and made his way forward. The Pharisees stood in front of him to restrain him from approaching Jesus, challenging Jesus, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"

Jesus knew what they were trying to do, but it was his conviction that the religious bigots must not only be defeated but routed. He signaled to the man: "Stand here in front of everyone", he told him. Turning to the congregation, Jesus addressed them: "Which is lawful on a Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?" If they said it was right to do something good, then the man could be healed; if it was wrong to do good, then they would be at fault for not permitting the man to be cured. They remained silent.

Jesus gazed at the fuming Pharisees in undisguised anger: "If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out?" he demanded scathingly. "How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath." He turned with sympathy to the man who was the focus of the debate. "Stretch out your hand," he said to him, and before their eyes, as the man lifted his shriveled useless hand, it returned to normal.

Instead of being pleased for the man's sake, or being impressed by this further demonstration of Jesus' power, the Pharisees stormed out of the synagogue in a rage, and went immediately to the palace of Herod to discuss how they might have Jesus put to death. They pointed out to the Herodians that every day the crowds following Jesus grew larger, his influence now reaching far beyond Capernaum and Galilee. People were coming from Syria in the north; Tyre and Sidon in the north-west; the Decapolis to the north-east; Judea and Jerusalem in the centre of the country; the regions on the east of the Jordan; and Idumea in the south. Streams of sick came to him with all manner of diseases, epilepsy, demon-possessed and the paralyzed, and Jesus healed them all. These people carried the news of this prophet from Nazareth back to their homes, and if it was not stopped soon his power would soon extend into the Jews of the Diaspora across the world



Jesus knew that his “hour of destiny” — the deliverance of all creatures from the bondage of inherited and practiced sin — would be consummated in less than two years, at the time of the Passover Feast. In those two years he had no interest in the current Roman occupation of Judea, but was focused on the destruction of rabbinical Judaism, Satan’s greatest weapon of spiritual subversion, which would still exist when the Roman empire was gone.

In the midst of the raging national controversy over his confrontation with the professional religionists Jesus remained serene. Their constant attempts to entrap him when he spoke to the crowds bothered Jesus no more than the flies buzzing around them. In fact, he informed his anxious disciples, he was now ready for the next step, and they were now ready to join him. The people who accepted his teaching and followed him had often asked him to formalize their relationship with him in some way but he had always refused. The kingdom of God was not an organization, he told them, it was an organism like yeast in bread or like the mustard seed expanding disproportionately to its size; growing spontaneously as a life-generating growth of the Spirit of God, not by the deliberations and mechanisms of men.

Many of those who said they wanted to be his followers still did not realize the scale of the commitment required of them. They were excited by the miracles, they were enthusiastic about the teachings, they were inspired by the thought that they were close to God’s Messiah, but they did not comprehend the perfection and allegiance God required of them as His children and chosen people, the divine necessity to enlighten the nations of the world that God had come to earth in his person and that they were messengers of the kingdom of God.

“The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests,” he told them, “but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.” It was common knowledge that Jesus had no home of his own, he had not lived with his family for some time, and did not live with them in Capernaum when they came to live there. In Capernaum he sometimes lodged with Peter and his family, but mostly he went off on his own in the evenings into the one of the surrounding mountain

areas. Everything he owned he carried on his person. When he said to one man, "Follow me", and the man replied, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father," Jesus said to him inflexibly, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Concern for the dead, or the social appearances associated with it, were an indication of a lack of understanding of God and His kingdom. When yet another said, "I will follow you, Lord, but first let me go back and say good-bye to my family," Jesus had told him, "No-one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

It was not just that they found it difficult to comprehend the kind of allegiance they owed their Creator, as well as the obedience to their heavenly Father; it was in their very nature to consider "me first". When they learned to seek first the kingdom of God and all its glories then they would truly understand the immensity of the gift God was offering in exchange for their trust in him. He had tried to teach them that when they entered this new kingdom of God it was like being born again into a new family; they "died" to everybody and everything—parents, children, spouses, families, groups, and governments. There had to be death to the unthinking requirements of social conformity, and the self-serving practices of the old rabbinical order, in order to find God-centered values and rewards in the new relationship.

He had an opportunity to illustrate this for his disciples and others when he was walking by the Lake one day. He had just finished an extended time of teaching, and was walking away when he saw a relative of his, Levi, commonly known as Matthew, son of Alphaeus, or Cleopas, the brother his step-father Joseph. Levi-Matthew was one of the hated tax-gatherers, an extremely clever and independent individual, who had flouted Jewish convention by becoming a tax-gatherer and associating with rebels and social outcasts. But Jesus knew that he had been interested in him and his teachings for some time.

When Jesus said to Matthew commandingly "Follow me" at his customary tax-gathering booth, both of them were aware that it was a call to leave his self-indulgent ways and to commit himself to the

discipleship of Jesus. Matthew promptly pushed himself away from his table and, without a backward glance, went with Jesus. They went to Matthew's house to talk over what the future held and, when they were finished, Matthew invited his fellow-tax-gatherers to come and hear about his decision and what Jesus had to say. The incorrigible Matthew also invited some prostitutes he knew to join them. When the Pharisees heard what was happening they approached the gathering of tax-gatherers and prostitutes eating with Jesus, and demanded angrily, "Why do you eat with tax-collectors and sinners?"

Jesus replied bitingly, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners".

Some of John the Baptist's disciples were among those listening, and they were disturbed at this new manifestation of the unorthodoxy of Jesus. One of them, swinging his arm in a sweeping gesture to indicate the table loaded with food and wine, asked Jesus sarcastically, "How is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?" It would have been easy for Jesus to dismiss the question, for the only obligatory fast according to the Scriptures was the Day of Atonement. Occasionally, the Sanhedrin or the synagogues would announce a fast for a special occasion, but it had become a standard practice of the rabbis to insist that fasting take place on all Mondays and Thursdays, throughout the year, clad in sober clothing, and making a public show of offering God their hunger pangs. To the professional religionist, therefore, seeing Jesus and his disciples sitting at an overflowing table on a rabbinically recognized fast-day, with tax-gatherers and prostitutes for company, was an unpardonable transgression.

Jesus replied to the question: "When you fast do not make a performance of it like others. Behave normally so that no-one knows you are fasting except your Father in heaven, who will reward you accordingly." Jesus had noted the "*we* and the Pharisees" in the question from John the Baptist's disciples, and knew the motives behind it. John's disciples were obviously upset at the greater publicity being given to Jesus and his disciples, but they were also

upset that their master was in prison for his Scriptural beliefs while Jesus was free to preach and practice unorthodox “violations” such as this gross public feasting display on a fasting day. Jesus knew John’s convictions regarding the principle of fasting; they had agreed that fasting, like public prayer, had become one of the most abused religious activities in ostentatious sanctimonious posturing. Fasting, like personal prayer, ideally was something to be practiced in secret between a sincere believer and God, not in public demonstrations of one’s godliness. John’s personal covenant with God was that he would be a Nazirite committed to a life of disciplined fasting; he, Jesus, as Spirit-filled Son of Man, had no such covenant with his Father.

John’s continued imprisonment in the dungeons of Machaerus was creating problems for the political as well as religious leaders in Palestine. He was recognized as being innocent of any charges requiring such treatment, and his denunciation of Herod Antipas and Herodias was clearly justified from the *Law*, so the authorities were in a quandary. It was being said publicly that the professional religionists were only too pleased to have John imprisoned by Herod and Herodias, because it saved them from being publicly exposed for their lack of support for a recognized Jewish prophet. Herod Antipas would willingly have released John, had it been left to him; but Herodias was adamant that he had to choose between John or herself: if John was released from prison to continue his public accusations, she would leave Herod, she told him. Herod feared the implacable prophet from the desert and several times he had John brought before him, pleading with him “to be more reasonable”. But John, with chained legs and wasted body, refused to agree with the beleaguered ruler, and on each occasion he was led back to his solitary confinement.

THE KING AND HIS KINGDOM

With the choice of Matthew Jesus decided it was time to bring the number of his disciples to twelve as witnesses to God's glory, to correspond with the former number of Israel's divinely chosen Twelve Tribes before their disobedience. The choosing of the group of twelve disciples had eternal as well as temporal significance, because they would share in future reign with him in heaven as well as on earth as representatives of New Israel. They would be known as "apostles" or "sent ones", distinct from being just disciples, or "followers. The discipleship which he had initiated until now was not the same as the rabbis'. Their disciples attached themselves in order to acquire their particular rabbi's knowledge, debating skills, and theological emphasis. But, ultimately, the loyalty of the disciples of the rabbi was supposed not to be to the rabbi but to their version of the *Law* and to the *Traditions* they represented.

The loyalty and service the "apostles" of Jesus was *above* the *Law* and the *Traditions* and was to be directed towards himself as Son of God, and to the eternal purpose of God. They were to be followers of him, as he was of God. They had not chosen to follow him; he had chosen them to follow him. Theirs was not a choice to follow a way

of life, or to follow a program taught by him, but a calling to follow him personally in life and death. They had to place obedience to his Lordship above all other claims on them—parents, wives, children, houses, lands, possessions. As disciples they were already learning something of what this demanded, but in the short time left which he would be with them they would have to learn it beyond anything they could presently imagine. It was not just a question of comprehending and teaching that he was a divine ruler, but of apprehending the principles of God's kingdom in order to share in the future administration of that eternal kingdom when this present world was purged.

Most of them he had known from his youth, some of them related to him through family ties. Theirs had been the greatest difficulty in acknowledging him as the Messiah, for they had to overcome the obstacles of familiarity. Yet they had done so, and had progressed to the point where they could now be entrusted with the next stage of establishing the kingdom of God. To Simon Peter and Andrew, James and John, Philip and Nathaniel-Bartholomew Jesus now added Levi-Matthew, the shrewd tax-gatherer; Simon the Zealot; Thomas "the Doubter"; Thaddaeus and James, the son of Alphaeus; and Judas Iscariot. Eleven of them came from Galilee, and Judas from Judea. They were an interesting cross-section of personalities and skills; some relatives, some acquaintances and one non-Galilean, Judas Iscariot. When the time came for their ultimate loyalty to be tested in the fiery trials ahead they would all fail, he knew, but the eleven Galileans would recover; the twelfth, Judas from Judea, fanatical and ambitious and devious, would not survive—but from heaven Jesus would designate his chosen Twelfth Apostle replacement at the right time.

They were all young men, most companions of his youth, like himself all around thirty years of age. All of them were characterized by zeal for God, as several of them had demonstrated by leaving their occupations to follow John the Baptist when he had appeared so dramatically out of the desert. They were following him, not because they had been the companions of his youth, but because they sensed and saw in him something that was different

from them, something that drew them away conclusively from John the Baptist they had so rightly admired, something that was greater than John. That response of faith to belief, of inchoate longing to known fulfillment, of willingness to suffer and if necessary to die for him and the Father he loved, had forged them into his divinely-ordained followers. They would do what previous messengers failed or were not instructed to do: declare and establish God's kingdom on earth as it was in heaven. They were also to be Israel in microcosm, with himself, the promised Messiah, incarnated among them instead of the previous *Shekinah* Cloud of the Presence in the desert, the Tabernacle and the Temple.

In sending them out on their own to declare "the gospel of the kingdom" to Israel for their last opportunity, he sent them out in pairs, each helping to support the other as they traveled to different parts of the country. From now on all who joined this small, but explosively burgeoning, spiritual community would form the new Israel of God, bridging the gap between the old failed Israel and committed to fulfilling God's purpose of enlightening the world and making it into his image. Hereditary membership of the nation of Israel because they were descendants of Abraham, or because they were circumcised, was no longer sufficient for God who had tired of the rebellion and disobedience of national Israel against the Old Covenants freely offered by God to them. However, God would give Israel one more chance before he, Jesus, and the Apostles turned to the Gentiles with God's offer of redemption and salvation. But, as the Twelve Apostles of the new kingdom, their responsibility until told otherwise was to preach only to the people of Israel.

"I am sending you out like sheep among wolves," Jesus continued, "so you will have to be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves. Be on your guard at all times because you will be handed over to local councils and flogged in their synagogues. Because of your association with me you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. But when they arrest you, don't worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be told what to say, for it will not be you speaking but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. Brother

will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace on the earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. A man's enemies will be the members of his own household. Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. All men will hate you because of me, but he who remains firm to the end will be saved."

Jesus could see from their expressions the intense excitement from the mixture of challenge and confusion of the message he was giving to them. They were conscious of being sent forth as messengers of the Messiah declaring the imminence of the new world kingdom, but the message also was not what they expected from their reading of the Scriptures. They believed him to be the Messiah, and the even more complexly prophetic "Son of Man"; yet he was giving them a message of suffering and death, and not conquest. They were like gladiators being trained for the arena, but without the experience of real combat. So far they had only seen the skirmishes as spectators watching him; the fears, and brutalities and despairs of battles still lay ahead for them. From now on they would be fully exposed in the arena, increasingly on their own until the time came when he would be removed from them and they would be exposed to the full onslaught of Satan.

"When an evil spirit is cast out of a man," Jesus continued, "it goes mindless through space seeking some form and does not find it. Then it says, 'I will return to the place I left.' When it arrives, it finds the individual has cleaned up his life and put it in order. Then it goes and brings back seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and occupy the individual, and the final condition of that individual is worse than the first. That is how it will be with this wicked generation."

It was a stunning commission—a regal inauguration of a divine kingdom by a divine king—such as no spiritual leader in the history

of the Jews, or any other nation, had ever laid down for his followers. It involved total recognition and allegiance of the individual to Jesus as Messiah, with no reservations or qualifications for any kind of person, from whatever class; no considerations of exemption, no alternative priorities of country, parents, spouses, children, relatives or friends. It required total dependence on God alone. They would live in the world as he was doing, the words and works of God in human bodies; and that was how they would be recorded in heaven. They would have unimpeded access to the mind and powers of God and be channels of divine purpose on earth and rewarded with association with the Messiah in the hereafter.

When they returned from the Lakeside slopes to Capernaum they were again faced by the needy crowds, pushing into the courtyard of the house where Jesus and his disciples had been invited to eat. At one point the disturbance at the entrance to the courtyard was so great Jesus asked the cause. He was told that his family was outside trying to take him away, saying, “he is out of his mind”, and wanting to take him back home to Nazareth!

Jesus shook his head sadly. It was a matter of constant concern to him that his mother, brothers and sisters, disapproved of his activities, for he loved them dearly. But they could not understand how different from them he was, how different his Messiahship was from what they expected. It was considered an inappropriate action at any time for a respected rabbi to be approached in public while he was engaged in a discussion; and it was incredible that his mother should be party to such a gesture knowing what Jesus in his youth had said to her in the Temple, and at the wedding in Cana. It was inexcusable that the family should publicly express such a comment about his state of mind. He detected the influence of his eldest brother, James, who was known and highly respected in Jewish orthodox circles for his strict observance of the rabbinical *Traditions*. James was genuinely concerned—like John the Baptist—at his Messianic message, but Jesus knew that argument alone would not convince him or his family—it would take his resurrection and ascension to his Father in heaven to alter their convictions.

“Who are my mother and sisters and brothers?” Jesus asked in

the silence following their remark about his “state of mind”. He swung his arm to include his disciples standing around him “Here are my mother, my sisters and my brothers! *Whoever does God’s will is my mother and sister and brother,*” he stated emphatically.

It was not just theological doctrine that Jesus was expounding; he was demonstrating what they all knew was a fact of experience. Jesus did not just spend most of his time with his disciples in the work of God, but all of his time. They were his true family, the primary focus of his words and works. Jesus was not only signaling a clear and radical division between himself and his family, but also providing an expanding view of his teaching about the kingdom of God. Until now, as he had emphasized to his apostles, he had placed emphasis on his place in that kingdom; now his emphasis was on the kingdom as a family: “*Whoever does God’s will is my mother and brother and sister,*” and that “whoever” included every race as well as every individual.

Few, if any, of those listening to Jesus were aware that he had just crossed another great spiritual divide in his teaching with the statement “*Whoever does God’s will is my mother and brother and sister*”. His Apostles were being sent on a final mission to all Jews calling for their repentance and place in the kingdom of God but Jesus articulating the principles of the new worldwide Israel/Gentile kingdom of God in a series of seven parables as “*a revelation of the mystery of the kingdom*” known only to those who believed in him. The seven parables were of the Sower and the Seed, the Tares, the Mustard Seed, the Leaven, the Hidden Treasure, the Valuable Pearl, and the Fishing Net. With these seven parables Jesus began to use the term “kingdom of heaven” in association with the “kingdom of God”. This transition would become evident at his resurrection from the dead when the old order of Temple, Israel and ritual sacrifices would end, and a new order of a Spiritual Body—“*my church*”—linked to him in heaven through the presence of the Holy Spirit in every individual would be launched. He explained: “Where two or three gather in my name, there I am in their midst.” In this new dispensation there would be no intervening priest because he, as “Son of God”, would be present in the presence of the

Holy Spirit. The old order of Temple rituals and priesthood was gone for ever.

The unequivocal distinctions between believers and unbelievers - "*Whoever*" meaning Gentiles everywhere as well as Jews, everyone worthy of the new worldwide kingdom of God and Spiritual Body —was both implicit and explicit in these and later parables, delivered with such authority and clarity by Jesus, convinced the professional religionists that Jesus must be put to death quickly before he did more damage to them and the nation.



Jesus knew that it was dangerous for him to visit Jerusalem, for the Passover or any other reason, with the Pharisees and Herodians plotting to have him killed. The rabbis of whatever school, as professional religionists, could not demand the death of Jesus for anything other than a religious reason; and even then, the death penalty had to be approved and carried out by the Romans. But the Herodian faction, being politically recognized by the Romans, could provide political tainted "evidence" that Jesus was provoking social unrest with his teaching emphasis on the "Israel/Gentile kingdom of God", and also that as "Messiah" he was claiming to be a contemporary" king of the Jews" in opposition to the officially appointed Herods and Caesar.

However, Jesus was not unduly concerned. The time for his ultimate confrontation with religious and political leaders in Jerusalem and Rome was still some distance ahead. He had more to say and do, more preparation of the ground, so that when the divinely pre-determined time was come all would know the importance of his final words and works given to him by his heavenly Father. His immediate priority was to destroy the mind-set of his Twelve Apostles and others which was fixed on a three-tier concept of him as a man on earth, God in a distant heaven, and both linked somehow with the Holy Spirit. In reality, God as Eternal Spirit was omnipresent at all times now, physically manifested in himself with unbroken and unsullied communion

through the Holy Spirit present in him without measure, but would be in them according to their apprehension and appropriation after his ascension and the manifestation of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. He was the contemporary physical exemplar of what every believer would be after he had risen from the dead and the Holy Spirit became available to everyone through faith.

It was important for the present, too, that Jerusalem should be seen as his city, the Temple as his *"Father's House"* until it was replaced by his Spiritual Body, the Church, and the religious debate conducted at all times on his terms. He was the Messiah come to claim his own. The Roman Caesar Tiberius, the Judean Procurator Pontius Pilate, the Idumean tetrarch Herod Antipas, the Jewish high priest Joseph Caiaphas, would all be forgotten when Jesus the Messiah would be remembered by the whole world because of what he said and did here and now.

When Jesus left Bethany and entered the city it was in one of its periodic tumults. Pilate, the new Roman procurator, had ordered three images of him to be made and brought to Jerusalem by night. At daybreak, when the Jewish citizens saw them, they were incensed at this disregard of their religious beliefs forbidding images in God's holy city. They had demanded the removal of the images but Pilate refused, and the Jewish delegation began a public fast unto death. Pilate had ordered the Roman soldiers to surround them with their swords drawn, and to separate the protesters from the mutinous spectators. He then stated that, if they did not withdraw and suspend the fasting protest and accept the placing of the images in Jerusalem, they would be cut to pieces immediately. At that command the Jewish spectators in the crowd pushed forward and, kneeling, exposed their necks to the ranks of Roman soldiers, shouting they were ready to die rather than accept the presence of the images. A furious Pilate had to withdraw and remove the images rather than risk an escalation of the simmering violence, but Pilate then heightened the tension by ordering his soldiers to disguise their armor under ordinary robes, and brutally assaulted and killed many of the protesters.

On the Sabbath day Jesus walked past the Sheep Gate, near which

was the small Pool of Bethesda, a spring that was locally famous for its healing powers. Around the pool were five porches to provide shade for the many sick who gathered there. It was a common public belief that, at a certain time, the waters would bubble mysteriously, and from the many sick, blind and lame sitting in the shade of the porches the first person to enter the water afterwards would be healed of his or her particular ailment. Jesus walked over to where an emaciated man lay inert on a mat beside the pool, out of the shade and in the heat of the sun, obviously unable to move himself. Jesus asked him how long he had lain there waiting to be healed, and the man told him "thirty-eight years." Longer than he himself had lived on earth, Jesus thought sympathetically.

"Do you want to get well?" Jesus asked him. The chattering among the others in the shade of the porches had died away, and in the silence they heard the words of Jesus. They did not know this stranger, but they knew that it was the Sabbath and, therefore, forbidden to heal. There were always some rabbis and scribes visiting the pool, for it was a matter of constant rabbinical debate as to whether it was right for a sick person to be healed if the waters moved on a Sabbath.

The man looked up at Jesus beseechingly, conscious of some significance in the question, and a strange power in the unknown questioner. "Sir," he said, "I have no-one to help me into the pool when it moves. While I am trying to get in, someone always gets in ahead of me."

Jesus held his fearful gaze. "Get up!" he told him. "Pick up your mat and walk."

There was not a sound from the watching sick and the onlookers as the man stood up as if he had never been incapacitated in any way. He bent down, rolled up his mat and, tucking it under his arm, he walked away in a daze through onlookers and the porches into the street. Outside, he was immediately accosted by the rabbis and scribes, wanting to know why he was "*breaking the Sabbath*" by carrying a mat. The sick man, who had no love for the religionists, who had never been able or willing to help him, told them curtly that the man who had healed him had told him to do it. The incensed

rabbis demanded to know the name of the man who had helped him to break the Sabbath, but he could not tell them, for Jesus had quietly walked away.

Later, when he was visiting the Temple, the healed man recognized Jesus as the man who had healed him, and learned he was the prophet from Nazareth. He went to Jesus to thank him again for healing him. “Stop sinning,” Jesus told him abruptly, “or something worse may happen to you.”

The man knew what Jesus meant without further explanation, that for many years simply by lying beside the pool he had publicly demonstrated his belief in blatant and religiously questionable superstition, when he should have believed God as he had just done in responding to Jesus. He was happy to witness to the fact now. But when the rabbis knew that it was Jesus who had once again violated the Sabbath—and that deliberately in a public place in Jerusalem in close proximity to the Temple—they were livid with anger. This Galilean pretender, they affirmed, would be taught a lesson in Jerusalem he would not forget. They took the matter to the Sanhedrin leaders, accusing Jesus of deliberately breaking the Sabbath, and encouraging others to do so.

The Grand Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, as it was known to distinguish it from the “smaller sanhedrins” or local councils held elsewhere, was the most august body in Israel, a senate and high court of justice uniting all the civil and judicial powers under its supreme spiritual authority. Its authority was claimed to have been derived from the time Moses had appointed seventy rulers and elders in Israel to help him judge the people. Under Herod the Great it had been deprived of many of its powers but since his death it had accumulated more than it had held for many decades. It held full juridical authority in all religious matters pertaining to Israel, and because it represented all the Jews of the Diaspora as well, with all their wealth and influence in their respective countries, it had a powerful say in political affairs.

It was composed of priests, scribes (or “doctors of the *Law*” as they were known) and elders elected by the people. Members had to be of pure Jewish blood, of an impressive personal appearance and

impeccable reputation, married and fathers of families. Recruitment was by recommendation and co-option, with the High Priest having the final decision. The place where the Grand Sanhedrin met was near the gate of the Temple known as "The Hall of Polished Stones," part of which was within the sacred enclosure of the Temple, and part of it extended into the street outside. The members entered from the side within the Temple, while the accused entered from the street. The members sat in a circle to the right and left of the two presiding dignitaries, the "ruler", and the "father of the assembly", the oldest member. Beside these two dignitaries were two scribes acting as clerks of the court, one for recording conviction and one for acquittal. A third scribe kept a register of attendance. When in full session the seventy members attended, plus the high priest, but usually twenty-three members were considered enough to form a quorum. Because of the haste in which the charges had been brought against Jesus it was not a full session; but there was sufficient interest in the prophet from Galilee for more than the minimum number to turn out.

There was considerable excitement as the members took their recognized places on the two semi-circles of raised stone seats, and Jesus was brought in to take his place in their midst. Some of them knew him from the past (such as Nicodemus, the presiding "ruler"), many only knew him from recent publicity. It was obvious that, unlike others brought before the austere Sanhedrin, he was not intimidated as he stood quietly waiting for the proceedings to begin.

They saw a man of average height and appearance, wearing the simple seamless off-white woolen *kittuna*, or robe, and fringed white *tallith* over-garment, with its four finger-length tassels, with a single blue thread in the fringes, of any ordinary rabbi; in the pouch formed by his colored girdle of flax were the Scriptures of choice, the drinking vessel and the plate for food. Pushed back from his forehead was the *sudar*, or headscarf, ready to be wound into a turban. Those who had heard or read reports of Jesus knew that was everything he owned. The only outstanding features, as he looked over the gathering and murmuring assembly, were the perceptive luminosity of his gaze and the aura of authority that he projected.

The charge and details of the healing of the man at the Pool of Bethesda were read out by Nicodemus, and the Scriptures regarding the punishment of death for breaking the Sabbath were read by the “convicting” scribe. Then Jesus was asked if he had anything to say in his own defence. Jesus described what had happened at the Pool of Bethesda, gave his usual explanation of what the Scriptures taught regarding the Sabbath, and added pointedly, “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working”.

The members of the Grand Sanhedrin were the cream of the nation’s religionists, and knew very well what Jesus was saying. The divine rationale for the Sabbath was that God had created the world in six days and rested on the seventh. But, as Jesus had pointed out elsewhere, the priests in the Temple going about their divinely-commanded duties of the Sabbath were also technically breaking the Sabbath yet were not condemned. Now, he was telling them, God was a Sabbath-breaker, constantly at work seven days a week, day and night, sending sun and rain, seed-time and harvest, acts of grace and mercy.

But, infuriatingly and undeniably correct as was this assertion, it was the accompanying statement of Jesus that pushed many of them beyond endurance: “*My Father . . . I, too, am working*”. This was nothing less than an identifying and outright claim to be equal with God, and it brought several of them to their feet in shouting outrage demanding that such a blasphemer be put to death. Jesus stood quietly waiting for the uproar to die down, and then proceeded with what he had to say: “I tell you the truth, the Son can initiate nothing by himself; he can only do what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. The Father loves the Son and shows him all he does. Yes, to your amazement He will show him even greater things than these. For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it. Moreover, the Father judges no-one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him”.

Jesus held up his hand to quiet the attempts at argument, and it

was a measure of his personal power that everybody sat down on their seats to listen: "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes Him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life. A time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live. As the Father has life in himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in himself. He has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man. You should not be surprised at this for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear His voice and come out - those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned. By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I don't seek to please myself but the one who sent me".

This was a breath-taking statement of equality with divinity such as no-one present had ever heard or read. They were all historical monotheists who did not believe in God having a Son, of being a duality or trinity, whose post-Ezra rabbinical predecessors in producing the *Traditions* had excluded even mentioning the name of God, and had "protected" Him behind 613 "hedges". Yet here was an admittedly learned Jewish rabbi not only stating such a doctrine of duality but claiming to be that Son co-equal with God! They were temporarily silenced not so much by the apparent blasphemy, but by the immensity of the temerity as he stood in front of them claiming God's powers to raise the dead, give life—*eternal life*— and judge the world. He had to be insane.

But Jesus was visibly unconcerned at their reaction, and was talking again: "If I testify about myself it is not valid. John the Baptist has witnessed regarding me, but I have greater testimony than that of John. For the very work that the Father has given me to finish, and which I am doing daily, testifies that the Father has sent me. Also, the Father who sent me has himself testified about me. You have never heard his voice or seen his form, and it is obvious you do not believe his word or believe me as the one he sent. You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life. If you believed Moses, you

would believe me, for he wrote about me. But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say?"

The Grand Sanhedrin sat in shocked, unbelieving silence at this unprecedented attack on the most feared body of religious leaders in the country. They had come expecting no more than a stubborn but respectful defense from a well-meaning but misled peasant rabbi, and they had just been subjected to the most scathing denunciation of their religious beliefs that had ever been delivered. Nor was it the ravings of a lunatic, for the whole address had been delivered with reasoned authority and lucidity. He might be from a village in Galilee but he certainly knew his Jewish theology! Except for his claims to be God!

Jesus had ceased speaking, and without waiting for their response he was preparing to walk out of the council chamber when several Pharisees jumped up, incoherent with rage and frustration, and shouted that he be put to death for blasphemy. Others (among them was Nicodemus, Jesus noted with interest) pointed out that Jesus' theological argument was flawless—if he was indeed the Messiah. So long as he continued to demonstrate powers that they were unable to summon or explain, and he appealed to the Scriptures as his authority, they were at a disadvantage for they could not prove that his powers or his words did not come from God, as he claimed. Also, there was a long history of unrecognized prophets in Israel.

Still, a few challenged Jesus to prove that his powers of which he spoke, and which he used, came from God and not Beelzebub. Jesus faced them again, and mockingly challenged them: "How can Satan drive out Satan? You know that every kingdom divided against itself can't continue to exist, and every city or household divided against itself will not long exist. If Satan opposes himself, he is divided against himself, so how can his kingdom exist? He is facing extinction. If, as you say, I drive out demons by Beelzebub, then by whom do your people drive them out? Conversely, if I drive demons out by the Spirit of God as I do, then the kingdom of God has come to you".

His voice sharpened in anger: "You deadly serpents, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart

the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. But I tell you that men will have to give an account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken here. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned”.

Jesus knew, as did the members of the Grand Sanhedrin, the rabbinical teachings regarding the powers that some of their own rabbi exorcists evoked in displaying their powers. Many of the scribes liked to be known as *sopherim*, “counters”, because of their esoteric skill in interpreting the significance of numbers in the Hebrew Scriptures. Philo, a Jewish philosopher in Alexandria in Egypt, had devised a system of the numerical interpretation of the Jewish Scriptures which, claimed by ten *sephiroth* or “pure numbers” known only to initiates, gave them knowledge of the “*pure being of God*”. They had used the measurements of the Temple in the Scriptures, and had added Egyptian numerology, Babylonian occultism, Persian astrology, and Greek mystery cultism, to develop a “Gnostic” cosmogony known only to the most select of initiates. Based on this arcane knowledge they had created a vast science of magic and superstition by which spirit powers in heaven and earth could be evoked to perform supernatural actions. So the members of the Grand Sanhedrin knew what Jesus meant when he mocked their heavy-handed attempts at implying the Satanic origin of his powers.

In a final demonstration of his authority, and their weakness, Jesus walked out of the chamber without waiting for a decision. With all their claims to wisdom and virtue Jesus knew that it was not intellectual debate that would convince them, but the convincing experience of believing in him as the Son of God and the personal assurance and transforming power of the Holy Spirit in their own lives.



On his return to Capernaum, as Jesus was about to enter the synagogue, some of the elders stopped him to request Jesus to heal

a valued servant of a Roman centurion who had become paralyzed by a crippling disease. "This centurion deserves to have you do this," they appealed to Jesus, "because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue".

If Jesus had reservations about treating a Gentile he refrained from expressing them, and simply said to the elders, "I will go and heal him." In the *Traditions* of the rabbis it was forbidden to enter the houses of Gentiles because they were considered "unclean", but Jesus knew the time had come to reach beyond the Jews who were determined to reject him as their Messiah and his message of God's new worldwide kingdom. The elders went ahead of Jesus to inform the Roman centurion of his imminent arrival, but while he was on his way to the centurion's home he was met by some of the centurion's friends, who passed on to Jesus what the centurion said: "Lord, don't trouble yourself, for I don't deserve to have you come under my roof."

But Jesus wanted to use the occasion to teach those who followed him a lesson, and he insisted on going to the centurion's home. When he arrived there he was met at the door by the centurion, who said again: "Lord, I don't deserve to have you come under my roof. That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and this one 'Come' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it."

Jesus smiled when he heard these words, marveling that a Gentile could perceive what most Jews did not, and, turning to the people following him, he said, "I have not found anyone with such great faith even in Israel. I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth." Then Jesus said to the centurion, "Go! It will be done just as you believed it would". When the centurion went to his servant's room he found him fully recovered.

Soon afterwards Jesus was on a visit to a town called Nain, about twenty-five miles from Capernaum. He was approaching it from the north-east by way of Endor—where King Saul of Israel had his notorious encounter with the witch before his fatal battle with the Philistines in which he and his son, Jonathan, died—when he saw a funeral procession coming out of the gate to the local burying place outside the wall. Travelers were drawing aside from the procession, partly out of respect for the mourners, but mostly because they did not want to be contaminated by coming close to a dead body.

Jesus stood in the road where he was, watching the approaching procession and taking note of the grieving mother being escorted by relatives at the head of the procession. This was her only son and Jesus was touched by her inconsolable grief. Walking towards her, he said, “Don’t cry!”

The grieving mother looked blankly at him, a strange man talking to her in public—while the mourners stood around uncertainly. But Jesus had already turned to the coffin in which the child was lying. There was a gasp of amazement as Jesus touched the coffin—all those who had even been close to it would have to go through extensive purification rites with the priest—and said to the dead body, “Young man, I say to you, get up!” There were cries of astonishment and fear as the youth sat up, and then Jesus held his hand as he helped him towards his mother. She could only gaze at him speechlessly. Her relatives, however, called out, “A great prophet has come to us!” and “God has come to help his people”, and ran back into the town to let everybody know what they had just seen.

The news of Jesus’ action in raising the youth from the dead in a public place raced throughout the whole of the territory, adding to the many stories already being told about the prophet from Nazareth and increasing the concerns of the professional religionists. How were they to deal with this man who already had many more followers in the country than all the religious factions combined? The Pharisees only had six thousand members, according to the historian Josephus. They were even more perturbed at the increasing willingness of the people to accept Jesus as God’s Messiah—*Immanuel*, “God with us”.

But Jesus continued to minimize the importance of the miracles he accomplished. Unless they were seen as the presence and purpose of God in their midst, Jesus told the people crowding around him, they had not only failed in their aim but were intrinsically dangerous. He warned them. "If the miracles that have been done among you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, if the miracles that were done in you had been done in Sodom it would have remained to this day. It will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you."

It was an essential part of his ministry to teach them the nearness of God, just as he was near to them now; to know the assurance of an immanent spiritual power greater than their own to which they could turn and on which they could depend at any time. They had to learn that while time was not always available for this, opportunity was there whatever the situation. If possible, they should withdraw from the roaring rage and hate and violence of the world, as he did from time to time, but when that was not possible they could develop a relationship with their heavenly Father that would be a constant source of strength. Beyond the destructive demonic forces coursing across the world around them there was a kingdom of love and joy and peace and righteousness and justice for all those who believed.

Seeing their confusion now, Jesus said to them, "All things have been committed to me by my Father. No-one knows the Son except the Father, and no-one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me," he urged them, with gentleness and compassion, "all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

When Jesus had finished talking two of John the Baptist's disciples approached him, saying they had a message from John. Jesus was in Magdala at the time, on the western shores of the Lake

of Galilee, and the disciples had traveled a considerable distance from Machaerus in the south, near the Dead Sea. They told Jesus of John's concern at the reports he was receiving and concluded with John's exact words: "Are you the One who was expected to come, or should we look for someone else?"

Jesus looked at their simple, travel-stained garments, their attenuated bodies and passionate eyes, and knew how his words and actions must seem to them and their revered and doomed master in the dungeons of Machaerus. It was difficult enough for his own disciples to accept what he was saying; how much more these men committed to a beloved and imprisoned master? His own disciples, too, would question his words and works when the final crisis came. John would not get out of his prison alive, and the message his disciples carried back would have to be one that would lift his heart as well as theirs as he faced his inevitable death.

"Go back and report to John what you hear and see," Jesus said to them gently. "The lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Happy is the man who does not fall away on account of me." This was an approximate prophecy taken from the *Book of Isaiah* familiar to all those listening. Jesus knew it would satisfy John as to one aspect of his ministry; the remainder was too difficult to communicate through others. As John's disciples turned away, obviously still not satisfied, there was a murmur of disapproval in the crowd around Jesus. But Jesus held up his hand to put a stop to it immediately.

"What did you go into the desert to see?" he demanded harshly, referring to John. "A reed swayed by the wind? If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in king's palaces." His voice rose passionately as he repeated again "What did you go out to see—a prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one of whom it is written, *'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.'* I tell you, there has not been born anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of

heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful individuals lay hold of it. For all the *Prophets* and the *Law* prophesied until John and, if you are prepared to accept it, he is the Elijah who was prophesied to come. He who has ears, let him hear.”

He looked somberly at the crowd around him—some eager, some skeptical, some laughing, some sneering, some calculating, some admiring—and in his mind he saw his imprisoned friend’s intense dedicated features. “To what can I compare this generation?” he said bitterly. “They are like children sitting in the market-places and calling out to each other: ‘*We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge and you did not cry.*’ For John came neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and they say, ‘He is demon-possessed’. The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Here is a glutton and drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!’ But wisdom is proved right by what is produced by actions.”

Chapter 10

will be available on this site on the 1st February 2010