

CHOOSING HEAVEN

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Chapter 1:

Four men choosing.

Jacob was a criminal to be executed under Roman law as punishment for his crimes. I have given him a name because it does not appear in any historical document. It was a popular name at the time so it will do. Two other men were to be executed with him. One was a criminal like himself, the other a renowned preacher, teacher and miracle worker called Jesus of Nazareth. Jacob wondered why the preacher was being executed. He had heard that Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor had declared him innocent and wanted to free him. It seemed that Jesus of Nazareth had caused a stir across the whole nation of Israel with his revolutionary ideas, and driven the religious establishment to such jealousy and anger that they wanted an end of him. They called him a blasphemer for claiming that he was the Son of God and could see that the people were beginning to think of making him King of Israel. So it seemed that they had forced Pilate's hand, threatening to cause trouble for him with the Emperor if he didn't order Jesus' death.

The method of execution chosen was crucifixion. Eventually it would be banned across the whole of the Roman Empire because of its terrifying cruelty.

Three crosses were laid on the ground. Nails were driven through the hands and feet of all three men and their crosses lifted up and dropped into the prepared sockets. Jacob wished that he could have been condemned to be executed by the sword as many were. Oh for a swift blow to the back of the neck with a finely sharpened blade and to be instantly dispatched to the next world? This was not what was planned for him. Crucifixion was designed to inflict maximum pain for the maximum length of time. He was not aware that he was caught up in a true life drama that was about to divide history.

He looked at Jesus next to him. His body had already been beaten and flogged and torn into a mess of blood. A crown of thorns had been driven hard onto his head and blood had run down his face. How could such a good man have been treated like this? Many of the onlookers began to jeer, especially the religious leaders, gloating that they were now to be rid of him at last. They spoke into his agony. "You're supposed to be the great Messiah, let's see you get yourself off the cross miracle worker?" The criminal on the other side of Jesus joined in. "If you're the Messiah, prove it

why don't you? Why don't you save yourself, and while you are at it, save us as well!" This was too much for Jacob. He called across angrily, "Don't you fear God you fool, even when you are about to die? This man is innocent, we are guilty." In agony of soul Jesus cried out, "Forgive them Father, they do not understand what they are doing."

Jacob wondered what was happening to him. In the close presence of Jesus he began to see and believe that this man from Nazareth truly was the Son of God. That the kingdom of heaven he had always preached about was real. The message of forgiveness that he had always preached could apply to him, dreadful man though he was. What had he to lose? He dared to ask, "Jesus, when you come into your Kingdom, please remember me!"

Jesus turned to Jacob, looked into his eyes with compassion, and replied, "Of course I will remember you Jacob. How could I turn away anyone who puts their trust in me? Be confident, even today you will be with me in Paradise."

I think we have to agree, Jacob made a good choice that day. He chose heaven. His companion in crime chose differently. Jesus chose to forgive. He chose the cross. Three men made choices that determined their destiny. There is a fourth man to consider in this day of drama.

His name doesn't appear in the records either so I will call him Julius, a popular Roman name of the time. Julius was a captain in the occupying Roman army, a centurion in fact, in charge of one hundred soldiers. He was not a criminal, just the opposite. It was his responsibility to make sure that law and order was upheld. To have achieved his rank would require that he was of excellent character, courageous and very able. It was his task to fully organise and be in charge of the executions, acting under the orders of the governor. Needing to keep a close watch on all the proceedings he would have seen and heard everything. What did he make of it all? We could only speculate on his private thoughts and feelings. These are not recorded. But we do know he was a changed man that day for his response to events, to his close encounter with Jesus is stated clearly in the bible. After Julius saw Jesus die having just called out to God, "Father into your care I give my spirit!" Julius himself cried out in response, "Without doubt this man was innocent! Without doubt he was the Son of God!"

What did he do then? The bible says, "He turned to God and worshipped Him." Julius believed in Jesus and turned to God. He chose heaven.

Chapter 2: Four Men with a Story.

These four men all became famous writers. They wrote the first four books of the New Testament section of the Bible. Considering that every year more copies of the bible are sold than any other book, these authors are the most read authors of all time. One might conclude that it is worth listening to what they have to say. Their names are well known. They are Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Thousands of churches have been named after them. Each of them tells about the amazing life of Jesus of Nazareth. However each tells the story from their own personal point of view and though there is naturally a huge amount of overlap, each writer includes or leaves out particular parts of the whole story according to their personal knowledge or purpose.

I will introduce them.

Matthew was a Tax Collector in a town on the shores of Lake Galilee in Northern Israel during the first century occupation of Israel by the Romans. Matthew was employed by the Romans to collect taxes from the local population. He was a Jew, and extremely unpopular for serving the Romans in this way. One day as he sat at his table in the market place receiving taxes from his own people, and recording the amounts they had brought, Jesus came by, looked him in the eye and said, "Why don't you give up this lifestyle Matthew? Come along with me and become my disciple." Something powerful connected with Matthew. He sensed that a new destiny awaited him. Without hesitation he just up and left his money table and went off with Jesus. He became one of the specially chosen twelve disciples who eventually became known as the twelve apostles. He spent three years with Jesus up to the time of his crucifixion and resurrection. He was a Jew, writing to the Jews about their expectation that a great Messiah would come to rescue them from oppression and restore Israel to a great and independent nation of which this messiah would become king. How disappointed they were when Jesus the Messiah came along as a man of peace, not war, and preached about a heavenly kingdom 'not of this world'. They wanted an earthly kingdom with a powerful army. The dominant theme of Matthew's writing is to explain to the Jews that Jesus' purpose was to establish a spiritual and everlasting kingdom, 'The Kingdom of Heaven.'

He opens his story by explaining Jesus' ancestry. He says,

"These are the ancestors of Jesus Christ who is the descendent of Abraham and King David."

He then lists the ancestors.

Mark's occupation is not known. All that can be said is that he was from a wealthy background and was probably a man of independent means. He was fascinated by Jesus and much taken with his many miracles. Though not one of the 'twelve' he belonged to the wider group of disciples that followed Jesus around. One might consider him an action man more interested in what was said and what happened than why. He writes his story at a fast pace. 'Suddenly' is a popular word with him. He tells the story of Jesus with wonder and amazement. His opening words are simply,

Here begins the wonderful story of Jesus.

His story is the shortest of the four.

Luke was a medical doctor. His Nationality was likely to have been Syrian. He was not a Jew. There is no indication that he ever met Jesus personally. He became a Christian when he met the apostle Paul and became a constant companion of his during his missionary travels. He is also the author of the fifth book (Acts) in the New Testament. One way of describing Luke in today's language would be 'Investigative Journalist'. He travelled about gathering exact records of Jesus life from a multitude of eye witnesses. He had a friend called Theophilus and decided to write to him regarding his developing faith. He could never have guessed that this personal letter to a friend would become the third gospel book in the bible. He never planned it this way.

The first words were,

My dear friend Theophilus, a number of articles about Jesus have already been written. I thought it would be a good idea to look carefully into them and then talk to as many eye witnesses as I could so that I could prepare a fresh, carefully

ordered and accurate report. The reason I do this is to reassure you of the truth of them so you will be helped with your faith.

John was a fisherman. He was out fishing one day when Jesus came along and invited him to become his disciple. John responded immediately and left his nets. Jesus said to him, "Now I will show you how to fish for the souls of people." He became one of the twelve and became a particularly close friend of Jesus. Though he writes quite fully about the things that Jesus did and taught, he seemed more interested in explaining exactly who Jesus was. He explains why God sent him as his Son from heaven to earth. He is very clear about his purpose in writing this particular account. "I have written all these things so that you who read them can believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and by believing in him you will find eternal life."

His first words in introducing his Gospel story are these.

Before God created the universe, Jesus was already there with Him. He worked together with God to create everything. In Jesus is eternal life and he wants everyone to have it. They can if they ask.

God sent John the Baptist to prepare the way for Jesus and to show people that Jesus was the true light of life.

When Jesus did come, only a few people recognised who he was. But those who did, those who chose to receive him, God took to be his own children. This was nothing to do with their natural birth. This was made possible through spiritual birth, being born of God through the Holy Spirit. When Jesus came down from heaven, to live on earth for a short time, he took on the form of a human being. He did this for our benefit. He became like us so that we could become like Him. He came so that we could see that he was full of loving forgiveness and perfect truth.

He came ready to pour out upon us one blessing after another.

His life is a light that shines into the darkness.

A word of explanation.

Chapter four, 'Simply True: The Amazing life of Jesus.' is my personal translation of the four bible accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, forged into one single account. The events are arranged according to the order in which they happened. This is a great help because the bible is not always written in this way. I have used ordinary everyday conversational language wherever I can, and have avoided wherever possible, academic or theological language. I kept two guiding principles in mind while translating. First, I asked myself on behalf of those that I was writing for, "So what's it saying?" and tried hard to make that clear. Secondly, I kept in mind an expression much used by modern architects, 'less is more', feeling free, for the sake of clarity to leave out altogether particularly difficult bible passages. I think this has helped considerably to keep focus on the essential truth of the gospel message. I am confident that you will find that after reading 'Simply True' in chapter four, that you will find the bible much easier to follow and understand.

I recommend the 'New Living Translation' (NLT).

Chapter 3.

Why the Book?

It was the first day of term at Wyther Park School. It was my gap year following the completion of sixth form prior to starting University at Loughborough for a three year teacher training course. I had been fortunate to land a contract with the Leeds Education Authority to teach for a year as an unqualified teacher.

On arrival at the school I reported to the headmaster's office as requested. He was called Mr. Turner and nicknamed Farmer Turner because of his looks. He invited me in and said, "Go and have a look round the school until morning break Mr. Towle, go to the staffroom and introduce yourself to the other teachers, then come and see me and I will show you how to prepare lessons. I must say I felt very important being call Mr. at the tender age of eighteen and two weeks.

So it was. I met with Mr Turner as requested. He brought out a brand new lesson preparation book, opened it and wrote at the top,

1. Aims of the Lesson:

"It is most important Mr. Towle that you are very clear about what you expect the lesson to achieve. Why are you giving this lesson and what is its purpose? Whenever appropriate, explain this to the class before you begin. They will be greatly helped and be much more involved, attentive and focussed if they understand what you are about and the benefits they will gain. Lessons without a clear aim will appear aimless. **Before planning the lesson, write down your aims.**"

Wow! Thank you Mr. Turner. Your instruction and advice laid a solid foundation not just for my teaching career but life in general. Before planning anything I ask myself, "What are your aims Michael, what is the outcome you are hoping for?"

The purpose of this chapter is to explain to you my aims in writing the book.

The apostle Paul wrote a letter to some Christians in Rome. In this letter he explained that if **anyone** believes God and puts their trust in him, they will never be turned away, will always be accepted by him, and that he will keep their souls safe for heaven. We saw a prime example of this at the

beginning of chapter one when the criminal Jacob, hanging on the cross next to Jesus, believed in him, put his trust in him and Jesus kept his soul safe for paradise (heaven). Getting to heaven isn't complicated. God's reservoir of mercy never dries up.

He explained it like this:

"Anyone who calls on God will be accepted by him and find safety for their souls.

But how can they call on him unless they believe in him?

How can they believe in him unless they have heard the truth about him?

How can they hear the truth about God unless someone meets with them and explains it?

How beautiful it is when someone takes the trouble to be a messenger of the Good News of God.

Faith comes to people when they hear this good news."

My purpose in writing this book is that you might hear the truth about God and Jesus, find faith, choose to put your trust in them, and keep your soul safe for heaven.

I remind you of what the apostle John says at the end of his Good News (Gospel) account. It is well worth repeating.

"I have written these things so that you who read them can believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and that by believing in him you will find eternal life."

I share completely his heart and purpose.

Read on.

Chapter 4: Simply True: The Amazing Life of Jesus:

1.

The town of Bethlehem was in Judea, a region of Israel. This is where Jesus was born. Herod the Great was king at the time. Mary, a girl who lived in Nazareth was engaged to a carpenter called Joseph. She was looking forward to their marriage. God sent an angel called Gabriel to speak to her. He brought a disturbing message. "I know you are a virgin," he said, "but you are going to become pregnant. This will not be because of sleeping with Joseph. You will remain a virgin but you will still become pregnant."

Mary was shocked. "This is impossible." she exclaimed. "How can that happen?" Gabriel replied, "Dear Mary, do not be upset, this is going to be a miraculous birth. The Holy Spirit of God will cause this to happen. Your baby will be a boy. He will be holy and will be called the Son of God. You are to give Him the name Jesus. Don't be frightened. This will turn out to be a greater blessing than you can ever imagine." Mary replied, "I am the Lord's servant, I am willing to do whatever He wants." She did become pregnant as the Angel Gabriel predicted.

Joseph, who had not slept with Mary, decided to break off the engagement, naturally believing that she had been with someone else. Being a kindly man, he arranged to do it secretly to protect Mary from disgrace. As he lay awake one night wondering how to do this, an angel of God came and stood at the side of him. "Listen to me Joseph. You must take Mary as your wife. She has not been unfaithful. The child in her has been conceived by the Holy Spirit. She is going to give birth to a son and I want you to give him the name Jesus. This name means Saviour, for he will save the people from their sins. He will also be called Immanuel. This name means, "God is with us." Joseph did just as the angel had asked. He brought Mary home to be his wife but did not sleep with her until after Jesus was born.

2.

About this time, Augustus, the Roman emperor of the day decided to take a national census of the population. This meant that Joseph had to

register in Bethlehem. Mary was well advanced in her pregnancy by this time but she went with Joseph anyway. When they arrived in Bethlehem the only place left to stay was the stable of an inn. This was where Jesus was born.

That night, there were shepherds caring for their sheep in the fields outside the village. They had an incredible experience. An angel appeared, and the whole landscape lit up with the dazzling presence of God. They were terrified. The angel calmed them down as well as he could. "Don't be frightened. This is a time for great happiness. I am bringing the best news you could ever hope for. The expected Messiah, Christ the Saviour, has been born in Bethlehem tonight."

At that moment, a vast crowd of angels appeared in the sky. They were praising God, singing, "Glory to God in heaven, and peace to those on earth." When the angels returned to heaven, the shepherds wondered what to do. "Come on, why don't we go to Bethlehem and see for ourselves what has happened?" They ran to the village in excitement and found their way to the stable where the birth had taken place. In amazement they looked upon the new born child and worshipped him, knowing he was sent by God. Full of happiness, they went everywhere, telling everyone what they had seen and heard. Eventually, full of thankfulness, they went back to their fields.

3.

Joseph and Mary found a place to live in Bethlehem. While Jesus was still under two years old, astrologers from Persia were inspired by God to go to see him. They found his home by following a star that moved ahead of them, finally stopping directly over the house where Jesus lived. They went in and knelt before the child and worshipped him. After leaving expensive gifts, they headed back to Persia full of wonder. Because King Herod was plotting to kill Jesus they avoided going the way of his palace so they could not be questioned about where Jesus could be found. An angel appeared to Joseph to warn him to go to Egypt immediately. That night, Joseph and Mary set out with their child. They lived in Egypt until the time when Herod died and it was safe to return to Israel. They decided to settle in Nazareth, in Galilee. This was where Jesus grew up.

At the age of twelve Jesus was taken by his parents to Jerusalem for the Jewish Passover Festival. When this ended, the whole family group, with others from Nazareth set off on the seventy mile return journey. After a while Joseph and Mary realised that they hadn't seen their son for over a day, so they went looking for him amongst the many travellers heading back to Nazareth. When they couldn't find him they became very worried and decided to go back to Jerusalem and look for him there. After searching Jerusalem for three days, getting more and more frantic, they finally found him at the Jewish temple. He was, sitting among the teachers and religious leaders discussing deep questions. The exceptional wisdom of his answers astounded them all.

Mary called him over. "Son, your Father and I have been sick with worry. We've been frantically searching for you for days! What are you doing here?" Jesus was puzzled. In all innocence he explained, "I thought you would have realised where I was, that I would be here in my Father God's House, doing what he has called me to do." They had no idea what he meant! On the way back to Nazareth, Mary thought deeply about things, wondering about the future.

As Jesus grew into manhood he was known for being exceptionally wise. Everyone loved him and it was obvious that God was always close to him, blessing him at all times.

4.

Jesus worked as a carpenter until he was thirty years old. This was the fifteenth year of the reign of the Roman Emperor Tiberius Caesar. Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea.

Around that time John the Baptist began to preach in all the regions surrounding the Jordon River. John lived in the wilderness and people from Jerusalem and all over Judea came to hear him preach. His message was this. "You are to give up all your wrongdoings, turn back to God, and change your way of thinking." Those who agreed with his message he baptised in the River Jordon. This was to show that God had forgiven them and that they were now washed clean. Another message he preached was, "I have come to prepare the way for Jesus Christ. He is much greater than I

am. I only baptise you with water, but when he comes, he will baptise you with water, and he will baptise you with God's Holy Spirit."

5.

One day, Jesus arrived at the Jordan. He went over to John and asked him, 'Will you also baptise me?' 'I can't do that.' exclaimed John, 'You should be the one baptising me!' Jesus replied 'John, this is to please God. He wants it done this way. It is the right thing to do. So John baptised Jesus and as he came up out of the water, the Holy Spirit, like a dove, rested on him. God's voice was heard. "This is my Son who I greatly love. I couldn't be more pleased with Him!"

Jesus, having been filled with the Holy Spirit was led by the Holy Spirit out into the desert. He lived there for forty days and ate nothing. This was the time for him to be tested and to overcome the temptations of the devil. At the end of the forty days, Jesus was very hungry. The devil came to Jesus with his first temptation. "If you are God's Son, why don't you do a miracle and turn those stones on the ground into loaves of bread?" Jesus answered, "I will not. It is written in the scriptures that man does not live only on bread but on every word that God speaks."

The devil tried again. "Why not perform a spectacular miracle that will astound people and cause them to follow you? Why not jump off the highest point of the temple? You know that God will send his angels to catch you before you hit the ground. People will gasp in amazement." Jesus answered, "It is written the scriptures that we must never put God to the test."

The devil tried another temptation. "If you will worship me instead of God I will give you the power to rule the world." Jesus replied, "I tell you again Satan, God expects us to live according to what is written in the scriptures. We are to worship only God, and serve only him. I command you to leave." So, the devil left. All his lies had failed. God sent angels to strengthen Jesus and provide everything he needed. Then, in the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus left the desert ready to do everything God had planned for him.

John the Baptist continued preaching and baptising, attracting so many people that priests were sent from Jerusalem to find out what was going on. They caught up with John at Bethany. "Who are you? Are you the Christ,

the promised Messiah?" "No I am not." John answered. "Then who are you? What do you have to say about yourself?" He replied, "I am a voice calling out, get ready, the Lord is coming? I have said many times that there would be one coming after me who is far greater than I am." The next day John saw Jesus coming towards him. "Look." he shouted, "He is the one I have been talking about! Here comes the one sent by God to give up his life and pay for peoples sins so they can be forgiven." From that time on disciples began to follow Jesus.

6.

While Jesus and his disciples were in Galilee, they were invited to a wedding which was being held at a village called Cana. Jesus' mother Mary was a guest. After the celebrations had gone on for some time, the supply of wine ran out. This was a great embarrassment to the hosts. In a panic, Mary came to Jesus to explain the problem. She was hoping that her son would work a miracle to help the hosts. Jesus said, "I don't wish to be involved Mother, it is not yet time for me to do miracles." Mary said to the servants, "Oh well, just do whatever he tells you to do." Reluctantly, Jesus asked the servants to fill six twenty five gallon jars with water. When they were all filled, Jesus said, "Take some of it to the master of the banquet." They did so, and when he tasted it he called the bridegroom over. "This is wine is delicious. It is the best I have tasted, far better than that which has been served earlier." This was the first of Jesus' many miracles. His disciples were astounded and began to believe that he really was the promised Messiah.

7

When the time of the Jewish Passover festival came, Jesus went to Jerusalem. He was shocked and angry to find that the temple courts were being used like a market place. It was full of animals, traders and money changers. He made a whip and started driving them all out, both people and animals. He turned over the tables of the money changers, scattering coins everywhere. "How dare you turn my Father's house into a market." he shouted. During the Passover Feast Jesus did many miracles which led many people to believe that he really was the promised Messiah.

One night, in secret, an important Jewish religious official, a Pharisee, called on Jesus to talk about the remarkable things he had seen. His name was Nicodemus. "You must be sent by God to be able to perform all these

miracles." he said. "How can I get into God's kingdom?" Jesus answered, "Nicodemus, you came into the natural world through a natural birth. In order to enter God's kingdom, you need a second birth, a spiritual birth. You need to be born of the Holy Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh and the Spirit of God gives birth to spirit. You have seen that I am sent by God. It is by believing in me that you will be born of the Spirit and gain eternal life. You must understand this. God loves people so much, that he has sent me, his only Son, so that those who believe in me can have eternal life."

After this, Jesus left Jerusalem with his disciples and began baptising people in the Jordan River. John was also baptising nearby. People started going to Jesus to be baptised instead of John. John's disciples got annoyed so he explained to them. "Didn't I tell you that one much greater than I am would come soon? Now he has come. I told you clearly that I am not the Christ. I am simply a man of the earth. Jesus has come from Heaven. It is good that people now turn to him, for those who put their trust in him will find eternal life."

8.

On the way to Galilee, after leaving Judea, Jesus and his disciples arrived at a Samaritan town called Sychar. Outside the town was a well. Because he was tired after the journey, Jesus sat down to rest while his disciples went into town to buy food. A woman came to draw water. Jesus asked her, "Would you please give me a drink?" "Sir," she said in surprise, "you are a Jewish man and I am a Samaritan woman. According to your Jewish customs you are not supposed to associate with me." "Let's not bother about Jewish customs," he replied. "Talking about thirst let me tell you about the living water, the spiritual water that I can give you to drink. This can become like a spring that never dries up, bubbling up from the soul." "Please Sir, I would like you to give me some of this water." "First, go and fetch your husband." Jesus instructed her. "I haven't got a husband. I am not married," she admitted. "That is true," Jesus continued, "you have had five husbands and you are not married to the man you are living with now." "You must be a great prophet to know these things she exclaimed!" "You are quite right. In fact, I am not just a prophet but the Messiah, the Saviour Christ you have been expecting to come all these years." She went into the town and told people her story. They all wanted Jesus to stay so he

spent two more days with them, teaching and answering all their questions. During that time they came to believe in him.

9.

When Jesus arrived in Galilee, a royal official, in desperation, came to find him. “My son is near to death, please come to Capernaum where I live so you can heal him.” “I don’t need to come to your home to heal him Jesus said, “I will heal him now. Go home, and when you arrive you will find your boy well.” The officer did so, and found that the boy had been healed at the exact time Jesus had spoken. He and his entire household became believers!

Herod Antipas, a son of Herod the Great, was governor of Galilee. John the Baptist publicly criticised him for marrying Herodias, his brother’s wife, and for committing many other corrupt acts, so Herod put John in jail. When Jesus heard the sad news, he went back home to Nazareth for a while to grieve before going on to Capernaum.

10.

In Capernaum he began to preach this message. “It is time for you to rethink the way you live. Turn to God. Give up doing wrong and live the way he would want you to.” Later he went back to Nazareth. On the Sabbath day, he attended the synagogue as usual. The leader gave him a scripture to read out. It had been written by a highly regarded prophet called Isaiah many years earlier.

He began to read;

“The Spirit of God is on me so that I can bring good news, especially to those who are needy.

I have come to set people free from being trapped in dreadful situations.

I have come so that those physically or spiritually blind can be made to see.

I have come to those who are downtrodden and crushed by burdens.

I have come to those who need forgiveness to tell them that all their wrongdoings will be cancelled when they turn to God.

I have come to let you know that it is always God’s desire is to pour out

his blessings on you.”

Jesus sat down and said, “I am the one that Isaiah was talking about.”

People looked at him in astonishment. He could see by their faces that they did not believe him so he spoke sternly to them. “If you look back into our history, you will see how many times the Jews have missed out on God’s blessings because they took no notice of what the prophets said. Now you are about to do the same.” They were furious, and dragged him out of the synagogue intending to throw him over the edge of a nearby cliff. But God’s power was on Jesus and no one could touch him. He simply walked through the mob and went on his way.

11.

One day, on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus was preaching to large crowds.

They were pushing in on him because they were so eager to hear what he had to say, so he borrowed a fishing boat from Peter. They put out from the shore a little way. When Jesus finished preaching, he said to Peter, “It is time for you to catch some fish. Go out into deep water then let your nets down.” Peter thought it was a waste of time because they had been fishing all the previous night without catching anything. He replied, “Alright, if you say so we’ll give it a try.” When they pulled in the nets they were bursting with such a huge catch of fish that another boat had to come out to help. Both boats were so loaded that they were in danger of sinking. Peter was overwhelmed with the holiness and power of Jesus. He fell to his knees saying, “I am such an unholy man. I cannot bear to be in your presence. Please, go away from me.” Jesus looked at him, “No Peter, I want you to become my disciple.” Other fishermen, Andrew, James and John also left their work to follow Jesus who promised them, “Now I will show you how to fish for people’s souls.”

12.

They went to Capernaum where Jesus amazed everyone with his teaching and his miraculous healings.

He went throughout Galilee, teaching in the synagogues, preaching the good news of God’s Kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. News of him spread far and wide. People from all over brought to him those suffering severe pain, the demon

possessed, those having seizures and the paralyzed. He was full of compassion and healed them all.

When he returned to his home in Capernaum, people filled the house until there was no more room even outside the door. Some friends of a paralyzed man brought him to be healed. There was no way into the house, so in desperation they climbed onto the roof and hacked out a hole in it. Using ropes, they lowered their friend right down to Jesus' feet. When Jesus saw their faith he was moved. Because the man believed that his sins had caused his sickness, he said to him, "Your sins are forgiven."

There were teachers of religious law present who complained to Jesus that he was blaspheming for saying "Your sins are forgiven." "Only God can forgive sins." they sneered. Jesus replied, "Well, if that bothers you it is just as easy for me to say, take up your mat and walk." He turned to the paralyzed man, "Take up your mat and walk." He was completely healed, and in full view of everybody, picked up his mat and carried it home. From this time on, the opposition of the religious leaders began to increase.

13.

Then Jesus returned to the shores of the Sea of Galilee. As he walked along the beach he saw a tax collector by the name of Matthew sitting at his table collecting, as usual, more money than he should. Jesus stopped and said to him. "Matthew, why don't you give up this dishonest way of life and come along with me? I want you to be my disciple." Astonished, he jumped at the chance and immediately went with Jesus. He felt so honoured that he held a party to celebrate. Many people with bad reputations attended. When Jesus arrived, he mixed happily with them. The religious leaders were shocked. "How can he lower himself to associate with such scum?" they scorned. Jesus challenged them. "Go and think about this. Is it the healthy that need a doctor or the sick? Learn what the scripture verse means where God says he is more concerned that you show love and mercy than give your time to heartless religious practices. Can't you see that I mix with these people to help them find their way back to God? They do not leave any dirt on me. I clean the dirt off them. I have come to show you all a new way to do things, to love and forgive, but you prefer petty religious rules that help no one."

Afterwards, Jesus travelled to Jerusalem. Inside the city was a large covered pool, where people who needed healing waited to get into the water. As Jesus came by, his attention was caught by a crippled man lying near the pool who after thirty eight years had failed to bathe in the healing waters. Others were always in first. Jesus fixed his gaze on him. "Do you want to be healed? If you do, stand up, roll your mat, and take it home." Instantly the man's body straightened out, strength came into it and he was able to walk away as though he never had a problem. This miracle happened on a Sabbath day. When the religious officials saw the man carrying his mat, they called out, "You over there! What do you think you're doing carrying that mat? Religious law classes that as work. You're breaking the Sabbath law." He answered, "The man who did this marvellous healing told me to carry my mat home." "So who is he?", they demanded. "I don't know. He didn't say." The religious leaders tracked Jesus down and angrily confronted him. "This healing work you have just done is breaking the Sabbath law so what have you got to say for yourself?" "I say this. God my Father never stops doing good things on any day of the week, so I follow his example." "So, you are making yourself equal with God are you? You're not only a Sabbath breaker, but a blasphemer as well. They were so furious they wanted to kill him. But Jesus went on, "**Anyone who listens to my message, believes in God, and believes that he sent me, will be able to cross over from death to eternal life.** It should be obvious to you by now that all the miracles that I have done, prove that I have been sent by God."

One Sabbath day Jesus was in the synagogue teaching. There was a man in the congregation who had a shrivelled hand. The leaders were watching closely to see if Jesus would do another Sabbath day healing. Hoping to cause him trouble, one of them called out, "Is it lawful for you to heal on the Sabbath day?" "Look at it this way", Jesus replied, "if you owned a sheep that fell into a ditch on the Sabbath day, what would you do? You know very well that you would help it to get out. Is a man worth less than a sheep?" To the man with the shrivelled hand, he said, "Stand up in front of all the people so they can see you." Then he turned to the synagogue leaders and in a clear voice, so everyone could hear, gave them this question to answer. "Is it lawful to do good things on the Sabbath day, or to do evil things, to save life or to kill?" They wouldn't answer. Jesus looked at them angrily, deeply upset at their stubborn hard hearts. "**Stretch out your hand he called to the waiting man.**" The people watched in amazement

as the hand became perfect. The Jewish leaders were furious and went away to plot as to how they could kill Jesus. When he left the synagogue crowds followed him. He healed every kind of disease and sickness and cast out evil spirits from those who were possessed.

14

Soon after that he went up into the mountains to pray about which twelve disciples he should choose to be apostles. After a whole night of prayer he came back and chose, Simon Peter, Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot, Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus.

People came from all over to hear Jesus and to be healed. He found a hillside near Capernaum from where he could teach. This is what he taught them:

God blesses those who realise their need of him. The Kingdom of Heaven is given to them.

God blesses those who mourn, for he will comfort them.

God blesses those who are gentle and lowly, for the whole earth will belong to them.

God blesses those who are hungry and thirsty for justice, for they will receive it in full.

God blesses those who are merciful, for they will be shown mercy. God blesses those whose hearts are pure, for they will see God.

God blesses those who work for peace, for they will be called the children of God.

God blesses those who are persecuted because they live for God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.

God blesses you when you are mocked and persecuted and lied about because you are my followers. Be happy about it! Be very glad! A great reward awaits you in heaven.

You are to be like salt. Bring the taste of heaven into every situation.

You have been filled with the light of God. Shine his love and truth everywhere you go. Don't hide it.

If you get so angry with someone that murder is in your heart, remember that in God's eyes, the thought is as bad as the deed.

If you or a friend have anything against each other go and sort it out because that will please God.

If you look at anyone with lustful intentions, God considers it the same as doing what you think about. Be severely self disciplined in your thinking.

God doesn't want anyone to get divorced. He knows how much pain and sorrow it causes for everyone.

If you make a promise, keep it.

Don't look for ways to take revenge on someone who has offended you. Find a way to do them a favour instead.

Always think about how you like to be treated and treat other people like that.

You might think it is alright to hate those you consider your enemies. No it isn't. God wants you to treat them with the same concern and kindness you would treat a friend. When you do this, he will reward you and treat you like sons and daughters.

When you give to charity, don't make a big show of it in order to look good and impress people. Only God needs to know.

You do not need fancy prayers when you talk to God. Don't go on and on thinking that the more words you use will get better answers. Just pray in a simple way, knowing that God has already seen what is on your heart.

Here is a good example of how to pray;

Our Father who lives in heaven, may your name be honoured.

We ask for your Kingdom to come, and for everything to be done as you want, just as it is done in heaven.

Give us all that we need each day.

Forgive us for all the wrong we have done in the same way as we forgive those who have done wrong to us.

Keep us safe from temptations. Don't let the evil one get hold of us.

Jesus continued to teach on many other subjects:

"When you become prosperous, don't be deceived that your wealth is secure in this unpredictable world. You can easily lose it or have it stolen. The best thing is to become spiritually rich. Riches like that are kept safe in heaven for you.

It is foolish, indeed impossible, to serve two masters at the same time. If you are loyal to one you will be disloyal to the other. You have to make up your mind whether to live for money or for God.

Don't be one of those people who spend all their time worrying. God doesn't want you to suffer from anxiety. The answer is to trust God in all things. Trust his great love for you. Trust that he can provide for your every need. He knows that you need food and clothing and a roof over your head. Concentrate on seeking God's will for your life. Live one day at a time and stop worrying about the future. Stay close to God all the time, listening to what he says. He will do an expert job of helping you to manage your life.

Don't go about judging people. When you do this you invite judgement on yourself. Instead, become the kind of person that wants to forgive.

Let me talk to you about giving. The measure of your generosity will always be out matched by God's generosity to you. The amount that you give is the amount that God will give back to you. However he will add a big bonus to it when he does.

How expertly you are able to see the tiny faults in others and be blind to much bigger faults in yourself. First give close attention to your own faults, then perhaps you will be able to see more clearly how to help others with theirs.

Do you want good things from God? The way to get them is to ask him. Seek him out, knock on his door. He will open it to you. He enjoys giving you things.

In everything treat others the way you would like to be treated.

There is a wide gate and a broad road that leads to the place of destruction. Don't go that way. Look for the narrow road with the small gate, the one that leads to life.

Houses can be built on rock foundations or on sand. When the floods come only the houses built on rock will remain standing. If you listen to my words and put them into practise you will remain safe when the storms of life come against you."

When Jesus finished preaching the crowds were totally amazed, saying, "No one we have ever known has spoken with such wisdom, power and authority."

15.

On returning to Capernaum, Jesus met a Roman centurion. He was a kind and humble man who had been a great help to the Jews. He pleaded with Jesus, "My servant, who has become a dear friend, is desperately ill and near to death. Please will you heal him?" "Of course I will." Jesus answered. "Let us go along to your house." "There is no need for you to come to my home." the centurion explained. "You are much too holy to come under my roof." "Then how do you expect me to heal your servant?" Jesus asked. "My understanding is this. I am under the authority of the emperor. That means that when I order anyone under me to do this or to do that, they have to do it because I speak with the authority of the emperor. I can see that you are under the authority of Almighty God, so all you have to say is, be healed, and my servant will be healed."

Jesus was amazed. "I have never seen faith like this in all Israel. Go home and it will be just as you have believed. Your servant will be completely well."

The crowds followed him to a town called Nain. Going down the street was a funeral procession where a widow was weeping over the coffin of her only son. Jesus felt a great compassion for her and called the procession to a halt. "I want you to stop crying and trust me." he said to the woman. He touched the coffin with his hand. Her son came back to life, sat up, and began to speak. She wept tears of happiness! The watching crowds were aghast, hardly able to believe what they had seen.

"God has sent us a mighty prophet. We have never seen anyone raise the dead before."

16

John the Baptist was still being held in jail by Herod and was beginning to wonder if he had made a mistake about Jesus being the Messiah. He asked two friends to go to Jesus and ask him if he really was sent by God. So they went to Jesus and said to him, "John wants to know if you really are the Christ?" Jesus told them, "Go back and say this! The blind see, the deaf hear, the dumb speak, the lame walk, the dead are brought back to life. This is my answer to John."

Sometime later, Herod executed John the Baptist. This happened because Salome, the daughter of Herodias, who was Herod's new wife, asked him to do after she had danced for him at a dinner party. She asked for John's head to be cut off and brought to her on a dish. This was done.

17

One day, a Pharisee named Simon invited Jesus to his dinner party.

A woman, who was well known as having been a prostitute, heard that Jesus was at Simon's house. She was deeply ashamed of the life she had led. Finding Jesus among the guests, she fell at his feet and wept so much that his feet were drenched with her tears. Using her hair, she dried them and poured expensive perfume over them. Simon was disgusted at this. "How can you let a woman like her touch you?" Jesus looked him in the eye saying, "You really do not understand, do you Simon? Let me tell you a story. There were two men, both of them in debt to a moneylender. One owed him two months wages, the other two years wages. Neither of them could pay him back. He showed great kindness by cancelling the debts of both. Now tell me, which of the men would be most grateful?" "I suppose the one who owed him the most." replied Simon. "So don't you understand? This sad woman that you despise so much, knows that she has a huge debt of sin that she cannot pay back. She also knows that I have the authority to forgive her and cancel the debt she owes. No wonder she is full of gratitude and that she weeps. What about you Simon? It seems to me that you don't think you have any sins. Ever since I entered your house you have not shown me any respect or hospitality." Jesus turned to the

woman and said gently, "All your sins are forgiven. Feel no more shame and go in peace."

18

After this, Jesus travelled about visiting many towns, villages and homes. Everywhere he travelled, he explained the wonderful good news that God's kingdom of love was within reach, that by believing in him, they could find their way into this kingdom. When he saw people in distress, or in need of healing in mind body or spirit, his heart went out to them. He responded by doing amazing miracles. Everyone realised that he could only do them because of the power he received from God.

The Pharisees hated Jesus. They couldn't do the things he did so were filled with jealousy. They accused him of receiving his power from Satan. "How ridiculous you sound." Jesus responded. "Tell me, why would Satan give me the power to destroy the evil works that he produces? Why would he give me the power to cast out his own evil spirits?"

The Pharisees used every opportunity to trip Jesus up with the most awkward and difficult questions they could think of. Never once did they get the better of him. Always they were reduced to silence by the wisdom of his answers. He spoke to them severely. "You Pharisees are obsessed with your ritual washing. You think that washing your body makes you clean, but inside you are full of filthy things like pride, greed, hate, lies, lust for power, and many more. It is time you started cleaning yourselves up on the inside."

Some experts in religious law complained, "When you say these things to the Pharisees, you insult us as well." Jesus agreed with them. "You are so right. You need to take a good look at yourselves too. You're so pompous! You strut about in self righteous pride, looking down your noses. You come up with endless religious rules and rituals expecting everyone to conform because you say so. When they stagger under the load you have put on them, feeling guilty because they can't live up to your demands, do you ever think of helping them? Not in any way at all. You find it much easier to judge them. You are as heartless as the Pharisees!"

To his disciples he said, "Make sure you don't become anything like the Pharisees. Remember this too. There will be times when your lives will be

threatened because you believe in me. Don't ever be afraid of those who threaten to kill you because they only have the power to kill your body. Your soul is safe with God as you continue to trust and serve him."

19

Jesus moved on with his disciples. Huge crowds followed and he taught them these things.

"Avoid all kinds of greed. God does not measure your worth by what you own but by how rich your soul is. There is nothing in the whole world worth more than your soul. Don't set your hearts on earthly things. They are temporary. Set your hearts on the things of heaven which last forever.

The time is coming soon when I will go back to heaven, the place I came from. But you can be quite sure that this won't be the end of it. At the end of the age I will come back again and bring with me thousands of angels to clear up the mess the world is in. Good and evil will be completely separated and every person who has rejected God will be separated from those who know God, who have trusted him and lived to please him. It will be a tragic end for the Godless but unimaginable happiness for God's people.

Love and trust me. Love and trust God the Father. Spend your time doing all the things we care about. Never get tired of doing good. Stick at it till the end. Believe me you will not be disappointed with the reward."

20

One day when Jesus went down to the Galilean sea shore, huge crowds gathered. So they could all hear him, he climbed into a boat and began to teach about the Kingdom of God. He used many stories called parables to help them to understand.

"This is a story about a farmer sowing his seed." he explained. "The seed represents the word of God. As the farmer scattered his seed, it fell in lots of different places. Some fell on the path where the birds came and ate it. Some finished up on rocky ground where there was not enough soil for it to grow. Other seed fell amongst weeds and thorns so when it began to grow it was choked and died. However, other seed fell into fertile soil where it produced a wonderful crop. This good soil represents people with

28

good, understanding hearts. God's word grows in them and their lives are productive. They become a blessing to many.

Another way of understanding God's kingdom is this. A farmer sowed good seed in his field one day, but he had an enemy who wanted to ruin his crop. This enemy collected seeds taken from weeds. At night he sneaked into the field and scattered them amongst the good seed the farmer had sown. When the seeds sprouted, the wheat and weeds came up together. The farmhands suggested that they go into the field and pull out all the weeds. "No", said the farmer, "by doing that, much of the wheat will be damaged. Let them grow together until the wheat is ready to harvest. After that, we will dig up wheat and weeds together before separating them and throwing the weeds on the fire." "You see", Jesus continued, "God sows good seed into the world, but Satan, his enemy, comes along and sows evil. God will wait patiently until his harvest of souls is ready. Then he will send all that is evil and all who do evil to destruction."

I will give you another illustration. The kingdom of God is like treasure buried in a field. A man working in a field found some treasure and recognised how incredibly valuable it was. "What shall I do?" he thought to himself. "I know, I will go and sell everything I own and use the money to buy the field. Then the treasure will be mine."

Jesus told many other parables to teach and reveal the truth about the kingdom of God.

21

"Let us go over to the other side of the lake", Jesus said. Part way across a dreadful storm blew up and the boat filled with water to the point of sinking. Jesus was fast asleep in the stern. Frantically the disciples shook him awake calling, "Master, master, don't you care that we are all going to drown?" Jesus stood up and spoke to the wind, "Wind, stop blowing!" and then to the waves, "Quieten down!" Immediately, the storm ended. "What kind of man is this!" his disciples exclaimed in awe. "Even the wind and the waves obey him!"

When they reached the shore at the other side of the lake, a man possessed by evil spirits ran howling towards them. He lived among the tombs, running about screaming and cutting himself with sharp stones.

29

Many attempts had been made to bind him. Even chains had been used, but he always broke free. The insane man threw himself down in front of Jesus. The demon that possessed the man called out, "I know who you are. You are Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God." "And who are you?" Jesus challenged. "My name is Legion, because I lead a tribe of demons possessing this man. There are many of us!" Jesus commanded, "All of you come out of him and do not return." The demons all left the man and he instantly became sane. He went back home to tell everyone how wonderful God had been to him.

22

After this Jesus and his disciples went back across the lake. As they arrived at the shore, the leader of the local synagogue who was called Jairus, rushed over to Jesus and fell at his feet. "Please, please come and heal my daughter, she is sick and dying! If you put your hands on her I know she will live." Jesus went with him. Huge crowds followed and jostled all around. There was a woman in the crowd who had been ill with internal bleeding for twelve years. She had spent everything she had on doctors. None of them had been of any help. She had heard all about the amazing miracles that Jesus had done. She said to herself, "All I would need to do to be cured, would be to touch just the hem of his cloak." She struggled through the crowd till she was close enough to do this. The moment she did, her bleeding stopped and she was entirely cured. She was just about to sneak away when Jesus turned round and asked, "Who just touched me? I felt healing power go out of me." He kept looking until the woman, truly frightened by now, owned up. "It was me." Jesus said to her kindly, "You have acted with great faith, and your faith has healed you. Well done. Go in peace."

At that moment, messengers from the home of Jairus met them. "It is too late your little girl has died." Jairus was distraught. "Don't be concerned, trust me and all will be well." Jesus said. Leaving the crowd behind he took Peter, James and John with him. When they arrived at the house, everyone was weeping and wailing. "There is no need for all this. I will go and see her." Jesus told them. He took the child's mother and father up to her room, held the girl's hand for a moment, and said, "Little girl, you can get up now." She did just that and confidently walked around the room.

After Jesus, Peter, James and John left the house, two blind men followed, calling out, "Have mercy on us Jesus." "Do you really believe that I can give you sight." "Yes we do, we know you can." "Then let it be so. Open your eyes and see. Your faith has made it possible." Just then a man without the ability to speak joined them. "You be healed as well." Jesus said. And he was.

23

Now it was time for the twelve apostles to be sent out on their own to do the things they had learned from Jesus. He gave them these instructions: "This is your first tour so go only to the Jews. This is the message you are to preach. God's kingdom has come near. It is within your reach. Turn to God and live as he wants you to live. As you preach this message, heal sick people, cure leprosy, drive out evil spirits, and raise the dead. You will be able to do this because I am giving you my power and authority to do so." They travelled from village to village preaching and healing, while Jesus took other disciples on a separate journey.

When they met up again, Jesus said, "It is time we had a rest. Let us find an isolated place on the other side of Lake Galilee where we can be undisturbed for a while." But people had found out about it, so by the time they arrived there crowds were waiting. He greeted them kindly and spent the rest of the day teaching and healing.

By evening everyone was hungry. In their rush to get ahead of Jesus no one had brought food and because the place was so isolated there was nowhere to buy any. On checking out the crowd, all the disciples could come up with were five small loaves and two fish that a boy had brought along. Jesus took charge of things and told his disciples, "Divide these five thousand people into small groups and sit them down on the grass. Now give me the loaves and fish." He looked up to heaven, then divided the food into pieces and gave his disciples instructions to feed everyone. As they handed out the food it miraculously multiplied. Everyone had plenty to eat, and when the disciples cleared up there were twelve baskets of scraps left over. The people were astounded at this miracle and became convinced that Jesus was who he said he was.

“You go back across the lake to Bethsaida.” Jesus told his disciples, “I want to remain here on my own for a while.” They took the boat, and by the time they were about three miles out a strong headwind started blowing and the waves built up. They saw a figure walking towards them on the water and were terrified thinking it was a ghost. “Don’t be afraid,” the figure called out, “it is me, Jesus.” Peter called back, “If it is really you, call me over, and I will walk on water too.” “Come on then Peter, walk towards me.” Peter was out of the boat in a moment and started to walk on the water towards Jesus, but soon noticed how big the waves were and panicked. His faith left him and he began to sink. “Save me, save me!” he yelled. Jesus took him by the hand, lifted him up, and they both climbed into the boat. The rest of the disciples were amazed. Bowing down before Jesus they proclaimed, “It is true. You really are the Son of God!” Jesus calmed the storm and they continued their journey to the other side of the lake.

The next morning Jesus and his disciples went to Capernaum. The crowds followed hoping that they would get free bread like they had done the day before. “Let me talk to you about this.” Jesus said. “You should have a greater hunger for the spiritual food I have to offer than the ordinary food you come looking for. Try to understand this. I am the bread of life sent down to you from heaven. Feed on me and receive eternal life.”

24

One day, religious leaders from Jerusalem came to see if they could find fault with what Jesus was doing. After watching for a while they asked accusingly, “Why don’t your disciples follow the traditional washing ceremonies before touching food”? Jesus replied, “What about you. Why do you class the traditions of men as more important than the laws of God?” He called the crowd over. “Now listen to me and try to understand. Anything on food that is not clean, passes through your system and finally down the drain without harming you. The things that harm you are those that come from inside you, from your heart and mind. Things like pride, lust, envy, greed, slander, lies, murderous thoughts, anger, and many other forms of wickedness. It is what comes from within that makes you unclean.”

25

Jesus set out on a tour of Tyre and Sidon in Phoenicia, followed by another tour of Galilee. Everywhere he went the lame, the crippled, the blind, the dumb, the deaf and those with many other afflictions were brought to him for healing. Then they continued northward to the region of Caesarea Philippi.

One day Jesus found a quiet place and gathered his disciples around him to have a talk with them. He started with a question. "Who do people say that I am?" His disciples answered "They have all sorts of ideas. Some say John the Baptist come back to life. Others mention the resurrection of ancient prophets from our history." "Well, my disciples, who do you say that I am?" Peter spoke up first and with great certainty answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." "You sound very sure Peter. Let me explain why that is. You didn't learn this from any man. My Father in heaven revealed this truth to you. It is knowledge given directly from heaven. I now name you Peter the Rock. On your understanding of who I am, I will build my Church."

Jesus then went on to explain that he was soon to face death because of the religious authorities. His disciples couldn't accept it, but he insisted. "I will be killed, but that won't be the end. After three days I will rise from the dead." It didn't make sense to them. He went on to say, "Remember that your life on the earth is temporary, so why spend all your time and energy providing for your body and trying to keep it safe. Your soul is what counts. Eternal life is what counts. You should invest in that and make sure you don't lose it. Spend your life living for God."

26

Six days later, Jesus took Peter, James and John to the top of a mountain so they could be alone together. Suddenly, heaven opened and Jesus began to shine with a dazzling white light. Then Moses and the prophet Elijah, who had both died centuries before, appeared alongside Jesus and began speaking with him. A heavenly cloud covered them and God spoke from this cloud. "This is my Son who I love greatly. He is a constant delight to me. Listen to everything he says!" The three disciples fell to the ground in terror, unable to move. Jesus put his hand on each of them saying, "There is nothing to be afraid of. Now get up and we will go

back down the mountain." On the way Jesus was insistent that they kept what they had seen secret. They were only to speak of it after he had died and risen from the grave.

When they arrived at the bottom of the mountain to meet up with the rest of the disciples, there was a disturbance going on. The disciples explained. "We have been trying to heal this epileptic boy and are getting nowhere. He has some sort of evil spirit that throws him into fires, or into water. A few times he has almost died. Why can't we heal him?" "This is a particularly powerful spirit." Jesus told them. "You would need a special time of prayer and fasting to overcome this one." He asked the boy's father, "Do you believe that I can heal him?" He cried out "Yes I believe but I still need help with my unbelief." Jesus commanded the spirit to leave the boy and never to return. It came out with loud screams. The boy went into convulsions and lay still as though dead. Jesus took him by the hand, lifted him up, and he was completely well.

This was a good opportunity for Jesus to teach about faith.

"Listen." he said, "Even the smallest amount of faith, carries extreme power. However large or impossible a problem seems to be, faith in God can deal with it."

27

They left that place to tour Galilee again. On the way Jesus repeated what he had told them earlier. "You need to know that I am soon going to be betrayed and put to death, but that won't be the end of me. Three days later I will come back to life." The disciples still couldn't take it in. When they arrived in Capernaum they had temple tax to pay but didn't have the right money. Jesus said to Peter, "Go down to the lake, throw out a fishing line, and open the mouth of the first fish you catch. There will be exactly the right coins for payment." And so it was!

They went on to the house where they had arranged to stay, and Jesus gathered his disciples for a teaching session. "Now tell me about that heated discussion you were having on the way here." They wouldn't say. Jesus knew they had been arguing with each other about which of them was the greatest. "Now listen to me. To become the greatest in the kingdom of God, you have to act as the least. The one who humbles himself

and becomes the servant of others is seen as great in the eyes of God. Children are great in the eyes of God because of their simple trust. Be like them.

Consider this also. If any kind of sin gets hold of you, be ruthless with yourself to be rid of it.

If someone has done a wrong to you and you are really hurt, offended and upset, don't go round telling everyone about it. Go to that person and explain how you feel. Talk it through with them and try to sort things out. If you can't, tell God about it and leave it with him."

Peter asked, "How many times should I forgive someone who keeps doing me wrong?" Jesus replied, "For as many times as they come back and say, "I am sorry, I won't do it again."

"You need to know how much God cares for lost people. He is like a shepherd who has a hundred sheep. If one of them goes astray he leaves the ninety nine to go and find it. Then he brings it safely back and rejoices over it."

28

The time came for the Harvest Festival celebration in Jerusalem. When Jesus began teaching in the temple courts, the people were amazed at what he said. "How did you get so much learning?" they asked. "You have never studied in our religious institutions." "I don't need your institutions." he answered. "Everything I teach comes directly from God." "Is this the man the religious councils want to kill?" the people asked each other. There was much divided opinion amongst them as to who Jesus really was. On the last day of the festival, Jesus stood up in front of everyone and in a loud voice cried out, "If any of you are thirsty, come to me and drink! Whoever believes in me will find streams of living water, the water of the Spirit of God, flowing through him."

After spending the night alone on the Mount of Olives, he returned to the temple courts to continue his teaching.

The Pharisees tried as usual to trap Jesus over matters of religious law. They brought a woman before him who had been caught sleeping with a man who was not her husband. "Our ancient law says she should be stoned

to death for doing this. So what do you say?" Jesus didn't answer straight away, but bent over and with his finger drew in the sand for a while. Then he straightened up. "I say, go ahead, just as the law states.

Let the first stone be thrown by the one who has never sinned." The people looked at each other and gradually one after the other drifted away until there was no one left. "Now listen to me," he said sternly to the woman, "from now on, stop your sinning."

29

The next time Jesus spoke to the people he declared, "I am the light of the world. Whoever believes in me will never walk in darkness for he will have the light of truth shining through him in everything he does. Take a strong hold on my teaching and you will know what is right and what is wrong."

He saw a man who had been born blind and called him over, spat on the ground and made a mud paste. After smearing it on the man's eyes he told him to go and wash in the Pool of Siloam. The man did so and could then see perfectly.

Then he went on to say, "I am the gate by which you find entry into the Kingdom of God. Only through me can you get in. I am the good shepherd who cares for his sheep. My sheep will hear my voice and follow me. I will give up my life for them. I will lead them to eternal life."

30

After two months in Galilee, Jesus set out to return to Jerusalem. On the way he encountered ten lepers. "Jesus, Master, have pity on us." they pleaded. "I will, your skin will be perfect. No longer will you need to cry out that you are unclean." He healed them all.

Jesus chose seventy two of his disciples and gave them these instructions. "Go ahead to all the places I plan to go through on my journey. Tell people about the kingdom of God, that it is near to them, it within their reach. Heal the sick. Wherever you go and whoever you meet, say, "God's peace be on you." If you do not receive a welcome, do not be disturbed. Leave things in God's hands and let the peace you have offered return to you. Continue on your way." They had an amazingly successful

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time and came back full of excitement. Jesus waited for them to calm down and said." Keep in mind that there are eternal things to be much more excited about than a successful tour." "Tell us?" they asked. "Because you have chosen to believe in me, your names are written in God's book of life, which is kept safe in heaven for you. Be excited about that."

One day, as they continued their journey the people gathered round Jesus for more teaching. "Are difficulties and sorrows getting you down? Is their weight becoming too much for you? Let me help. Let me take the strain. I have an understanding heart. I can give rest to your soul. Let me shape and guide you so that life becomes an easy fit. I want you to know what it is like to journey through life with a light step."

An expert in religious law came to test Jesus. "Tell me he said, what must I do to gain eternal life?" "You are the expert," Jesus replied, "you tell me. What does the law say?" "It says that we are to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and our neighbours as much as ourselves." "Well said. There you are! You knew the answer all along." The lawyer asked another question. "But how do I know who my neighbour is?"

"I will tell you a story and then you will be able to answer this question yourself too. It is about a Samaritan and as you well know, the Jews despise the Samaritans because of their mixed ethnic origins. The story goes like this. A Jew, on a journey from Jericho to Jerusalem, was attacked and robbed by bandits. They left him half dead by the roadside. The first man who came along was a Jewish priest. He saw the terrible state the injured man was in, thought about the trouble it would be to come to his aid, and crossed to the other side of the road, and went on his way. A little while later, another Jew came along and did exactly the same. Eventually, a Samaritan came along and when he saw the terrible condition of the man he took pity on him. Using wine, olive oil and bandages, he dressed his wounds and gently lifted him onto his donkey.

He took him to the nearest inn and arranged for the innkeeper to care for him till he recovered. "Money is no object," the Samaritan said, "here is a good down payment. Whatever it costs, don't worry, I will make up any difference when I come back for him." So, what do you think? Jesus asked the lawyer. Who was his neighbour?" "I suppose the Samaritan, for he showed him pity." "Correct, go and be like him."

On another occasion Jesus talked to his disciples about how to get their prayers answered. "Your Father God is always listening and ready to answer, but he is not impressed with a half hearted approach. He wants to see you determined, passionate, persistent, meaning business. Knock on the door of heaven and keep on knocking. Keep on seeking and keep on asking till you get the answer."

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"Now" Jesus continued, "I have a story that shows how much love God has for his children, and how ready he is to forgive.

There was a wealthy landowner who had two sons. One day the younger of the two came to see him and said, "I want to leave home, go far away from here and live my life the way I want to live it. I want my inheritance now. Will you give it to me?" His father decided that there was nothing to be gained by trying to hold on to his son, so he gave him the money. His son set of to live the high life. It wasn't long before he had squandered everything on wild parties, gambling and prostitutes. Friends deserted him when his money ran out. Destitute, he begged a farmer for a job working in a pigsty. He was so hungry at times that he ate pig food with the pigs. He began to think of home. "My father's lowest servants live like kings compared to this. What if I went home and asked to be a servant? What would my father say? I will die if I stay in this place any longer. What have I got to lose?" He set of home, filthy and ragged, begging for scraps on the way wondering all the time just how furious his father would be. As he came to the crest of the hill overlooking the homestead he could see his father a long way off in the far field supervising the workers.

His father had always lived in the hope that one day his son would return home. He had never stopped loving him. He would look frequently at the place where he knew his son would first appear if he ever did come home. On this day, as usual, he glanced up the path. "I wonder who that ragged creature is stumbling this way?" he thought. He watched, shading his eyes and squinting. "Surely not! It can't be!" Recognition dawned. "It is! It's my son!" He set off running at top speed, threw his arms around him weeping tears of happiness. "You're back son, you're back. How I have longed for this day." "Oh father, I am not fit to be called your son anymore. I have done

you great wrong and have sinned against God. Please just let me be one of your lowest servants. I don't even deserve that." "My son, you are home, that is all that matters! You were dead and now you're alive. You were lost and now I have found you again." He instructed his servants, "Find my son the very best clothes you can. Set up a homecoming party. This is a day for a great celebration."

The older son was deeply upset with all this and complained bitterly to his father. "What about me? All these years I've worked faithfully for you. I've been a perfect son while that useless brother of mine has been living wild, squandering money till he's broke. I don't get it! All this attention and a big party! "Please try to understand son. You and I have always been together, always close, sharing everything. All I have belongs to you. You see, you have never been lost, we have never been separated. Your brother is home. Come and celebrate with me."

32

In Bethany near Jerusalem, there lived a great friend of Jesus called Lazarus. His two sisters were called Mary and Martha. While

Jesus was teaching and healing in the region of Perea, he received a message that Lazarus was extremely ill and might die. Jesus continued his work for two more days and then announced to his disciples that it was time to go and visit Lazarus. His disciples warned Jesus, "The last time you went through Judea, the Jews tried to stone you." "Don't be concerned," he replied, "It is not my time to die yet. The work my Father God has planned for me is not yet finished. Lazarus has already died. My Father has shown me this. He has planned for me to do a mighty miracle by raising Lazarus from the dead. This is to help you and many others to put your faith in me."

By the time they arrived in Bethany, Lazarus had been in his tomb for four days. Mary and Martha came to Jesus in great sorrow. "Oh Jesus, if you had been here he would not have died." "Take me to his tomb." he said. Many followed, including community, leaders because Lazarus was highly respected in the town. A heavy stone had been rolled across the entrance of the cave where he was buried. Jesus called out, "Roll the stone away!" Martha was concerned. "But the stench will be terrible. He has been dead four days now." "Trust me Martha." Jesus looked up to heaven. "Thank you Father that you always hear me." Then he shouted in a loud voice, "Lazarus,

Come out of your grave!" To the astonishment of everyone, Lazarus came walking out draped in his grave clothes. "Un-wrap him and take him home." Jesus commanded. That day many came to believe that Jesus was indeed the promised Messiah, the Holy Son of God.

When the Chief priests and the Pharisees heard what had happened they called a council meeting. "How are we going to stop this man? If he goes on like this, the whole nation will follow him and make him King of Israel."

33

After staying a while at Ephraim on the edge of the desert, Jesus set off towards Jerusalem, teaching and healing along the way. A man came running up to him one day and asked. "Good teacher, what must I do to gain eternal life?" "Young man, you already know the commandments that God gave to Moses." "In all my life I haven't broken one of them." he said. "That is very good", replied Jesus, but I see that you have a problem. It is your great wealth. To gain the eternal life you are seeking, you need to break free from its grip. Sell everything you own and give all you receive to the poor. Then become one of my disciples and follow me." The man walked away sadly for he loved his money. Jesus said to his disciples, "How difficult it is for those who trust in riches to find their way into God's kingdom." They were very surprised and asked, "Then who can be saved?" "No one by their own efforts can manage it. Without God it is impossible, but with God anything is possible." "We have given up everything to follow you." the disciples said. "Yes you have, and a great reward is waiting."

As the journey continued, Jesus explained to his disciples what would happen to him when they reached Jerusalem. "I will be arrested and taken before the Jewish council. They will sentence me to death and hand me over to the Roman authorities to be killed. Then three days later I will rise from the dead."

As they came into Jericho, there were crowds lining the route. A wealthy tax collector called Zacchaeus was longing to see Jesus, but he was a short man and couldn't see over the heads of the people in front of him. So, he ran on ahead and climbed a roadside Sycamore tree. As Jesus came by he noticed Zacchaeus, and called to him. "Come down from your tree and walk with me. I would like to come to your house today."

Zacchaeus was thrilled and scrambled down as quickly as he could. The people were unhappy about this. Zacchaeus was most unpopular because he had cheated many of them with his dishonest tax collections. "What's this Jesus of Nazareth doing inviting himself to be the guest of a crook?" But Zacchaeus said to Jesus. "I want to put an end to my cheating. Whatever I have taken dishonestly from anyone I will pay back to them four times the amount. Besides that, I will give half of all I own to the poor." Jesus looked at him and said, "Salvation has come to your house today. It is people like you that I seek so that I can give them a new life and make them ready for heaven."

On their way out of Jericho, large crowds followed Jesus and the disciples. A blind man called Bartemaus was begging by the roadside.

When he realised that Jesus was coming along, he began to shout, "Jesus, Jesus, have mercy on me." People in the crowd told him to shut up. He just shouted all the louder. "Jesus, Jesus, have mercy on me." Jesus stopped and commanded, "Bring him over to me." With great excitement, Bartemaus jumped up and was led over to Jesus, who asked him "What do you want me to do for you?" "Teacher, I am blind and I want to see." "So you will. Your faith in me has healed you." Instantly Bartemaus could see. He followed Jesus, jumping up and down and praising God. Before long others in the crowd joined in till everyone was praising God.

34

As Jesus, with his disciples, approached Jerusalem, he came to Bethpage at The Mount of Olives. He sent two of his disciples ahead with these instructions, "When you enter the village, you will find a donkey tied up and waiting for my use. Bring it back here to me." They did so, and as he rode towards Jerusalem, crowds of people went ahead, throwing their coats and palm branches on the road for him to ride over. They kept shouting, "Praise to the son of David. Blessed is he who comes in the name of God. Peace and glory in heaven." Pharisees in the crowd complained. "Teacher, tell them to stop all this noise." "No. If they keep quiet the stones in the road would have to shout out praises to God." When they entered Jerusalem, they found the whole city in an uproar. "Who is this man?" they wanted to know. People called back, "This is Jesus, the great prophet from Nazareth."

When he went into the temple forecourts, he was distressed and angry to find many merchants there trading for personal profit. As he had done once before, he threw them all out, overturning tables and stalls. Coins were scattered everywhere. He shouted out in a loud and angry voice, "This is God's House! It is called a house of prayer. You have turned it into a den of thieves."

The blind and the lame, and those with all manner of sicknesses flocked to him for healing.

The next two days he spent his time teaching many things, knowing that it would not be long before he would be put to death. The religious leaders used every opportunity to trap him with awkward questions, but each time he answered with such wisdom that they looked foolish. Jesus spoke to them sternly about their hard hearts. "You are so full of yourselves, full of pride, self righteousness and hypocrisy. You are legalistic, unjust, and promoters of false religion. Don't you know that what God wants from you is love! When you get people converted, you make them worse off than they were before they met you."

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Jesus took his disciples to a quiet place on the Mount of Olives. They asked him to tell them about the end of the world.

"When the world as you know it has served its purpose, it will be rolled up like an old worn out coat and thrown away. God will create new heavens, and a new earth. They will be far superior! There is no way you can imagine it. I can tell you some things though. There will be no sin, no evil, no sorrow, no pain, no sickness, not even death. No one will ever cry again. Not one single tear will be shed. The only people that will live there will be people filled with love. They will be those who have loved and trusted God and have lived to please him. Physical bodies will be exchanged for glorious spiritual bodies that never grow old. Best of all, God will be present, pouring out his love without measure. "When will this be?" his disciples asked. "This is my Father's secret. Only he knows. It will come as a complete surprise when people least expect it."

"Tell us about the day of judgement?" his disciples asked next. "When that day comes, everyone who has ever lived will be made to stand before

God to explain their lives. Then they will be divided into two groups. Those who have loved God, and shown love to people, will go to live with God. Those who have lived godless, uncaring lives will go to a place away from God, a place where he is not present. Be warned, that will be a terrible place to be, a terrible punishment." Jesus continued, "Soon I will go back to heaven, where I came from. At the end of the age there will be a mighty trumpet blast and I will return to earth in power and glory, shining like the sun. With me will be thousands upon thousands of mighty angels. Every eye on earth will see it."

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The Passover Festival was only two days away. Jesus was sad and said, "It is now the time for me to be handed over to the authorities." The chief priests and members of the council were meeting with Caiaphas the high priest, plotting to secretly arrest Jesus. Judas, one of the twelve apostles, offered to help them for payment. He accepted thirty pieces of silver as a bribe.

When the time for the Passover supper came, Jesus met with the twelve apostles in a large upstairs room. It was evening time. When they were all sitting at the table, Jesus announced, "This is the last time we will have supper together while I remain upon the earth. But, the time will come when we will eat together like this again, not on the earth but in God's heavenly kingdom." The disciples began to discuss amongst themselves who would then be the most important, who would have the highest place at the table. "Answer me this," Jesus asked. "Is the one who rules, or the one who serves the greatest?" He wrapped an apron round his waist, fetched soap, water and a towel, and began to wash the feet of all twelve of his disciples. When he had finished, he said to them, "There, you see, though I am your master, I have done the task of a most lowly servant. If you want to be great, learn to humble yourselves and serve one another.

What I now do, I want you to remember always." He took a loaf of bread, gave a prayer of thanks, broke the loaf in pieces, and passed the pieces round. "This bread represents my body, which is about to be broken for you and for many in the future. All of you eat it." After they had eaten the bread, he filled a cup with wine, gave thanks to God, and said, "This wine

represents my blood, which will be poured out so that sins may be forgiven. All of you drink it. In future, every time you break bread and drink wine, remember me." He became troubled. "One of you here is about to betray me." They all began to protest asking, "Surely it's not me?" As the discussion continued, Jesus went over to Judas. "You know that you are the one. Go and do what you have to do."

"Listen to me." Jesus said to the remaining eleven. "My death is very near. I give you a new commandment. Love each other the same way I have loved you. How else will people recognise you as my disciples? It is when people see the way you love each other, that they will learn to love me."

Peter was still confused about what Jesus meant when he talked about leaving his disciples. He asked, "Master, when you talk about leaving us, where are you intending to go? I want to follow you wherever it is, even if it means imprisonment or death." "You mean well Peter," Jesus replied, "but where I am going next, you cannot come. In a short time from now your courage will fail. Before the cock crows tomorrow morning, you will have said three times that you do not know me."

The disciples finally accepted that Jesus was about to leave them and were extremely sad. He comforted them. "Don't be worried or upset. Believe and trust in the Father. Also believe and trust in me. I am about to go back to heaven to be with my Father, and when I arrive I will prepare a marvellous place for you, ready for when your time on earth comes to an end. I will be waiting for you, and the day you die I will be there to meet you and take you to that place. Then we can be together again." Thomas was still struggling to understand. "But how can we possibly know the way?" he asked. "Thomas, I haven't come to show the way, I am the way. It is through your friendship with me that you will find yourself in heaven." I do not just speak the truth, I am the truth. I am life itself. In me you will find eternal life. Death will not touch you."

Philip said. "Jesus, you have talked much about the Father, if you would only show him to us we would be satisfied." "Philip, in all the time you have been with me, haven't you yet realised that when you look at me, you do see the Father. He and I are as one. He is in me and I am in Him. We are always in complete agreement about everything. It may not seem like it at first, but it is a good thing for you that I am leaving to go back to heaven,

because when I do, I will send the Holy Spirit to be with you. When he comes, he will be with you at all times, to help, comfort and guide you in every situation. He will reveal to you everything that is true. He will give you wisdom and power, and fully equip you to do God's work.

Do you want to be fruitful and productive as you serve God? Then learn a lesson from the grapevine. If a branch is broken off from the vine, it withers away and dies, no longer producing grapes. I am the vine and you are the branches. Stay joined to me."

37

Aware of how little time he had left, Jesus began to pray passionately.

"I pray Father, that through me, many will find you and gain eternal life. I pray that you will protect my disciples from all the lies of the evil one. Show them always what is true and right. Father, keep them strong in your strength for all they will have to endure because they believe in me. I pray also for all those who are believers now and all those who will become believers in the future, that they will know how much you love them. It is my deep longing that through your love they will learn to love each other and be united as an example to everyone. I thank you Father that you always hear my prayers."

After singing worship songs together, Jesus and the apostles went up to the Mount of Olives. When they arrived, Jesus found a secluded place to pray. "Father, you know how I dread the awful suffering I am about to face. Is there some other way that your purposes can be worked out? If not, you know that I will go through with it." He prayed this prayer three times with such feeling that his sweat fell to the ground like drops of blood. When he finished praying an angel came to be with him and gave him strength.

38

"It is time to go," Jesus called, "here comes Judas to betray me." A detachment of armed soldiers was with him, also priests, Pharisees and other officials. Judas said to them, "So you will know who to arrest, I will give a kiss of greeting to Jesus of Nazareth." He went over to Jesus saying "Greetings Master!" and gave him a kiss. Jesus called out, "Yes, I am the one you have come to arrest, there is no need to bother with these others." When the officials went to get hold of Jesus, Peter drew his sword and

swung at them, slicing off the ear of the High Priest's servant Malchus. Jesus spoke sternly to Peter, "Put your sword away Peter! If I wished, I could call on twelve legions of angels to defend me. Come here Malchus!" Jesus touched the place where the ear had been cut off. To everyone's amazement a complete new ear grew. The commander of the soldiers had Jesus tightly bound and taken to the house of Annas who had been high priest before Caiaphas took office.

All the disciples had run away, except Peter, who followed at a distance to see what would happen. When he came to the courtyard, the servant at the door looked closely at him saying, "Hey, aren't you one of the disciples of that Jesus of Nazareth who has just been taken into the house?"

"Don't be stupid, of course I'm not." Peter said. In the house, Annas began to question Jesus. "Tell me about this teaching you've been creating such a stir with. What have you been saying to cause so much trouble?" "Why ask me?" Jesus answered, "You can ask any of those who have heard me." One of the officials struck Jesus in the face. "How dare you insult someone like him who was once a high priest?" They dragged Jesus away to the house of Caiaphas, the high priest now in office. Peter followed, keeping well back, but when he entered the courtyard he was recognised by a servant girl. "You were with that Jesus who's just been arrested. You're one of his disciples" Another girl agreed. "Yes, she's right, you are." Peter swore back in anger, "You don't know what you're talking about, either of you. I've never known him."

Caiaphas gathered the whole Jewish council together. Failing to find any evidence that they could use to prosecute Jesus, they got together a group of disreputable characters, who they could bribe to tell lies about him. The whole thing was a farce. None of them could agree on the false evidence they brought. Caiaphas pressed on anyway. "Come on Jesus of Nazareth," he demanded, "when are you going to answer these accusations?" By remaining silent, Jesus infuriated the council. Exasperated, Caiaphas shouted, "Just give me a straight answer to this! Are you the Messiah, the Son of God or not?" "Yes I am." Jesus declared, "and I tell you this. The time will come when you will see me return from heaven in glory. The time will come when everyone will see me sitting at the right hand of God." Caiaphas was incensed. He ripped his cloak in fury. "What other evidence do we need? We have heard the worst form of blasphemy. He

deserves to die. I vote we give him the death sentence. Do you the council find him guilty?" They were unanimous. "Yes we do." They started spitting on him. Then they put a blindfold on, and one after another struck blow after blow. "Come on great prophet," they taunted, "tell us which one hit you?"

Peter was waiting in the courtyard. Some of those standing round challenged him. "You're one of his disciples. You've got the same accent as him. You're from Galilee." Peter began cursing. "I tell you I don't know the man, I've never known him." Just as he finished protesting a cock crowed. At this very moment Jesus was being led out of the house. He looked into Peter's eyes. Peter was heartbroken when he remembered what Jesus had said to him at the last supper. "Before the cock crows in the morning, you will say three times that you do not know me." He went away sobbing bitterly. When Judas discovered that Jesus had been condemned to death, he was overwhelmed with regret and hated himself for what he had done. He took the thirty silver coins back to the priests saying, "I have done a terrible wrong. I have betrayed an innocent man." "What do we care, go away and take your money." Judas threw the coins on the temple floor then went and hanged himself.

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Bound in chains, Jesus was taken before Pontius Pilate the Roman governor. Only Pilate was able to authorise the death sentence passed by the Jewish council. Once again false accusations were brought, but on questioning Jesus, Pilate could find no basis for the charges so he called together the Jewish authorities and the people. When they were assembled before him he spoke out, "I have found Jesus of Nazareth not guilty of any of the crimes you accuse him of. He should be freed." The crowd became angry. In an uproar they shouted, "We want him dead. Crucify him, crucify him!" The shouting became louder and angrier until Pilate gave in to the pressure. He raised his hand for silence. "Very well, go and do what you like with him." He sent for a bowl, soap and a towel and in clear view of all the people washed his hands saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood. I find nothing wrong with him. Let this be a witness that I place full responsibility on you, and you alone." The people called back, "Yes, let his blood be upon our heads and the heads of our children."

As was the custom when someone was to be crucified, Jesus was taken and flogged. The whip, with twelve metal tipped thongs, inflicted deep wounds on his body. When the flogging ended, he was taken, bleeding severely, to the governor's yard. The soldiers dressed him in a purple robe, placed a crown of thorns on his head and put a staff in his hand. "Now you are a king." they mocked. We kneel before you. Hail king of the Jews." When they tired of this, they stood round spitting on him. They took the staff out of his hand and beat him over the head. When their cruelties were finished, they stripped the purple robe from him and heaved the heavy cross onto his back. He hadn't gone far when in his weakness from loss of blood he stumbled and fell. An African called Simon was passing by so a soldier called out, "Come over here you. Pick that cross up and carry it for him." Simon carried the cross the rest of the way until they arrived at a place called Golgotha, the place of the skull.

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They laid Jesus on the cross and drove nails through his hands and feet. A sign, prepared by Pilate, was fixed above the cross. It said, "Jesus of Nazareth - King of the Jews." The chief priests strongly objected. "Take that down and write, He claimed to be the king of the Jews." Pilate told them, "I have written what I have written. It will stay as it is."

The crosses of Jesus and the two criminals being crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left, were lifted and dropped into the sockets prepared for them. Hanging in agony Jesus called out, "Father forgive them, they do not understand." One of the criminals started hurling insults. "You're supposed to be the great Messiah, the great Saviour. Why don't you save yourself, then you can save us too?" As he continued taunting Jesus, the other criminal called out, "Don't you fear God you fool? We deserve to be here. This man is innocent. He hasn't done a single thing wrong." He looked at Jesus and asked, "When you come into your Heavenly Kingdom Jesus, please remember me?" Jesus looked at him. "I will remember you. This very day you will be with me in Paradise." Many continued to mock him. "Look at you. You say you have come to save people and you can't even save yourself. If you are the Son of God, why doesn't God rescue you? Come on great prophet, get yourself down off the cross why don't you?"

48

At noon, a great darkness descended as though the sun had been eclipsed. It lasted till three in the afternoon. Jesus was at the point of death. He cried out in great distress, "My God, My God, why have you deserted me." A few moments later, with a final gasp, he said, "It is finished. Father I give my spirit into your care." Then he died.

41

The temple in Jerusalem had a room called 'The Most Holy Place'. A large curtain separated it from the rest of the temple. Only the High Priest was permitted to enter. The moment Jesus died this curtain ripped down the middle from top to bottom. There followed a great shaking of the ground like an earthquake. Rocks split apart, graves opened and just as Lazarus had done, Godly people came back to life. They were seen walking about in the city. The soldiers on guard at the cross were terrified and cried out, "He really is the Son of God." The centurion in charge of them said this also, claiming that Jesus was innocent of the charges made against him. He fell to his knees and worshipped God.

Joseph of Arimathea was a prominent member of the Jewish council. He owned a grave plot where he had prepared a tomb for himself for when he died. He went to see Pontius Pilate and asked. "Could I take the body of Jesus of Nazareth, and use my tomb for his burial?" This suited Pilate well so he gave his permission. Joseph went to see Nicodemus, another important council member, and asked for his help. They went to the cross together, took down the body, and placed it in Joseph's tomb. A false rumour had been spread, that the disciples were planning to steal the body and hide it so they could claim Jesus had come back to life. To prevent this Pilate sent a detachment of soldiers to the tomb to guard it.

Early on Sunday morning there was a sudden shaking of the ground around the tomb. An angel of God appeared, shining with an intense white light. He promptly rolled the huge stone away from the tomb entrance and sat on it. The whole detachment of soldiers shook with fear at the sight of him, fell down and lay in a coma. When they came round and looked in the tomb they found it empty. Fearfully they went back to Pilate to report what they had seen. A little later in the morning, Mary mother of James, Mary Magdelene and Salome, came with burial clothes, ointments and spices to attend to Jesus' body. They were shocked to find an angel

sitting in the tomb waiting for them. The angel said, "You will not find Jesus here. Didn't he tell you that he would rise from the dead? Go and tell the disciples." When Peter and John received this message, they ran at top speed to see for themselves. The tomb was indeed empty as the women had said.

42

The same morning, as Mary Magdalene walked in the graveyard garden wondering about things, Jesus appeared. At first she thought it was the gardener, then in amazement and happiness, realised that she was seeing Jesus. He had risen from death as he had promised. She was the very first person to do so.

That afternoon, Cleopas and another believer set off to walk to Emmaus, a village seven miles away. They were deeply upset after what had happened to Jesus. As they talked about it, Jesus came up alongside them but at first didn't allow them to recognise him. "Friends, you seem very unhappy. What are you discussing?" "Haven't you heard about Jesus of Nazareth, the great prophet that we expected would free Israel from Roman Occupation? We thought he would be made King. The Jewish council sentenced him to death and had him crucified. Now we hear from some women that his tomb is empty and he has come back to life. They say that angels spoke to them. We can't make sense of it." "But aren't these things just what the prophets of old predicted?" their walking companion asked. As their journey continued, Jesus carefully explained what the scriptures said about him. As he spoke, their hearts were set on fire and their spirits lifted. When they reached the place where they were to stay for the night, they invited Jesus to join them. At meal time, Jesus took a loaf of bread, gave thanks to God, and broke it. Suddenly they recognised him. Then he disappeared.

The same evening, in Jerusalem, the disciples were together in a locked room, afraid of being arrested. Suddenly Jesus appeared among them. At first they thought they were seeing a ghost. Jesus said, "I am not a ghost. Look at my hands and feet. See where the nails went in. Come and touch me, see I am flesh and bone. Do you have something to eat?" He was given some cooked fish and he ate it as they watched him. "This is what I told you about. Didn't I say that I would rise again on the third day? Here I

am, just as I said I would be." As the truth finally dawned, the disciples were thrilled. He said, "Let my peace be with you." Then he breathed on them saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

Thomas wasn't with them on this occasion. When he heard what the disciples had to say, his response was, "I don't believe it. I would need to stand before him and put my fingers in the nail holes to believe what you have told me." A week later, Thomas was with them in the same room, when Jesus appeared again. "Come over here Thomas and stand before me. Here are my hands, put your fingers in the nail holes. Now stop all this doubting and start believing." Thomas fell to his knees and all he could say was, "You are my Lord and my God."

Sometime after this, the disciples returned to Galilee. One evening, Peter, Thomas, Nathaniel and John were together by the Sea of Galilee when Peter said, "I'm going out to do some fishing. Do any of you want to come?" "We might as well." the others answered. They fished all through the night without catching anything, and as they neared the shore at dawn, a man on the beach called out, "Hello friends! I see you haven't made a catch yet. Try your net on the other side of the boat." They did as he suggested. To their amazement the net was so full they couldn't pull it aboard. It was a massive haul. When the fish were counted later there were 153. As they headed for the beach, John looked at Peter and with surprise in his voice said, "You know who it is? It's the Lord Jesus." Peter leapt out of the boat and thrashed his way to shore. The others dragged the net full of fish with them. Jesus already had a fire burning. "Bring a few of the fish over here, and let me cook breakfast for you." After they had talked and eaten breakfast, Jesus arranged to meet with them later on a nearby mountain to talk about the future.

43

When they came together he explained, "Very soon you will see me go up into heaven. When I have gone, it will be your task to continue my work here on earth. You are to go everywhere preaching the good news of God. Invite people to believe in me and become my disciples. Baptise them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Then, teach them everything I have taught you. I am sending you with my authority, in my name, and in

the power of the Holy Spirit. I will always be with you, even to the very end. Those who believe in me and are baptised will have everlasting life."

When the disciples were in Jerusalem for the Jewish feast of Pentecost, Jesus appeared to them for the last time. It was forty days since he rose from the dead. "Before you go out preaching," he instructed them, "you are to wait in Jerusalem until you are visited by the Holy Spirit. He will equip you with all the gifts you need, and he will give you power to do everything God calls you to do. Come with me now to the Mount of Olives. It is time for me to return to heaven." As they gathered there, without warning, Jesus was lifted off the ground and into the sky. He went out of sight into a heavenly cloud. As the disciples stared intently into the sky, two angels appeared alongside them. "Men of Galilee don't keep looking into the sky for him. The time will come when Jesus will return to earth in the same way as you have seen him leave." Full of amazement and happiness, the disciples went back to the place where they were staying. After they had prayed and worshipped God, Peter stood up and said, "Friends, since Judas betrayed Jesus and hanged himself, we have only eleven apostles instead of twelve. Shall we seek God's guidance for who should take his place." A disciple called Mathias, who had been with them from the beginning, was chosen.

This concludes the Gospel accounts.

It is good to remind ourselves again of what the apostle John concluded.

"There are many miraculous signs, and many other works that Jesus did that are not recorded. Hundreds of books would have to be written to tell you about them all. Why have I chosen to write the things that I have? It is so that you will believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and that you will gain eternal life."

Chapter 5:

What Next?

It would be so helpful if I could have a conversation with you at this point in the book. We could work out just where you have come to in your journey of faith and consider the next step. One way of looking at things is this. Becoming a Christian believer is a decision, a choice. We travel a journey towards making that choice which may be very long, very short or anything in between. There is a time when we decide. Then there is the journey that we travel following our decision. It may be that you are able to recognise which of these three stages of journey you find yourself.

Sometimes our hearts and spirits lead the way on these journeys and sometimes our minds. Eventually though head and heart come to agree.

We have a good example of the journey towards decision when we look at two people meeting and developing a relationship which eventually leads to marriage. My wife and I met when we signed up for the same night school class. We hoped to learn how to speak French. An unrealistic hope as it turned out. However, we got to chatting in the coffee break and eventually made a date without a great deal of enthusiasm. Other dates followed and gradually our friendship and affections grew. We began to fall in love and did fall in love. A year from our first meeting I was absolutely sure that she was the girl for me. I proposed, using those decisive words, "Will you marry me?" Brenda wasn't ready. I proposed again. She was in love with me at this time I am sure, but really scared to make a decision. This was for life. On my third proposal she said yes, with some trepidation! We got engaged, and from that time on our relationship, our love, grew even stronger. It has continued to do so through our fifty two years of marriage. I use this illustration to explain that the basis for our decision to marry was a developing relationship that finally produced the desire and confidence to make it permanent.

There are obvious similarities in our journey towards making a decision to put our lifelong trust in God and his son Jesus. Make it your priority to develop your relationship with them. Get to know them and how much you are loved by them. The time will come when you will want to make things permanent and you will have the confidence to do so.

The best known characters in the Old Testament are Abraham and Moses. Abraham is recognised as the father of the Jewish, Muslim and Christian Faiths so we can learn much from him. He is a great example. When called by God he needed some time to discover who God was and what he was like, time to grow in understanding and relationship. His relationship grew into a friendship. The bible clearly says, "Abraham was a friend of God." When God first spoke to Abraham he said this, "Abraham, I will bless you and you will become a blessing to many." He didn't say, "Abraham, start blessing me so that I can bless you." I will return to this later. For now, I would like you to accept that God wants to bless you because he knows that his blessings will equip and resource you to become a blessing.

I know a young lady who has a great compassion for people who are living troubled lives. She will go to any lengths to help them through their troubles and has been successful in many cases. She has seen many people experience transformed lives. How is that? Well, she doesn't hesitate to say to them, "You need God in your life. Ask him to help you sort things out." Those who have done this have found to their amazement that God has been quite ready help without judging them. It is a good starting point in developing a friendship with God. Who wouldn't want a friend who is always ready to help? Moses too is spoken of in the bible as a friend of God.

When the disciples of Jesus began to walk with him and learn from him, they considered themselves to be his servants. They often called him Master. As their relationship with him grew, Jesus sat down with them one day and said to them, "From now on I will not consider you as servants, but as friends and in that friendship you will begin to see and understand what my purposes are."

Trust me when I say that God wants you as a friend. Jesus wants you as a friend and he wants you to join with him in his purposes. At the very heart of the Christian faith is friendship with God, friendship with Jesus and friendship with people. So I recommend that as you journey towards a time when you might choose to walk with God permanently and become a Christian, just focus on discovering that he is real. There is a Psalm which says, "Taste and see that the Lord is good." Make friends with caring

Christians who will help and guide you. If you are not yet ready to make a decision, continue patiently looking into things.

One excellent way of doing this is to join what is called an Alpha course. Alpha is the first letter of the Greek alphabet so one could consider this course as a place to begin. Alpha provides an opportunity to explore many of the fundamental questions of life and to be able to ask any questions at all that you might have about the Christian faith. The course is used nationwide and internationally. Millions of people have found faith in this free informal discussion based environment.

But perhaps you are on the brink of decision. Often people say they are not good enough to become Christians. No one is, join the club. On the first page of the book I introduced you to a criminal who couldn't have been further along the road of not being good enough. His qualification for paradise was turning to Jesus and putting his trust in him. The same applies to us all. We have a level playing field here. Of course our lives will be transformed along the way and goodness will increase.

Here is an illustration. My wife Brenda is a very caring person. A lady we knew was having trouble selling her house, so Brenda offered to help her to present it in a manner that would help it to sell. Shock horror! The state of this house was unbelievably, awesomely bad, filled to overflowing with years of accumulated junk. Every single surface needed deep cleaning. She spent a number of days sorting out all the junk and taking it to the tip. Believe it or not, she discovered part way through this exercise, a sofa so heaped over with junk that the lady who owned the house had forgotten it existed. Cleaning and presentation followed. The house sold in record time. It was a truly horrible job that she took on. Brenda surprised me at the end of it by saying, "You know Mike, I really enjoyed myself." I thought, "I guess God is like that. Whatever kind of mess our lives are in, however bad, God will come in if we ask and enjoy himself sorting it out and cleaning it up."

There is a hymn that was popular some while ago that started with the words:

'Jesus take me as I am, I can come no other way.'

How do we practically make our decision? There are some words of Jesus, well known and frequently quoted that go like this. "Look, I stand at the door of your life and knock. If you will open your door to me I will come in." Our decision is made in prayer. Keep it as simple as you like. Saying to God and Jesus, "I open the door of my life to you, please come in." is sufficient, but often it is helpful to add to this according to what is on your heart. There are a variety of formal prayers available to use if you find that helpful. You could use this simple prayer of mine if you wish:

Jesus, I believe you are the Son of God and I open the door of my life to you. Thank you for forgiving my past. Please come in and help me to live the way that God would want me to live. I now place my destiny in your hands.

It seems incredible to me that such a simple prayer, sincerely and truthfully spoken, can unlock heaven for us. How, in a tiny moment of time we can step into heaven's eternity.

I suppose faith is the answer. This was a faith discovered by Abraham. The bible tells us this:

It was by faith that he chose to do what God asked him when he was called to leave home and go to a strange land. He went without knowing where he was going. When he eventually reached that land he was like a foreigner and he lived in tents. But, he lived there by faith trusting God that this was only a temporary situation. He spent his days confidently looking forward to an eternal city designed and built by God.

It is self evident that our time in this world is temporary and I hope you are persuaded that you can look forward to an eternal dwelling place prepared by God. It is called heaven.

Perhaps you have already made your choice to trust God with your life and destiny and are ready to continue the journey that follows decision. I often joke with people that the Christian journey from here on is a 'Journey into the Unknown' and there is some truth in it. We have handed our life plan over to God and only he has full knowledge of it. God said to the great prophet Jeremiah:

“Jeremiah, I know the plans I have for you. Remember this. They are plans for your good and not for your harm.”

You are about to continue your journey with God and continue developing your great friendship with him. My understanding of this is that we should travel this journey in the deepest and fullest knowledge of his love.

The apostle John wrote this. “Our relationship with God did not start with us first loving him, but with him first loving us.”

We are God’s children, that is what we are! It is well understood that children need to be bathed in the love of their parents from the beginning if they are to be able to fully express love to others. Children growing up without a parents love are usually emotionally crippled and find it difficult or impossible to love their parents or anyone else. Where children are deeply loved they find it easy to love out of the love they have first received. Our daughter who died suddenly at three and a half years old was deeply loved, not with a spoiling love I might add. She knew it and was secure in it. The day before she died we had a day out with my parents. All day Angela just kept repeating, “I love you Mummy, I love you Daddy, I love you Grandma, I love you Granddad.” We took our three year old Grandson out a few days ago. His Mum and Dad have poured love into him. When we took him home and stood at the door to leave I found him hugging my leg and pressing his cheek against it. When I picked him up he threw his arms round my neck and pressed his cheek against mine. He had learned how to love from his parents and we need to learn how to love from God.

When the apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome he said, “We cry out to him, Abba Father.” The nearest we can come to translating that into English is “Daddy.” I know that it is a deep, deep mystery that we as mere human beings can enjoy an individual, intimate, loving relationship with the one who created the universe, but that is just how it is. When we choose to believe it we begin to experience it. Millions of people can testify to the truth of it.

Paul wrote this to a group of Christians in Asia:

I pray that your Father God, from his unlimited resources will empower you with inner strength through his Spirit. Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him. Your roots will grow down into

God's love and keep you strong. I pray that you will have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how long, how wide, how high and how deep his love for you is. I want you to experience the love of Christ, even though it is too amazing to understand.

If you can't understand it, just enjoy it I say.

So the first part of my answer to 'What Next?' is this. Open your heart wide to the love of Father and Son and Holy Spirit and allow them to pour it in. You will find that your journey and your service to God will be motivated by a return of their love.

The rest of this book will be a continuation of the answer to the 'What Next Question', so do go on to read chapter six. This is my condensed and simplified translation of the fifth book of the New Testament called 'Acts of the Apostles.' It is written by the same Luke that wrote the third gospel. It tells of all that happened after Jesus went back to heaven and how he sent the Holy Spirit as he promised his disciples that he would. The main characters in the story are the apostles Peter and Paul. Enjoy!

Chapter 6: The Acts of the Apostles.

1

Hello Theophilus, this is Luke.

My first book, told you the story of the life of Jesus until the day when he was taken up to heaven. He left instructions with his disciples to wait in Jerusalem until the promised Holy Spirit of God came upon them. This book will tell you the things that happened after Jesus returned to heaven.

2

Pentecost was a celebration fifty days after the Passover. On this day the believers were all gathered together in a house in Jerusalem. While they were praying, a sound like the blowing of a powerful wind filled the whole house where they were sitting. Also they saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that rested on each one of them. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit, who gave them the ability to speak foreign languages. At this time Jews from many nations had come to stay in Jerusalem for the festival. When they heard the incredible sound of the wind, a crowd soon gathered to see what was going on. They were confused when they heard the disciples speaking out about how wonderful God was in each of the visitors own languages such as Greek, Italian, Egyptian, Arabic and many more. They kept asking, "What does this mean? What's this all about?" Some made fun of the whole thing saying, "Oh, they've had too much wine, they're drunk."

Peter stood up and called for the attention of the crowd. When things had settled down, he called out. "These men are not drunk, for it is only nine in the morning! Listen to me and I will explain what is happening. God said in the scriptures there would come a time when He would pour out His Holy Spirit on all His people. This is the beginning. The Holy Spirit is now being poured out." Then he went on to teach them about Jesus, making it clear that he was indeed the Son of God, who the Jews had crucified. "We disciples are witnesses that God raised him from the dead and that he went back to heaven." After the crowd heard the message of Jesus they were so moved that they cried out, "What shall we do?" Peter replied, "This is what you should do. Turn away from all your wrong doings, turn to God, and be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ. Then you will have all your sins forgiven, and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

With many other words he warned and pleaded with them saying, "You must save yourselves from this corrupt generation!" What an amazing response there was. Over three thousand people believed, accepted his message, and were baptised. They were taught by the apostles. They took bread and wine as Jesus had instructed at the Last Supper. They joined together for prayer and to praise God every day. More and more people became believers. The Apostles did many miracles, and everyone found that becoming a Christian was a marvellous experience.

3

One afternoon, Peter and John went up to the temple to pray. A man who had been crippled from birth was outside the temple begging. When he saw them he asked for money. Peter and John looked straight at him and Peter said, "Look at us! We haven't got any money but we have a much better gift for you, a gift from God. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth stand up and walk." Peter took his right hand and lifted him to his feet. Instantly his feet and ankles were healed and made strong. He followed Peter and John into the temple courts, jumping up and down and praising God. When people recognised him as the crippled beggar, they were filled with amazement at what had happened. They came running to an area in the temple called Solomon's Colonnade to find out what had happened. Peter said to them, "You really shouldn't be surprised by this. It is not our power or Godliness that has healed this man, but faith in the name of Jesus Christ." He then preached the message of Jesus and told them to listen to everything that Jesus had said if they wanted to be right with God.

4

The Jewish religious authorities were angry at the message Peter and John were preaching, so they arranged for the Temple police to arrest them. They were put in jail for the night. Many of those who had heard the message believed in Jesus. They joined the other believers, increasing the number to over five thousand. The following day, Peter and John were brought up from the cells to explain themselves before the High Priest and the Jewish leaders. "By what power and with who's authority have you done this?" they demanded. Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit replied, "If you mean the good deed done to a crippled man, and how he was healed, let me

clearly state to you that it was done in the name and power of Jesus Christ. He was the one you crucified, but God brought him back to life.”

The council saw how bold and certain Peter and John were and how powerfully they could speak. The healed man was standing with them as proof of what they had done. There was no way they could argue against it. They could see that Peter and John were just ordinary working men. They were amazed, realising that it was because they had been with Jesus that they could do what they had done and speak as they had. Peter and John were sent out of the council room. “What are we going to do with these two?” the council members asked each other. “It is obvious that they have done an incredible miracle and all of Jerusalem has heard about it. But, we don’t want them spreading propaganda about that Jesus of Nazareth. They called them back into the council hall. “You are never ever to speak about Jesus of Nazareth again. If you do, you will face the worst punishment we can hand out.” Peter answered, “We hear what you have said but now we have something to say to you. You had better make your minds up whether you want us to obey you, or obey God! We cannot and will not, stop telling people about the wonderful and amazing things that Jesus said and did.” This put the council in a fix. They didn’t know what punishment to give without causing the people to riot. Everyone was praising God for the miracle of a forty year old man, crippled from birth, being instantly and completely healed. So the council had to set them free.

Peter and John reported back to the other disciples all that had gone on. They gathered with the other believers to pray together. This is what they prayed. “Lord God, you hear the threats of those who are against us. Give us the courage to preach the message of Jesus Christ with great boldness. Send your power so that wonders and miracles can be done by the name of your Son.”

After this prayer, the building they were in began to shake. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit, who gave them the ability to fearlessly preach God’s message. The believers were so filled with love for one another that they freely shared everything that they owned so that there wasn’t one person that suffered from poverty.

The apostles met regularly in an area of the Temple called Solomon's Hall. By the power of God they performed all sorts of incredible miracles. Because of this, crowds more people became believers. The sick were brought from all over Jerusalem to be healed. There were so many that those who brought them had to lay them on mats along the road. When Peter walked past and his shadow fell on them they would be healed. The High Priest and his friends reacted with violent jealousy. They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail. But God was watching over them. During the night an angel came, opened the gates, and they walked free. He instructed them, "First thing in the morning, go back to the Temple and start preaching again." They did so, but it wasn't long before they were again arrested. When they were brought before the council, the High Priest spoke angrily to them. "Didn't we tell you never again to preach about Jesus from Nazareth. Instead you are filling the whole of Jerusalem with your teaching. We know that you plan to blame us for his death." "And didn't we say that we must obey God." replied the apostles. Then they preached the Christian message to the members of the council who became so angry that they decided to put the apostles to death. Gamaliel, a highly respected council member spoke out. "Let me give you some advice on this matter. Think about this, we have had trouble in the past from men who thought they were something and gathered a band of followers to their cause. Did it ever come to anything? No it didn't. Now, what about these men? We must take great care. They claim that what they are preaching is inspired by God. If what they say is true, you could find yourselves fighting against God. I suggest that you leave them alone. If what they are doing is not from God it will soon fade away." Gamaliel's advice was accepted, but before freeing the apostles the council ordered that they be beaten with rods and told them again never to speak about Jesus. The apostles were not put off and continued to teach every day in the Temple and all over Jerusalem that Jesus was the Son of God.

6

The number of believers grew rapidly and this produced problems with the distribution of food to the poor. Seven men were chosen to take responsibility for this task. They were men who were full of wisdom and the Holy Spirit. This allowed the apostles to focus on teaching and preaching and the number of new disciples increased in a spectacular way.

Stephen was one of the men who had sorted out the food program for the poor. He had great faith and did amazing miracles among the people. One day, some men from a Jewish cult started to argue with him about the message he was preaching. Other Jews joined in, but none of them could stand up against his wisdom and Holy Spirit power. So, these Jews bribed some men to lie about Stephen. They claimed that he had cursed Moses and God. This got Stephen into serious trouble with the Jewish authorities. He was arrested and brought before the council. As they began to accuse him, Stephen's face began to shine like that of an angel.

7

The High Priest asked him, "Are these accusations true?" Stephen answered by giving a long review of Israel's religious history. He took them through the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, King David and King Solomon and pointed out sternly how the Jews had resisted the will of God so many times. He challenged them, "Name me one of Israel's prophets that your ancestors didn't persecute? They killed all those who predicted the coming of Jesus, and when he came, you betrayed and murdered him also by getting the Romans to crucify him. Even now you are resisting the Holy Spirit, just like your ancestors did." At this the High Priest and the council of leaders were furious, grinding their teeth in rage. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit looked up and saw heaven open. "Look", he cried, "I see Jesus, standing at the right hand of God." Putting their hands over their ears to drown out Stephen's voice, they rushed at him and dragged him out of the city to stone him. As the stones hurtled at him he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Falling to his knees he shouted, "Lord God, forgive them." With that he died.

8

A young man, a Pharisee called Saul, watched what happened and fully approved of it. He was later to become the famous apostle Paul.

A great wave of persecution of Christian believers began that day. Everyone except the apostles fled from Jerusalem going everywhere preaching the good news about Jesus. Saul was like a wild man, searching out Christians wherever he could, dragging men, women and children out of their homes and putting them in jail.

Philip, the disciple who had worked with Stephen on the food program, travelled to the city of Samaria to spread the good news about Jesus. The people there were overwhelmed by his preaching. He did all kinds of miraculous healings. As Philip preached about the Kingdom of God and gave the message of Jesus, many people became believers and were baptised. There was a sorcerer called Simon, a proud man who had impressed many with his magic. He also became a believer and was baptised. He followed Philip everywhere, astounded at the amazing miracles he performed.

When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that so many people in Samaria were becoming Christians, they thought it would be a good idea to send Peter and John to take a look. As soon as they arrived, they began to lay their hands on the heads of the new believers and pray for them to be filled with the Holy Spirit. When Simon saw this, he wanted the power to do the same, and asked if he could pay them money to get it. Peter spoke sharply to Simon. "How can you possibly think that God's gift can be bought? You have jealousy and evil thoughts in your heart. Go to God and pray for forgiveness."

After preaching in Samaria for a while, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem, stopping at towns and villages along the way to preach the good news of Jesus. As for Philip, an angel came to speak with him and said, "You know the road that runs from Jerusalem through the Gaza desert. Be there around noon." Philip did as the angel asked. When he arrived the Finance Minister of all Ethiopia was travelling by in his chariot. He was reading out loud from an Old Testament book which had been written by the great prophet Isaiah. The Holy Spirit said to Philip, "Go and walk beside the chariot." "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked. "Not really, I will only be able to understand it if someone explains it to me." "I could explain it to you if you wish." Philip offered. "Then climb up and sit with me," invited the great man. Philip explained the scriptures, pointing out that they predicted the coming of the Messiah Jesus. He then explained the full Christian message. The Ethiopian was thrilled with what he heard and as they passed by a pool of water cried out, "Look, here is water. What is to stop me being baptised?" "No reason at all if you believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." So, they went down into the pool and Philip baptised the Ethiopian, who went happily on his way. Immediately

the Spirit of God transported Phillip to the town of Azotus many miles away. As he travelled to Caesarea, he stopped in every town on the way and preached the good news of God's kingdom.

9

Saul the Pharisee was violently opposed to the message of Jesus. He was on his way to Damascus to persecute the Christians there. His plan was to arrest them all and take them in chains back to Jerusalem. As he came near to the city, breathing murderous threats, suddenly, a brilliant light from heaven shone down on him and around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice speaking to him. "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Who is speaking sir?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, the one you have set yourself to oppose. Now get up, go into Damascus, and wait for me to tell you what to do." The men who were with Saul were speechless. They could hear the voice but see no one. As Saul picked himself up he realised that he was completely blind. His men had to lead him to Damascus where for three days he ate nothing and drank nothing.

There was a sincere Christian in Damascus called Ananias. Jesus spoke to him in a vision. "Go over to Straight Street Ananias and find the house of a man called Judas. Ask to see Saul of Tarsus. I have given him a vision of you coming and laying hands on him to restore his sight. He is expecting you." This worried Ananias. "But this man has a notorious reputation!" "Trust me," Jesus said, "I have chosen him to be my faithful servant. He will take the message of God's Kingdom all through Israel and to many countries beyond. He will be known as the apostle Paul." Finding courage, Ananias did what he had been asked. He found Saul, and placing his hands on his head, said, "Saul, the Lord Jesus has sent me to you so that you may be filled with the Holy Spirit and be able to see again." Instantly, what seemed like scales fell from Saul's eyes and he could see perfectly. He was filled with the Holy Spirit and then he was baptised in water in the name of Jesus. He ate a meal to restore his strength and went down to the Jewish synagogue to tell everyone the good news that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, the Son of God. They were amazed. "Isn't this the same man who has been savagely persecuting Christians in Jerusalem? He came here to Damascus to do the same. Why all of a sudden is he preaching Jesus?"

Saul's preaching became more and more powerful. He proved with his arguments that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God. Many Jews objected to his teaching and worked out a plot to murder him. He heard about this, so during the night some of his converts helped him to escape from the city. As the gates were all guarded, they found a hole in the city wall, tied a rope to a basket and let him down to the ground in it. Saul made his way back to Jerusalem. When word was out that Saul was back, the Christians were very afraid. A disciple called Barnabas, who knew all about Saul's conversion, explained everything that had happened in Damascus. The Jerusalem Christians decided to accept him amongst them. For a time, Saul went about Jerusalem fearlessly speaking about Jesus. A group of Greek immigrant Jews took great objection to his preaching and threatened to kill him. When his Christian friends heard about this, they persuaded Saul to go with them to Caesarea. There he boarded a ship for Tarsus, his home town.

As Peter travelled about the country preaching, he came to a town called Lydda. There was a paralysed man there who had been bedridden for eight years. When Peter healed him and preached the message about Jesus, many people became Christians. In the nearby town of Joppa there was a disciple called Tabitha who spent her time doing good and helping the poor. She became sick and died. Two men were sent to Lydda to fetch Peter. When he arrived in Joppa he was taken to the upstairs room where Tabitha's body was laid. People were weeping and wailing. Some were looking at the beautiful clothes that Tabitha had made for the poor. Peter asked them all to leave the room. He knelt down to pray. After a while he turned to the dead woman and commanded, "Get up Tabitha!" Her eyes opened and she sat up. He took her hand and helped her to her feet, then called the believers back into the room. News of this miracle spread quickly through the town and many people became believers. Peter stayed on in Joppa for a long time, lodging at Simon the Tanner's house.

10

In the coastal city of Caesarea, there lived a Roman centurion called Cornelius. He worshipped God, prayed regularly, and gave generously. He was known as a good man and everyone respected him. One day at three in the afternoon he had a vision. An angel came towards him and called his name. In great fear, Cornelius asked, "Why are you here sir?" The angel

replied, "God has been watching you and has seen all your good deeds. He has sent me with a message. This is what you are to do. In Joppa there is a man called Peter who lives at the home of Simon the tanner. Send some men to ask him to come and visit you." Cornelius did as he was instructed.

The next day, while the messengers were approaching Simon's house, Peter was up on the roof waiting for a meal to be prepared. As he waited he fell into a trance and saw a very strange vision. It was of a canvas sheet held up by its four corners. In the sheet were various animals that Jews were not allowed to eat. He heard a voice saying, "Peter, you are feeling hungry, go ahead, kill any animal you wish and prepare yourself a meal." "Never Lord," he replied. "It is against Jewish religious law. In my whole life I haven't once eaten any such animal." "Are you arguing with God?" the voice continued. "If he says something is clean, it is clean. Don't contradict him." This vision was repeated three times. Peter was not left in any doubt as to what he had seen and heard. He was confused and deeply upset. While struggling to make sense of it, the Holy Spirit spoke to him. "Three men from Caesarea have come to see you. They are waiting outside the Gate. I have sent them to invite you to go back with them to the home of a centurion named Cornelius. Go and you will soon understand the vision." The messengers stayed overnight and the following morning, Peter and a few believers from Joppa travelled to Caesarea.

When they arrived, Cornelius took Peter to meet a large group of people who had gathered in his house. These people were not Jews. Jews referred to anyone who was not of their faith as Gentiles, and considered them unclean. Peter now understood the vision. He spoke to the gathering. "Friends, my Jewish faith says that I should have nothing to do with Gentiles, but God gave me a vision yesterday and made it very plain that he does not think that way. He sees Jews and Gentiles as equals and so he has sent me here to tell you the good news about Jesus of Nazareth. Anyone who chooses to believe and to put their trust in him will have all their sins forgiven and receive eternal life. He is the promised Messiah, the one born of God." As Peter began to preach a long sermon on this, everyone was suddenly filled with the Holy Spirit. They spontaneously burst out praising God and spoke in languages given from heaven. The Jewish Christians, who had come with Peter, were astounded that the Holy Spirit had been given to people who were not Jews. Peter said, "Seeing that all these

people have been baptised in the Holy Spirit, we might as well baptise them in water." And so they did.

11

When the Christian Jews and apostles in Jerusalem got the news that Gentiles had started to become Christians, they were very concerned. Just like Peter before his vision, they couldn't see this being from God. When Peter returned to Jerusalem, he was strongly challenged. "What is this we hear Peter? You have been mixing with Gentiles, even eating with them. What is going on? Peter told them the whole story of his vision of the canvas sheet and the following visit to Cornelius' house. He explained how they had all been filled with the Holy Spirit and then baptised in water.

As Peter spoke, they realised that it must be God's plan for both Gentiles, and Jews, to find eternal life through faith in Jesus. They were thrilled when this truth sunk in, and they thanked and praised God for it.

The believers who fled from Jerusalem after the stoning of Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia, Syria and Cyprus, preaching the message of Jesus Christ wherever they went. Christians from Cyprus took the message to Gentile Greeks in the major city of Antioch in Syria. Many became believers. There was a disciple called Barnabas who was a kind man of strong faith and filled with the Holy Spirit. He was sent from Jerusalem to help. He was thrilled when he saw the wonderful things that God was doing. More and more Gentiles became Christians as a result of his visit. Barnabas decided to go and find Saul (Paul to be) in Tarsus and ask for his help. Saul agreed and they went back to Antioch where they spent a full year teaching the new converts about the Christian faith.

After that they went on to Jerusalem.

12

By this time Herod's grandson Agrippa had become King. To gain popularity with the Jewish authorities he began to persecute Christians. He killed the apostle James, John's brother, then arrested Peter and put him in prison. He planned to keep him in prison until after the Passover festival and then hand him over to the Jews for execution. The night before Peter was due to be executed, the Jerusalem believers met together at the house of Mark's mother, to pray that God would save Peter's life. Peter was

double chained between two soldiers and there were other soldiers standing guard at the prison gate. Suddenly, his cell was filled with a bright light. There standing beside him was an angel sent by God. The angel shook him awake and said, "Quickly Peter, get dressed and follow me." His chains fell off. He got dressed and followed the angel out of his cell, thinking all the time, "This must be a dream. This can't really be happening!" When they came to the iron gates that led onto the street, they opened by themselves. After walking for a little way with Peter the angel disappeared. Peter said to himself, "This is real! God has rescued me from Herod. What shall I do now?"

He decided to go to the house where the prayer meeting was taking place. When he knocked on the outer door, a servant girl called Rhoda came to answer. "Who is it?", she called. "It's me, Peter." he shouted back. Without letting Peter in, she ran back in great excitement to tell the others, "Peter is at the door! Peter is at the door!" she cried. "Don't be so foolish girl, that's impossible." they answered. Rhoda insisted, but they wouldn't believe her. Peter kept knocking on the door until he was finally let in. The believers were astonished. Peter called them to silence and amazed them with the story of how God had so miraculously rescued him. He then left to find a safe place to stay. When Herod got news of the escape, he had all the prison guards executed.

13

The church at Antioch in Syria continued to grow rapidly and it became a great centre for mission. One day when the people were praying, the Holy Spirit made it plain that Saul and Barnabus should be chosen as missionaries. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit they went to Cyprus. Barnabus was a citizen of this country. It had a large Jewish population. It was here that Saul first began to be called Paul.

He first preached in the Jewish synagogue in Salamis, and afterwards from town to town across the island until they came to Paphos. Here they had problems with a sorcerer named Elymas. The governor was very keen to hear the message that Paul and Barnabus were preaching, but Elymas, who had a lot of influence, kept trying to persuade the governor to take no notice of what they had to say. "Don't go putting your trust in this God they are telling you about!" he kept saying. One day Paul reached the end of his

patience. He glared angrily at Elymas, and said, "You son of the Devil! You're full of all sorts of evil trickery! You're the enemy of all that is good! Now God is going to punish you. He is going to strike you with blindness for a time." Instantly Elymas lost his sight. When the governor saw this he was astonished at the display of God's power and the power of the message that Paul preached. The outcome was that the governor, Sergius Paulus became a Christian believer.

After this, Paul and those with him left Cyprus and sailed to the port of Perga in Turkey. The gospel writer Mark had been travelling with them but decided to leave at this point and go back to Jerusalem. Paul was very upset by this, calling him a deserter. Paul and Barnabus continued on to Antioch in Turkey. On the first Sabbath day they attended the synagogue and were asked, "Have you got anything to share with us?" Not one to miss an opportunity, Paul talked to them about their Jewish history showing them how God had prepared the way for the coming of Jesus as the Messiah. He went on to tell them about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus concluding, "Listen friends, this man Jesus forgives sins and gives eternal life." They asked, "Will you come and speak to us again next week?" The following week practically the whole town turned up. This caused the Jewish leaders to become extremely jealous and they argued against everything Paul said.

Paul spoke to them severely. "We have done the right thing coming to you Jews first with this amazing message of Jesus but you have rejected it. We will go on our way and offer life in Jesus to the Gentiles." That was just what they did. The Gentiles were thrilled with the message when they realised that if they accepted Jesus he would give them eternal life. God's message spread all through the region and many became Christians. The Jewish leaders hated it. They stirred up a mob and ran Paul and Barnabus out of town. So, they went on to Iconium which was a commercial centre on the trade route between Turkey and Syria.

14

When Paul and Barnabus began to preach in Iconium, they spoke with such power that great numbers of both Jews and Gentiles believed their message. However, many objected and soon the city was sharply divided about what they preached. The apostles continued to preach and God

gave them the power to do great miracles. Those who opposed them plotted to stone them to death. When Paul and Barnabas heard about it they left and went on to a town called Lystra.

In Lystra Paul and Barnabus preached powerfully as usual. One day they came across a man who from birth had suffered with crippled feet. Paul looked at the man and could see that he had faith to be healed. "I say to you, stand up!" The man jumped up and walked for the first time in his life. The crowd was amazed and shouted, "These men must be Gods who have come down in human form." They wanted to offer temple sacrifices to them. "No, no!" shouted Paul. "You mustn't do this! We are just ordinary people like you. We have come to tell you about Jesus Christ the Son of God. It is only by his power that we can do these miracles."

Soon after this, some Jews from Antioch and Iconium came to cause trouble. They gathered a crowd of people and turned them into a murderous mob. Paul was dragged out of the city and stoned until they were sure he was dead. As the believers stood around full of sorrow, the rocks began to move. Paul shook them off, stood up, and walked back into the city!

After spending further time preaching and teaching in Turkey, Paul and Barnabus went on to find a ship in Attalia and sailed back to Antioch, completing Paul's first missionary journey.

15

Some Jewish Christians arrived in Antioch and began to teach that the Gentile Christians must follow Jewish laws and customs. Paul and Barnabus argued with them about this, telling them it was nonsense. They pointed out that the Gentiles had no Jewish background so didn't need to bother with these laws to be acceptable to God. It was decided that these differences should be settled by the apostles in Jerusalem.

In Jerusalem the apostles and other believers gathered for a meeting. The matter was discussed at length. Then Peter stood up. "Let me remind you of the time I went to the home of Cornelius in Caesarea. He called me over from Joppa to speak to a group of Gentiles. There I was, preaching the good news of Jesus and suddenly the Holy Spirit came upon them. This showed God's approval so I baptised them in water without bothering them

about Jewish laws and customs. It was plain to me that from God's point of view there is no difference between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. Both will receive eternal life by believing in Jesus." James, the brother of Jesus backed Peter up. He taught a lesson on the Old Testament scriptures, explaining that this was just what the prophets had said would happen. The dispute was happily resolved and they returned to Antioch.

After a while Paul suggested to Barnabus that they go back to Turkey to help the churches they had started there. Barnabus thought this was a good idea. "Shall we take Mark with us?" he said. "I'm not having that!" Paul replied. He let us down when he deserted us in Pamphylia." This led to such a serious argument between them that they decided to go their separate ways. Barnabus took Mark with him to Cyprus, while Paul teamed up with Silas, an apostle from Jerusalem, and went to Turkey. This was the beginning of Paul's second missionary journey.

16

When they got to Lystra, where Paul had been stoned and left for dead, they met a Christian young man named Timothy. His mother was a Jewish Christian, his father a Gentile Greek. Everyone spoke so highly of Timothy that Paul and Silas invited him to go with them on their journey.

Guided by the Holy Spirit, the three of them set off and travelled through various regions and towns, helping churches as they went. When they reached Troas on the west coast, Paul had a vision. He saw a man calling out to him and saying, "Paul, come over to Greece and help us." The next day they found a ship and sailed to Phillipi.

They stayed for several days. On the Sabbath day, they found a place of prayer down by the river where a number of godly women were gathered. Amongst them was a wealthy clothing trader named Lydia. When she heard Paul preach, she became a believer and was baptised. Her family also became believers and were baptised. She invited the disciples to stay in her house for the rest of their visit.

One day on their way to the river they were followed by a slave girl. She was possessed by an evil spirit that gave her the power to tell fortunes. Her owners made a lot of money out of her. The girl kept shouting out making it very difficult for Paul to preach. Eventually he lost his patience and

commanded the evil spirit, "In the name of Jesus, come out of her." The spirit left instantly. She lost the ability to tell fortunes and her owners lost their income. They were furious and dragged Paul and the other disciples to the Law Courts. The girl's owners presented their case. "These Christians are making trouble in our city". The magistrate ordered Paul and his friends to be severely flogged. After the flogging they were put in the inner cell of the prison. They were chained, with their feet clamped in stocks.

By midnight they were singing hymns and praising God while the other prisoners listened. Suddenly, there was a great earthquake. The prison was shaken to the foundations. All the doors flew open and the chains of every prisoner fell off. When the jailer woke up he was terrified that the prisoners had escaped. This meant he would be executed. He drew his sword to kill himself, but Paul called out, "Don't do it! We are all still here!" The jailer was amazed that they had not run away. Paul told him all about Jesus. The jailer then showed kindness to Paul and his friends and washed their wounds. He and all his family became Christians and were baptised. The following morning Paul and those who were with him were set free.

17

On they went to the important city of Thessalonica where Paul and Silas again preached the message of eternal life through believing in Jesus. Many people, including important men and women of the city became Christians. The Jewish leaders opposed Paul and Silas saying, "These two have caused trouble every place they've been, and now they're disturbing our city." Sensing the trouble ahead, the disciples smuggled Paul and the others out of Thessalonica and took them to Berea.

The Bereans were open minded and listened carefully to what the apostles had to say. They were convinced by the message of Jesus and became believers. The Jews from Thessalonica heard about this and came down to Berea to cause trouble. Before things got out of hand, Paul decided to go on to the famous city of Athens where he waited for Silas and Timothy to join him. This was a city where many different gods were worshipped. The city intellectuals loved to gather in the city square to discuss the latest theories and ideas.

When they heard Paul preaching they said, "This is all rubbish. He's pushing some sort of new religion." But some said, "Come back tomorrow and tell us more about this new religion of yours." The following day Paul presented a reasoned argument saying, "I noticed as I walked about your city, that you worship many different gods. One of your statues has carved on it, "To the Unknown God." This is the God I have come to tell you about. He is the mighty creator God who made the world and everything in it. He isn't a god made by men out of silver or gold or carved from stone or wood. He is the one and only God who made all men. His reason for making them was so they would seek and find him. He set a day to send his Son Jesus into the world but men killed him. God brought him back to life to show who he was."

When they heard Paul describing Jesus coming back to life, some of them laughed at him, but others said, "We want to know more about this later." Only a few people became believers in Athens.

18

This ended Paul's stay in Athens and he went to Corinth about forty miles away. This city was the political and commercial centre of Greece. He got to know a married couple there called Aquila and Priscilla. Paul lived and worked with them because they were tent makers just as he was. Each Sabbath day Paul was at the synagogue trying to convince everyone of the truth of his message about Jesus. When Silas and Timothy eventually joined him he gave up his tent making to spend all his time preaching. Once again he met with severe opposition from the Jews. They even blasphemed against Jesus. Paul lost patience. "I give up on you Jews." he declared. "From now on I will preach to the Gentiles."

He went to live in the home of Titus Justus who lived next door to the synagogue where Crispus was the leader. Through his conversations with Paul, Crispus became a Christian along with his whole family. They were all baptised. Paul remained in Corinth for a further eighteen months, teaching the truth about God and his Kingdom. Many people became Christian believers.

When Gallio was appointed as a new governor of the region the Jews thought this would be an ideal opportunity to make trouble for Paul. They

dragged him before Gallio and accused him of persuading people to worship God in ways that were against the Roman law. Paul was just about to give his defence when Gallio stopped him. Speaking to the Jews he said, "I can't be bothered listening to all this arguing about religion. I can't make any sense of it. I want nothing to do with it. Just go away all of you." The Jews blamed Sosthenes, the new synagogue leader. They gave him a severe beating there and then! Gallio couldn't have cared less.

Paul stayed in Corinth a few more days before setting out to return by ship to Antioch. He took Aquila and Priscilla with him. Having sailed across the Aegean Sea, the ship docked at the Turkish city of Ephesus. Paul used this as an opportunity to visit the synagogue there. He had discussions with the Jews about the Christian faith and got a good response. They wanted him to stay but he had to be back at the ship before it sailed. The ship took them across the Mediterranean where it docked at Caesarea. This allowed them to make a brief visit to the church in Jerusalem before continuing to Antioch and completing Paul's second missionary journey.

After spending some time in Antioch, Paul was ready to set out again. His aim was to return to Ephesus as he had promised. On the way, he called at the new churches he had started, giving them much help and encouragement.

In the meantime a believer from Egypt named Apollos arrived in Ephesus. He was a gifted teacher who spoke powerfully about Jesus. The problem was that he only had half the story. One day after Aquila and Priscilla had heard him preach they took him to their house and explained the full message. After this Apollos was used greatly by God in Greece to strengthen the churches with his powerful preaching.

19

When Paul arrived in Ephesus he met a group of disciples. He soon realised that they were believers who had not been filled with the Holy Spirit. He asked them, "What kind of baptism did you have?" "We were baptised by John the Baptist." they replied. "And what about the Holy Spirit he asked?" "We have never heard of the Holy Spirit." they said. So

Paul taught them the full gospel message, and baptised them in the name of Jesus. Then he laid his hands on their heads and they were filled with the Holy Spirit.

Paul preached in the synagogue every week for the next three months. He spoke about the Kingdom of God and how it was possible to have eternal life by believing in Jesus. Many people became Christians, but many opposed Paul, arguing against his teaching. He stopped using the synagogue because of this. Instead, for the next two years he held his meetings in a lecture hall just down the street. Everyone in Ephesus and the surrounding areas heard the word of God during that time. God gave Paul the power to do amazing miracles.

Seven sons of a Jewish priest followed Paul around and watched him casting out evil spirits using the name of Jesus. They thought they would try it for themselves. They came across a demon possessed man and they called out, "In the name of Jesus, we command you demon, to come out of him!" The demon answered back through the man, "I know of Paul and I know of Jesus but who are you?" Then the possessed man, leaped on them, tore their clothes, and savagely beat up all seven of them. They ran down the road injured and bleeding. The story of what happened spread all through Ephesus causing the name of Jesus to be greatly honoured. More and more people became Christians. Many who had practiced sorcery and witchcraft brought their priceless scrolls and charms and burned them on a public bonfire.

Ephesus was the main centre in Turkey for the worship of the Greek Goddess Dianna. There was a huge manufacturing industry because of this. All kinds of items such as shrines, statues and charms, made from wood, stone and precious metals were constantly being made and put on sale. Hundreds of craftsmen were employed. As Christianity spread through the city, demand for their products fell sharply. Demetrius was a silversmith with many employees and his business was suffering. He called a meeting and said, "Paul is ruining our businesses by convincing many of our customers that handmade gods are not really gods. Many people have stopped buying them. Besides losing income, there is a grave danger that the Great Temple of Diana will lose influence and our goddess will be forgotten. Where will we be then?" Anger and rioting broke out all over the city. Dianna worshippers chanted for hours, "Great is Dianna of the

Ephesians.” Everyone rushed to the amphitheatre in confusion, some people shouting one thing and others something else. Many didn’t even know why they were there! Eventually, the mayor of the city managed to calm them down. “Stop all this disturbance, there is no need for it! If you carry on like this we will be in serious trouble with the Roman Authorities. If Demetrius or anyone else has a complaint, let them take it to the courts in a civilised manner. Now all of you go home.” Gradually the crowds dispersed and order was restored.

20

Paul had already made plans to go to Greece and this seemed a good time to set off. On route he preached to the believers in all the places he passed through. He spent three months in Greece and was preparing to sail for Syria, when he heard of a plot by the Jews to kill him. He travelled north to Philippi instead and sailed from there to Troas in Turkey. He stayed there for a week and on the last night gathered all the believers together to say goodbye. They were gathered in a room on the third floor of the house. Paul began to preach and went on and on till midnight. A young man called Eutychus was perched by an open window and couldn’t stay awake. He fell out of the window to his death below. Paul rushed downstairs, held the young man in his arms and said, “Don’t worry, he will live!” Eutychus came back to life and everyone was amazed!

They all went back upstairs and Paul continued preaching until dawn.

He then journeyed south until he reached a port called Miletus near Ephesus. He didn’t have time to go to Ephesus so the church leaders came to see him off on his ship. When they arrived Paul said to them, “I know that this is the last time I will be able to speak with you and I feel very sad. My dear friends, I have always been completely honest with you, always wanting the very best for you. I have found it very difficult at times because the Jews were so often plotting to kill me. But, I have never let that stop me preaching everything that would be helpful. You have now heard the full message of God’s kingdom and of eternal life through believing in his Son Jesus. Guided by the Holy Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem. God has shown me that I will face hardships in many places and spend much time in jail. I don’t count my life of much importance except that I want to finish the task of telling people all about God’s kindness, love and forgiveness. Please

remember the example I have been to you. Protect those that God has placed in your care. Now I trust God to take good care of you.”

Paul prayed for them and they wept because they would never see him again. They parted with great sorrow.

21

Paul sailed for Jerusalem, calling at the islands of Cos, Rhodes and Patara, then continued to Caesarea and stayed at the home of Philip for several days. This was Philip who had baptised the Ethiopian after meeting him on the Jerusalem road. A prophet called Agabus warned Paul, “When you arrive in Jerusalem the Jews will hand you over to the Romans.” The local Christians and Paul’s travelling companions pleaded with him not to go to Jerusalem, but he replied, “Don’t be upset. I am ready to be jailed, and if necessary, to die, for the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Shortly after this they left for Jerusalem and on arrival were greeted with great happiness by the Christians there. The next day, Paul took his companions to meet with James, the brother of Jesus, and the other leaders of the Jerusalem church. He gave a detailed report of all that he had achieved on his journey. They were thrilled. When he went with some of the Jewish Christians to the temple he was recognised by some Jews from Turkey. These Jews were violently opposed to Christianity. They grabbed Paul and yelled, “Help us hold him! This is the man who tells people to disobey Jewish laws! He’s a trouble maker!” As word of these accusations got around, a riot started. Paul was dragged out of the temple. The mob began beating him as hard as they could. It was their intention to beat him to death but the commander of the Roman garrison sent his troops to restore order. When they arrived, the mob left off beating Paul who was promptly arrested and bound with chains. The commander demanded of the crowd, “What has this man done to get you into such a fury?” Some shouted one thing, and some another, making no sense at all. The uproar got worse and worse. The commander of the troops decided to take Paul to the fort but as they reached the steps, the mob had become so violent that the soldiers had to lift Paul onto their shoulders to protect him. “Let me speak to these people?” Paul asked. Standing on the steps he raised his hand for silence. When he began to speak in the Hebrew

language of the Jews, they were taken by surprise and gave Paul their full attention.

22

“Let me tell you who I am and the message I bring.” he began. “I am a Jew, as much a Jew as any of you. I was born a Jew, in Tarsus. I was educated as a Jew here in Jerusalem, under the famous Jewish Rabbi Gamaliel. He taught me everything there was to know about the Jewish faith. I followed all the laws and customs to the last detail. When Jews began to turn to the Christian faith here in Jerusalem, I hounded and persecuted them relentlessly, putting many in jail. When I heard that people in Damascus were becoming Christians I set off in a rage to seek them out. My plan was to bring them back in chains and put them in jail.

However, on my way, something astounding happened to me! About noon, a light much brighter than I had ever seen before, broke out of heaven and shone all around me. I fell to the ground under the power of it. A voice said, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” I found myself saying, “Who is it who is speaking to me sir?” The reply came, “I am Jesus of Nazareth, the one you are persecuting.” All the men around me could see the light, but couldn’t understand the voice. I asked, “What do you want me to do Lord?” Jesus replied, “Continue your journey to Damascus and when you get there, you are to meet with my servant Ananias.” Then I realised that I couldn’t see a thing. I was completely blind and had to be led by the hand.

When I reached Damascus, I was taken to the house of a highly respected Jew called Ananias. He had become a Christian. He laid his hands on my head and said, ‘Saul, receive your sight.’ Instantly, I could see again. He told me, “God has chosen you to take the message about Jesus Christ to many countries.” I was baptised in the name of Jesus.

I returned to Jerusalem and went to the Temple to pray. While I was praying, I fell into a trance and heard God say, “Leave Jerusalem immediately, for The Jews here will not accept your message about Jesus. I will send you to far places to preach to the Gentiles.”

When Paul had finished telling the crowd all this, they went into a frenzy. They shouted, “Get rid of him! Kill Him!” The commander of the garrison decided to send Paul for a flogging and then get to the bottom of things.

When the soldiers stretched Paul out to be flogged, he said to the centurion in charge, "Is what you are doing legal?" "What do you mean by that question?" the Centurion asked. Paul continued, "Don't you know that I have Roman Citizenship? I am a Roman by birth." This shocked the Centurion. "In that case, what we are doing is not legal. You are right. A Roman citizen cannot be punished without going to court and being proved guilty of a crime." Paul was released and told to explain himself before the Jewish Council on the following day.

23

When Paul stood in front of the Council he saw that it was made up mainly of Pharisees and Sadducees who belonged to the two largest religious parties. The Pharisees believed in life after death, but the Sadducees insisted the opposite. He called out, "Listen to me! All my ancestors were Pharisees and so am I. The reason I have been brought before you today is because I have been preaching about the resurrection of the dead." Before he could get any further, a fierce argument broke out between the Pharisees and Sadducees. Some were shouting, "This man Paul is alright!" others, "Let's do away with him!" The two factions got so wound up they began tugging at Paul with such force that the Roman commander in charge was frightened they would actually tear him in two. He sent in his soldiers to restore order and have Paul taken to the barracks.

During the night God came close to Paul and spoke to him. "Paul, don't be worried about all this. Just as you have spoken about me in Jerusalem, so you will speak about me in Rome." The following morning, forty Jews got together and worked out a plan to kill Paul. They went to the Chief Priests. "Pretend that you want to ask Paul a few more questions. Ask for him to be brought before the council again. We will set an ambush on the way and kill him." Paul's nephew heard about the plot. He went to the Roman authorities and explained it. The commander of the troops got together two hundred spearmen and seventy mounted cavalry. He gave them these instructions. "Give Paul a horse to ride and take him to the Roman headquarters in Caesarea. Place him under the protection of Felix the Governor. I will write a letter to Felix explaining everything. You can take it with you. In this letter I will ask him to hear Paul's case."

After Paul was taken to Caesarea and Felix had read the letter he agreed to hear the case. Paul was put in jail to await his trial.

24

Ananias the High Priest arrived in Caesarea with a group of Jewish leaders. He brought with him a prosecuting attorney called Turtullus. He began the case against Paul by flattering Felix, and then went on to say, 'Esteemed Felix, I do not wish to take up your valuable time, so I will be very brief as I outline my case. Wherever this man Paul goes he causes trouble, provoking riots and rebellion against the Roman Government. He is the ringleader of a new movement called the Nazarines.' The other Jewish leaders called out, "It's true! Everything he says is true."

Felix pointed to Paul. "Now it's your turn to speak." Paul said to Felix, "Sir, I am confident to make my case before you because you have been a judge of Jewish affairs for many years. It will be very easy for you to find out that none of what you have heard about me is true. My accusers have no way of proving a single one of their statements. I do admit that I am a believer in the Christian Faith and preach the message of Jesus of Nazareth. I try to be true to my conscience in all I say and do."

Felix knew full well that Christians never went around causing trouble or starting riots, so he said, "I am suspending this court case until Lysias, who the garrison commander in Jerusalem, is able to be here." He sent Paul back to prison with instructions that he be well treated, and allowed to have his friends visit at any time. A few days later Felix sent for Paul and asked him to tell his wife and himself about the Christian Faith. They both listened carefully to the message, but when Paul began to speak about the judgement that would come on those who rejected the true ways of God, they became afraid and sent him back. Paul was left for two years in jail waiting for his trial. Every so often, during that time, Felix would call for Paul to speak to him about his faith. Then a new governor was appointed. His name was Festus, and to please the Jews he put Paul in chains.

25

Three days after Festus took over the governorship, he went to visit Jerusalem. As soon as he arrived the Jewish council leaders went to see him to make their complaints about Paul. They tried everything they could

to persuade Festus to send Paul back to Jerusalem to face trial. This was an excuse to have him killed on the way. Festus refused their demands saying, "If you want this man in court, you will have to come to Caesarea and have him tried there."

Ten days later the time of Paul's trial arrived. When he entered the courtroom, the Jews bustled around him making all sorts of wild accusations, not a single one of which they could prove. When Paul was given the opportunity to make his defence he said, "It is perfectly clear that I am not guilty of any one of these charges. I have not opposed Jewish laws. I have not rebelled against the Roman Government. Who can provide a single piece of evidence to prove that I have?" Festus, trying to keep on the right side of the Jews, asked Paul, "Then are you willing to stand trial in Jerusalem?" "I am definitely not," he replied. "As a Roman citizen, I stand by my right to have a hearing before Caesar the Emperor. You know perfectly well that these men are trying to kill me. If I was guilty I would accept being put to death, but I am innocent and I refuse to go with them." Festus discussed this with his advisors then replied, "Very well, to Caesar you will go!"

A few days later, King Agrippa, with his sister Bernice, came to visit Festus. "This is a good opportunity to ask your advice on a matter that is troubling me," Festus said to the King. "Tell me about it." Agrippa replied. "It is a case that was passed on to me by Felix when he left. It is to do with a preacher called Paul. There is a dispute going on because Jewish leaders in Jerusalem are in a fury about what he is preaching. He insists that a man called Jesus, who died, is now alive again. I can't make any sense out of it and hoped that he would go to Jerusalem for trial where they understand these things. Paul has demanded to go to Rome for his trial." "Let me hear this man for myself." Agrippa proposed. Festus said eagerly, "Good. I will arrange it for tomorrow."

The court was assembled the following day. Military officers and prominent men of the city were present. Paul was brought in before Agrippa and Bernice. Festus spoke first. "King Agrippa and all present here. The Jews are demanding the death of this man, but I can't find anything he has done wrong. I am sending him to be heard by Caesar in Rome. I have a real problem with this because I don't know what to write to the emperor. There

is no real charge so I have brought him before the King and yourselves so that you can tell me what to put in my letter."

26

Agrippa said to Paul, "Go ahead and tell us your story." Paul began, "It is most helpful to present my case to you King Agrippa because you are an expert on Jewish laws and customs." Then Paul explained his Jewish background. He told how he had been trained as a Jew, how he had become a Pharisee and how he had persecuted Christians. Then went on to tell them how he had met with the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus and become a Christian.

Paul continued by saying, "The reason that the Jews arrested me and tried to kill me was because of the message I preach. It is the message about Jesus Christ of Nazareth who was raised from the dead and who forgives our sins and gives us eternal life." Agrippa interrupted Paul. "With all this talk are you expecting me to become a Christian?" "It would be a wonderful thing if everyone in this room believed in Jesus the way I do but, I would not want you to have to wear chains as I do."

The King and his sister left the room with Festus and the others to discuss what they had heard. They all agreed that Paul had done nothing to deserve imprisonment or death. Agrippa said to Festus, "What a pity that his appeal to Caesar means that he must now go to Rome. We could have set him free, here and now."

27

Arrangements were made for Paul to set sail to Italy with other prisoners. Julius was the Centurion in charge. They sailed North of Cyprus, but the wind was against them. The ship fought its way as far as Crete where they found harbour at a place called Fairhavens. Because of the time lost it was now the month of October, a dangerous time to be sailing. The Holy Spirit warned Paul that if they set sail from Fairhavens the ship would be wrecked. He went to the captain and the ship owner with this warning. However, when a gentle south wind began to blow they decided to risk sailing along the coast to Phoenix to stay over for the winter because it had a more sheltered harbour. It wasn't long before they sailed into a hurricane. This swept them off course south of the island of Crete. The stars could not be

seen to navigate by, so they had to let the wind blow them along with the sea anchors dragging out behind to stop them capsizing. The ship took such a battering that ropes had to be passed under the hull and tied across the deck to hold the ship together. The storm continued raging for many days until everyone gave up hope.

During the night, Paul was visited by an angel. The following morning he spoke to all on board. "Do not fear. Have courage. No one is going to die. God sent an angel to tell me that we will soon be shipwrecked on an island but not one life will be lost." At dawn on the fifteenth day after leaving Fairhavens, they sighted a bay. The foresail was raised and they were headed straight for the beach when the ship struck a sand bar and began to break up. The soldiers were about to kill all the prisoners to prevent them swimming ashore and escaping. Julius, the centurion commander had become good friends with Paul during the voyage and did not want to see him killed. He gave instructions to all on board saying, "Listen to me carefully. Everyone who can swim, jump overboard now and head for the beach. The rest of you find a piece of wreckage to hang on to and let the waves take you ashore." As Paul had predicted, not one life was lost.

28

The island was Malta. The people showed remarkable kindness to those from the wrecked ship. First they built a bonfire to warm them through. Paul was helping to gather wood when he disturbed a highly poisonous viper. The snake sunk its fangs into his hand and hung on. When the others saw this they expected to see him swell up and fall down dead. After he shook it off and came to no harm, they decided Paul must be some kind of god. The governor of Malta had a large estate and provided Paul and his companions with accommodation. He fed them well and treated them kindly. His name was Publius. When Paul discovered that Publius' father was sick in bed with fever and dysentery he went to pray for him. Immediately he became well. When the islanders heard about this they brought many sick people to Paul, who laid his hands on them and healed them.

After three months, all those who had been shipwrecked were able to board a ship headed for Italy. Eventually Paul arrived in Rome to have his appeal heard by Caesar. He was given the freedom to live where he wanted with just a single soldier to guard him. Three days after his arrival, he called

together the Jewish leaders. "I want to explain to you how I come to be here in Rome." he began. He went on to tell his story, describing all the events that led up to his arrest. When he had finished, they said to him, "We would like to meet with you again so that you can explain to us what it is that you believe." A time was arranged, and on the day, a large numbers of Jews came to hear Paul. From morning till evening he talked to them about the Kingdom of God, and about Jesus of Nazareth the promised Messiah. There was a mixed reaction. Some believed and many disagreed. For the next two years, Paul lived in his rented house giving a kind welcome to all who visited him. Always he would boldly explain his message about the Kingdom of God and the Lord Jesus Christ. No one gave him any trouble or tried to prevent him preaching his message.

COMMENT

The Book of Acts comes to a sudden end here. The story seemed to be heading towards the trial of Paul before Caesar. There is no mention of this anywhere in the Bible or any other historical source. This leaves us to wonder what happened after this.

Some scholars speculate that there probably wasn't a trial in the end. Under Roman law, Paul's prosecutors had a limit of two years to bring their case. The final chapter of Acts clearly states that Paul was in Rome for two years without a prosecution so it is reasonable to assume that he was freed.

In his letters to the churches, Paul mentions his intention to take the good news message to Spain. Who knows? Maybe he did.

God bless you.

Chapter 7: Baptism and the Holy Spirit:

As we read through the Gospels and Acts clarity and consistency emerge as we observe various individuals and groups travelling their journeys of faith. When they choose to believe the message they choose to be baptised. This seems always to be the response to becoming a Christian.

The word baptise is a translation of the Greek word, baptidzo. It means to dip, soak, plunge, submerge, immerse in a liquid. It is used for example to describe the dyeing of cloth or the sinking of ships. Being baptised involves being completely submerged in water. Jesus himself was baptised and he and his disciples baptised all those who believed in him. When he gave his disciples their final instructions just before he returned to heaven, he told them to go everywhere with the message and to baptise all those who responded. When we receive baptism, we are following the instructions of Jesus and the example set.

The best way to understand what is going on in baptism is to watch somebody being baptised. It is a dramatic event, an extremely happy event. It is similar in many ways to a wedding ceremony.

While there is much symbolism involved, which I will explain, there is a 'happening' that takes place, 'an experience' that I would find it impossible to explain. When Brenda and I boarded the train to London after our wedding, we could have asked, "What has changed? We are the same two people who have travelled on a train together before." But everything had changed. We were now, quote, 'joined together in matrimony'. We had publically committed our lives to one another. We now belonged to one another and were extremely happy to be so. We still are after fifty two years. I think that is the best I can offer in way of explanation.

The symbolism of baptism I can explain and will do so as briefly as possible. If you choose to be baptised, a fuller explanation will be offered from those you have asked to baptise you.

Baptism is a symbol of forgiveness. Forgiveness for everything we have done that has fallen short of God's perfection and all the things we will do in the future. Also forgiveness for all the things we have failed to do which we should have done, and things we will fail to do in the future. This is absolute forgiveness by God, which we never could earn or pay for. It is a

pure gift of love and mercy. When we are plunged in the water it symbolises our cleansing. We are washed clean by God.

Baptism also symbolises death and resurrection. We descend as it were into a watery grave where our old life, lived separate from God, dies, and we rise to a new life in Jesus Christ. Our self life is put to death and we receive his righteous life to replace it.

The new birth we experience includes our birth into the family of God. Now we are children of God. That is what we are. We have millions of brothers and sisters world - wide including those who have left the earth and gone to heaven, and those who will live on the earth and become children of God in the future. There is a technical term used for this, 'The Universal Church.' We will only meet a tiny few of these this side of heaven, but we do find ourselves being joined with particular Christian brothers and sisters on our earthly journey.

John the Baptist said when he was baptising people, "I baptise you with water but Jesus will baptise you with water and the Holy Spirit." When Jesus came up out of the water after being baptised by John, we read that the Holy Spirit came to rest on him like a dove. God spoke and everyone present heard his voice. God said, "This is my dearly loved Son, I am very pleased with him." I want you to be blessed by this. You are a child of God and when you are baptised your Father God will be very pleased with you! Believe it. Believe this also, God wants to soak you in his Holy Spirit. After his baptism, Jesus found himself filled with the Spirit, led and guided by the Spirit, helped and comforted by the Spirit and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

When the apostle Paul visited Ephesus in Turkey, he met a group of Christians there who he recognised had only experienced water baptism. He explained that they needed to be baptised in the Holy Spirit. He laid hands on them and prayed for the Holy Spirit to come on them. They were filled with the Holy Spirit. There is a mystery that I can't explain. I see that some people are filled with the Holy Spirit before water baptism, some during their baptism and sometimes after baptism. The important thing is to know that God wants us filled. If you have not already received the gift of the Holy Spirit, ask God for it. Find Christians who do have the gift and ask

them to lay hands on you and pray. It is what I did and it worked in a dramatic fashion.

There is so much more I would want to say about the Holy Spirit but this will have to do for now. I did promise to be brief.

Chapter 8: The Bible and Prayer:

Remember when Philip walked alongside the carriage of the Ethiopian finance minister on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza? The minister was reading out loud from an Old Testament chapter written by the prophet Isaiah. Phillip asked him, "Do you understand what you are reading?" The Ethiopian, a very intelligent and capable man in charge of a nation's finances, had the humility to admit that he didn't understand. "How can I", unless someone explains it to me?" he replied. Phillip explained it to him and he got it straight away. There are many things in the Bible that need explaining to us. I have a straightforward teaching program headed 'A Birds Eye View of the Bible, Old and New Testament.' I am still surprised at how relieved and excited people are when they are able to go back to their bibles and make so much more sense of what they are reading. If you are new to bible reading, please don't feel put out if you find parts of it difficult to understand. As you continue your journey, take the trouble to find someone who has a good understanding of the scriptures and the ability to explain them. It is most unlikely that someone is going to walk up to you and say, "Would you like me to explain the bible to you?" You will need to take the initiative. Start asking around, saying, "Who do you know who understands the bible and would be able to explain it." When you find out, be very bold and ask them if they would be willing help you. I guarantee that nine times out of ten they will be honoured and delighted.

That is for the future. For now, let me encourage you with the fact that if you have read all that is in this the book so far you have already made a terrific start. You have in effect read the first five books of the New Testament!! That is amazing. You already know most of what is really important. Well done. I am impressed. Following the first five book are twenty one letters written to various people and various Churches by the apostles Paul, Peter and John, and two brothers of Jesus, James and Jude. The last book of the New Testament is called Revelation. It is written by the apostle John. What I suggest is that you read the letters in a modern translation over the period of time that you feel comfortable with. For example, someone choosing to read for ten minutes a day at slow speed would read all the letters in twelve weeks. Choose your own pattern. Some people like to read a chapter a day. In that case it would take seventeen

weeks. An avid reader reading a letter a day would be done in three weeks. I only include these numbers as a guide to work out your own pattern.

With regard to the Old Testament, some of it is quite difficult, but Genesis and Exodus are action packed and entertaining to read. They are the best books to start with anyway. That is why they are first and second books.

If you can develop the habit of reading the bible regularly, I promise you that it will become a life - long blessing. I will pass on to you this bit of helpful advice. Don't be fussed about the things you don't understand. Be happy to pass them by to begin with and focus on the things that you do understand. You will have more than enough to be blessed by, with the many things that are easy to understand. For example, the first letter you will encounter if you follow my suggested reading plan is Paul's letter to the Roman Christians. Parts of this letter are very difficult. Even Peter comments that some of what 'Brother Paul' writes is very difficult to understand. But when he writes, "If God is for us, who can be against us." And, "Nothing in heaven and earth, of even under the earth can separate us from the love of God." This is plain speaking, and easy to understand.

Jesus said, "People cannot live only on bread. They need every word that God speaks to them." One of the main ways that God speaks to us is through the bible. It is excellent food for the soul and gives health and strength to the soul. And remember, as I mentioned earlier, that every year the bible is the world's best- selling book. It is life giving and life changing.

Endless books have been written on prayer. I have read many. They are helpful, but the only way we can really begin to understand prayer, is to practice it. We are uniquely individual and our prayer lives will reflect our individuality. I suspect that people who are very formal will develop a formal kind of prayer life that is right for them. I am very relational, informal, and humour plays a big part in my life. This is reflected in my prayer life. I see God as having a great sense of humour. I don't see him as particularly formal. I find him to be an exceptional friend. He understands me perfectly, so it is easy to talk to him. When he gets serious about something I get serious too. It seems that when I become concerned about something and am moved with serious intent he shares my heart and we work it out together. If I am asked "What is prayer?" I would say that for me it is all about relationship with God, talking everything over with him, discovering

his heart and purpose on every matter, and coming to agree with him. I love to discover and understand his purposes and get on with working them out. Everything that is impossible for me, I know is possible for him and I have access through prayer to all the resources of heaven. God is a God of mighty works and I have the honour and privilege to ask him through prayer to exercise his might to bring all kinds of blessings to those I am concerned for. I can know the thrill, excitement and happiness of seeing prayers answered. I am sure that God wants us to know his heart and respond to it. Prayer is a marvellous partnership with a loving Father. Often it is appropriate to just sit in silence in his presence and enjoying him. It is in these times that I find 'God thoughts' invading my mind and understanding.

If you are new to praying may I suggest that you begin by simply chatting to God and enjoying his company and give him the opportunity to enjoy your company too. My three year old grandson is at that stage where he is just beginning to learn how to converse. When we go to the park he trots along at the side of me chatting away. "Look at that G'andad. What's that G'andad? Can I have an ice-cream G'andad? He has picked up a phrase I use with him. "That looks interesting Zac." Now he says to me, "That looks interesting G'andad." He has picked up a phrase from Brenda. "This is a bit tricky Zac." Now when he is having difficulty with something we get, "This is a bit tricky." I think I will start using that phrase with God. I am frequently in the 'bit tricky' zone. We are children of God. That is what we are. Practice being a child of God and go for a walk in the park. In the future, as your prayer life deepens, don't lose the habit of walking in the park chatting and having happy time.

My daughter and I go out together once a fortnight, just the two of us, because our friendship is so strong. We usually go for a walk in the country and have a cafe stop. Our conversation ranges from hilarious humour to the most serious conversations you could imagine. We share our concerns, our plans, and our hearts. Almost always we come to the same mind over things. We love one another's company and encouraging each other is at the top of our agenda. We always come back filled with fresh hope, excitement for the future, strengthened and encouraged. This is an illustration of prayer. The same happens with my son. We are great pals. We spent three weeks touring Western Australia in a camper van and never had a cross word. We were able to quickly agree on where we went and

what we did. It was great time of fun and adventure, and at times deep and serious conversations about life. This is how it can be between us and our father God.

I could have provided a very competent technical manual on prayer in this chapter. There are many ways of praying. I chose not to because my convictions about relationship praying are so strong that I wanted to get those across above all else.

However, I will mention the 'Cry for Help' prayer. In purely human terms it is only a heartless person that will not respond to being asked for help. You will know that yourself. What goes on in your heart when someone comes to you and says, "Please can you help me?" The best of you comes out and you give any help that you are able. Many people have started their faith journey through desperation. The only person they have had to turn to is God. When they do it seems that he cannot resist the cry. He has a much bigger heart than we do so has available an endless reservoir of love, mercy and compassion, along with unlimited power to meet their need. Some time ago Brenda was looking out of our front window when a neighbour who kept very much to himself and was somewhat unapproachable, walked past. His head was bowed and his look of sorrow complete. Brenda prayed, "God if we can help him show us how?" The next morning he came to our door. This had never happened before. He had come with an invitation from his daughter for Brenda to attend a sales party. Brenda's reply was, "Do you know that God has sent you round here for help?" His eyes filled up with tears and he said, "I am desperate and am considering suicide. Last night as I lay on my bed, I looked up and cried out, if there is anyone out there, please help me?"

We talked to him about his troubles. His wife had left him. He had lost his job and car, he was an alcoholic, he was about to lose his house and he had a cancer. We prayed with him and invited him to our church. He came and heard the gospel message. His house sold and he left the district. Three years later he came to see us to thank us for the help we had given. He was a completely new man. He had found a really good church and become a Christian. His cancer was healed. He was free of his addiction. He had found a new wife a new job and a new car. That's not a bad result from a single desperate cry to God. I have included this story because I guess that this

book is likely to include desperate people in its readership. If you are one of them I hope this helps you.

As you continue your journey, give yourself to prayer and bible reading, enjoying God and letting your heart, soul, mind and relationships be shaped and changed by him.

Chapter 9.

About Church:

I have not been looking forward to writing this chapter, not at all. I am so aware of the negative image that exists for many people regarding church. Only church people are to blame for this and it is not my purpose to attempt a defence. I remember the day many years ago when, after morning service Brenda said to me, "Mike, if heaven is like this I don't want to go there!" I remember a season some years ago when I was experiencing acute disappointment and disillusionment with the church I was in. My heart was breaking because it seemed so far removed from representing the Jesus Christ that I loved. God put this thought into my mind. "Michael, you are looking at the 'world in the church' and calling what you see, 'the church'. Do not do that. My church is pure, spotless and Holy." Does this make sense to you? After giving this a lot of thought I was greatly helped. In every church community there will be a measure of worldliness. My experience tells me that this measure varies dramatically from community to community, from individual to individual, but what matters is that in response to God, in response to Jesus building his church as he promised, worldliness is getting less and Godliness is growing. We are all imperfect people, but God is at work progressively making us more like Jesus. There is a saying, "If you ever find a perfect church, for their sake, don't join it."

When we talk about church we are not talking about a building but about a community of believers, a family of believers. If the building used by those believers is destroyed, the church remains intact and can simply find another building to use. It is surprising just how many Christian communities now meet in schools, community centres, converted warehouses, homes, hotels etc.

When most people think of church they think in terms of historical denominations such as Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists, and so on. The media portrays church almost exclusively in terms of highly traditional, ceremonial, priestly costumed clergy, and traditional hymns accompanied by one musical instrument, that being a pipe organ. We are shown uncomfortable bench pews, cold buildings, and strict formality. We listen to strange religious language delivered in artificial tones. While there may be a proportion of churches that this would be true for, this portrayal is

indefensible misrepresentation of the nation's churches at large, and has little appeal for most of today's generation, particularly the young.

Lively, modern churches are springing up all over our land. They are attracting young families and growing rapidly. Many traditional churches have wonderfully modernised and are experiencing the same. Lively bands accompany worship with new and contemporary songs. All manner of appealing events are organised giving the church community an opportunity to socialise, form deep friendships, and to serve the communities where they live. All kinds of charitable works are being done. Come on Television. Show us some of this please?

Another very encouraging trend is this. At one time most Christians would identify themselves by their denomination. They would say, "I am a Baptist." Or. "I am a Methodist." And so on. Happily, more and more Christians are calling themselves just that. They will say. "I am a Christian", and if asked, they will then identify their place of worship according to where they meet. There is a very lively Baptist Church near where we live where only ten percent of the congregation have a Baptist background. They are a very happy mix of many different church backgrounds or none at all.

It is very important if you have just become a Christian, to find a church where you are accepted, valued, and included. It needs to be a spiritual, God centred church made up of people who will care for you, show true friendship, and help you to grow spiritually. How do you find the right church for you?

First off, I suggest that you make your first port of call the church where a good Christian friend goes if that is what they recommend. It is possible that they might recommend a different church to their own because they think it will be more suitable for you. Ask them to go with you for the first week or so to help you to discover if you are in the right place. Think in these terms. If you were intending to buy or rent a property, you would spend plenty of time on viewings. Different churches suit different people according to their individuality. I am convinced that if you pray for God's guidance he will lead you.

If Brenda and I decided to live in a different town or city, we would explore the churches regardless of denomination and may find ourselves settling in

a modernised church that was Anglican, Methodist or any other denomination. We would explore the new expression churches too and not be surprised if we settled with one of those. We would be seeking for a community of people that had a great love of God and a great love of people and a great concern for those outside the church. A few years ago we were asked by a black African church to help them with their teaching and preaching program. We spent over a year there and baptised a lot of people. Wow! Did we enjoy ourselves? We absolutely loved their deep spirituality, their worship style and their freedom of expression. Please God, call us to another season with the black churches. While on holiday in Northumberland we worshipped at a Baptist Church. We would have loved to have made that our church. We fitted there. The people showed us great friendship and invited us to one of their home meetings. So I could go on. I am sure I have got my message over. Find the right church for you, whatever it is like and wherever it might be.

Don't be fussed about the manner in which your chosen church is led and governed. Styles vary considerably. Someone said to me just a few weeks ago, "Mike, I have never forgotten what you said to me about church. It was so helpful. You said that as Jesus was building his church, be very clear that you recognise what is scaffolding, and what is being built within that scaffolding. The scaffolding is temporary and will eventually be removed leaving only the beauty and wonder of what has been built." Jesus is generally misrepresented regarding his trade as a carpenter. Artists usually illustrate him as making some furniture item in a little workshop. In woodworking tradition there are three trades, Cabinet Makers, Joiners, and Carpenters. Carpentry is the heavy timber work associated with buildings. In Jesus time stonework was included in a carpenter's trade. Put simply, Jesus was a builder who worked on building sites and would be expert at it. Perhaps this is why he used the expression, "I will build my church." In his teaching he said, "A wise man builds his house on rock, not on sand where the floods can wash it away."

Don't look at the scaffolding and make the mistake of thinking it is the building. The structures of church, its institutions, what it calls itself, its organisation, its methodology, the way it does things, the style of services it uses, are all necessary for building. But, they are only temporary. They are the scaffolding. Peter spent a lot of time with Jesus. Maybe something had

rubbed off on him when he used a building illustration to describe the church. This is Peter's description.

"You are living stones that God is building into his spiritual temple. You are coming to Christ who is the living cornerstone of this temple."

The church is made up of those people who believe in Christ and are joined together by his Spirit. They are destined for life together in heaven. When they form a community, they are intended to present a picture to those who have not yet turned to God, of what the Kingdom of Heaven might be like.

Jesus insisted that his disciples love one another. "How will people know you are my disciples unless they see this?" he said.

I will end by listing some practical expressions of this love as taught in the bible.

Be devoted to each other:

Lay down your lives for each other:

Be family to each other:

Serve each other and show hospitality.

Don't harm or irritate each other:

Don't be jealous of each other:

Carry each other's burdens:

Be kind and tender hearted to each other:

Be tolerant with each other and don't get angry:

Freely forgive each other:

Show kindness and compassion to each other:

Be humble towards each other and don't boast.

Look out for each other's interests:

Do not lie to each other:

Encourage and help each other and protect each other:

Do good to each other and be patient with each other:

Share your hopes with each other:

Wow! What kind of church would that be?

Let Jesus have the last word:

“Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness.”

First Century Israel at the time of Jesus 33 AD

www.bible.ca/maps
Steven Rudd 2017

