

All Who Draw the Sword Will Die by the Sword

Then the men stepped forward, seized Jesus and arrested him. With that, one of Jesus' companions reached for his sword, drew it out and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear. "Put your sword back in its place," Jesus said to him, "for all who draw the sword will die by the sword."
-Matthew 26:50-52

There are significant segments of the body of Christ who, at least historically, have embraced pacifism. The Random House Dictionary defines pacifism as, "Opposition to war or violence as a method for settling disputes." Thousands of Christians have been "conscientious objectors" and have not fought in wars because of their conviction that it was against the teaching of Christ. One of those teachings is Jesus' statement that "*all who draw the sword will die by the sword.*"

A large crowd with swords and clubs had come by night to arrest Jesus. Why would they have swords and clubs?

Because they were ready to take Jesus by mob violence. As Jesus was being apprehended, one of Jesus' companions (whom John identifies as Peter) reached for his sword and began to fight, cutting off the ear of the servant of the high priest. It is doubtful that Peter was just aiming for the guy's ear, so Jesus rebukes him and tells him to put away his sword. What Jesus then says is something that he surely means for all of us to bear in mind: "*All who draw the sword will die by the sword.*"

I don't think that you can make an unassailable case for pacifism on the basis of just this statement (though there is more in the New Testament on the subject). But the words and actions of Jesus in this context lend themselves to a pacifistic point of view. Jesus is telling Peter not to use violence. Keep in mind, however, that Jesus intended to be arrested, for how else *will the writings of the prophets...be fulfilled* (v56)? Also keep in mind that Jesus said that if he needed, he could have called on the Father and had 72,000 non-pacifistic angels dispatched in a moment.

At the very least, what we must deduce from Jesus' statement is that violence begets violence. Those who *take up the sword shall perish with the sword* (KJV). Once the violence begins, it is hard to stop. Northern Ireland and the Middle East are prime examples. Those who take up the sword put themselves, and innocent others, at peril by doing so.

Are there cases where the use of "the sword" is justified? Certainly. Hitler and Hussein could not have been stopped without it. But you have to be very careful and very certain that there is no other way because once you draw the sword, violence is bound to escalate and the cost of further suffering is certain.

It is doubtful that Peter was just aiming for the guy's ear

Barabbas, or Jesus?

Now it was the governor's custom at the Feast to release a prisoner chosen by the crowd. At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Barabbas. So when the crowd had gathered, Pilate asked them, "Which one do you want me to release to you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?"
-Matthew 27:15-17

We all know about Barabbas. Because he is instrumental in the story of the crucifixion of Jesus, no portrayal of the passion of Christ in any medium is complete without him. All four gospels refer to him by name. Books, films, and plays that depict Christ's Passion all must have a Barabbas. Most depictions of him are more sympathetic to his character than he probably deserves. The New Testament writers describe him as notorious—an insurrectionist and a murderer. Whatever the exact truth about him, this character known as Barabbas is particularly relevant to the epic drama of salvation—perhaps even more than we know.

Barabbas is a picture of us all. You may say, "I'm not an insurrectionist or a murderer." Perhaps not, but see how this man parallels your life and the life of all mankind. He is a guilty sinner deserving of death—condemned and awaiting his demise. The door of his dungeon is flung wide and instead of being dragged to his ill-fated end, he is told that he is now a free man, fully pardoned for his crimes. The worst sinner around has been set free, and in his stead another is condemned. Only, his substitute is completely innocent. He is a prophet of God, and in fact, more than a prophet. He is the very Son of God.

How ironic that Barabbas, a name which means "son of the father," should be released when the real "Son of the Father" is condemned. In Aramaic, "bar" means "son of," and "abba" means "father" or "daddy." But Jesus died so that we could all become true children of God, true bar-abbas.

If Jesus would give his life and as a result Barabbas could be released from his sentence of death, then let all doubt concerning the possibility of our own salvation be swept away. We are Barabbas. We are insurrectionists. We are murderers. We are notorious sinners. But it doesn't matter. The true "Bar-abba" went to the cross in our place.

How ironic that Barabbas, a name which means "son of the father," should be released when the real "Son of the Father" is condemned.

The Curtain of the Temple Was Torn in Two

And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. -Matthew 27:50-51

The most pervasive symbol of the Christian faith is the cross. The most auspicious symbol of the Christian faith is the empty tomb. But to me, the most significant symbol of the Christian faith is the torn curtain.

All the forces of good and evil were coming to a head on the day that Jesus was crucified. During the last three hours of his life, from noon until three, *darkness came over all the land* (v45). As Jesus hung on the cross, he knew nothing of the presence of God and everything of the presence of sin and evil. He cried out, "*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*"—*which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* (v46). At the end of the three hours he cried out again and, with a loud voice, he gave up his spirit.

***Access to the holy God was
no longer denied***

All history pivots on this one moment. Everything before was focused on it and everything since is defined by it. The moment itself is marked by cataclysm. Darkness, an earthquake, saints rising from the dead and coming out of their tombs—all signs on earth that something significant was happening in the spirit realm. But the definitive sign occurred at the temple. The curtain that restricted access to the Most Holy Place, the place where God was said to dwell, was torn in two, signifying that the way was now open for all to come into the presence of God.

You probably know that no human being, other than the high priest—and him only once a year—was permitted to enter the Most Holy Place. The curtain that shielded this “Holy of Holies” from the rest of the temple was said to have been a foot thick. This, coupled with the fact that the curtain was torn *from top to bottom*, indicates that it wasn’t torn by the earthquake; it was torn by God himself. This happened at one exact moment in time; the very moment that Christ died. Access to the holy God was no longer denied. The way into his presence was opened for all who desired. And what could be more significant than that?

The day, hour and exact minute of certain historical events are indelibly imprinted in the chronicles of human existence because what happened at those moments of time changed the world. August 6, 1945 at 9:15am is one. September 11, 2001 at 8:45am is another. But the most significant moment in human history came at 3:00pm the afternoon that Jesus Christ died, the curtain in the Temple of God was torn in two and sin no longer separated us from a holy God.

Teaching Them to Obey

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. -Matthew 28:19-20

What’s wrong with the following quotation?: *Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them everything I have commanded you.* It sounds right, but it’s not. There are two words missing. If you haven’t already figured it out, compare this quote with the correct one at the top of the page. The two missing words are “to obey.”

The making of disciples is not about teaching people the commands of Jesus. It is about teaching them to obey those commands. And there is a big difference. You may have grown up in Sunday school, know all the Bible stories and can quote the Sermon on the Mount, but that does not make you a disciple.

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So what’s the difference? It is the difference between head knowledge and life experience. It is the difference between building your house on shifting sands or on solid granite. It is the difference between knowing how you are supposed to do it and actually doing it. A genuine disciple is not one who gives lip service to the commands of Jesus. He or she is one who actually obeys them. And to obey the commands of Jesus often involves difficult choices. It is not the easy road: Forgive those who sin against you, love your enemies, bless those who persecute you, give to the poor, take up your cross....

If you want to fulfill the great commission, your job is not just to teach what Jesus commanded but to teach your disciple to obey those commands. How is that done? It must be by example. The new believer and the nonbeliever alike must see some real evidence of the efficacy of the teachings of Christ at work in your life to be inspired to obey those same teachings. They have to see it work in your life because discipleship is more reproduction than production. And the more you are in relationship with those whom you are discipling, the more you will be able to influence them to be obedient with your encouragement, exhortation, correction, and accountability.

I’m afraid that we have overemphasized the role of the lectern and the pulpit in the disciple-making process. They may be good for “teaching” but not necessarily for “teaching to obey.” And those two little words make all the difference in making true disciples of Jesus.

I Will Make You Fishers of Men

As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men." At once they left their nets and followed him. -Mark 1:16-18

How much are we to read into Jesus' statement to Peter and his brother Andrew that he would make them "fishers of men?" Was it just a clever phrase to get the attention of these fishermen, or is there something for all of us in what Jesus was saying?

Jesus had just begun his public ministry and was about to call his first disciples. As he was walking by the Sea of Galilee (which is more like a lake than a sea) he saw Simon, whom he would later name Peter, and his brother Andrew. Whether Jesus had in mind beforehand to call these brothers to follow him, or if he was receiving unprecedented revelation from the Father, is not clear. But as they were in the act of casting their net into the lake, Jesus calls out to them and says, "*Come, follow me and I will make you fishers of men.*" Immediately the brothers respond to the call and drop what they are doing to follow Jesus.

The call to be fishers of men is the essence of Jesus' call on the church and every believer in it

The way in which the Lord called Peter and Andrew was ingenious. They would certainly have understood what he was saying and, no doubt, Jesus would have used a different metaphor if they had been farmers or shepherds. But, does the call to follow Jesus always carry with it the call to become "fishers of men"—or was this just Andrew and Peter's specific call?

Jesus' call to Peter and Andrew was vocational as well as missional. Their days as fishermen were basically over because of their missional call to be fishers of men and their vocational call to be apostles of Jesus. Their vocational call may not be ours, but their missional one is. The call to be fishers of men is the essence of Jesus' call on the church and every believer in it. This call is part and parcel of the heart and mission of Jesus and we are the ones who carry his heart and are entrusted with that continuing mission.

Notice that Peter and Andrew would first have to follow Jesus and then be taught by him in order to become "fishers of men." It would be a process. Jesus said to them, "*Come, follow me and I will make you fishers of men.*" There would be discipleship and ministry training in their call to become fishers of men.

Peter and Andrew received a much higher calling than catching fish. They were called by Jesus to catch men. And, whatever your vocational calling, your missional assignment is centered on this great calling: Becoming a fisher of men.

Immediately Jesus Knew in His Spirit

Now, some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, "Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts... -Mark 2:6-8

Jesus was not omniscient while he walked the earth. How do I know that? Because he said concerning his return, "*No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father*" (Mk 13:32). When Jesus *emptied himself* (Php 2:7 NASB) of his deity, *being found in appearance as a man* (Php 2:8), he subjected himself to the limitations common to humanity. This meant that even though he was sinless and had perfect communion with the Father, he was dependent on the Father through the agency of the Holy Spirit for his ability to minister.

Notice that it was in his spirit, not his mind, that Jesus knew what they were thinking

In Mark 2, Jesus tells a certain man that his sins are forgiven. *Some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, "Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts.* Did Jesus know, or need to know, everyone's thoughts all the time? No. But if he was not all-knowing, how was it then that he knew what the teachers of the law were thinking? The only real conclusion to how he knew their thoughts was that it was revealed to him. The Spirit knows all things and was the agent through whom Jesus was able to acquire this knowledge.

What a person is thinking can often be picked up by natural discernment, but that was not the case here. Notice that it was in his spirit, not his mind, that Jesus knew what they were thinking. It was Spirit to spirit revelation. This is how we hear God. I believe that Jesus' ability was what Paul describes as the "word of knowledge" (1 Cor 12:8 NASB). The ability to have unknown but pertinent information communicated by the Spirit of God to your spirit should not be unusual. The Holy Spirit has perfect understanding, discretion and timing. Last week while I was sitting at home, I had a sense in my spirit that if I went to a certain place right away I would find a particular acquaintance to whom the Lord wanted me to minister. This sense was in a deeper place than my mind, and, in fact, my mind argued against it. But I went and, sure enough, the person was there.

We, like Jesus, can know things at the discretion of the Spirit according to his timing. But we will never know if we do not function like Jesus who operated according to spiritual understanding.

Looking for a Reason to Accuse Jesus

Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely... Mark 3:2

Why would anyone want to accuse Jesus? What was the problem with the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law? What was at the root of their accusations? How in the world could they be opposed to the one who was the very embodiment of love and truth?

Matthew, Mark and Luke all tell the story. Jesus was in Capernaum (which was now his hometown (see Mark 2:1)) and went to the synagogue on the Sabbath. In the few months that Jesus had been in public ministry, he had gained a widespread reputation and immense following as a healer. Jesus already had a run-in or two with the Pharisees and they were keeping their collective eye on him. Jesus comes into the synagogue and the Pharisees are on red alert. Why? This particular Sabbath there was man with a shriveled hand in the synagogue. Would Jesus have the audacity—of all terrible things—to heal the man on the Sabbath?

The veneer of accusation is the last thin layer before the face of Satan is exposed

Of course, Jesus healed the man, but not before becoming angry at the Pharisees—being *deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts* (Mk 3:5). Those who are bent on accusing are plainly revealing the obstinacy of their hearts. The Pharisees were preoccupied with the witch-hunt. That is why they had nothing to say when Jesus had the disabled man stand up in front of them and asked them *"Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill"* (V4)?

What was at the root of this obsession to accuse Jesus? You could start with jealousy. Then you could go to hypocrisy, selfish ambition, pride, religiosity, legalism, and greed (see Matthew 23). Underlying it all was the accuser himself, Satan—the *accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night* (Rev 12:10). The veneer of accusation is the last thin layer before the face of Satan is exposed. It is a serious matter. False accusation is the only unforgivable sin mentioned by Jesus (see Mark 3:29). Unfortunately, the most common place where it raises its ugly head is in the religious setting and the ones most frequently responsible are the religious.

All the great women and men of God who have ever lived have had to endure the jealousy, resentment and antagonism of spiteful and false accusations. If you are falsely accused by religious people with hearts made stubborn by envy and the perceived threat to their religious establishment, you bear the honor of your Lord who had to endure such accusations.

He Is Out of His Mind

Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat. When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, "He is out of his mind." - Mark 3:20-21

The Pharisees oppose you and are looking to nail you (literally). The teachers of the law think that you are possessed by the Devil himself. And now, your family thinks that you have lost your mind. It's enough to make you insecure.

You figure Jesus' family would have been more supportive. They obviously didn't understand. Jesus was getting himself into a number of situations that, if not embarrassing to the family, certainly would have caused them to have concern for the well-being of their now suddenly famous son and brother. Word had gotten to them of the crowds besieging Jesus in Capernaum. "My God," they said, "He can't even go to someone's house to eat. This thing is getting out of hand. Who in their right mind would let this happen? We had better go do something about it."

Jesus was misunderstood, even by his own family.

When Jesus decided to set up home base for his ministry, it wasn't in Nazareth, the town where he grew up and where most of his relatives would have lived. I don't know how much to read into that, but it is sometimes a smart move to get away from your family to do what you need to do in life.

Now, what family are we talking here? Most commentators agree that Mark takes a little side trip in the story to tell about how the teachers of the law were attributing the ministry of Jesus to *the prince of demons* (vs22-30) and picks up the story again in verse 31. If this is the case, then it's his immediate family—his mother and his brothers—who show up at this house with the crowd spilling out into the street. They have come *to take charge of him*. They believe that he is in need of some psychiatric help. In today's world they might have even acquired a court order to take him into custody. Their problem is that they can't get to him. So, they send word, "Your mother and brothers are here." Does he come out? Apparently not. He responds by saying, *"Who are my mother and my brothers?" Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers!"* (vs 33-34). If his family thought he was crazy before, now they must really be worried.

Jesus was misunderstood, even by his own family, but it didn't seem to bother him. And guess what? In the end, Jesus' mother and brothers wound up among the hundred and twenty on the day of Pentecost (Acts 1:14) where, yes, they too would be perceived as being out of their minds.

Swear to God You Won't Torture Me

When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and fell on his knees in front of him. He shouted at the top of his voice, "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? Swear to God that you won't torture me!" For Jesus had said to him, "Come out of this man, you evil spirit!" -Mark 5:6-8

Have you noticed the reaction of demons in the presence of Jesus Christ? They couldn't seem to keep quiet. Unclean spirits were constantly manifesting when Jesus came near. This phenomenon also occurred when Paul encountered evil spirits. In Acts 16 we read how a slave girl who had a spirit by which she was able to tell the future would go frenetic when Paul was around. It is obviously a mark of spiritual power in a person's life if demons make a fuss in their presence.

Demons feared Jesus. "*Swear to God you won't torture me*" was the cry of the trembling legion of demons that Jesus

Demons become beggars in the presence of Jesus

encountered in the man from the region of the Geresenses. The demons were so scared that they tried to tempt Jesus by having him *swear to God*, a practice that Jesus said was from the evil one (Mt 5:37). They knew their fate was in his hands. Demons become beggars in the presence of Jesus.

Notice the fact that demons not only recognized Jesus as powerful, they recognized him personally. They knew his name and they knew who he was: *Jesus, Son of the Most High God*. This is understandable because demons as spirits couldn't help but know the one who rules the spiritual realm. Again, look at the ministry of Paul. When the seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish priest, tried to cast a demon out of a man by saying, "*In the name of Jesus, whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out,*" it replied, "*Jesus I know, and I know about Paul, but who are you?*" (Acts 19:13-16). Both Paul and Jesus had a reputation in the haunts of the evil one.

Do we carry enough spiritual clout that Satan's forces know our names or at least get fidgety in our presence? I remember having to go to the apartment of a witch one Halloween night to retrieve a vulnerable and confused young woman and her baby because I had reason to fear for their safety. The Lord anointed me with an authority that night that literally scared the witch into her bedroom, and she stayed there while I helped the mother gather her things and we left.

We can have the same effect on demons as did Jesus because it is Jesus who dwells in us. And, of course, that is the only reason. May God grant us a power and reputation among the demons that they see us coming a mile away and tremble even before we get there.

Who Touched My Clothes?

Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering. At once Jesus realized that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and asked, "Who touched my clothes?" -Mark 5:29-30

In recent years there has been controversy in the church about "manifestations." Although the commotion seems to have died down as of late, the question has to do with whether or not the Spirit of God is responsible for certain physical manifestations in some church and revival settings. At the center of the recent controversy are such experiences as falling under the power of God, shaking, healing, "holy laughter," and being "drunk in the spirit," at such places as Toronto, Pensacola and Argentina. The question for me is not whether every experience is a bona fide response to the power of God but whether the presence and power of God can and does elicit these and other physical manifestations.

Does the presence and power of God elicit these and other physical manifestations?

In Mark 5 we have an example of how the release of the power of God resulted in a healing and the physical manifestations that accompanied it. As Jesus was on his way to the house of Jairus to heal his daughter, a large crowd was dogging him. A woman who had suffered for twelve years with an incurable bleeding condition knew that if she could just touch Jesus she would be healed. The fact that she was hesitant to approach him directly and the fact that she was reluctant to reveal herself after she was healed were indications that she was "unclean" according to Levitical code and feared the repercussions of violating the law. But when she secretly touched his cloak in the midst of the pressing crowd, Jesus knew that someone had done it. How? Because *power had gone out from him*.

Among other things, the fact that Jesus could feel that power had gone out from him tells me that physical manifestation attends the release of the power of God (just ask Moses on Mt. Sinai or the disciples at Pentecost). And it wasn't just Jesus who felt it. When the woman touched Jesus, *immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering*.

There have been times when praying for people that I have literally felt power go out from me. And in most of those cases there has been a corresponding physical reaction in the prayer recipient—including falling, shaking and laughing. For me, the question is settled. Not everyone who has a "manifestation" is necessarily responding to the presence of the Lord, but there can be no doubt that when the power of God is at work there will be a resulting manifestation.

He Was Amazed at Their Lack of Faith

Jesus said to them, "Only in his hometown, among his relatives and in his own house is a prophet without honor." He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. And he was amazed at their lack of faith. -Mark 6:4-6

It's hard for me to imagine Jesus being amazed. Given his perception, it doesn't seem that there was much that could take him by surprise. But here in Mark 6, we find Jesus shaking his head in wonder. He was amazed at the people of Nazareth and their lack of faith.

It was not that Jesus was necessarily expecting them to have faith. They were *taking offence* (v3) at him and he knew it. *"Only in his hometown, among his relatives and in his own house is a prophet without honor,"* Jesus said. He knew the people of Nazareth didn't see him for who he really was. They were "amazed" at Jesus' wisdom and miracles (v2) but it was not in an awe-inspiring way. It was amazing to them in an unbelievable sort of way. They were incredulous: "How can this guy be doing this stuff? This doesn't make sense. We know his family. Why, we knew little Joshy when he was just a kid. He's not all that. He's just a carpenter."

Jesus understood where they were coming from, but he was still amazed at their lack of faith. The Father had anointed him with the Holy Spirit and with power (see Acts 10:38). The blind were receiving their sight, the lame were walking, the lepers were being cured, the deaf were hearing and the dead were being raised (Mt 11:5). But not in Nazareth. Their lack of faith prevented Jesus from doing many miracles there. And Jesus was truly amazed.

Does the Lord find our lack of faith "amazing" at times? Perhaps he does, considering the times he has shown himself powerful and faithful in our lives, and yet we still doubt his word. And what about when an anointed man or woman of God comes to minister and we become dubious about the reports of healings and miracles? Don't we then become like the people of Nazareth who amazed the Lord by their lack of faith?

Only one other time in the Scriptures does it say that Jesus was amazed. Again, it had to do with faith—not the lack of it but, this time, the display of it by a Roman centurion: *Jesus was amazed at him, and...said, "I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel."* (Lk 7:9).

It is not beyond our means to amaze the Lord, either with our faith or with our lack thereof. Which one will it be?

The lame were walking, the lepers were being cured, the deaf were hearing and the dead were being raised. But not in Nazareth.

All Who Touched Him Were Healed

Wherever he went--into villages, towns or countryside--they placed the sick in the marketplaces. They begged him to let them touch even the edge of his cloak, and all who touched him were healed. -Mark 6:56

Those who desire to be healed often find themselves asking the Lord (or some healing evangelist) to touch them when, perhaps, there would be better results if they could somehow touch Jesus.

When I read the gospel of Mark, I am struck by the picture that he paints of the crowds that pursue Jesus. It is all that Jesus and his disciples can do to find respite from the converging masses. And despite the fact that he is forced to preach from a boat off the shoreline and that he misses more than a few meals because of the pressing throng, Jesus continues to welcome everyone with patience and compassion. In Mark 6 we find people running throughout the region of Gennesaret to bring the sick to Jesus. They had faith that Jesus could heal, and when they came to him they didn't even bother asking Jesus to pray. All they wanted was to be granted permission to simply touch the edge of his cloak. That would be enough for them. That would be enough for their healing. *And all who touched him were healed.*

We want Jesus to touch us when, perhaps, there would be better results if we could somehow touch Jesus

Now, it is certainly a biblical practice to lay hands on the sick for their recovery. Jesus himself did it. And if Jesus were here today, I would probably want him to touch me if I needed healing. But for those who were part of the Gennesaret scene, all they wanted was to touch Jesus. Perhaps word had gotten out about the woman with the bleeding problem who was healed by simply touching the hem of his garment. Perhaps the chaos of the crowds prevented most from getting an audience with the Master. Perhaps the faith level in that place was high. Perhaps people were just plain desperate. In any case, they *begged him to let them touch even the edge of his cloak.* And every single one who did was healed.

In your quest for your healing, whatever it may be, perhaps it would do you well to press in to touch Jesus. Don't take a passive stance regarding your healing. You may be asking Jesus to touch you when it would be better if you became active in the pursuit of getting close to him. No, he's not here in the flesh, but that is actually an advantage. You don't have to wait until the man of God comes to town and hope that you can get through the crowd so that Jesus can touch you through the anointed minister. You can have Jesus all to yourself wherever you are at. And instead of passively waiting for him to touch you, maybe he is waiting for you to touch him—and experience how effective that can be.

A Fine Way of Setting Aside the Commands of God

"You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men." And he said to them: "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!" -Mark 7:8-9

The traditions of men. How do they sometimes become more important than the word of God itself? I believe we would be surprised to know in what ways and to what degree we have let go of the commands of God in order to hold on to the traditions of men.

The Pharisees, who were big into extra-biblical traditions, were bothered by the fact that some of the disciples of Jesus didn't wash their hands before they ate. This particular group had come from Jerusalem to check out Jesus' ministry. If the Pharisees were the religious police of their time, and they were, then this group from headquarters would have been the KGB. They wasted no time interrogating Jesus as to why his disciples did not wash their hands. They were concerned, not about hygiene or the violation of biblical injunction, but about the fact that the disciples were not living according to the *tradition of the elders*.

Before we go "Tsk, tsk, tsk," let's take a look at some of our own "traditions..."

What were the traditions of the elders, you ask? It seems that they were an assortment of customs handed down by rabbis after the Babylonian exile which were supposed to be practical applications of the Law of Moses. They were what eventually became the Jewish "Mishnah." Things like how far you could actually walk on the Sabbath (about one kilometre), *the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles* (v4) (in case they had been touched by Gentiles) and this thing called "Corban." Some rabbi had come up with the idea that you didn't have to support your aging mother or father if the money that you would have used to help them became "Corban," that is a gift devoted to God. That is why Jesus said to the Pharisees, *"You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!"*

Before we go "Tsk, tsk, tsk," let's take a look at some of our own "traditions of the elders": Democratic votes and church boards instead of shepherds directing the affairs of the church. The "Eucharist" instead of the Lord's Supper. Creedal statements instead of Scripture. Denominations instead of the church. Infant sprinkling instead of believers' immersion. "Senior Pastors" instead of a plurality of elders. Bylaws instead of the Bible. The list goes on.

We too have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God to hold on to the traditions of men.

No Sign Will Be Given

The Pharisees came and began to question Jesus. To test him, they asked him for a sign from heaven. He sighed deeply and said, "Why does this generation ask for a miraculous sign? I tell you the truth, no sign will be given to it." -Mark 8:11-12

The Pharisees asked Jesus for a sign from heaven as proof that he was from God. They weren't honest seekers of the truth hoping that Jesus might be the one to redeem Israel. They came to test him with an unbelieving agenda to discredit him. It is no wonder that Jesus did not give them a sign from heaven. They would not have believed him even if he had catered to their whims.

When I was a young Christian, I heard about an organization which was offering a substantial cash reward to anyone who could produce and verify a specific miracle chosen by the organization. The sceptics wanted to discredit claims of the church regarding the miraculous. I prayed that the Lord would prove himself to these people in order to humble them. Right about that time, I read this verse in Mark and understood that these people were putting the Lord to a foolish test (see Matthew 4:7). No sign would be given. The Lord would allow them to live in their unbelief because they had no heart to authentically seek him.

God is more than willing to give signs to those who sincerely seek to know the truth and do his will

Ironically, Jesus had previously fulfilled the requisition of the Pharisees. He had already given multiple signs from heaven. All the Pharisees had to do was to hang around Jesus for half-a-day with a half-open mind. They would have seen. Signs from heaven were breaking out like fights at a hockey game, but the Pharisees could not see them. They had already made up their minds that they did not want to see. As the old proverb says, "There are none so blind as those who will not see."

There was a sign, however, that was yet to come: The resurrection of the Christ. But notice that after Jesus rose from the dead, he didn't appear to everyone; he appeared to only five-hundred people. It's not likely that the Pharisees were among them. And even if Jesus had appeared to them, do you think they would have believed? Don't bet the farm on it.

God is more than willing to give signs to those who sincerely seek to know the truth and do his will. But he is not going to play games with those who are looking to oppose the truth and cynically ask for some kind of proof they don't really want anyway. For those kinds of people, no sign will be given.

You Deaf and Mute Spirit

When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the evil spirit. "You deaf and mute spirit," he said, "I command you, come out of him and never enter him again." -Mark 9:25

How many times in your life have you addressed a deaf and mute spirit and commanded it to come out? I am not trying to be facetious—I want to make a point. The way Jesus ministered, at least in this case, in not the way we minister. If a desperate father came to us with a son who was having seizures and could not speak since childhood (Mark 9), it is not likely that most of us would ask ourselves, “What would Jesus do” and then do it.

Blame it on our culture. We are much more enlightened than those, ancient and modern, who would attribute certain maladies to the presence of evil spirits. In our society, it is ludicrous, archaic and embarrassing to diagnose a person’s problems as demonic oppression. This is not, after all, the ancient Near East or primitive Africa. So we discount the possibility and send people off to doctors, psychologists and hospitals in hopes that they can be helped by the professionals. But often, they can’t.

In Jesus’ day, a demon was a demon. And if they existed then, why wouldn’t they now? It is not consistent to accept the Bible as true but have no regard for the possibility that unclean spirits may be tormenting someone’s body or soul today. I am not saying that every affliction is the result of the presence of a demonic spirit. I know the frustration of being with people who believe that if you pass gas, it is a sign of a demon.

Even if you accept the truth about demons, are you still ready to deal with them like Jesus did? Are you ready to accept the idea that there may be such a thing as a *deaf and mute spirit*? Are you prepared to discern and address specific spirits by their function?

For most of us the answer is “no.” But how will we be able to help people if we don’t have a clue about how to minister to those whose affliction may be demonic. There should be no stigma attached to people who are demonized. Was it the boy’s fault that he couldn’t speak and that he was being thrown into fires? No, we need to have compassion for those in whom the devil has gained access. We need to address spirits according to their stronghold, and if need be, fast and pray until our faith is strengthened and their grip is weakened.

Jesus commissioned us and gave authority to cast out demons (Mk 16:17; Mt 10:8; Lk 10:19). Don’t expect the world or much of the church to understand. Just concern yourself that the demons do.

In Jesus’ day, a demon was a demon. And if they existed then, why wouldn’t they now?

Anyone Who Divorces His Wife and Marries Another

“...and the two will become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate... Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her.” -Mark 10:8-11

Jesus’ teaching on divorce is among his most controversial. The controversy does not lie in the fact that his teaching is unclear but that it is unacceptable to many.

The ubiquitous Pharisees were testing the Lord about his view of divorce. “Moses had allowed for it” they said, “We want to know what you think about it, Jesus.” Now remember that Jesus always gets to the crux of the matter. He says *“It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law”* (v5). Do you find it interesting that he says it was Moses who wrote them this particular law? Jesus points out that divorce was not God’s intention at the beginning of creation (v6). And this is the foundation for Jesus’ teaching on divorce. He says, *“God made them male and female”* (v6) (this obviously rules out same-gender marriages). *“A man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife”* (v7). *“The two will become one flesh”* (v8). *“They are no longer two, but one”* (v8). *“Therefore, what God has joined together, let man not separate”* (v9). Consequently, Jesus says, *“Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her.”* I don’t see how he could have been more plain.

The reason that a person commits adultery if they divorce and remarry is that when a man and woman marry they become “one flesh.” Now you can go ahead and get a *certificate of divorce* (v4) but that does not change the reality that you are still married in the sight of heaven because it is God who unites a couple in marriage. The only two things that can separate that one flesh union are death and marital unfaithfulness (see Matthew 5:32). God hates divorce (see Malachi 2:16). If a person remarries apart from the death or adultery of their spouse they not only commit adultery, they terminate the possibility of the miracle of reconciliation.

Four points: 1) There is nothing in the Bible to say that a woman has to stay in an abusive relationship. Separation is provided for (see 1 Corinthians 7:10-11). 2) Jesus was actually advocating for women when he taught this because it had become the male prerogative to divorce their wives for *any and every reason* (Mt 19:3). 3) The argument, “God wants me to be happy” as justification for divorce or remarriage is preposterous. God has not called us to be happy, but to be obedient. 4) Adultery is not the unforgivable sin.

The controversy does not lie in the fact that his teaching is unclear but that it is unacceptable

He Went Away Sad, Because He Had Great Wealth

Jesus looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack," he said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth. -Mark 10:21-22

I half-expect to see the "rich young ruler" in heaven. Maybe it's because I can relate to him. Not that I have ever been rich, but there have been things in my life that I didn't want to give up at first, but eventually did. That's why I think it possible that this man, whom Jesus told to give away all his wealth in order to be saved, may have ended up following Jesus.

Matthew identifies the man in this story as "young" and Luke identifies as a "ruler." Contravening the cultural norm for men of standing, he "ran" to meet Jesus. He had a sense of urgency and excitement about gaining an audience with Jesus. He showed great respect for Jesus by falling on his knees before him. He continued that respect by addressing him as "good teacher" and immediately asked the question that was on his heart. Unlike the Pharisees, he was not there to test Jesus with his questions. He was in earnest. He wanted to know, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" What a fabulous question. The majority of the world would be saved if they queried the Lord with the same earnestness.

So, it seems that he sincerely wanted to know how to be saved. After reminding him that only God is good and exhorting him not to use that adjective lightly, Jesus recounted some of basic requirements of the Law. "All these I have kept since I was a boy," the young man replied. He was still in earnest. He could honestly say that he had been mindful to follow the commands of God from his mother's hip. But now he has met the Master and there is something within him that says that perhaps there is more. And there is. According to Jesus there is one thing he lacked—or is it two? "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor...Then come, follow me." His response? *At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.*

There is nothing here that says that the rich young ruler changed his mind, sold everything, gave the money to the poor and followed Jesus. But there is plenty to suggest that he may have had a heart to do just that. He had character; Jesus loved him; and it was with sadness, not disdain, that he went away. Yes, he did walk away—but so have I. To give up his great wealth was even more difficult than Peter walking away from his fishing nets. Perhaps he needed time, as we all do on occasion. And perhaps we'll get to meet him in Glory. I'll be asking for him.

*Perhaps he needed time...
perhaps we'll get to meet
him in Glory*

The Lord Needs It

Jesus sent two of his disciples, saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you doing this?' tell him, 'The Lord needs it...'" -Mark 11:1-3

Jesus was about to enter Jerusalem in a triumphal procession. As he approached Jerusalem, he sent two of disciples ahead to a village on the outskirts of the city. He said that they would find a colt that no one had ever ridden at the entrance to the village. They were to untie it and bring it to him. If anyone were to stop them and ask, "Why are you doing this?" they would explain to them that *the Lord needs it*.

Does the Lord ever need anything? Does he need us? Good questions. The answers would give us insight into the very nature of God. First of all, God would not be God if there was any insufficiency about him. The Lord is totally self-sustaining and never deficient in any way. But Jesus became "needy" when he became human. He "needed" air to breathe, food to eat and clothes to wear. When it came time for Jesus to ride triumphantly into Jerusalem to fulfil the prophecy of Zechariah, he "needed" a donkey colt in order to do it. Luke's gospel (19:34) tells us that when the owners of the colt asked the disciples why they were untying it and they told the owners exactly what Jesus had instructed them: "The Lord needs it."

And he did need it. The divine plan written from eternity for the salvation of the entire world needed that donkey to proceed. Jesus could have flown into Jerusalem like Superman, but that wasn't part of the plan. Jesus needed a humble beast of burden to portray the manner in which he would conquer the enemy. There was a reason that he wanted—yes needed—that colt. That donkey was in his purposes.

But you say, "Really now, God doesn't need anything or anyone." Agreed. But in his sovereignty, it seems that God has chosen to "need" us—like Jesus needed that donkey—to do his bidding. It is not that God is unable to get along without us or that he couldn't have found another way to get the job done. But he needed that donkey and he needs us.

The Lord needs you. You are part of his divine plan for the ages. So, when the Spirit of God comes by and starts untying you for his purposes, don't say, "Why are you doing this?" The answer is clear. The Lord needs you.

*The divine plan written
from eternity for the
salvation of the entire
world needed that donkey
to proceed*

Give to Caesar What Is Caesar's and to God What Is God's

Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not? Should we pay or shouldn't we?... "Bring me a denarius and let me look at it." They brought the coin, and he asked them, "Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?" "Caesar's," they replied. Then Jesus said to them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." -Mark 12:14-17

The chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders were out to get Jesus (Mk 11:27; 12:12). So, *they sent some of the Pharisees and the Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words* (12:13). Now, the Pharisees and Herodians were strange bedfellows. The Pharisees would have been nationalistic in their outlook and would have opposed in principle, though not always in practice, the Roman occupation of Israel. The Herodians were Jews who favored a secular society free from religion. They supported the rule of Herod who received his power from Rome. The Pharisees saw Jesus as a threat to their religious order and the Herodians saw him as a threat to their vision of a modern society under Greek influence. Strange bedfellows indeed.

***The Pharisees and
Herodians were strange
bedfellows***

But their common cause brought them together and they came to set a trap for Jesus. Now this wasn't the first time someone tried to ensnare Jesus. There was the "*whose wife will she be in the resurrection*" trap (Mt 22:28) as well as the "*this woman was caught in adultery*" trap (Jn 8:4). This new trap seemed foolproof. After buttering him up with sickly-sweet flattery, they would question him on whether it was *right to pay taxes to Caesar*. If he said "yes," the Pharisees would spread it around that Jesus supported the Romans and he would lose face with the people. If he said "no," the Herodians could accuse him of being subversive toward the governing authorities and gain grounds to have him arrested. But, *Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!* (Ro 11:3). Jesus called for a denarius (notice that he didn't have one) as his object lesson. Looking at the coin he asked, "*Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?*" "*Caesar's,*" they replied. Then Jesus said to them, "*Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's.*" Amazing.

The NIV Study Bible points out that the coin that Jesus had in his hand had Caesar's portrait plus an *inscription* that claimed the divinity of the Caesars. That's why he was specific in asking about the inscription as well as the portrait. So, not only was Jesus saying that we should give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's but also that we should not give to Caesar what only belongs to God—our worship.

Love the Lord Your God with All

"Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' -Mark 12:28-30

Do you find it interesting that Jesus would rank one commandment as the greatest? It is kind of like Oscar night when they open the envelope. Everyone wants to know who or what is considered the best or greatest or most important. The envelope please...and the winner is...Deuteronomy 6:5: *Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.*

So Jesus made it clear that the highest calling of everyone is to love God with everything that we are made of: heart, soul, mind and strength. How do we love God with our heart? With our soul? With our mind? With our strength?

***God did not give us the
commandment to love him
with everything we are
without first loving us with
everything he is***

How would fulfilling this commandment translate into actual experience? Does it mean a particular feeling? Lifestyle? Commitment? Action? Whatever the practical answer to that question, there is something more fundamental and profound that we may want to first consider.

I believe that God did not give us the commandment to love him with everything we are without first loving us with everything he is. God has not required us to love him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength without first loving us with all his heart, soul, mind and strength.

Imagine the immensity of the heart of God that created humankind in his image and that longs for intimate relationship with every single man, woman and child on the planet. Think about the depth of the soul (the being) of God which not only purposed the universe but encompasses everyone and everything in it with perfect holiness and justice. Try to fathom the mind of God that designed every physical law of the universe and knows every move and every thought of every creature that crawls, walks or swims the earth. Envision the strength of God who with just the word of his mouth brought the vast expanse of the ever-expanding cosmos into being and with just a word will bring it to destruction in the twinkling of an eye.

What then is the result of God loving us with all he is? The ultimate effect of God loving us with his total being is Jesus Christ. Jesus is everything that God would or could give. All the fullness of God, including his heart, soul, mind and strength, was given to us in Jesus, so that we in turn could finally fulfill the wonderful desire of God for us: to love Him with everything we are.

The Abomination That Causes Desolation

"When you see 'the abomination that causes desolation' standing where it does not belong--let the reader understand--then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains... -Mark 13:14

Many Christians, when they hear the term “*the abomination that causes desolation*,” immediately look for an end-times antichrist. An appreciation of both the biblical context and history should give the student of Scripture a broader focus.

The term is used five times in the Bible, three times in Daniel, once in Matthew and once in Mark. The context for the Matthew and Mark accounts are the same. Jesus’ disciples have commented on the magnificence of the Jewish temple. Jesus’ reply is, *"Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down"* (Mk 13:2). The disciples want to know, *"When will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?"* (v4). Matthew records the disciples asking not only about when the temple would be destroyed but also, *"What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"*

You have to try to differentiate between the destruction of the temple and the end of the age

To understand and interpret both Mark 13 and Matthew 24 you have to try to differentiate between when Jesus is referring to the destruction of the temple and when he is referring to what will happen at the end of the age. It gets confusing if you don’t know that there is a difference but the pieces of the puzzle fit much easier if you can discern that difference.

So, what did Jesus mean when he said, *"When you see 'the abomination that causes desolation' standing where it does not belong...then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains."* Historians tell us that in the year 168 B.C., the Syrian king who controlled Jerusalem, Antiochus IV, also known as Epiphanes, abolished the daily sacrifice, desecrated the Jewish temple and set up an altar to Zeus. This is what was predicted by the prophet Daniel and accounts for his use of the term. Jesus, picking up on Daniel’s term, predicts that it will happen again. The context clearly suggests that he is speaking about the future destruction of the temple. In Luke’s account, the people of Judea were told to flee to the mountains, *"When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies"* (21:20). All this was fulfilled when, in A.D. 70, the Romans, under Titus, desecrated the temple and destroyed Jerusalem.

Can an ‘*abomination that causes desolation*’ appear a third time at the end of the age?” Possibly. It depends on who the “man of lawlessness” is in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-9. Remember however, that the primary meaning of Jesus’ words have already been fulfilled.

Why this Waste of Perfume?

A woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head. Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, "Why this waste of perfume?" - Mark 14:3-4

I heard Rodney Howard-Browne give a rather profound illustration regarding this passage of Scripture. According to the original Greek of Mark 14:5, the perfume was worth three hundred denarii. Since a denarius was worth a day’s pay, the perfume that the woman poured out in a few short moments was worth more than a year’s wages. Howard-Browne asked those assembled what a year’s wages might be in our part of the world and we came up with an answer of forty thousand dollars. He then asked one of the Pastors to come forward, sit in a chair, and asked the congregation how many people thought that it would be a waste if he were to take a cruse of perfume that was worth forty-thousand dollars and anoint that brother with it. Most, if not all, of us raised our hands. He then asked us to imagine that Billy Graham was seated there. How many of us would think that it would be wasteful to take that perfume and anoint the great evangelist with it? About half the hands in the place went up. He then asked us to imagine Jesus among us. Would we think it a waste to see the expensive perfume poured out on the Master? A few hands went up and, I have to admit, that mine was one of them.

She was very much in step with God with this act of extravagant love and worship

A year’s wages. Forty thousand dollars. *"Why this waste of perfume,"* they asked. Think what you could do with the money. Those in Bethany who were with Jesus that day said, *"It could have been sold for more than a year's wages and the money given to the poor."* And they rebuked her harshly (v5). But Jesus had a different perspective. He said, *"Leave her alone... She has done a beautiful thing"* (v6). He pointed out that they would always have the poor, but they wouldn’t always have him. In fact, she was very much in step with God, for in this act of extravagant love and worship she had anointed him for his burial. The beauty and expense of the pure essence of the rose-like spikenard was hers to do with as she pleased. It pleased her to “waste” it on Jesus and she would always be remembered for her act of worship.

There are times when we just need to let loose and be extravagant in our love and worship of Jesus—things that we will do for him that others might criticize. If it truly is worship (not about you but about Jesus) then go ahead. It may not be wasteful at all. Jesus just may consider it a beautiful thing.

He Prayed That the Hour Might Pass From Him

Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. "Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will." -Mark 14:35-36

Did Jesus have to go to the cross? Could there have been another way for humanity to be saved? Was the suffering of the crucifixion absolutely necessary?

In Matthew we looked at Jesus' humanity in the Garden of Gethsemane and how we can take comfort in the fact that he is able to sympathize with our weaknesses. He struggled with the cup of suffering that was before him and the death on the cross that awaited him but submitted himself to the will of his Father. But what about his request that if possible the hour might pass from him? "Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me." Might there have been another way?

Might there have been another way?

We look at the Old Testament prophesies which awaited their fulfillment and we say, "No, it was the destiny of Jesus to go to the cross." He was *the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world* (Rev 13:8). But this doesn't mean that God couldn't have saved humanity some other way. Concerning the matter, Jesus expressed the truth that all things were possible for the Father. It was certainly in the ability of God that the "cup" that Jesus was about to drink be taken from him. The Father could have pulled Jesus off that scene in two seconds and devised a million times a million other ways to bring righteousness to the human race. But even though Jesus' humanity was hitting him full force in that he was *deeply distressed and troubled* (v33) and *overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death* (v34), he was not asking that it be possible in the ability of God that the hour might pass from him, but in the will of God.

It was certainly possible in the ability of God that Jesus not go to the cross. This was not the only way, but it was, no doubt, the best way. Don't ask me what plan B could have been, but of all the possible ways the omnipotent God could have done it, this was the way he chose. This was plan A. This was perfection.

And in the end, the Father chose not to take the cup, but to let the hour come. And in the end, Jesus chose to face the hour and drink the cup. And because of these choices, it doesn't matter what plan B could have been. There is no plan B. Salvation has been forever chosen and established in heaven and set upon the earth for our own choosing.

Let this Christ Come down Now from the Cross

In the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked him among themselves. "He saved others," they said, "but he can't save himself! Let this Christ, this King of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe." -Mark 15:31-32

They didn't understand. Nobody did. Not even the twelve. The ultimate proof that Jesus was the Christ would not be coming down from the cross. It would be coming out of the grave.

Jesus was dying on the cross. This was wonderfully evident to his detractors and painfully obvious to his followers. To the former, it meant that they were right about him. To the latter, it meant that perhaps they were wrong about him. Both groups had the same question: "Would this be happening if Jesus was really the Christ? So, *the chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked him among themselves. "He saved others," they said, "but he can't save himself! Let this Christ, this King of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe."*

The ultimate proof that Jesus was the Christ would not be coming down from the cross. It would be coming out of the grave.

Human reasoning could not predict that God would sanction this. When Jesus told Peter what was about to happen, Peter took Jesus aside, rebuked him (can you imagine?) and said, "Never, Lord" (Mt 16:22). Only heavenly understanding could see past the suffering of the Messiah on the cross, and it was in short supply that day in Jerusalem. One of the few who did have revelation that day about the true nature of the man on the cross was the Roman centurion who had overseen the crucifixion. He had a chance to observe Jesus throughout his ordeal. When it was over and he saw Jesus breathe his last, he said, "Surely this man was the Son of God" (v39).

It was only after the resurrected Jesus had walked with the grieving disciples on the road to Emmaus did they understand truth of Jesus' question to them: "Did not the Christ have to suffer these things to enter into his glory?" (Lk 24:26). God's ways are higher than our natural human understanding of things and his thoughts so far beyond ours that we are surprised, sometimes shocked, by how wrong our conclusions can be—as both the chief priests and Jesus' disciples were to discover.

Carnal understanding saw Jesus on the cross and concluded that he must not be the Son of God. When it was over, the bookies called in all those who were betting that Jesus was the Christ and said, "Pay-up." But, as you know, it wasn't over. The chief priests, and even the disciples, had been surmising that an empty cross would be the proof that Jesus was the Christ. Little did they realize a far superior proof was forthcoming.

And These Signs Will Accompany Those Who Believe

“And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well.” -Mark 16:17-18

There are tenable grounds that the last twelve verses of the gospel of Mark (9-20) were not part of the original manuscript. The earliest known copies of Mark’s gospel do not have it. The transition from verse 8 to verse 9 is awkward. A full one-third of the words that appear in this section do not appear elsewhere in the writing. And there is theological content that has no precedent in the rest of the gospel.

So, does all this mean the ending to Mark’s gospel was not part of Mark’s original manuscript? Probably. Does it mean that it should not have been included in the Bible? Not at all. Early church fathers and Providence deemed it appropriate to be included as part of the canon of Scripture, and so should we.

The notion that Mark may not have written this portion of Scripture is not a problem

Part of the debate surrounding this section has to do with the signs that Jesus said would accompany those who would believe. There are four of them: 1) We will drive out demons; 2) We will speak in new tongues; 3) We will not be harmed by snakes or poison; and 4) We will place our hands on the sick and they will be healed. Old-time Pentecostals love this stuff but others (including some new-time Pentecostals) are not entirely comfortable with the four signs mentioned. Of the four, driving out demons and laying hands on the sick have much precedent in Mark and the rest of Scripture. The sign of speaking in new tongues is prevalent in the history of the early church in the Book of Acts, as well as in 1 Corinthians. The third sign is the one on which people get hung-up the most: *They will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all.* Although I don’t know of any other example in the New Testament of immunity from deadly poison, we see where Paul was unaffected by a lethal snake bite in Acts 28:3-6. The principle here has to do with supernatural protection of believers.

The notion that Mark may not have written this portion of Scripture is not a problem. The problem would lie in any spurious doctrine or practice contained therein. And there is none (eccentric Christian snake handling groups, notwithstanding). So, don’t worry about whether or not this section should be in the Bible. Be more concerned about whether or not these signs which Jesus said would follow those who believe are following you.

To Make Ready a People Prepared for the Lord

“Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” - Luke 1:16-17

There can be no doubt that the Lord wants his people ready. Ready for what, you say? Ready for him.

Zechariah was getting a prophetic word, if there ever was one. This wasn’t your general “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life” dispatch. It was delivered by an angel, Gabriel, who had come directly from the presence of God. Zechariah was told that his prayer had been heard and that his barren wife, Elizabeth, would bear a son. Gabriel then spelled out nine specific details about who the boy was going to be, including his name. The last thing that the angel said about this one to be born to the aging priest was that he would *make ready a people prepared for the Lord.*

A person who is not willing to repent is not ready for him

So what is it that readies a people prepared for the Lord? Repentance. John came *preaching a baptism of repentance* (Lk 3:3). This is how he would *prepare the way for the Lord*, and *make straight paths for him* (Lk 3:4). Repentance always precedes salvation, or any other positive change for that matter. A person who is not willing to repent is not ready for the Savior.

I heard some humorous wisdom in a lawyer’s office last week: “How many psychologists does it take to change a light bulb? Only one, but the light bulb has to really want to change.” We have to really want to change in order to be ready for the Lord. John the Baptizer was no psychologist; he was a prophet who boldly proclaimed that the kingdom of God was at hand, and that if people wanted to be a part of it, they had better start changing. Jesus was coming, and if the people did not want to change, there was little even he could do to help them.

Other than prayer, the most consistent hallmark of the revivals of church history is repentance. It precedes and engenders the coming of the Lord to his people. If we want to be ready for the Lord’s coming—in Spirit or in person at the end of the age—a humble and repentant heart is essential.

Something Gabriel foretold about John was, “*Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God.*” He did this through one simple message: “*Repent.*” It is the one thing that will make us and keep us prepared for the Lord.

Because of the Tender Mercy of Our God

...to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.
-Luke 1:77-79

The tongue of Zechariah is loosed after nine months of silence. His son, whose coming he doubted, has been born and, according to the word of the angel of the Lord, the time of Zechariah's imposed muteness is over. The Spirit of God not only reinstates his ability to speak, he gives him the words to say. After nine months without speech, his first words are a melodic river. Praise and prophetic inspiration flow from lips which have not spoken a word for the duration of his wife's miraculous pregnancy. He speaks of the goodness of God and the role his son, John, would play in the history of salvation. He recounts God's faithfulness to the covenant he swore to Abraham by raising up a *horn of salvation* in the house of David (Lk 1:69-72). An ability to serve God in holiness and without fear was being restored to his people. The knowledge of salvation and the forgiveness of sin were coming—all *because of the tender mercy of our God*.

***Where would we be without
the tender mercy of our
God?***

A.W. Tozer said, "Truth has two wings," and quoted G. Campbell Morgan who said, "The whole truth does not lie in 'It is written,' but in 'It is written' and 'Again it is written.'" There is, on one hand, the holy judgment of our God and then there is the *tender mercy of our God*. This is the tender mercy *by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace*. This beautiful mercy shines all the brighter knowing that without it we would remain in darkness and never know the path of peace—only the severity of what our sins deserve.

The tender mercy of our God is a mercy with feeling. The word for tender is a Greek word that originated from the word for "bowels" and came to mean the place where you feel things the most—deep down in your gut. Both exhilaration and pain are felt there. It is a tender place. It is a sensitive place. It is a feeling place. It is a place of compassion. It is the place in God where salvation was born and forgiveness is offered.

Where would we be without the tender mercy of our God? We would be separated from him. But with the birth of John the Baptist came the first light of the dawn of a new day of a great salvation; a salvation that was born out of, and gives witness to, the tender mercy of our God.

Destined to Cause the Falling and Rising of Many

Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too." -Luke 2:34-35

It can be said of certain rulers, kings, presidents and dictators that they have caused the falling and rising of many in their times. Political and military power has brought low and raised up countless persons this side of heaven. But the little baby who was nestled in the arms of the old man at the temple was destined to cause the eternal falling and rising of all who lived on the earth.

Simeon was waiting for this day. *It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ* (Lk 2:26). But when and where would he appear?

***The thoughts of people's
hearts would be revealed
simply by how they
reacted to him***

Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts where Joseph and Mary had brought their son of eight days to be circumcised and named. Seeing Jesus, he took him in his arms and praised the Lord. And then he spoke to Mary: *"This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."*

According to Simeon, Jesus would be a "sign." Those who would speak against this sign would fall. Those who would speak in favor and believe the sign would be raised. Since Jesus was the true sign from heaven, the thoughts of people's hearts would be revealed simply by how they reacted to him. *God has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed* (Acts 17:31). Somehow Simeon knew that the baby he held in his arms was this very one. He had been waiting for the *consolation of Israel* (v25) and now he had come. Simeon's prophecy went beyond his time and even the "Israel" of which he spoke. It would be for all times, all places and all people, for *salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved* (Acts 4:12).

Up until this point in time, Mary was cherishing and pondering in her heart the events surrounding the birth of her new baby. But Simeon was letting her know that this child would have the ability to not only touch her maternal affections, but as the Living Word of God, to pierce her soul and reveal the thoughts and attitudes of her own heart, thus being the cause for her falling or rising as well.