

New Testament Survey

Study Guide by

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THE BIRTH OF JESUS

Matthew 1-2

Background: Matthew is the gospel written primarily to the Jewish people emphasizing Christ as King. The author is Matthew, also known as Levi, who was a Jewish tax-collector before he answered the call of Jesus to follow Him. When Matthew said *yes* to Jesus, he said *no* to his past world. Whereas some of the other apostles could return to their fishing boats, Matthew closed the door on his previous life forever. What an example of true servanthood! The probable date of writing is around 60 A. D.

Today's Lesson: A true miracle is revealed through the ancestry of Christ's family, the advent of the Christ Child, and the adversity which confronts the holy family.

I. 1:1-17 THE ANCESTRY

II. 1:18-2:12 THE ADVENT

III. 2:13-23 THE ADVERSITY

Introduction: Marcus Norris, in an old copy of *The Baptist Standard*, asks the question entitled: "What if Jesus Had Not Come"?

"... consider what life would be like if there had been no babe in a Bethlehem manger."

No angelic announcements.

No invitation to humble shepherds as representatives of the less fortunate.

No star to beckon the wealthy and wise.

No model of obedience in Joseph fleeing with his family to Egypt.

No Sermon on the Mount to correct our understanding of God's law.

No washed feet, no cross, no empty tomb.

No church.

No New Testament.

But the manger was not empty!

In our lesson today, Matthew validates the birth of the Christ Child in "a Bethlehem manger", including the ancestry, the advent, and the adversity.

I. 1:17 THE ANCESTRY

Passage: The ancestry of Jesus is traced from Abraham to David, from Solomon to Josiah, and from Jeconiah through Jesus.

1. 1:1-6a from Abraham

A. vs. 1 the recording – the authentication of the genealogy of Jesus, the Messiah, beginning with Abraham (notice the Messianic reference to Jesus as "the son of David")

B. vs. 2-6 the records – the naming of the genealogy including the patriarchs Isaac and Jacob, the tribes of Judah "and his brothers", the women, and Jessie, the father of David

2. 1:6b-11 **from David**

A. vs. 6b the designation – the reference to Bathsheba, former wife of Uriah, as the wife of David and the mother of Solomon

B. vs. 7-11 the decline – the naming of the generations following Solomon which reveal a steady spiritual decline, concluding with the deportation of the Israelites to Babylon under King Nebuchadnezzar

3. 1:12-17 from Jeconiah

A. vs. 12-15 the return – the recording of the Messiah’s lineage following the restoration of the Israelites from Babylon

B. vs. 16 the relationships – the recording of the family of Joseph, including his father Jacob, who was the husband of Mary “by whom Jesus was born” (The phrase “by whom” is feminine which designates Mary as the mother of Jesus through the virgin birth.)

C. vs. 17 the review – the summarizing of the ancestry of Jesus into three groups of fourteen each (Charles Ryrie in the *Ryrie Study Bible* notes that not every generation is included in a genealogy.)

Points to Emphasize:

1. 1:1-6a “No babe in a Bethlehem manger”? How do we know about the blessed event of the incarnation of our Lord? Paul confirms it when Christ “emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men” (Philippians 2:7). Matthew confirms it (1:24-25). Luke confirms it (Luke 2:7). In his genealogy Matthew begins with Abraham, “the Father of the Jewish nation”. As a tax collector, Matthew is trained to be thorough (even though dishonest before he met Jesus). So he begins the gospel with a documented record of the earthly lineage of Jesus, the Messiah, which includes Gentiles, Jews, men, women, kings, peasants and “sinners.” ***We are blessed with our spiritual genealogical roots as Paul says in Galatians 3:9: “And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s descendants, heirs according to the promise”.***

2. 1:6b-11 The people in this passage reflect a gradual but certain departure from God’s ways to pagan idolatry. When God said “enough”, He allowed the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, to be His instrument in purging the land and its people of impurity. This exile lasted for seventy years. ***God, in our lives today, removes us from the place of blessing into a spiritual exile until we are ready to again experience the fellowship of His presence.***

3. 1:12-17 The good news in this passage is that God restores repentant sinners to a place of blessing. Just as John the Baptist preached a message of repentance in preparing the people for salvation through Jesus, the Lord calls us to repentance so that we can experience the miracle of the new birth. ***Jesus, meaning “the Lord is salvation”, is the Messiah, meaning “the anointed one” and wants to be my Savior and my Lord.***

Personal Applications:

1. 1:1-6a Do I thank God that the people in this passage come from all backgrounds? Do I praise God that my name, as a believer, is recorded in the “book of life” (see Revelation 20:12, 15)? Am I grateful that I do not have to be born into a “royal line” to receive my spiritual inheritance?

2. 1:6b-11 Do I take comfort in the knowledge that the same forgiveness which God extended to a repentant David is available to me today? Do I claim the promise in 1 John 1:9: “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness”? If I am headed toward the spiritual exile of broken fellowship, will I listen to God’s voice before I have to go to “Babylon”?

3. 1:12-17 Can I really say that I have been “born again” with the indwelling presence of the Lord Jesus? Is the “manger” of my heart empty, or is it filled with the Holy Spirit? If not, will I say yes, so that I can experience new life in Christ?

II. 1:18-2:12 THE ADVENT

Passage: Matthew announces the birth of Jesus which includes the preparation of the parents, the fulfillment of prophecy, and the praise of the magi from the east.

Pattern:

1. 1:18-21 The preparation

A. vs. 18 the parents – the conception of the Child by the Holy Spirit to the virgin Mary, who is engaged to be married to Joseph

B. vs. 19 the perplexity – the initial plan of a very compassionate and righteous Joseph, upon hearing of Mary’s condition, which was to “send her away secretly” (or to break off the engagement privately so as not to humiliate Mary) Note: The period of betrothal was considered binding and required a “bill of divorce” to legally cancel.

C. vs. 20-21 the plan (of God) – the appearance of an angel (in a dream), who reassuringly directs Joseph to wed Mary, as the Child, who has been miraculously conceived by the Holy Spirit, will be named Jesus and will “save His people from their sins”

2. 1:22-25 The prophecy fulfillment

A. vs. 22-23 the prophecy – the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy which foretold of a virgin birth and a Son named Immanuel, which means “God with us”

B. vs. 24 the personal obedience –the arousal from sleep of Joseph, who obeys the command of the angel to take Mary as his wife

C. vs. 25 the purity – the righteousness of Joseph, who keeps his wife pure until after the birth of the Son whom he names Jesus

3. 2:1-12 *The praise*

A. vs. 1-2 the purpose – the arrival in Jerusalem of Judea of the magi from the east, who inquire about the location of the “King of the Jews” for they have followed His star and want to worship Him (notice the word “house” in verse 1, which is the basis for some scholars to place the age of Jesus as a boy instead of an infant)

B. vs. 3-8 the prophecy – the arousal of the suspicions of the devious King Herod who, after learning about the prophecy of the Lord’s birth from the indifferent religious leaders, directs the magi to Bethlehem to find the Child and to report back to him so that he, too, supposedly can worship Him (remember that Satan is the “father of lies”—John 8:44)

C. vs. 9-12 the presentation – the worship and giving of gifts to the Christ Child by the magi who, after following the star to Bethlehem, obey the warning by God in a dream to return home a different way (The gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh denote royalty or deity, purity, and death.)

Points to Emphasize:

1. 1:18-21 The birth of Jesus is a carefully documented event in the Bible. The existence of a man named Jesus is a historical fact. The betrothal of a virgin named Mary to a righteous man named Joseph is fulfillment of ancient prophecy. The overwhelming characteristic of both Mary and Joseph in a uniquely unsettling situation is peace—the peace which Jesus Himself describes in John 14:27: “Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful”. Peace is the result of a life which believes God even during extraordinary circumstances. ***Just as God prepared Mary and Joseph for the miracle of the Lord’s birth, He will prepare each of us to fulfill His purpose through obedience.***

2. 1:22-25 There is no such thing as a coincidence in God's word. Everything which happens is according to a divine calendar of events. The overwhelming miracle is that God became a Man like us physically so that we can become holy like Him through Jesus Christ. The faith of Joseph is exemplary: he did not look at his circumstances, nor other people, nor his own feelings. He just trusted God! His obedience is complete: physical—preserved purity of Mary; emotional—overcame circumstances; and spiritual—submitted completely and immediately to God's command. ***The righteousness, faithfulness, and obedience of Joseph serve as timely examples for us to follow in a world which has no absolutes, no standards, and no personal values.***

3. 2:1-12 There are three groups of people from whom we can draw spiritual applications in this passage—the magi, Herod, and the religious rulers. The magi were wise men who studied the stars. Tradition presents them as royalty and the number three (perhaps because three gifts were given). The magi are a picture of those who seek the Lord with a desire only to worship Christ in humility and with generosity. Herod, whose methods include secrecy, suspicion, and lies, typify the adversary who is constantly trying to destroy the presence of Jesus in the world. The religious leaders, including the chief priests and the scribes, represent superficial religion which is characterized by knowledge, indifference, and unbelief. ***The advent of our Lord confronts each of us with some choices: do I sincerely desire to kneel before the Lord in genuine worship; am I busying myself with removing His very presence from my life; am I too indifferent to travel to Bethlehem to experience His presence?***

Personal Applications:

1. 1:18-21 Am I currently in a situation where my circumstances have changed unexpectedly? Do I receive assurance from God's "Fear not"? Do I acknowledge that the heart of the gospel message is contained in these words: "He will save His people from their sins"?

2. 1:22-25 Do I acknowledge that God's prophetic word is always fulfilled in His timing? Do I realize that God never calls me to do anything for which He does not prepare me? Do I immediately obey the Lord's commands, remembering that delay is an opportunity for the enemy?

3. 2:1-12 Do I seek a living Lord? What is my response to Jesus—to worship Him, to be troubled by Him, or to ignore Him? Is God's word a dynamic book which I can apply to my own life, or is it just a book for reading and studying? Am I so busy with religious activities that I am indifferent to the Person of Jesus Christ? Is my life characterized by the faith of the magi in following the Light of His presence, or in the frenzy of futile efforts in making my life secure? Do I bring my treasures to Jesus—my possessions, my obedience, my life? Do I remember that I always depart a "different way" after I have knelt at the feet of Jesus?

III. 2:13-23 THE ADVERSITY

Passage: Adversity results in anguish to the holy family, atrocities to families of infant sons, and apprehension to Joseph.

Pattern:

1. 2:13-15 The anguish

A. vs. 13 the dream – the command in a dream to Joseph by an angel to take the Child and His mother to Egypt, where they are to remain until they are safe from the murderous intentions of Herod

B. vs. 14 the departure – the immediate obedience of Joseph, who leaves for Egypt with his family "while it was still night"

C. vs. 15 the death – the remaining in Egypt of the holy family until the death of Herod in fulfillment of prophecy

2. 2:16-18 The atrocities

A. vs. 16 the fury – the rage of Herod (after discovering the absence of the magi), who orders the death of all male children two years of age and under in the Bethlehem region according to the timetable of the magi's visit

B. vs. 17-18 the fulfillment (of prophecy) – the prophecy by Jeremiah of Rachel's mourning over Israel's exile, which Matthew connects to the mourning in Bethlehem over the death of its sons

3. 2:19-23 The apprehension

A. vs. 19-20 the first dream – the command to Joseph by an angel to return with the family to Israel because Herod has died

B. vs. 21-22 the fear – the awareness by Joseph of the reign of Archelaus, the son of Herod, which results in the family's departure for Galilee following a warning in a dream

C. vs. 23 the fulfillment of prophecy – the residing by the family in Nazareth in fulfillment of the prophecy "He shall be called a Nazarene"

Points to Emphasize:

1. 2:13-15 Often in periods of turmoil and upheaval, we give in to the crisis of the moment through impulsive reactions. During these times, we must control our inner confusion by obeying God, even when His directions seem illogical. Just as God protected the Israelites in Goshen centuries before, He will now protect His own Son from Herod in fulfillment of prophecy, "Out of Egypt I called My Son." ***We must choose to obey, like Joseph, in the darkness of our circumstances, so that God can protect us from the world system.***

2. 2:16-18 Enraged "Herods" of the world still seek to persecute Christians. When horrible things occur, especially to innocent victims, we must seek God's assurance. While God does not exempt us from earthly dangers, He does promise that He will never leave nor forsake us (see Joshua 1:5), and that one day, He will "wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain" (Revelation 21:4). ***We can receive His "Blessed Assurance" during times "of weeping and great mourning."***

3. 2:19-23 Many times, spiritual obedience involves taking a step of faith in one direction (into Judea), only to proceed in another direction (into Galilee). God often gives us guidance just for the day, so we must be ready to live in "daily bread" sufficiency through obedience. ***The miracle of the manger is that Jesus lives, and most important, He wants to have a personal relationship with me.***

Personal Applications:

1. 2:13-15 What "darkness of night" am I currently experiencing—fear, family problems, a threatening circumstance, an unfamiliar place? Am I sensitive to God's warnings through His word? Do I remain in God's place of refuge until I sense His subsequent direction?

2. 2:16-18 Do I acknowledge the depths of hostility which the world system has for Christ and for Christians? Do I realize the futility of the world's battle against Christ, despite temporary pain and suffering? Do I anticipate that time when He is coming again, when there will be eternal peace, and when the "Herods" of the world will no longer be a problem?

3. 2:19-23 Am I spiritually sensitive to God's complete directions, even when it involves unexpected circumstances? Am I willing to be aligned with the "lowly" Nazarenes along with Christ, or do I insist on being with the world's "acceptable" people in Judea? Will I say with John (1 John 5:11): "God has given us eternal life; and this life is in His Son"? Will I praise God that the manger in Bethlehem was not empty?

Parting Thought:

Marcus Norris concludes his thoughts on the manger: “Our world would be starkly different if there had never been a babe in a manger. But, praise God, he did send his Son to that manger! God chose to establish a new covenant of grace through faith that is available to all people. Because of that single event, our world has been positively changed in so many ways, and we have salvation and hope.” Blessings at Christmas in June!

Prayer of Commitment:

Dear Father,

Thank You for the greatest miracle of all—Your Son Jesus Christ and His provision for my sins. Enable me to experience Your presence so that I, too, may rejoice with wise men everywhere.

In Your Name,

JOHN THE BAPTIST

Matthew 3:1-17

Background: John the Baptist or Baptizer was the son of the aging Elizabeth and Zacharias, a priest. He is the last of the Old Testament prophets. After a four-hundred year period of silence, God chose John to announce the beginning of the public ministry of Jesus Christ. Although he was a simple man and a humble man, he was also a very courageous man whose ministry is characterized by one word: REPENTANCE. Matthew 14:10 describes the horrific death of John during Herod's reign. Matthew, in 11:1, also records the eulogy at his death by Jesus Himself: "Truly I say to you among those born of women, there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist."

Today's Lesson: The gospel message of Matthew provides information on the significance of John the Baptist's ministry, including the anticipation, the acknowledgment, and the affirmation of the incarnate Christ.

I. MATTHEW 3:1-10 THE ANTICIPATION

II. MATTHEW 3:11-12 THE ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

III. MATTHEW 3:13-17 THE AFFIRMATION

Introduction: In *Signs of the Times*, the illustration is given about the ancient Olympic Games in Corinth. One of the most popular races was the relay race. In this event, the competitors lined up side-by-side at the starting line with each one carrying a torch. Farther down the line was another group of men, and still farther, another group. When the starting signal was given, the first contestant began to run with a lighted torch. When the first runner reached his partner, the torch was exchanged and so on until the final contestant crossed the finish line. With this event, a special phrase has emerged: "Let those who have the light pass it on."

In our lesson today, the message of John the Baptist, including the anticipation, the acknowledgement, and the affirmation surrounding the onset of the public ministry of the Messiah, is also a summons to all believers: "Let those who have the light pass it on."

I. MATTHEW 3:1-10 THE ANTICIPATION

Passage: Matthew describes the anticipation of the coming of the Messiah through the ministry of John the Baptist, including the prophecy, the popularity, and the preaching.

Pattern:

1. 3:1-3 **The prophecy**

- A. vs. 1 the messenger – the reference by Matthew to the time, the person, the calling, and the place pertaining to ministry of John the Baptist
- B. vs. 2 the mandate – the stating by John of his purpose in preaching, which is for people to repent for "the kingdom of heaven is at hand"
- C. vs. 3 the message – the designation of John the Baptist as the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy (40:3), which is to prepare the people for the Lord's coming

2. 3:4-6 **The popularity**

- A. vs. 4a the appearance – the description of John's apparel, including a garment made of camel's hair that is secured by a leather belt worn around his waist

B. vs. 4b the adherence – the reference to the simple dietary habits of John, including locusts and honey

C. vs. 5-6 the audience – the straight-forward preaching style of John the Baptist, which attracts throngs of people (from Jerusalem, “all Judea, and the area surrounding the Jordan River”), who confess their sins and are baptized

3. 3:7-10 **The preaching**

A. vs. 7 the indictment – the verbal denouncement by John of the superficial religious leaders, who desire baptism (notice the prophet’s boldness in referring to the Pharisees and the Sadducees as a “brood of vipers”)

B. vs. 8-9 the insight – the emphasis by John on true righteousness instead of the self-righteousness of the religious leaders, who base their claim of “religion” on national heritage (descendants of Abraham), and whose effectiveness is less than “the stones” which God could use to create the “children of Abraham”

C. vs. 10 the immediacy – the warning by John to the people that God’s judgment (“thrown into the fire”) is at hand for those whose message is contrary to His purpose (“unfruitful”)

Points to Emphasize:

1. 3:1-3 A message of “light” to a darkened world. A message of “light” to those trapped in the abyss of hopelessness. A message of “light” to those who have never heard the voice of God speaking through His prophets. The “announcer” is John the Baptist. Matthew does not elaborate on the background of John, but we gain insight into his heritage from the first chapter of the gospel of Luke. His parents’ names are Zacharias and Elizabeth, both from a priestly lineage. Luke describes them as “righteous in the sight of God”, and obedient to His law. The announcement of the birth is supernaturally delivered: “But the angel said to him, ‘Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your petition has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John’ ” (Luke 1:13). Luke also reveals the familial relationship between Elizabeth and Mary, the mother of Jesus. The confirmation concerning the deity of Christ comes when the unborn son of Elizabeth “leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit” (Luke 1:41) as Mary, bearing the Son of God, greets her relative. Nothing more is said of John’s early years following the first chapter of Luke, who records the following: “And the child continued to grow and to become strong in spirit, and he lived in the deserts until the day of his public appearance to Israel” (vs. 80).

Fast forward to the wilderness area surrounding the River Jordan, where John bursts on the scene “like a great bulldozer, building a highway in the desert for God to come” (Ray Stedman in his book: *The Servant Who Rules*). The title of his message: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” All of the gospels contain parts of Isaiah’s prophecy focusing on “Make ready the way of the Lord.” The prophecy is fulfilled with John: “the voice of one crying in the wilderness” (see the prophecy concerning Elijah in Malachi 4:5-6 and Matthew 17:11-13).

Luke, in 3:3-4, also refers to the Isaiah prophecy, including the way to “make ready” the coming of the Lord. In past days when a visiting dignitary was coming, the paths were made “straight” (in today’s vernacular) by filling in all the “potholes”, removing the “bumps” in the road, straightening out the curves, and repaving the streets. ***What a beautiful lesson of repentance for us—we must straighten our own lives through the removal of any “rough spots” which are caused by spiritual neglect and unbelief.***

2. 3:4-6 What an unlikely person for “Man of the Year”! Just look at his clothes! Have you seen what he eats? Have you seen where he lives? Yet, there can be no doubt that this is a man of God. Whereas the religious leaders wear robes, John the Baptist wears garments made from an animal.

Whereas the rulers eat lavishly from a table of feasts, John the Baptist eats “natural” or rather, nature’s food. Whereas Jerusalem and the temple are the venues for religious oratory, John the Baptist reaches the masses in the desert. We often think of this prophet as a blustery “screamer” who is filled with loud bursts of “Thou shalt not’s”. But for “all” Judea and for “all” the area around the Jordan River—even those from Jerusalem—he must have had a compelling message of “light” for all people in the throes of spiritual darkness. Not only did they hear John’s words, but also they became convicted of their own sins and were baptized by “the Baptizer”. John’s baptism was one of cleansing and not of “filling”, which he would announce in verse 11. ***Just as John’s message of repentance prepares the way for Christ’s message of salvation, we must recognize our own need for cleansing from sin.***

3. 3:7-10 When the Bible says that “all” people were coming to hear this man named John the Baptizer, even the Pharisees and the Sadducees were attending. Perhaps their motivation was curiosity. Perhaps their motivation was following the crowd. Perhaps their motivation was an inward, but hidden vacuum which needed to be filled with something else besides self-righteousness. Whatever the reason, John wastes no time in condemning the “brood of vipers”. Who are these “vipers”? The Pharisees were the most orthodox of the Jewish hierarchy. They believed in a strict adherence to the Law, even to the tithing of an herb (see Matthew 23:23). In today’s church, they *might* be welcome, for they had perfect attendance, were fastidious in their giving, and knowledgeable about the Old Testament. In fact, the scribes painstakingly wrote the scriptures on scrolls of parchment. But there would be a glaring omission: superficiality instead of sincerity. The Sadducees, on the other hand, included the priests and the elite groups of people. In contrast to the Pharisees, with whom there was great tension, the Sadducees obeyed the written Law, but not the man-made traditions of the Pharisees—thus the conflict. They were concerned mainly with the political aspects of temple worship. The Sadducees were not as sectarian as the Pharisees, for they remained quite friendly with the Roman rulers. They did not believe in angels or in an after-life (as some have said that was the reason they were “sad”).

John had no qualms about speaking “truth to power”. He cited both groups for their lack of true spiritual effectiveness. They were like fruit trees with no fruit (remember the cursing of the fig tree by Jesus in Matthew 21:18-21 as a symbol of the fruitlessness of Israel). His explicit warning is about “the wrath to come”—the condemnation for denying the deity of Christ. His invitation? “Therefore, bear fruit in keeping with repentance.” *The Message* says: “It’s your life that must change, not your skin!” And with a keen view of their “spiritual” safety-net, John condemns them for their basis of security—their heritage as “sons” of Abraham. He dispels this notion quickly, as he reminds them that the Creator God could turn the river rocks into “children of Abraham” if He so wished.

Then the immediacy of his warning is given: “The axe is already laid . . .” to fell the fruitless trees which will fuel the fire of judgment. The criteria will be simple: “If a fruit tree does not bear fruit, then it is worthless and must be destroyed.” ***We must also heed the message of John the Baptist: to be a part of “the kingdom of heaven”, we must lead changed lives from spiritual barrenness to spiritual fruitfulness.***

Personal Applications:

1. 3:1-3 Do I allow the “light” of the word of God to come to me by having a teachable spirit? Am I willing to “make ready” the hearts of others to receive Christ? Am I willing to fill my “ravines” of indifference, to level my “mountains” of pride, to straighten my “crooked” paths of disobedience, and to “smooth” my roads of doubt in obedience to God’s call? Am I willing and available to be the “voice of one” who tells others about Christ’s invitation to be a part of their lives? Do I

acknowledge that true repentance means more than just saying “I am sorry”? Do I acknowledge that I must make a “U-turn” and go a different direction as the magi did when they worshipped at the feet of the Christ Child (2:12)?

2. 3:4-6 Am I guilty of all “fluff” and no faith? Am I more concerned with my appearance than my Christ-like attitudes? Am I obsessed with eating “refined” foods or with producing the “fruit of the Spirit” (see Galatians 5:22-23)? Do I realize how starved the world is to hear someone who speaks the truth with authority?

3. 3:7-10 Do I remember the lack of patience with which both John the Baptist and our Lord Jesus had with spiritual imposters? Do I pray for daily strength to resist the message of the “brood of vipers” who permeate our society? Do I take God at His word—accept Christ or experience “wrath to come”? Am I grateful that there is a “Therefore” in God’s word—a second chance, a new beginning, an open door? Do I anticipate the coming of my Lord, either at my death or at the Second Coming, with the same urgency to which John speaks?

II. 3:11-12 THE ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Passage: John the Baptist announces the coming of the Jesus with an acknowledgement of *his* own unworthiness, His power, and His purpose.

Pattern:

1. 3:11a *of his own unworthiness*

A. the honesty – the statement by John the Baptist of the focus of his ministry, which is a baptism of repentance

B. the honor – the reference to the supremacy of the One who is coming

C. the humility – the awareness by John of his position, which is lower than a slave in comparison to Jesus

2. 3:11b *of His power*

A. to cleanse – the unequivocal statement by John that the ministry of the One “who is coming” supersedes his

B. to fill - the empowering by Jesus for believers to receive a baptism of the Holy Spirit (a one-time occurrence at the point of their conversion)

C. to judge – the reference to the coming judgment by fire (at the return of Jesus)

3. 3:12 *of His purpose*

A. in clearing – the use of a wheat-gathering comparison by John, who pictures Jesus as holding a tool (“a winnowing fork”) to completely clean the “floor” in preparation for the “harvesting” of believers

B. in separating – the reference to the dividing process between believers and unbelievers (notice that Jesus will gather the wheat—believers--“into the barn”)

C. in judging- the reference to the final judgment by fire for unbelievers (“the chaff”)

Points to Emphasize:

I. 3:11a Following John the Baptist’s strong warning concerning the reality of judgment, he clearly states his mission statement: “I baptize you with water for repentance”. Ray Stedman comments about repentance: “Have you ever repented? Have you ever changed your mind, stopped defending yourself and trying to blame everything on others, and said, ‘No, Lord, it’s not they, it is just me. This is the way I am, and I need help’. That is the place God will meet you.” John is calling the people to meet God. Then he points the people specifically to the

One who is coming. His power is superseded by no one. He is “mightier” than anyone. He is “the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords” who “emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant . . .” (Philippians 2:7). At this point, we see the true courage of this “wilderness man” who is not afraid to single out the religious leaders for their hypocrisy. We see the true humility of the man, who places himself even lower than slaves (whose duty was to carry the sandals of their masters) when compared with Jesus. ***The first step in genuine repentance is to recognize our own unworthiness and our need for cleansing in the eyes of God.***

2. 3:11b John makes it very clear that repentance is just one part of salvation. Only Jesus Christ can complete the process. Every person is faced with two options: baptism of the Holy Spirit which indwells the new believer at the point when they says yes to the invitation of Jesus; or the fire of judgment which awaits all people who reject Jesus as their Lord and Savior. The “unquenchable fire” will eternally torment unbelievers in the “lake of fire” (Revelation 20:15) at Judgment Day. ***This passage underscores the need for believers to make the most of every God-given opportunity to prepare the way for unbelievers to meet Jesus.***
3. 3:12 Another warning from John the Baptist is given in “layman’s terms”--the harvesting of wheat. His audience would be well aware of the process. First, a clearing of the threshing floor; then the use of a “winnowing fork” or shovel to throw the wheat into the air. The chaff would be blown away while the kernels of wheat would land on the floor. Spiritually speaking, John says that the ground will be level; the wheat will be separated from the useless “chaff”; and Jesus Himself will gather His wheat into the barn while burning the chaff. This illustration again emphasizes the separation process which will take place at “end times”. ***The question that I must ask myself: will I be gathered into the place of eternal security by Jesus, or will I be destroyed as useless?***

Personal Applications:

1. 3:11a Do I accept that a “baptism of repentance” indicates a desire for spiritual cleansing? Do I acknowledge that it requires a step of faith? Do I remember that it must be personal—there are no proxies? Do I remember that in my humanity, I do not deserve anything, for I, too, “am not fit to remove His sandals”?
2. 3:11b Am I experiencing the power of the Holy Spirit in my everyday life? Am I aware that the Holy Spirit is a seal which secures my eternal position with Christ? Am I careful to avoid grieving the Holy Spirit, especially with my words (see Ephesians 4:30)? Am I also careful to avoid quenching the Spirit through impeding the progress of Christ’s work in my life or in the life of the church (see 1 Thessalonians 5:19)? Do I accept the reality of a literal hell which is reserved for all unbelievers?
3. 3:12 Just as “the axe is already laid at the root of the trees” (vs. 10), do I acknowledge that Jesus is ready to use the “winnowing fork” to separate the genuine from the imposter, the indifferent from the devoted, the believer from the unbeliever? If the Holy Spirit is convicting me to be “wheat” instead of “chaff”, will I open my heart to the reality of my need? Do I acknowledge that everyone will have eternal life—either in heaven with the Lord, or in the “unquenchable fire” with Satan?

III. 3:13-17 THE AFFIRMATION

Passage: Despite the initial resistance of John, the request by Jesus to be baptized is fulfilled with a response from heaven.

Pattern:

1. 3:13 **The request**

- A. the presence – the arrival of Jesus of Galilee to the Jordan River
- B. the purpose – the seeking of Jesus to be publicly baptized by John

2. 3:14-15 **The resistance**

- A. vs. 14a the reluctance – the initial response of hesitancy by John to the request of Jesus
- B. vs. 14b the reasoning – the expression of unworthiness by John (“I have need to be baptized by You”)
- C. vs. 15 the reassurance – the explanation by Jesus to John that it is a fulfillment of “all righteousness” (Stedman writes: “. . . declared his intention to meet the righteous demands of God by himself undertaking to pay the debts of men. So the baptism was clearly an act of identification”.)

3. 3:16-17 **The response**

- A. vs. 16 of the Holy Spirit – the opening of heaven with the descent of the Holy Spirit as a dove, which rests on Jesus following His baptism
- B. vs. 17 of the Father – the voice from heaven which says, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased” (This is a revelation of the Trinity—the Son, the Holy Spirit, and the Father)

Points to Emphasize:

1. 3:13 *Then* is another one of those important words, which seems like an ordinary connector, but Matthew uses it here to announce the timing of an important event—the coming of Jesus. We are told where He is coming from—Galilee; where his destination is—the River Jordan; and the timing of His coming—the next day (John 1:29a). After spending thirty years in relative obscurity as a carpenter in Nazareth of Galilee, Jesus comes to John, not for repentance, but in identification and confirmation of his ministry. The words of John: “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29b) ***We, too, are called to acknowledge the Lord Jesus as the One who voluntarily sacrificed His own life to cleanse us from sin.***
2. 3:14-15 Can you imagine the thoughts of John as he saw his own relative—perhaps a cousin—whom he had not previously acknowledged as the Messiah, coming for baptism? The reluctance of John to obey the request of Jesus is a sign of his own humility and unworthiness. “After me comes a Man who has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.” (John 1:30) Baptism is two-fold: first a person identifies with Jesus in a personal relationship which is sealed by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit; then a person takes a step of obedience in identifying with a local church through “believers’ baptism”. ***The question is paramount: do you have a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus through the indwelling Holy Spirit, and have you publicly identified yourself with a local church—now is the time!***
3. 3:16-17 The divinity of Christ is strongly affirmed at His baptism when He is anointed by the Holy Spirit for His public ministry and identified and commended by God the Father. The prayer of Jesus (“. . . while He was praying”—Luke 3:21) during His baptism, results in the “opening of heaven” as evidenced by the dove, representing the Holy Spirit, and the voice of the Father. John’s response: “I myself have seen, and have testified that this is the Son of God” (John 1:34). ***We must adopt the words of John the Baptist as our own: Jesus “is the Son of God.”***

Personal Applications:

1. 3:13 Do I acknowledge that a “baptism of repentance” indicates a desire for spiritual cleansing? Have I taken the step of faith which I must take for salvation? Do I recognize the perfect timing of God’s plan for *my* life?
2. 3:14-15 Do I pray that I will never interfere with the “fulfillment of righteousness” in another person’s life? Do I take my doubts to the Lord Jesus in prayer, while awaiting His answer? Do I pray that God will wipe away any vestiges of “false” humility in obeying His command?
3. 3:16-17 Do I take the time to reflect on the power which is available to me through prayer? Do I realize that heavenly access occurred not when Jesus intended to pray, or when He positioned Himself for prayer, but “while He was praying”? Am I careful to act on God’s timing, neither running ahead nor failing to respond? Do I thank God for the example of John, who broke through the darkness of spiritual silence, and calls us to share the words of the Father: “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.”?

Parting Thought:

Josh McDowell relates the true experience of an executive who was sharing with him the secrets of his interviewing process. He begins by making the person being interviewed very comfortable in such ways as discussing football or his family. “Then, when I think I’ve got him relaxed, I lean over, look him square in the eye and say, ‘What’s your purpose in life?’ Most people, even high-level executives, fall apart at the question. He recalls one exception who responded quickly to the question: “To go to heaven and take as many people with me as I can”.

This attitude emulates that of John the Baptist: “I must decrease, He must increase.” (John 3:30).

Prayer of Commitment:

Dear Father,

Thank You for the example of John the Baptist, who spoke the truth, who recognized the Lord Jesus, and who acknowledged his own unworthiness. Please refocus my purpose on decreasing the hold of the world on my life, and increasing the power of Jesus through obedience.

In the precious Name of our Lord,

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Matthew 5-7

Background: Following the lineage, the ministry of John the Baptist, the baptism and temptation, the beginning of the public ministry in Galilee, Matthew records the message of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. The emphasis of His message is on changed hearts instead of superficial acts. Luke, in 6:17-49, includes a similar sermon, which may be his account of the theme of Jesus' messages given at different times.

Today's Lesson: Jesus presents spiritual guidelines for abundant living in the Sermon on the Mount, including the process, the principles, and the practice.

I. 5:1-16 THE PROCESS

II. 5:17-48 THE PRINCIPLES

III. 6:1-7:29 THE PRACTICE

Introduction: A friend sent me the following story entitled *Attitudes*:

There once was a woman who woke up one morning, looked in the mirror, and noticed she had only three hairs on her head. "Well," she said, "*I think I'll braid my hair today*" So she did and had a wonderful day.

The next day she woke up, looked in the mirror and saw that she had only two hairs on her head. "H-M-M," she said. "*I think I'll part my hair down the middle today.*" So she did and she had a grand day.

The next day she woke up, looked in the mirror and noticed that she had only one hair on her head. "Well," she said, "*today I'm going to wear my hair in a ponytail.*" So she did and she had a fun, fun day.

The next day she woke up, looked in the mirror and noticed that there wasn't a single hair on her head. "Yea!" she exclaimed, "*I don't have to fix my hair today!*"

ATTITUDE IS EVERYTHING!

In our lesson today, Jesus presents the spiritual "be-attitudes" to believers for everyday living, including the process, the principles, and the practice.

I. 5:1-16 THE PREPARATION

Passage: Jesus describes the process for a spiritually-enriched life as the emptying of self, the equipping with spiritual attributes, and the evidencing of a new life to a tasteless and darkened world.

Pattern:

1. 5:1-6 *by emptying*

A. vs. 1-3 of pride – the preaching by Jesus to the disciples concerning the requirement of setting aside "self" through humility, resulting in an inheritance in the presence of God ("blessed" means happy; "poor in spirit" indicates a genuine awareness of unworthiness)

B. vs. 4 of indifference – the promise of comfort for those who evidence repentance, which comes from a broken and contrite heart over sin ("those who mourn")

C. vs. 5-6 of stubbornness – the promises of victory in the world and spiritual satisfaction for those who set aside self-control for God's control ("the meek") and earnestly "hunger and thirst" for a right relationship with Him

2. 5:7-12 *by equipping*

A. vs. 7-9 with virtues

a. vs. 7 of mercy – the happiness which ensues from evidencing empathy for another person, resulting in reciprocal mercy (“the merciful”)

b. vs. 8 of purity – the happiness which ensues from a sincere heart that seeks to please God and not man, resulting in the promise that “they shall see God” (an assurance of eternal life with the Father—“the pure in heart”)

c. vs. 9 of peace – the happiness which ensues from a spirit of loving cooperation, resulting in the promise that “they shall be called sons of God” (an assurance of an eternal relationship)

B. vs. 10 with victory – the promise of a future inheritance in the presence of God (“the kingdom of heaven”) for those who make righteousness a priority, in spite of spiritual persecution

C. vs. 11-12 with value – the call for rejoicing and gladness in expectation of a great reward for those who, like the prophets of old, suffer insults, persecution, and injustice because of their commitment to Jesus Christ

3. 5:13-16 *by evidencing*

A. vs. 13 as “salt of the earth” – the contrast between those people who are as spiritually worthless as tasteless salt, and those who carry out their responsibility to be a purifier, a preservative, and a seasoning to an evil, temporal, and undesirable world

B. vs. 14-15 as “light of the world” – the call for believers to be spiritual light in a darkened world, including the reminder that, like a city which is situated prominently on a hill, the light will be evident to everyone

C. vs. 16 as a “lamp on the lampstand” – the command by Jesus for believers to evidence “light” by displaying their Christian testimony (“good works”) in such a way that will bring glory to the Father in heaven

Points to Emphasize:

1. 5:1-6 It is about attitudes. While the “joy” of the woman may be a little “far-fetched”—okay silly—the lesson is not. God created us to experience joy—in fact, it is a fruit of the Spirit (see Galatians 5:22-23), which is listed as the second evidence of a Spirit-filled life (following love, and preceding peace). His teachings are directed toward believers—those who have already experienced salvation and are ready to take the next step of obedience. It is a blueprint for Christian living in a Christ-less world. It is about spiritual emptying and spiritual filling (read Galatians 2:20). It is about Christ’s purpose: “I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10).

The first three “Blessed’s” involve “emptying”, or exchanging the old nature for a new nature in Christ. This preparation for Christian joy involves a replacing of pride with humility. The “poor in spirit” are those who are aware of their own unworthiness. The reward which awaits them is this: “With less of you, there is more of God and his rule”. (MSG) The next “be-attitude” involves a spiritual grieving over the presence of sin in one’s life. The reward is the blessed comfort of the Lord God, who forgives the contrite of heart. The next exchange occurs when we trade our stubbornness or self-control for God’s control. The word is “meek”—not weakness, but Spirit-controlled strength. The emptying of pride, indifference, and stubbornness results in a spiritual hunger for the only One who can satisfy. ***This emptying process is often painful as it leads to***

brokenness, but the Lord's promise is real to us today: "He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds." (Psalm 147:3).

2. 5:7-12 The proof of the emptying process is a teachable spirit. Jesus, in the equipping or the "filling" process, emphasizes mercy, purity, and peace. While the first three beatitudes deal with man's relationship to God, these beatitudes deal with interpersonal relationships. Because we have received mercy from God, we can evidence mercy to others. Because our goal is the purity of God, we can evidence purity to others. Because the process brings cooperation ("peacemaker"), instead of contentiousness to others, we can bring peace to those around us. The last one is difficult to "be happy" because it involves persecution. It is not persecution as a result of consequences for bad choices, but persecution as a result of godly choices. ***The rewards for joyous enduring are the promises of eternal victory, heavenly rewards, and identification with the spiritual giants of old.***

3. 5:13-16 Jesus, the Master Teacher, now uses three word pictures to emphasize His standards—salt, light, and a lamp. He reminds the disciples (that is, the learners) that *salt* without flavor is worthless. In the same way, Christians who lose their witness are worthless in God's kingdom. Believers are called to evidence the *light* of the One who said, "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12). Our lives are called *lamps* which have a particular use—to be vessels from which the light can be evidenced. If a lamp is functional, it cannot be hidden. Just as the ingestion of salt must be balanced for good physical health, the light from a lamp must be balanced—not so much to cause a glare, but just enough to bring good vision. The lamp of our Christian testimony must be apparent without being obtrusive. ***The difference in genuine Christian witnessing often lies in the attitude of the person; that is, does the testimony draw attention to the individual or does it glorify God?***

Practical Applications:

1. 5:1-6 Do I acknowledge that my Christian effectiveness begins with humility? Do I realize how much my sins hurt the Father? Do I acknowledge that a humble spirit evidences itself in a gentle spirit to others—not weak, but a God-sized confidence of who I am "in Him"? Am I hungry and thirsty for the things of the world, or for righteousness?
2. 5:7-12 Do I recognize the law of reciprocity in the "filling" process? Because of Christ's mercy to me through forgiveness, do I evidence the same mercy to others? Is the presence of God in my life an example of being "pure in heart"? Do I recognize the high calling of being a peace-maker? Do I remember that the thought is not *if* I am persecuted, but *when* I am persecuted (read James 1:2-4)?
3. 5:13-16 Do I remember that salt must come in contact with something else for it to be effective? Am I willing to allow my "salt" to touch lives which desperately need cleansing for salvation, preserving for eternity, and enhanced for abundant living? Do I accept that the closer I am to Jesus through following the standards for Godly living, the more vibrant my light will shine? Do I refuse to allow pride, indifference or stubbornness dim the light of His presence in my life? Do I waste my time on activities, words, or attitudes which hide my lamp under a barrel, or is my lamp prominently displayed on the lampstand where it attracts hurting people to the healing power of Jesus? Does my life reflect a blessed life which chooses to be joyful even in unhappy circumstances?

II. 5:17-48 THE PRINCIPLES

Passage: Jesus teaches on the principles of righteousness, of right relationships, and of right attitudes.

Pattern:

1. 5:17-20 **of righteousness**

A. vs. 17-18 the purpose – the assurance by Jesus that His coming is in complete fulfillment of the Mosaic Law and prophecy, and not a denouncement of it

B. vs. 19 the promise – the definition of kingdom greatness which is obedience to and the exemplifying of God’s laws, in contrast to kingdom “least-ness” which is disobedience and the wrong influencing of others in His laws

C. vs. 20 the peril – the strong emphasis on sincere obedience to the law of righteousness, which must exceed the hypocritical lip-service of the Pharisees and Sadducees

2. 5:21-32 **of right relationships**

A. vs. 21-22 in families – the teaching concerning the complete fulfillment of the Old Testament commandment against murder, which is the avoidance of anger, insults, and slander that render us spiritually guilty before God’s court

B. vs. 23-26 through forgiveness – the teachings concerning reconciling with a fellow believer before presenting an offering, and settling disputes before experiencing the possibility of imprisonment and full payment of settlement

C. vs. 27-32 by faithfulness – the teaching concerning the complete fulfillment of the Old Testament commandment against adultery, which is to avoid lust; thereby denying access to sin in our lives and avoiding divorce (except for unfaithfulness)

3. 5:33-48 **of right attitudes**

A. vs. 33-37 concerning truth – the teaching concerning the imperative of avoidance of any kind of oath to bolster the veracity of words with the admonition: “Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.” (NEV)

B. vs. 38-42 concerning graciousness – the teaching concerning the complete fulfillment of the Old Testament commandment about justice, which is to include non-resistance, unselfishness, kindness, and generosity

C. vs. 43-48 concerning love – the teaching about the complete fulfillment of the Old Testament commandment about love, which includes loving and praying for enemies (unlike the “Gentiles”) and spiritual maturity through godliness

Points to Emphasize:

1. 5:17-20 These teachings of Jesus are given to enhance the spiritual quality of the believer. To say the least, His life is contradictory according to worldly standards: those who seek worldly greatness (wealth, acclaim, prestige) will be the least in heaven; those who humble themselves as obedient servants of God will be rewarded with heavenly greatness. “If anyone serves Me, he must follow Me; and where I am there My servant will be also; if anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him” (John 12:26). **Every promise, prophecy, and commandment in the Old Testament is completely fulfilled in the life of our Lord.**

2. 5:21-32 Jesus now teaches about particular situations concerning inter-personal relationships. The commandment against murder must also include the avoidance of anger and expressions of hatred. The teaching concerning offerings must be accompanied by reconciliation with anyone who “has something against you.” The teaching concerning the preserving of marriages includes the avoidance of lust (“ . . . everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” NEV) The consequence of marital corruption is divorce. The teachings of Jesus always protect the weaker person; that is, the wife from a husband who uses divorce papers “as a cover for selfishness and whim . . .” (MSG). **Jesus calls us to change from the inside out as He told Nicodemus “You must be born again” (read John 3:5-8).**

3. 5:33-48 The sermon by Jesus now proceeds from right actions to right attitudes—words reflecting inner truth, a spirit of graciousness, a heart of love. Our words must be sincere and without deception or manipulation. When a person has to verify his words with an oath, “anything beyond these is of evil.” His teaching? *Yes or no* will suffice. What about conflict resolution? Jesus even goes a step further than His teaching in vs. 23-26. We are not only to be reconciled, to forgive, but also to give unselfishly—even to those who mistreat us. This teaching supersedes an “eye-for-an-eye”. It emphasizes “two”—two slaps instead of one, two shirts instead of one; two miles instead of one; and two open “hands” instead of one. The final teaching incorporates the previous principles into one word—LOVE. His commandment is revolutionary—“love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” ***A heart filled with the love of Christ is a heart which reflects the principles of righteousness, peace, forgiveness, purity, honesty, and unselfishness—abundant living.***

Personal Applications:

1. 5:17-20 Do I accept Jesus as the complete fulfillment of the Old Testament? Do I praise God that I live in post-Calvary days with the completed word of God? Do I ask God daily to purify my inner being so that my outward actions will reflect His righteousness?
2. 5:21-32 When I have angry thoughts and deep-seated bitterness against another, do I realize that my offerings are not acceptable? Do I admit that words can “kill”? Is my goal to maintain friendships and not to win court cases? Do I reflect on the injustice which Christ endured for my sake when I feel unfairly treated? Do I strive to keep my family life pure by remembering that the eye is the window to the soul (read Luke 11:34-36)?
3. 5:33-48 Do I avoid placing myself in situations where I have to continually defend my words? Is there a person in my life right now with whom I need to show merciful forgiveness and gracious unselfishness? Will I ask God to give me a “two-mile” heart of love for both my enemies and my friends? Will I pray that God will so overflow my heart with His love that I will love the angry, the despised, and the unlovely with the perfect love of Jesus?

III. 6:1-7:29 THE PRACTICE

Passage: Jesus presents godly guidance for daily living, including decisions, discernment, and dedication.

Pattern:

1. 6:1-18 ***The decisions***

- A. vs. 1-4 in giving – the emphasis by Jesus on giving which is to be seen only by God
- B. vs. 5-15 in praying – the presentation of the pattern for personal prayer, which includes beginning and ending with praise, as well as petitions, pardon, and protection together with a promise of divine forgiveness which results in a forgiving spirit toward others
- C. vs. 16-18 in fasting – the emphasis on private fasting (with no overt attention-drawing displays), which will be rewarded by God “who sees what is done in secret”

2. 6:19-7:12 ***The discernment***

- A. 19-34 in priorities – the teaching concerning the imperative of serving only God and not temporal possessions, of trusting God to provide life’s necessities as He does in nature, and of seeking God and His righteousness, which will result in His daily provisions with the “tomorrows” taking care of themselves

B. 7:1-5 in personal relationships – the teaching for people to avoid critical, self-righteous attitudes by removing their own sin (“log”) before accusing others of the “speck” in their eyes

C. vs. 6-12 in personal decisions – the teachings concerning the avoidance of giving precious truths to those who despise God, concerning the availability of the Father to answer those who seek Him in prayer, and concerning the reciprocity rule which is to love

3. 7:13-29 **The dedication**

A. vs. 13-20 to the “narrow gate” – the teaching for believers to avoid false prophets (“you will know them by their fruits”) by traveling the “less-traveled” road which leads to eternal life

B. vs. 21-23 to true profession – the emphasis on obedience and spiritually-fruitful living as the entry to heaven, in contrast to the empty professions and unfruitfulness of insincere people who will be divinely rejected

C. vs. 24-29 to the solid foundation – the amazement of the crowds who are impressed with the authoritative teachings of Jesus as He concludes with the comparison of the wise builder, who builds his house on the rock, and the foolish man whose house built on sand doesn’t withstand the storms

Points to Emphasize:

1. 6:1-18 The teachings of our Lord stand in stark contrast to man’s plan for achievement. The key difference is attitude. Are we giving, praying, or fasting to look good for men, or to glorify God? Some thoughts on *giving*: God is much more interested in our heart condition than in the amount of the gift (see 2 Corinthians 9:7). On *praying*: The place for praying involves an “inner room” where God can speak to us “in a still small voice.” Our Father knows our needs before we ever voice them, but humbly and sincerely presenting our petitions in prayer activates our faith and removes our self-sufficiency. Divine forgiveness gives us the capacity to forgive others and is an indication of our fellowship with the Father. On *fasting*: Fasting is the removal of anything, including food, which becomes a distraction to pure worship of the Father. It should never be used as an outward indication of spirituality, but only to draw closer to God through intense prayer. **Whereas man’s activities are centered on personal agendas, intellectual credentials, and social-ladder climbing, the teachings of Jesus focus solely on honoring God.**
2. 6:19-7:12 When we make godly decisions, God gives us divine discernment (see James 1:5). Jesus, in this passage, stresses priorities—the priority of serving God, instead of wealth; of trusting God instead of worrying; and of seeking God and His righteousness, instead of worldly possessions. Discernment is so vital in maintaining personal relationships. Healthy relationships encourage, don’t criticize; gently restore, don’t tear down; and complement, don’t compare. Discernment, which is available by “asking, seeking, and knocking”, must be used in deciding who is ready to receive God’s truths. We must *ask* in prayer, *seek* God’s will with an open heart, and *knock* while listening for Him to answer. **There is law of reciprocity which is evident in our lives—judge not and you will not be judged; forgive and you will be forgiven; give and it will be given to you (see Luke 6:37-38).**
3. 7:13-29 The teaching method of Jesus in contrasting two opposites is highly effective, as it confronts believers with choices—two ways, two trees, two professions, two builders (from *The Ryrie Study Bible*). Jesus says there is one way to eternal life—the narrow gate—and not many will enter. The final test centers on the spiritual fruitfulness of the person. Many people will panic on Judgment Day when the Lord opens the book “according to their deeds”

(Revelation 20:12). The desperation of the “broad way group” will result in many plea-bargain appeals. To those whose professions are superficial, the Judge will answer: “I never knew you; depart from Me.” To those whose professions are sincere as evidenced by their obedience, the Lord will say, “Well done, good and faithful servant . . . enter into the joy of your Master” (see Matthew 25:23). The difference in the ability of the houses to withstand the storms of life lies in the foundation—the Rock of Jesus Christ or the shifting sands of the world system. ***We build our eternal futures on the Person of Jesus Christ when we hear “these words of Mine and act on them.”***

Personal Applications:

1. 6:1-18 Am I missing the heavenly rewards of peace and satisfaction because I insist on publicizing my spirituality? Do I ask the Lord, like the disciples did, to teach me to pray (see Luke 11:1)? Do I set aside a specific time and place to pray on a consistent basis? Do I remember that an unforgiving spirit toward my fellowman adversely affects my fellowship with the Father? Do I wear my “sacrificial” attitudes like medals on a soldier’s uniform? Do I realize that if I am fasting in the right spirit, it must be coupled with prayer? Do I use my self-denials as spiritual “sit-ins” to draw attention to myself?
2. 6:19-7:12 What do my treasures indicate about my spiritual heart condition? Is my life characterized by frustration because of futilely trying to serve two masters? Do I realize the degree of spiritual paralysis which anxiety causes? Do I remember that if I give God the lordship in every area of my life, He will provide for my needs? Is a critical spirit robbing me of fellowship both with God and with my fellowman? What beam or log needs to be removed from my eye—an unloving spirit, legalism, self-righteousness? Do I remember that an act of kindness on my part to a person who rejects Christ can sometimes soften the hardest of hearts? Do I acknowledge that the basis for Golden Rule living lies in the overflow of a heart which loves God “with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind”?
3. 7:13-29 Do I seem to be going along with the crowd on “broad way”; or do I find myself on a rather lonely road? Will I pray for discernment in recognizing the false prophets? Do I realize that being wise or foolish, according to God, depends on my obedience to His word? Do I acknowledge that just as it takes time to build a house on a rock, it takes time and commitment to build my life on the person of Jesus Christ? Do I accept that while rain, floods, and wind affect everyone, only those lives which are securely anchored to Christ will survive? Am I experiencing the joy of abundant life which comes through obedience to godly attitudes as evidenced and taught by our Lord?

Parting Thought:

Rick Warren in *The Purpose Driven Life* writes: “Christianity is not a religion or a philosophy, but a relationship and a lifestyle. The core of that lifestyle is thinking of others, as Jesus did, instead of ourselves. . . Thinking of others is the heart of Christlikeness and the best evidence of spiritual growth. This kind of thinking is unnatural, counter-cultural, rare, and difficult. Fortunately we have help: ‘God has given us his Spirit. That’s why we don’t think the same way that the people of this world think’ ” (1 Corinthians 2:12a).

Prayer of Commitment:

Dear Father,

Thank You for Your “impossible” teachings in an unforgiving world. Remind me gently that abundant life is a process—a process of spiritual growth which comes from relying on the power of the indwelling presence of Your Son through the Holy Spirit.

In the Name of the One who is abundant life,

WHO IS JESUS? Matthew 16:13-20

Background: Following the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew records certain events in the ministry of Jesus, including His healing power over hurting people, His selection and commissioning of the apostles, His teaching through parables, the feeding of the masses, and the increasing confrontations with the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Despite being eye-witnesses to such miracles of Jesus, the apostles ask: “What kind of a man is this, that even the winds and the seas obey Him” (Matthew 8:27)? It is only when Jesus asks the question: “But who do you say that I am?” that Peter answers: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

Today’s Lesson: Jesus commends Peter for the supernatural confession of His identity, which is followed by His confirmation of the disciples’ authority.

I. 16:13-16 THE CONFESSION

II. 16:17-18 THE COMMENDATION

III. 16:19-20 THE CONFIRMATION

Introduction: In *Signs of the Times*, the following translation of parts of a letter, which was sent to the Roman Senate during the period of the Roman Empire, appeared:

“There appeared in these days a man of great virtue, named Jesus Christ, who is yet among us; of the Gentiles accepted for a prophet of truth; but his disciples called him the son of God. He raiseth the dead and cureth all manner of disease. A man of stature somewhat tall and comely, with a very reverend countenance, such as the beholder must both love and fear.

His hair the color of a chestnut full ripe, plain to the ears, whence downward it is more orient, ruling and waving about his shoulders. In the midst of his forehead is a stream of partition of his hair, after the manner of the Nazarites; forehead plain and very delicate; his face without spot or wrinkle, beautiful, with a lovely red; his nose and mouth so forked as nothing can be represented; his beard thick, in color like his hair, not over long; his look innocent and mature; his eyes gray, quick, and clear.

In reproving, he is terrible; in admonishing, courteous and fair-spoken; pleasant in conversation, mixed with gravity. It cannot be remembered that any have seen him laugh, but many have seen him weep; in proportion of body most excellent; his hands and arms delectable to behold, in speaking, very temperate, modest and wise; a man of singular beauty, surpassing the children of men.”

In our lesson today, Peter answers the question, “Who is Jesus?” which includes His confession, the Lord’s commendation, and the confirmation of the disciples’ authority.

I. 16:13-16 THE CONFESSION

Passage: Peter, with certainty, pronounces Jesus as the Messiah, among different choices, and the personal concern of the Master.

Pattern:

1. 16:13-14 *The choices*

A. vs. 13a the arrival – the positioning of the disciples and Jesus in Caesarea Philippi (north of the Sea of Galilee)

B. vs. 13b the asking – the questioning of disciples by Jesus concerning the public’s perception of Him

- C. vs. 14 the answer – the possibilities, as stated by the disciples, as John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or other prophets
- 2. 16:15 **The concern**
 - A. the inquiry – the direct questioning by Jesus to His disciples
 - B. the identity – the questioning by Jesus concerning the disciples’ personal view of His position
- 3. 16:16 **The certainty**
 - A. the pronouncement – the answer to the questioning of Jesus by Peter
 - B. the Person – the response by Peter that Jesus is “the Christ, the Son of the living God”

Points to Emphasize:

1. 16:13-14 There is so much more than the color of His hair, His height, the thickness of His beard, or even His demeanor. The disciples were quite aware of His appearance and His charisma, especially His authoritative leadership. But there is still more: “Who is Jesus?” Luke sets the stage for Peter’s confession with the added information that, following the feeding of the five-thousand, Jesus was “praying alone” (9:18). During this time in His ministry, Jesus is, no doubt, anticipating His own death. How can He prepare His disciples for what is to come? First, they must know that He is more than just a man with supernatural powers—more than a man for whom they have given up everything to follow him; more than one who “multiplies” fish and bread, who calms the turbulent seas, who attracts crowds wherever he goes. But Jesus has to know. He begins by asking a rather generic question: “What are people saying about Me? Who am I to them?” The disciples are familiar with the comments of the people. Matthew, Mark, and Luke name John the Baptist and Elijah in particular. Only Matthew adds Jeremiah. Then, general comments follow: “one of the prophets.” Luke adds the possibility “that one of the prophets of old has risen again.” Even John the Baptist ponders His identity: “Are You the Expected One?” (Matthew 11:3). Herod, in Luke 9:7-9, also wonders about His identity because of the rumors, especially about John the Baptist (remember that Herod had beheaded John). Luke makes an additional comment about Herod: “And he kept trying to see Him.” ***Even two-thousand years later, people are still curious about the identity of the One who said, “I am the Son of God” (Matthew 27:43b).***
2. 16:15 And then the question: “But who do you say that I am?” It is the question of the ages—no one can escape it. Paul, in Romans 1:19-20 makes it clear that God reveals Himself through conscience (“from within them”) and through creation (“clearly seen”), and of course, through His ultimate revelation, Jesus Christ, our Lord. To reflect what others say is easy, for there is no commitment. To answer the question from a personal viewpoint involves soul-searching. There are two choices: Yes or no. Yes, Jesus is my personal Savior. No, I reject Him as my personal Savior. ***The most important question we will ever answer is: “Who is Christ to me?”***
3. 16:16 Oh, how we love Peter—the one who speaks and then thinks, the one with bravado, the one who is never at a loss for words. But this time his answer is divinely inspired: “You are the Christ.” Not just the One who controls nature, who touches the leper with His healing hand, who causes the nets to be full, but as Matthew adds: “the Son of the living God.” ***The pattern of faith moves from who Jesus is to others, to who He is to the individual.***

Personal Applications:

1. 16:13-14 Do I gain valuable insight on personal evangelism from Jesus? Do I recognize that He moves from the known to the unknown? In spiritually reaching out to others, am I careful to avoid putting them on the defensive? Do I realize what an enigma Jesus is to unbelievers?

2. 16:15 What is my answer to the question of Jesus? Is He more than a prophet, a good man, a miracle worker? Am I praying for an opportunity to ask someone the question: “Who is Jesus to you?”
3. 16:16 Have I confessed Jesus as my Lord and Savior, remembering Paul’s words in Romans 10:9 that “. . . if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord and Savior and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved”? Do I believe that Jesus is the Son of the living God who lives in my heart through the Holy Spirit? If not, why not today?

II. 16:17-18 THE COMMENDATION

Passage: Jesus commends Peter for His confession by identifying the source, the significance, and the security.

Pattern:

1. 16:17 *The source*

- A. the blessing – the approving words by Jesus to “Simon Barjona” (because of his confession of faith)
- B. the benefit – the absence of the influence of outside sources (“flesh and blood”) on the revelation
- C. the basis – the identifying by Jesus as a divinely-revealed confession of faith by “My Father who is in heaven”

2. 16:18a *The significance*

- A. of the confession – the changing of the apostle’s name from Simon Barjona to Peter (which means rock or Petros in Greek)
- B. of the profession – the use of the word, rock (or petra in the divine revelation to Peter), as the basis for the future kingdom
- C. of the establishing – the future reference by Jesus to the establishment of “My church”

3. 16:18b *The security*

- A. the suppression – the statement by Jesus of the severity of the opposition (“the gates of Hades” or death)
- B. the sustaining – the assuring words of Jesus that not even death (His own death) will interfere with the progress of His church

Points to Emphasize:

1. 16:17 God has indeed blessed His work through the years by sustaining His kingdom. As Paul says in Ephesians 1:4: “. . . He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him.” For this, we are blessed with “every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ” (Ephesians 1:3). Jesus makes the distinction between superficial confessions (“flesh and blood”) and the divine revelation by “My Father who is in heaven.” ***We must not only accept this blessing from God, but also share His message of salvation with others.***
2. 16:18a Following the supernatural revelation by “Simon Barjona” that Jesus is indeed the Messiah, he is referred to as Peter. This “ordaining” by the Lord is an indication of the potential which Jesus sees for Peter’s future leadership in the church. Warren Wiersbe, in his commentary *Be Loyal* writes: “Nowhere in this passage, or in the rest of the New Testament, are we told that Peter or his successors had any special position or privilege in the church. Certainly Peter in his two epistles claimed to be nothing more than an apostle (1 Peter 1:1), an elder (5:1), and a servant of Jesus Christ (2 Peter 1:1).”

We may not be a “rock” (petros) like Peter, but we are called to be “living stones” (1 Peter 2:5) which “are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit” (Ephesians 2:22).

3. 16:18b Matthew emphasizes the strength and power of two opposing forces. “My church” and “the gates of Hades.” Clearly, the victor is the church over the ultimate enemy—death. Warren Wiersbe comments: “The city gate was to a Jew what city hall is to people in the Western world . . . ‘The gates of Hades’ then would symbolize the organized power of death and Satan.’ ” ***Praise be to God that “in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us” (Romans 8:37).***

Practical Applications:

1. 16:17 Am I experiencing the blessing which Peter received by believing that Jesus is God’s Son? Do I acknowledge that there is no “self”-help book which tells me how to accept Jesus as my Savior? Do I accept that the Bible is the living word of God (Hebrews 4:12) and reveals to me through the Holy Spirit how to make a profession of faith?
2. 16:18a Do I receive assurance that Jesus knows me by name? Do I also receive assurance that Jesus sees my potential for service in His kingdom? Am I reminded in this passage that Jesus is the foundation of the church and that I, along with other believers, am part of His structure—the church?
3. 16:18b Do I recognize that, in my own strength, I am no match against the forces of evil? Am I aware that, as a believer, Satan is trying to “overpower” my daily trust in the Lord? Do I take comfort in the words of Paul: “. . . greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world” (1 John 4:4)?

III. 16:19-20 THE CONFIRMATION

Passage: Jesus confirms the authority of Peter in affirming the principle of “binding and loosing”, with the admonition to keep quiet about His true identity.

Pattern:

1. 16:19a ***The authority***
 - A. to accept – the promise by Jesus of a “gift” to Peter
 - B. to open – the verification by Jesus of His presentation of “the keys of the kingdom of heaven” to Peter, who will have the authority to “open the doors” of Christianity (first to the Jews on the Day of Pentecost and then to the Gentiles in the house of Cornelius)
2. 16:19b ***The affirmation***
 - A. to “bind” – the granting of authority by Jesus to Peter to announce what has already been decided in heaven
 - B. to “loose” – the granting of authority by Jesus for Peter to announce what has already been decided in heaven
3. 16:20 ***The admonition***
 - A. to the apostles – the source of the explicit warning, who is Jesus
 - B. to keep silent – the words of warning for the apostles to tell no one of His identity as the Christ

Points to Emphasize:

1. 16:19a After announcing the still-future establishment of His church, Jesus now gives directions to the apostles who will be the leaders. The promise of a “gift” (“I will give you”) is announced—

“the keys to the kingdom of heaven.” These keys were initially given to Peter, to the apostles, and subsequently to others who, through their witness, would (and will) bring the lost into the kingdom through Christ. Jesus is handing the “keys” to each of us in the Great Commission (see Matthew 28:18-20). The keys are marked “go”, “tell”, and “teach.” ***The question remains: What am I doing with the keys for which I am responsible?***

2. 16:19b *The Ryrie Bible* again cautions us: “Heaven, not the apostles, initiates all binding and losing, whereas the apostles announce these things.” Think of how many people are “bound” by their sins and are yearning to be free. ***Regardless of the exact interpretation, we know, as believers, that we are to experience kingdom living here on earth and to share the way to salvation for the lost.***
3. 16:20 Why would Jesus warn the apostles to keep His identity secret? In His own words (John 7:6), “My time is not yet here.” So, He is preparing His disciples for what is to come as He makes the first prediction of His death in 16:21. ***This lesson affirms that Jesus Christ is the Rock, the kingdom of heaven, and the key, and it is my special privilege to introduce Him as the way to supernatural living to my lost friends and loved ones.***

Practical Applications:

1. 16:19a What am I doing with “the keys to the kingdom”? Am I sensitive to opportunities to share the gospel message? Do I praise God for His precious gift—my salvation—and for the stewardship of that gift?
2. 16:19b Do I seek to open doors (“loose”) with my testimony which have previously been closed through unbelief? Do I remember that I cannot “open” the door of another’s heart without their personal confession that Jesus is God’s Son, which is a revelation from the Lord? Do I realize the freedom which comes in my own life as I “bind” man’s traditions and “loose” the truths found in Christ?
3. 16:20 When sharing the gospel, do I always pray first for an opportunity? Do I realize the negative response which can result from not waiting on the Lord’s timing? What is my personal testimony to those who ask: “Who is Christ to you”?

Parting Thought:

In the book *He Chose the Nails*, Max Lucado lists the following data concerning the movement called Christianity:

“The belief of French philosopher Voltaire. The Bible and Christianity would pass within a hundred years. He died in 1778. The movement continues.

The pronouncement of Friedrich Nietzsche in 1882. “God is dead.” The dawn of science, he believed, would be the doom of faith. Science has dawned; the movement continues.

The way a Communist dictionary defined the Bible. “It is a collection of fantastic legends without any scientific support.” Communism is diminishing; the movement continues.

The discovery made by every person who has tried to bury the faith. The same as the one made by those who tried to bury its Founder: He won’t stay in the tomb.”

Praise God that the movement continues because “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

Prayer of Commitment:

Dear Father,

Thank You that, as a believer, I can answer the question that not only is Jesus the Son of the living God, but also that He is my Lord and Savior and that I will live with Him forever. Remind me of the certainty of Peter's confession when I am besieged by the doubts of the world. Enable me to do my part in assuring that "the movement continues."

In the Name of the Son,

THE LAST DAYS OF JESUS

Matthew 21-25

Background: The road map for Jesus and His followers reaches its destination in Jerusalem. In previous passages, He is clearly preparing them for His death (Matthew 17:22-23), including the witnessing by Peter, James, and John of the Transfiguration (17:1-14), teachings on civic responsibilities (17:24-27), the instruction on the handling of societal issues (19:1-26), and the need for humility in leadership (19:27-30). So much to learn; so much to teach; so little time. But His time has come. The “last days of Jesus” are here.

Today’s Lesson: Upon arriving in Jerusalem, Jesus displays His power, confronts the provocation of the religious leaders, and prophesies concerning the last days.

I. 21:1-22:14 THE POWER

II. 22:15-23:39 THE PROVOCATION

III. 24:1-25:46 THE PROPHECY

Introduction: Billy Graham in his book, *Nearing Home*, describes the time when he and his wife, Ruth, were planning to build their home. An engineer friend volunteered to survey the land to see if there would be any potential problems. “His tests revealed that under certain conditions the soil where we were planning to build might shift after a period of prolonged rain. At his recommendation the builder dug down through the surface soil to the bedrock and poured concrete pilings to make our house stable and secure. It proved to be the right solution.”

In our lesson today, the last days of Jesus in Jerusalem prove that He is our security, as He displays His power, confronts the provocation of the religious establishment, and prophesies of the future.

I. 21:1-22:14 THE POWER

Passage: Jesus evidences His power through the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem and through the cleansing of the Temple, despite examples of Israel’s rejection of Him.

Pattern:

1. 21:1-11 *The entry*

A. vs. 1-3 the preparation – the arrival in Bethpage (outside of Jerusalem) of the disciples and Jesus, who instructs them to bring a colt to Him with the explanation to the owner that “the Lord has need of them”

B. vs. 4-9 the prophecy – the response of “most of the crowd” with joyous celebration over the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem riding on a colt in fulfillment of prophecy (see Zechariah 9:9)

C. vs. 10-11 the perplexity – the curiosity of “all the city” of Jerusalem concerning the identity of this One, whom most conclude, is the prophet, Jesus from Nazareth

2. 21:12-27 *The evidence*

A. vs. 12-17 the focus – the emphasis on purity by Jesus, who cleanses the Temple of money changers and merchants, on prayerfulness by Jesus who proclaims His Father’s house as one of prayer, and on personal compassion by Jesus who heals the blind and the lame in the Temple before departing for Bethany (notice the jealous indignation of the religious leaders)

B. vs. 18-22 the fruitfulness – the teaching by Jesus to the curious disciples over His cursing of “a lone fig tree by the road,” emphasizing the necessity of faith, which is the catalyst for the power that not only can wither a fig tree, but also cast mountains into the sea (notice the promise of answered prayer through faith)

C. vs. 23-27 the faith – the refusal to answer the religious leaders concerning His authority by Jesus, who asks them whether John the Baptist’s authority is “from heaven or men”, which represents a dilemma to the accusers—either revealing their unbelief or inciting the crowds who consider him a prophet

3. 21:28-22:1-14 *The examples*

A. vs. 28-41 the requirements (of repentance) – the relating of parables concerning the obedience of the tax collectors and prostitutes as well as the disobedience of the self-righteous religious workers, and the decision of the absentee landowner to rent out his vineyard to more trustworthy vine-growers

B. vs. 42-46 the rebuke – the self-awareness of the religious leaders that Jesus is condemning them while commending those that will be spiritually fruitful (notice the use of the word *cornerstone* to describe Jesus, who becomes a stumbling block to the nation Israel)

C. 22:1-14 the righteousness – the teaching by Jesus through the parable of the wedding feast, which emphasizes sincerity instead of self-righteousness, faith instead of rejection, and commitment instead of superficiality (“For many are called, but few are chosen.”)

Points to Emphasize:

1. 21:1-11 The long journey to Jerusalem is over for Jesus. Now He must make preparations in fulfillment of prophecy for His final week. The careful way in which Jesus prepares His disciples for the anticipated question concerning the colt reassures us in times of indecision. The unquestioning obedience of the disciples, as well as the unidentified owner, is exemplary. Certainly, many people in the Triumphal Entry on Palm Sunday are sincere. Sadly, there are those who are quick to join, but quicker to desert the cause when personal expectations are not fulfilled. ***Many times in our lives we are too quick to “offer our coats” and “spread our branches” in the excitement of the moment; but when the “cross” becomes evident, our enthusiasm wanes.***
2. 21:12-27 The incidents in Jerusalem highlight the healing ministry and the teachings of Jesus on holiness in the Temple, fruitfulness outside the Temple, and the skepticism of those outside the kingdom. The Temple cleansing shows us that there is no room for greed in God’s house. The fig tree, which represents the nation Israel, reminds us that mere “foliage” or outward displays are not pleasing to God. The skeptics of the world always challenge the authority of Jesus, which negates faith--“the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). ***The source of all power in the kingdom reign is Jesus Christ; the access to that power is through faith; the communication of faith is through prayer; and the result is fruitfulness.***
3. 21:28-22:14 Jesus now turns to a favorite teaching method—the parable. The parables in this account emphasize the privileges which God extended to the nation Israel. The first parable involves the responses of two sons—the “sinners” (the tax collectors and the prostitutes) and the self-righteous. The second parable is recognizable by the religious leaders, for they are the ones who killed the prophets and will kill the Son. Old Testament scripture (Psalm 118:22) affirms that Jesus is the Chief Cornerstone—the most important part of our spiritual structure. He not only secures our foundation, but also keeps our “building projects”

spiritually aligned and moving upward. The third parable, which pictures an invitation to a wedding feast, emphasizes the imperative of acceptance instead of rejection. The lessons in these parables are: 1) if we are indifferent to God’s opportunity to be a part of His kingdom, He will extend it to someone else; 2) judgment awaits those who disobey God’s commandment: “Do not touch My anointed ones and do My prophets no harm” (1 Chronicles 16:22); and 3) physical presence without spiritual participation and commitment is not sufficient. ***Any nation or individual who does not submit to Jesus as the Chief Cornerstone faces exclusion from the kingdom and eternal condemnation.***

Practical Applications:

1. 21:1-11 Can my life be characterized as obedient to the Lord? Am I available and willing to do the “little things” for Jesus? What do I have that the Lord may need? Am I willing to return what is already His? Am I searching for a leader who will make my life easier, or for a Savior who will make my life new?
2. 21:12-27 What is my reason for going to the Lord’s house—to conduct business or to honor God through prayer and worship? Do I evidence the Lord’s compassion to those who are hurting? Does my jealous spirit prevent me from enjoying the spiritual freedom of others? Can my life be characterized as “a lone fig tree” with the outward appearance of life, but inner uselessness?
3. 21:28-22:14 Do I reflect on the depth of God’s love for me by sending His Son? What more can He do to convince me of His love? Do I remember that if I do not obey the Lord’s command to produce spiritual fruit, He will remove the opportunity and give it to someone who will? Do I reflect on the joy of experiencing a continual “wedding feast” in heaven? Am I guilty of “crashing” the wedding feast through self-sufficiency? Do I remember that the only wedding garment which is acceptable is the robe of righteousness (see also Revelation 19:8)?

II. 22:15-46 THE PROVOCATION

Passage: Jesus responds to the provocation of the religious leaders, who can be described as skeptical, superficial, and stubborn.

Pattern:

1. 22:15-33 *by the skeptics*

A. vs. 15-22 concerning a political question – the response of dual citizenship to the amazed and speechless Pharisees and Herodian questioners by Jesus, who is asked about the legality of paying taxes to Caesar (“render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s; and to God the things that are God’s”)

B. vs. 23-30 concerning a theological question – the answer by Jesus concerning the absence of marriage relationships in heaven to the Sadducees, who try to entrap Him with a question on which one of seven husbands in levirate marriage arrangements (see Deuteronomy 25:5-10) will claim the one wife in the resurrection (the Sadducees do not believe in an after-life)

C. vs. 31-33 concerning the resurrection – the amazement by the crowds in hearing the teaching from the Old Testament (Exodus 3:6) concerning the reality of the resurrection (“He is not the God of the dead but of the living.”)

2. 22:34-40 *by the superficial*

A. vs. 34-36 the testing – the questioning of Jesus by a Pharisee, who is a lawyer, concerning the “greatest commandment in the Law”

B. vs. 37-39 the testimony – the combining of the “foremost commandment” which is to love God completely (see Deuteronomy 6:5) and the second commandment which is to love one’s neighbor “as yourself” (see Leviticus 19:18)

C. vs. 40 the truth – the statement by Jesus that these two commandments summarize the entire Law and the Prophets

3. 22:41-46 **by the stubborn**

A. vs. 41-42 the response – the silence by the Pharisees to the question by Jesus concerning the relationship between “the son of David” and “the Christ, whose son is He?”

B. vs. 43-45 the reference- the citing of the Old Testament passage (Psalm 110:1) in which King David gives a spiritually-inspired answer of the human lineage of Christ to David (“the son of David”) and of the divine relationship of Christ to David, who calls Him “my Lord”

C. vs. 46 the reaction – the complete silence of the accusers, who refrain from asking Jesus any more questions

Points to Emphasize:

1. 22:15-33 Rebellion against Christ results in the unlikely uniting of enemies, such as the Pharisees, the Herodians and the Sadducees. Skeptics love to argue about religious doctrine. Their search is never for truth, but merely to engage in debate over details. Frequently, their premise is based on mistruths or half-truths and must be answered, if at all, by God’s word. ***We as believers must be faithful citizens of both earthly and heavenly kingdoms (see Romans 13:6-7) and avoid pettiness.***
2. 22:34-40 Probably, after much frustration, it is the Pharisees’ turn. One of their group, a lawyer, seeks to test Jesus’ knowledge of the Law. No better way than to ask Him to rank the Laws in order of importance. Jesus does better than that. He combines all the Law and the Prophets into two commandments: love God only, completely, with no exceptions; and equalize the love for one’s neighbor with one’s self. Sometimes, however, we find that we really do not like, much less, love ourselves very much. So Jesus teaches His disciples a “new commandment” in John 13:34: “. . . love one another, even as I have loved you” (read Philippians 2:3-4 for Paul’s description of unselfish love). ***We cannot truly love our neighbor until we love God.***
3. 22:41-46 Loving God completely and one’s neighbor unselfishly are impossible without acknowledging Christ as the Son of God. At some point, we are all confronted with the question—“Whose son is Christ?” If we believe solely in His earthly genealogy, then He is the son of David. In truth, Jesus is both the son of David from a human perspective and the Son of God from a divine perspective. ***The real search should be for a personal relationship with a living God, the God of Abraham and of Isaac, through acceptance of His Son, Jesus Christ.***

Practical Applications:

1. 22:15-33 Do I cloak my self-righteousness in outward words of truth with no inner beliefs? Am I a good citizen of my country? Am I a good steward of God’s blessings? Do I acknowledge the spiritual heritage I have in the Great “I AM” (see Galatians 3:29)?
2. 22:34-40 Am I guilty of “testing” God? Do I accept that loving God first makes it easier to love my neighbor? Do I really focus on loving the Lord in every area of my life—with my emotions, with my spiritual commitment, and as an act of my will?
3. 22:41-46 Who is Jesus to me? Is He more than just a prophet and a historical figure whose lineage dates back to King David? Is Jesus my Lord as He was to King David? Do I receive

assurance that right now Jesus is interceding on my behalf at the right hand of the Father (see Hebrews 7:25)?

Notes on Chapter 23:

In this chapter, Jesus directs His teachings toward the hypocrisy of the Jewish religious leaders. He characterizes servanthood as the requirement for kingdom greatness, with the reminder that self-exaltation will result in humbling, while humility will result in exaltation by God. He condemns the current generation of religious leaders, who are as guilty as their predecessors who killed the prophets. Despite His harsh judgments, the tender compassion of Jesus is evidenced toward the Jewish nation even if they are unwilling to respond. Their rejection results in the spiritual desolation of their “house” and the removal of His presence from their nation until the Second Coming. Jesus again reminds them, as He does us today, that the way to spiritual greatness is through humble obedience to one Teacher, to one Father, and to one Leader—Christ Himself.

III. 24:1-51 THE PROPHECY

Passage: Jesus prophesies about the suffering, the signs, and the summons surrounding His Second Coming. (Chapters 24-25 are known as the Olivet Discourse.)

Pattern:

1. 24:1-28 *The suffering*

A. vs. 1-3 the curiosity – the prediction by Jesus “as He was sitting on the Mount of Olives” of the complete destruction of the temple in response to the questions of the perplexed disciples on when the events will occur, what signs will surround His return, and the “end of the age”

B. vs. 4-20 the circumstances – the descriptions of the *preliminaries*, including spiritual chaos, political unrest, geographical disturbances, religious persecution, spiritual apostasy, deception, lawlessness, and indifference; of the *prophecy*, including world-wide evangelism, and the appearance of the “Abomination of Desolation”, which will be the sign for all people in Judea to seek refuge in the mountains with all urgency and without delay; and the *peril*, including the extreme danger for anyone who is faced with unavoidable personal, seasonal, or religious hindrances to a quick flight

C. vs. 21-28 the catastrophes – the description of the “great tribulation” as uniquely unprecedented, as unparalleled in its devastation of human lives, and as a time of deception through the messages of the false prophets who will try to mislead the people with “signs and wonders”, including a reminder by Jesus of His advance warnings, and the assurance of His return, which is certain and accompanied by great carnage

2. 24:29-41 *The signs*

A. vs. 29-31 the events – the description of the cosmic disturbances (see Joel 3:15) and the sadness of “all tribes”, who will recognize that Christ is the Messiah at His Second Coming “on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory” (notice that His coming will be accompanied with the appearance of an unknown sign, which some believe will be the Shekinah glory or the lightning mentioned in vs. 27)

B. vs. 32-39 the examples – the reference to the re-emerging of foliage on the fig tree (a symbol of Israel); to His timing, with the assurance that the nation Israel will be preserved; and to the time which is known to no one, except the Father (notice that the culture will resemble Noah’s time preceding the flood)

C. vs. 40-41 the evidence – the description by Jesus of the separation of two men in the field and two women grinding at the mill

3. 24:42-51 *The summons*

A. vs. 42 to be alert – the call by Jesus to be alert and constantly aware of the reality that the time of the Lord’s return is unknown

B. vs. 43-44 to be ready – the reminder by Jesus that, just as the home owner should keep his house secure because of the unexpected break-in of the thief, everyone should remain constantly vigilant since no one knows the hour of the Lord’s return

C. vs. 45-51 to be obedient – the warning by Jesus of the severe punishment which awaits “the evil slave”, in contrast to the increasing responsibilities, including the management of his household, which the master gives to his “faithful and sensible slave” pending his return

Points to Emphasize:

1. 24:1-28 Following the announcement by the Lord of His suffering, death, and resurrection, the disciples are perplexed about the future. They want to know about His statement concerning the destruction of the temple—when, what signs will precede His return, and the end of the age (read also chapter 21 in Luke) Notice that He does not answer the question: “when”. These are the signs which Jesus lists: wars, false prophets, horrific droughts, seismic disturbances, religious persecution, disrespect for national and religious laws, and spiritual apathy. Paul in 2 Timothy 3:1-7 also characterizes the conduct of people living in the “last days.” Many of these prophecies have been fulfilled, but God’s word tells us that there is coming a time of unprecedented devastation. It will be a time of great polarization of people—on one side will be the overtly evil and on the other will be the courageously evangelistic who will preach “the gospel of the kingdom.” The pivotal point will be the appearance of the Antichrist, whose image will be set up in the temple. ***The end times will include incredible suffering, but the assurance which all of us have, as believers, is that Jesus Christ is coming again so that “where I am, there you may be also” (see John 14:3).***
2. 24:29-41 The Second Coming of Jesus will not take place at some obscure stable, but rather will be public and obvious to all people. Great cosmic disturbances will accompany the coming of the Messiah, who will be announced by a great trumpet and a host of angels gathering the “elect” to worship the King. While we might miss a lunar eclipse or a speeding comet, we will all be eyewitnesses to the Second Coming of the Lord. This occasion will be a time of mourning for the people, who will recognize that their sins caused His death on the cross. ***One thing is certain: while people are going about their daily routine “in the field” or “at the mill”, they will encounter the consequences of their choices here on earth at His coming.***
3. 24:42-51 Jesus calls us to be in a constant state of alert in anticipation of His coming. As with unexpected company, we have nothing to be concerned about if our house is in order. We must be very careful that the “thief” of apathy does not break into our lives. The Master has one criterion when selecting someone to be in charge of the household during His absence—faithfulness. ***Our Lord’s coming may be unannounced as to the day and the hour, but it must never be unexpected.***

Practical Applications:

1. 24:1-28 Do I take the time to go to the “Mount of Olives” in prayer, and to His word where the Lord prepares me for my future? Am I sincerely concerned that “no one misleads me” about end-time prophecies? Am I sensitive to the Lord’s leadership in directing me toward the battles I should fight and toward the times when I need to “flee to the mountains”? Do I

accept the prophecies of the Second Coming as truth, relying on the fulfillment of past prophecies?

2. 24:29-41 Do I acknowledge the significance of the role which the nation Israel plays in God's plan? Do I realize the love of God for the Hebrew people as described in Romans 10:21? Do I acknowledge the fulfillment of prophecy concerning the preservation of the Jewish race despite horrible persecution? Do I acknowledge that spiritually, winter is almost gone and "that summer is near"?
3. 24:42-51 Am I living my life in anticipation that the Lord could come today? Is my "house" secured by spiritual readiness? Do I refuse to be lulled into false security concerning the Lord's coming?

Notes on Chapter 25:

In facing the future, Jesus emphasizes the priorities of prepared hearts, faithful stewardship, and loving service. He demonstrates these priorities through two parables. The first is the parable of the five wise virgins with oil in their lamps and the foolish virgins with no extra oil for their lamps. We must be prepared for His coming by having "oil in our lamps", so that we will not be spiritually asleep and unprepared.

Then the parable of the man who distributed his talents to his three servants, two of whom re-invested their talents, and one who buried his talent in the field. The lesson in this parable is not how much we are given, but rather what we do with what we are given.

Jesus prophecies concerning the gathering of all Gentile nations before His throne, and the separation of the nations on the right and on the left (according to their treatment of Israel). An invitation of the King will be presented for the faithful to inherit the prepared kingdom, which will be based on the people's ministry to the needy in His name. And then there is a reference by Jesus to the denial of kingdom entry, as well as eternal punishment for those who failed to respond to the needy in His name. We must remember that any personal insensitivity to "one of the least of these" is a refusal to help the Lord Himself.

Parting Thought:

Billy Graham concludes: "We need a foundation that is as solid as that bedrock. Only God can provide it. Jesus Christ is the bedrock on which we need to build our lives. As we commit our lives to Him and grow in our relationship with Him, we discover He truly is the solid foundation we need. Every other foundation proves false. The Bible says, "Together, we are his house, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. And the cornerstone is Christ Jesus himself" (Ephesians 2:20 NLT)."

Prayer of Commitment:

Dear Father,

Thank You for Your assurance that You are coming again. Fill me with joyous expectancy as I face my future with confident hope.

In the Name of the One who is my hope,

THE CROSS OF JESUS

Matthew 26-27

Background: The preceding chapters, 21-25, describe the last days of the earthly life of our Lord. Two groups, actually three, dominate the scenes—the faithful followers, both during the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem and in the mob scene on Friday; the fickle followers who desert Him on Friday; and the ever-present group of religious leaders who hover in the background, plotting their next move. The shadow of the cross begins to loom large in the life of Jesus, whose final days involve teaching, preparing His house for prayer, and a confrontation with His accusers. The calendar now changes to Wednesday and Thursday during Passover week.

Today's Lesson: Following the events of previous days, Jesus evidences peace despite the torture and the execution on a Roman cross on Friday.

I. 26:1-56 THE EVENTS

II. 26:57-27:31 THE EVIDENCE

III. 27:32-66 THE EXECUTION

Introduction: Following the death of his son, Ron Dunn, in his book *When Heaven Is Silent*, quotes C. S. Lewis: "When I lay these questions before God I get no answer. But rather a special sort of answer.' It is not the locked door. It is more like a silent, certainly not uncompassionate gaze. As though He shook His head not in refusal but waiving the question. Like, 'Peace, child; you don't understand.'"

In our lesson today, the lessons on peace, as evidenced by our Lord during the events preceding His uniquely cruel execution on the cross, serve as examples to us when we are faced with heaven's silence.

I. 26:1-56 THE EVENTS

Passage: The events on Wednesday and Thursday preceding Christ's death take place in Simon the leper's house, in the Upper Room, and in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Pattern:

1. 26:1-16 *in Simon's house*

A. vs. 1-5 the plot – the formulation (on Wednesday) of a quiet strategy by the religious leaders to capture and kill Jesus, who prophesies of His coming death during the Passover season (notice their fear of riots "among the people")

B. vs. 6-13 the priceless devotion – the defense by Jesus at Simon's house in answering the complaint concerning the anointing of Jesus by "a woman" (Mary of Bethany—John 12:3)

Note: Luke 7:37-38 describes a different anointing.

C. vs. 14-16 the proposal – the offer by the High Priest of thirty pieces of silver to Judas (one of the disciples), who both initiates the plan and seeks "a good opportunity to betray Jesus"

2. 26:17-30 *in the Upper Room*

A. vs. 17-19 the preparation – the obedience of the disciples in finding a place to observe the Passover (notice the generosity of "a certain man" who provides the place)

B. vs. 20-24 the prophecy – the identification of the betrayer as Judas (see John 13:26) by Jesus, who warns of the extreme punishment which awaits him (“It would have been good for that man if he had not been born”)

C. vs. 25-30 the participation – the institution of the Lord’s Supper (following the Passover meal) in which Jesus breaks the bread that is eaten by the disciples as a symbol of His broken body, and pours the wine which they drink as a symbol of His shed blood—all of which is to be done in remembrance for His provision of forgiveness at the cross (notice their departure to the Mount of Olives following the singing of a hymn)

3. 26:31-56 *in the Garden*

A. vs. 31-35 the awareness – the repeated reference by Jesus to His death and resurrection, as well as the warning to an overconfident Peter of his subsequent denial (“before the rooster crows three times”)

B. vs. 36-46 the anguish – the disappointment in the three disciples (Peter, James, and John), who sleep while Jesus agonizes in prayer, first for deliverance from “the cup” of suffering, next for God’s “will to be done”, and finally for a call to “let us be going” (to the scene of His arrest)

C. vs. 47-56 the arrest – the identification by Judas of Jesus, who surrenders to the armed men, which is followed by Peter’s severing and the Lord’s healing of an ear of the high priest’s servant (Luke 22:51), the reference by Jesus to the twelve legions of angels who are at His disposal if He asks the Father, the necessity of betrayal and death as fulfillment of prophecy, and the prophecy concerning the scattering of His disciples (notice the reminder to the crowd of His daily presence in the temple where they could have seized Him without “swords and clubs”)

Points to Emphasize:

1. 26:1-16 Even though Jesus is aware that prophecy is being fulfilled, He knows that redemption for man’s sins involves suffering and God’s silence—the deafening roar of silence. He again tells His disciples of the coming crucifixion. Three people emerge in these events. First, the host—Simon the leper, the outcast, the untouchable, the prisoner of his physical circumstances. Yet Jesus, His disciples, and His followers are guests in his home. Possibly Jesus had healed him and he is honoring the One who has resurrected him from a life of hopelessness. Then, we meet a woman, unnamed by Matthew, but identified by John as Mary of Bethany—the same Mary who had knelt at the feet of Jesus (read Luke 10:39). In this public display of love for her Lord, she unknowingly prepares His body for burial with a “very costly perfume”. As she anoints Him “on his head”, Jesus commends her for her act of devotion. The greed of Judas Iscariot begins to appear as he condemns Mary for her extravagance. Judas now opens his heart, not to Jesus, but to Satan as he bargains with the enemies of Jesus for His life. Three people—three perspectives. Simon represents the one who shares his joy with others because his life is totally changed from despair to celebration. Mary represents the one who loves Jesus, not just with words, but with a heart completely devoted to worshipping Him. Judas represents the one who says, “What’s in it for me?” ***We must always be sensitive to opportunities to celebrate and to worship, as well as to warnings about conspiracy.***
2. 26:17-30 The scene changes from Simon’s house to the upper room of an unnamed host. Two “suppers” are observed. The first, the Passover meal, is annually celebrated in

commemorating God’s deliverance of Israel from Egyptian slavery. The second, known as the Lord’s Supper, has its genesis on Thursday following the Passover meal. This special time is reserved for the Lord and for the twelve disciples—actually only eleven participate for Judas has left (John 13:30). This “Last Supper” is an ordinance for remembering the sacrifice of the Lord, who is “the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” (see John 1:29). The bread represents the body of our Lord who willingly and voluntarily sacrificed Himself on the cross in our place. The cup of wine represents the shedding of Christ’s blood in fulfilling the requirement to atone for sins (see Hebrews 9:22). ***The observance of the Lord’s Supper must never become so commonplace that we forget the pain and sacrifice of our Savior on the cross.***

3. 26:31-56 Again the scene changes to a garden—the Garden of Gethsemane. According to prophecy, Jesus knows that His followers will scatter. For believers, then, His Gethsemane experience is a preparation for those times when loved ones and friends will scatter, leaving them with no one except the Lord from whom to draw strength. Even though times of challenge are prophesied in the Bible, we, like Peter, often believe that the “scattering” will be by someone else who is weaker in the faith. The assurance from the prophecy of Peter’s denial to us, as believers, is that Jesus knows when we will spiritually stumble and is available to restore our fellowship. Another Gethsemane experience which we will all encounter at some point in our lives is disappointment, especially in those who are closest to us. Not only did our Lord need the comfort of His Heavenly Father, but also He needed the special companionship of His closest friends. So it is with us when friends fail us, we, too, must go “a little beyond” to our Father in heaven who knows all about our “cup” of suffering, and who knows whether or not it is possible to remove it. One of the most hurtful of the Gethsemane experiences, however, has to be the betrayal by one who has posed as a friend. Even though Jesus anticipated the event in His life, He is deeply grieved and continues to extend mercy to His betrayer. ***We, too, betray our Lord when we sell out to the enemy through ambition, greed, and unbelief.***

Personal Applications:

1. 26:1-16 Is my home a place of warmth and hospitality, where Jesus is always a welcome guest? Will I pray for God’s sensitivity in recognizing those once-in-a-lifetime opportunities to worship Him in total commitment and priceless devotion? Will I pray that I will not sell out to the enemy through dissatisfaction, worldliness, and desire for position?
2. 26:17-30 Is my home, like Simon the leper and “a certain man”, available to the Lord for His use? Do I acknowledge my personal vulnerability to betraying the Lord? Will I accept His mercy by repenting of my sin? Will I spend some time in reflecting on the passage in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, which describes the attitude I should have in coming to the Lord’s Table of remembrance?
3. 26:31-56 Am I impulsive about my devotion to the Lord, which can complicate the work of the Lord (like Peter)? Do I try to live by “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (see Ephesians 6:17)? How do I respond to the Gethsemanes in my life? When faced with loneliness, disappointment, and betrayal, will I remember the priority in the life of Jesus—“not my will but Thine”?

II. 26:57-27:31 THE EVIDENCE

Passage: Jesus faces His trials triumphantly as evidenced by hope, humility, and honor.

Pattern:

1. 26:57-68 *of hope*

A. vs. 57-58 the circumstances – the presence (at his home) of Caiaphas, the high priest, along with Jesus, (who has been arrested in the garden), the ruling members of the Sanhedrin, and Peter, who follows “at a distance”

B. vs. 59-63 the confusion – the amazement of Caiaphas over the initial silence of Jesus amidst the frenzied attempt to find a charge against Him (notice that two witnesses testify about the destruction and rebuilding of the temple in three days—a reference to the body of Jesus--John 2:19-21)

C. vs. 64-68 the confidence – the confession by Jesus (that He is the Christ, the Son of God), who refers to the prophecy concerning His position (see Psalm 110:1) and His return (Daniel 7:13), resulting in the charge of blasphemy

2. 26:69-27:10 *of humility*

A. vs. 69-75 the sorrow – the despair by a weeping Peter following his denial of the Lord

B. 27:1-2 the submission – the willingness of our Lord to be bound, led away, and brought before Pilate, the governor, following the official condemnation to death by the Sanhedrin

C. vs. 3-10 the stubbornness – the reaction by Judas (with no repentance but just remorse over being misled by the leaders), who throws the money back at the accusers after learning of the death sentence on Jesus, and who then commits suicide

3. 27:11-31 *of honor*

A. vs. 11-14 the confidence – the affirmation by Jesus that He is the King of the Jews in response to an astonished Pilate over His refusal to defend Himself against His accusers

B. vs. 15-26 the calmness (of Jesus) – the voluntary submission to God’s will of Jesus, who is beaten with a leather whip and handed over to the Roman soldiers for crucifixion (notice the release of Barabbas at the insistence of the crowd)

C. vs. 27-31 the courage – the display of spiritual strength by Jesus, despite the presence of 300-600 soldiers and the humiliation of the crowd, before being led away to be crucified

Points to Emphasize:

1. 26:57-68 Facing the hostility of our enemies, either tacit or obvious, is a challenge which confronts us regularly. We have only to look at Jesus to receive some encouragement: 1) our trials can never approach His in severity; 2) He walks with us through the presence of the Holy Spirit; and 3) His example of hope in His future enables us to anticipate our own future with Him. One group, in particular, incriminate themselves in this passage: the religious leaders who have access to the truth from the scriptures. ***We can face our challenges with hope because, right now, Jesus is “sitting at the right hand of power” interceding on our behalf (see Hebrews 7:25) and because He is coming again (see John 14:3).***
2. 26:69-27:10 There are three people facing trials in this section—Jesus, Peter, and Judas. While Jesus experiences ultimate victory by submitting to the trial with humble obedience to God’s will, Peter experiences spiritual failure, and Judas faces eternal condemnation. The Sanhedrin, which is the highest court of Jewish law, breaks its own law in the trial of Jesus in at least six ways, including predetermined guilt, false witnesses, and denial of self-defense. The tragedy of Judas begins with his expressed disapproval of Mary’s act of devotion (John 12:4-5), increases with his display of greed, and culminates in his betrayal of Jesus in the garden. Whereas the heart of Peter is cold, his company is wrong, and his decision is disobedient, the heart of Judas is closed, his company is evil, and his decision is deadly. On the other hand, the heart of our Lord is forgiving, the company of the Father is sufficient, and

His decision is life-giving for all believers. ***We must be very careful to confront personal resentment, to avoid over-confidence, and to maintain a commitment to prayer, or we, too, will be defeated in our trials.***

3. 27:11-31 The confidence with which Jesus meets His accusers reminds us that silence is often an effective response. While the world revels in self-defense and assertion of rights, Jesus places His confidence in the Heavenly Father. The calmness of Jesus is evident because His battle was won in the Garden of Gethsemane. He can victoriously face the abuse and humiliation of the enemies because He knows God's purpose in it. ***We can likewise endure great suffering with honor and dignity when we focus only on God's higher purpose.***

Personal Applications:

1. 26:57-68 Do I acknowledge that had Jesus not voluntarily submitted to the will of His Father in Gethsemane, no force on earth could have led Him away? Do I realize the great lengths which the world will go to remove the presence of God in our world and in our lives? Do I refuse to argue with the world concerning religion, but rather stand on my belief that Jesus is the Son of God? Do I remember that I, too, must be prepared to share in the "sufferings of Christ" (see 1 Peter 4:12-13)? Am I currently facing a conflict in which I am being unjustly accused? Do I receive hope from the words of the Lord to Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:9: "My grace is sufficient for you"?
2. 26:69-27:10 Are my present attitudes making me vulnerable to a serious act of disobedience? Do I realize the absolute necessity of prayer in my life for keeping strong during times of testing? Do I acknowledge the difference between genuine repentance and remorse? Can I imagine the despair which people (like Judas) experience when they reject the Lord, when the world rejects them, and when they are left completely alone? Am I ever guilty of justifying my disobedience through a distorted application of God's word (like the religious leaders)?
3. 27:11-31 Do I acknowledge the power of the opposition when facing spiritual struggles? Will I pray for the Lord's guidance on when to speak and when to keep silent? Am I being ridiculed for my Christian faith? If so, will I receive assurance by remembering that Christ suffered so that my struggles will only be temporary?

III. 27:32-66 THE EXECUTION

Passage: Jesus teaches us how to survive our darkest hour by accepting the cross, by dying to self, and by burying the past.

Pattern:

1. 27:32-44 ***Accept the cross***

A. vs. 32 the assistance – the conscription of a man named Simon, who is from Cyrene (a location in Africa where many Jewish people lived), to help a physically weakened Jesus to carry His cross

B. vs. 33-37 the accusation– the casting of lots for the Lord's garments by the indifferent soldiers, who display a sign over His head: "This is Jesus the King of the Jews"

C. vs. 38-44 the abuse – the extreme hostility of the by-standers, who demand that Jesus "save yourself"; of the religious leaders, who demand proof that He is the Son of God by coming down from the cross; and of the thieves on either side of the crucified Lord, who hurl insulting words

2. 27:45-56 ***Die to self***

A. vs. 45-49 the darkness – the presence of a supernatural cosmic blackness and a spiritual separation (“My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?”) experienced by our Lord from the hours between noon and three o’clock

B. vs. 50-53 the demonstration – the triumphant yielding of the Lord’s spirit in death by the words “It is finished” (John 19:30), and the supernatural tearing of the temple curtain from the top to the bottom, signifying the removal of the barrier between God and man (see Hebrews 10:19-20)

C. vs. 54-56 the discernment – the awareness by the centurion that “Truly this was the Son of God” (notice the faithfulness of the women who had followed Jesus from Galilee)

3. 27:57-66 **Bury the past**

A. vs. 57-58 the risk – the request by Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Sanhedrin (Mark 15:43, as is Nicodemus—John 3:1) for permission from Pilate to bury the body of Jesus

B. vs. 59-61 the resources – the provision for the burial of Jesus of a new tomb (Joseph’s), which is sealed by a large stone in the presence of Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of James and Joseph (and others—see vs. 56)

C. vs. 62-66 the resistance – the religious leaders’ demand that Pilate give orders to make the grave secure in order to prevent the followers of Jesus from stealing the body and deceiving the people about His resurrection (notice the posting of a guard)

Points to Emphasize:

1. 27:32-44 A three-hour period, from noon to 3:00 p.m. during the Passover Feast in Jerusalem over two-thousand years ago, surely stands out as the darkest hour in the history of mankind. Jesus not only accepts His cross, but also directs us to “take up his (my) cross and follow Me” (Matthew 16:24). At Golgotha, all of the hostility of hell itself is directed toward our Lord, who refuses anything which would dull His sensitivity to the purpose of His Father. It is notable that His enemies speak words of truth but with hearts of unbelief: Jesus, the temple of God, would be destroyed by death and resurrected in three days; Jesus is the Son of God and could have come down from the cross if He had so chosen; and He saves others, but He could not save Himself (or He would not have been able to save others). **Because Jesus accepted His cross through physical death, we are able to bear our cross through His power in our deepest need.**
2. 27:45-56 Certainly, the early Christians felt a heightened sense of despair on that Friday in Jerusalem. The most difficult part to understand was that the perfect Lord Jesus was the willing target of this abuse. The cross was necessary for Jesus in God’s redemptive plan, and it is necessary for our own spiritual rebirth. Together with the total darkness is the presence of unprecedented activities, which include a triumphant shout, the death of a Savior, and the presence of God revealed in a new way. What does this mean to us today? Just as a cross in the first century meant death, a cross in the life of a believer today means death to self. The old life of living in the flesh is finished; we voluntarily nail it to the cross of Christ. **When we cannot stand the darkness of sin, we can yield our hearts to the Lord in triumph because of Calvary.**
3. 27:57-66 The decision for Joseph of Arimathea to seek official permission to bury his Lord involved a great deal of risk, not only from the Roman authorities, but also from his fellow leaders in the Sanhedrin. So it is with any person who sincerely desires to give up the old way of life as an unbeliever. However, the Lord will provide the necessary resources which we need to bury the past, just as He did for Joseph. These resources may include new desires, new friends, and new lifestyles. The provision may include a different use of a pre-existing

resource (such as the tomb). The reality may include resistance from family members, friends, business associates, or individuals who seek to thwart the will of God. ***Praise God! The same power is available to me that was promised to Joshua in 1:5b, "I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you."***

Personal Applications:

1. 27:32-44 Am I available to bear the cross of people who are too weak to walk alone? Do I remember that Jesus is always ready to bear my burdens (see Matthew 11:28-30)? What does the world offer me to ease the pain of spiritual suffering—compromise, refusal to accept truth, excessive behavior? Am I in a dark period where I feel that the world has stripped me of all purpose and that people are “playing games” with the very things which I hold dear? Am I still denying the truth of suffering in the Christian life, or do I pray that God will give me the strength to accept my cross, which is His will (John 16:33)?
2. 27:45-56 Is my life bereft of hope? Are there areas of despair from which I cannot seem to get any relief—my spiritual condition, my relationships, my pain? Do I feel forsaken not only by my friends and family, but also by my Lord? Am I being maligned by misperceptions, malice, and mockery? Will I depend on the Lord completely for His sustaining grace during all the disruptions which follow spiritual obedience?
3. 27:57-66 Am I willing to bury the past not only through salvation, but also in daily yielding to the Lord? Am I willing to risk my self-direction by stepping out in faith in obedience to God’s commandments? Will I be obedient to the Lord even when I do not understand the significance? When heaven is silent, will I take the risk involved in stepping out in faith, will I appropriate the resources which God makes available, and will I acknowledge God’s power in dealing with any resistance which confronts me as I bury the past?

Parting Thought:

Ron Dunn writes: “It isn’t the everyday problems that turn our paradise into Pearl Harbor—it’s the sneak attacks. We simply aren’t prepared for the sharp curves life throws at us, those unannounced turns in the road. Just when we get a grip on life, our hands go numb and our exclamation points turn into question marks. The unexpected and the unexplained: This is what throws us off balance.” As C. S. Lewis writes: “Peace, child, you don’t understand.” Praise God that the cross is not the end of the story!!

Prayer of Commitment:

Dear Father,

Thank You for giving me Your example to follow when my world doesn’t make sense. Enable me to rest in Your loving arms of comfort, peace, and grace, remembering that You never give me more than You and I can handle together (see 1 Corinthians 10:13).

In the Name of the One who promises: “I will give you rest”,

THE RESURRECTION AND THE GREAT COMMISSION

Matthew 28

Background: The week which had started with so much joy and celebration over the coming of a King deteriorated quickly. The culmination was on Friday afternoon in total darkness as three men hung on crosses outside of Jerusalem. The cross in the middle was the source of the hostility of the fickle mobs, for it bore the blood-soaked body of the One who claimed to be the Son of God. Before the approaching sundown, the body was hurriedly prepared for burial in a borrowed tomb, awaiting the start of the Jewish Sabbath. The words in Lamentations describe the beginning of hope on Sunday morning for the despairing—"The Lord's lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness" (3:22-23).

Today's Lesson: The believers experience hope because of the empty tomb, the resurrected Lord, and the Great Commission.

I. 28:1-7 THE EMPTY TOMB

II. 28:8-15 THE RESURRECTED LORD

III. 28:16-20 THE GREAT COMMISSION

Introduction: Greg Laurie, in his book *Breakfast with Jesus*, writes in a section entitled "Death is not the end of existence": "Four centuries before the birth of Christ, the condemned Greek philosopher Socrates drank poison hemlock and lay down to die. His friends asked, 'Shall we live again?' The dying philosopher could only reply, 'I hope so, but no man can know'. But Jesus *did* know, and He told us that plenty comes after this life on earth. Death does not end everything. We can enjoy everlasting life.' "

In our lesson today, we, too, *know* that death does not end everything, because of the empty tomb, the resurrected Lord, and the Great Commission.

I. 28:1-7 THE EMPTY TOMB

Passage: The women go to the burial site of the Lord with a sense of finality and a heart of fear only to experience freedom from both, through the message of the angel.

Pattern:

1. 28:1 *The finality*

A. the circumstances – the journey of Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary" (Mark 16:1 identifies her as the mother of James) early on "the first day of the week" (Sunday)

B. the concern – the purpose of the visit to the tomb, which is to "look at the grave"

2. 28:2-4 *The fear*

A. vs. 2a of the uncontrollable – the occurrence of an earthquake at the site of the tomb

B. vs. 2b of the unsolvable – the appearance of an angel of the Lord who both rolls away the stone securing the tomb, and sits on it (Mark 16:3-4 refers to the concern which the women had about rolling away the extremely large stone that secured the tomb.)

C. vs. 3-4 of the inconceivable – the stunning effect on the soldiers (who become as "dead men") by the brilliant appearance "like lightning" of the angel, whose clothes are "white as snow"

3. 28:5-7 *The freedom*

A. vs. 5a from fear – the assurance by the angel to the women to "Do not be afraid"

B. vs. 5b-6a from hopelessness – the announcement that the body of Jesus, who has been crucified, is not in the tomb, for “He has risen”

C. vs. 6b-7 from doubt – the assurance by the angel (“Come, see the place where He was lying”), who directs the women to tell the disciples about the Lord’s resurrection and to meet Him in Galilee

Points to Emphasize:

1. 28:1 They had heard the words: “. . . He will rise” (Mark 9:31). “. . . you will see Me” (John 16:16). “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you” (John 14:18). “But they did not understand . . .” (Mark 9:32). Can you sense the emotions of the women: despair, hopelessness, perplexity? Their focus was on one last act of devotion: to properly prepare their Lord’s body for burial. The first day of the week dawned with the same spiritual and emotional darkness which had characterized believers in Jerusalem since Friday afternoon--the time the Lord Jesus had died on a Roman cross. The women, both named Mary, probably had counted the hours until the first hint of dawn on Sunday morning. They quickly gathered the burial oils and started on the trail to the site of the tomb. It would not be an easy task, for there were physical obstructions, military guards, and the emotional trauma involved with saying good-bye to a loved one. ***As with the devoted women, finality is almost unbearable for anyone who has no hope for future re-uniting.***
2. 28:2-4 The thoughts of the women, no doubt, went back to Friday afternoon when they had witnessed their beloved Lord being crucified. In a genuine act of courage, they had gone to the site of the new tomb where the body was to be buried. They observed the hurried preparation for burial. They also saw the huge stone being rolled in front of the tomb. Then, it was time to leave as the Sabbath hour was fast approaching. They were fearful, not only for their very lives, but also for their lives without Jesus. Even though they had been fearful of the unknown conditions surrounding the tomb, they now begin dealing with natural disasters—the earthquake; supernatural occurrences—the appearance of the angel; and “human” impossibilities—the guards who were like “dead men.” How would we react to the presence of an angel who was powerful enough to roll away the secure stone, revealing an empty tomb? His appearance added to the trauma of the onlookers—“like lightning”; clothing “as white as snow.” Even the position of him sitting on the stone added to the heightened expectancy of the moment. The word “fear” seems like an understatement. ***Certain events in our lives can also result in extraordinary fear such as unexpected disasters, immovable “stones” of separation from loved ones, and uncertainties over an unknown future.***
3. 28:5-7 The message of the angel resonates with us today: “He is risen.” Oh, there had been other resurrections, like Lazarus, but the resurrection of Christ brings new meaning to the message of the angel. In his book, *The Finishing Touch*, Charles Swindoll writes: “Our illnesses don’t seem nearly so final. Our fears fade and lose their grip. Our grief over those who have gone on is diminished. Our desire to press on in spite of the obstacles is rejuvenated. Our differences of opinion are eclipsed by our similar faith.” The invitation of the angel is brief: “Come, see.” In other words, come personally experience the empty tomb; come personally experience the resurrection. But there is more: “Go and tell.” Go to Galilee, as He said: “But after I have been raised, I will go ahead of you to Galilee.” (26:32) And then, almost as a tacit postscript from the angel, “I have done what I was supposed to do. Now you go and do what you are called to do.” The heart condition of individuals determines whether the tomb remains a place for the dead, or a place of the new birth. For believers, the empty tomb is a

place of reassurance, of fulfillment of prophecy, and of transforming “dead men” into people with an eternal future. ***The message of the angel gives freedom to the fearful, hope to the hopeless, and a mission to those without purpose.***

Personal Applications:

1. 28:1 Do I praise God for transforming the Sabbath of legalism into a Sunday of eternal life with Jesus? Do I, like Mary Magdalene and Mary, take time to “look at the grave”? Do I reflect on the serious nature of my own sin and how much agony, both spiritual and physical, it caused my Lord?
2. 28:2-4 What fear is causing me to react like “dead men”—“stones” of unbelief, “earthquakes” of spiritual indifference, “lightning” flashes of God’s presence? Do I remember that, as with the women, God knows my heart and honors my desire to be in His presence? Do I allow God to remove any barriers from my life, so that I can experience His living presence through the Holy Spirit?
3. 28:5-7 Do I listen to God’s personal message of assurance which He reveals through His word? Am I still trying to keep Jesus in the tomb through my unbelief? Am I responding to the “empty tomb” by obediently telling others that Jesus “is not here, for He has risen”? Am I tarrying at the tomb instead of dwelling “in Galilee” with the risen Lord? Am I experiencing the blessing of the “empty tomb”?

II. 28:8-15 THE RESURRECTED LORD

Passage: The resurrected Lord is reunited with the women who are reassured, and is rejected by the religious leaders.

Pattern:

1. 28:8-9 ***The reuniting***

A. vs.8 the acceptance – the responding to the angel’s words by the women, who depart quickly from the tomb “with fear and great joy” to deliver the message of the resurrection to the disciples

B. vs. 9a the appearance – the personal presence of the resurrected Lord to the women

C. vs. 9b the adoration – the worshipping at the feet of Jesus by the women (John 20:11-18 records the first post-resurrection appearance of the Lord to Mary Magdalene, who receives a rebuke from her Master for clinging to Him.)

2. 28:10 ***The reassurance***

A. the comfort – the words of encouragement by the Lord for the women to “fear not”

B. the commission – the direction by the Lord for the women to instruct His disciples to depart for Galilee

C. the confirmation – the promise of a reunion between the Lord and His disciples (in Galilee)

3. 28:11-15 ***The rejection***

A. vs. 11 the panic – the relating of the events by the guards to the chief priests

B. vs. 12 the payoff – the bribing of the guards with “a large sum of money” by the religious leaders

C. vs. 13-15 the plot – the directions by the religious leaders for the soldiers to explain the event by saying that the disciples had secretly stolen the body from the tomb while they were sleeping—a story which they would corroborate if the governor should hear of it (notice that this conspiracy plot was still being circulated among the Jews at the time of the writing)

Points to Emphasize:

1. 28:8-9 “Why do you seek the living One among the dead? He is not here, but He has risen.” (Luke 24:5-6) Can you imagine the “fearful joy” which the women must have felt as they entered the empty tomb (see Mark 16:5) and heard the words of the angel? Would the disciples believe them (they did not—see Luke 24:11), or should they remain silent (they did initially—see Mark 16:8)? Then, He appears! Mary Magdalene, because of her consuming grief, supposes that He is the gardener until He calls her by name (see John 20:16). All she, and later the other women in this passage, can do is kneel at His feet in humble worship. ***The empty tomb always involves a spiritual encounter with the risen Lord.***
2. 28:10 The world is filled with fear—fear of the known, fear of the unknown, fear of uncertainty. The one thing which the women had known on Friday was that they had lost the One who had resurrected their hope from hopelessness. Now the words from Jesus-- “Fear not!” This “fear not” from the mouth of Jesus, however, has a special instruction to the women—Go. Tell. It is a harbinger of the Great Commission which is given to every believer (vs. 18-20). The “Galilee” for the followers of Jesus was a place of refuge from the angry crowds in Jerusalem. It was a place of joyous reunion. It was a place where they could eat “breakfast” with the “King of Kings and the Lord of Lords” (see John 21:12). ***The Lord Jesus is waiting for us in “Galilee”, where we can experience the peace of His presence and the blessing of His fellowship.***
3. 28:11-15 Evidence of “new life” always results in desperation from the enemies of Jesus, including “alibis” for the soldiers, who would have been put to death for “sleeping on the job”; secretive “cover-ups” between the leaders and the soldiers; and a “large sum of money to “seal the deal”. Even with first-hand accounts of the Lord’s resurrection, hardened hearts will explain away the miracle of the resurrection with lies, bribery, and conspiracy theories. ***When new believers initially step out in saving faith, they must be prepared for all kinds of resistance from a world which has rejected the Lord.***

Personal Applications:

1. 28:8-9 Do I remember that a step of faith always involves conflicting emotions—both fear and great joy? Do I realize how much courage is involved in sharing the message of the resurrection—especially to those we love? Will I follow the example of the women who receive their assurance from a personal encounter with the risen Lord? Will I take the time to worship at His feet through prayer and Bible study?
2. 28:10 If my life is presently characterized by “reluctant obedience”, will I allow the Lord to reassure me with His resurrection power? Will I dedicate my life anew to “taking the word” both to discouraged believers and also to the hopelessly lost? Do I pray for an opportunity to share the message of the angel, “He is risen”, with a friend, a family member, a stranger?
3. 28:11-15 Will I not lose sight of the fact that the “the world” includes the enemies of the cross for which Jesus prayed, “Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they are doing” (Luke 23:34)? Will I refuse to be victimized by the spiritual enemies of spite, personal bitterness, and useless self-defense? Will I put on the armor of faith (see Ephesians 6:13-17) when I go from the empty tomb to the closed minds of unbelievers?

III. 28:16-20 THE GREAT COMMISSION

Passage: The disciples seek the presence of the resurrected Lord in Galilee, submit to His authority, and hear His commission to spread the message of the gospel.

Pattern:

1. 28:16-17 **to seek His presence**

A. vs. 16 the response – the obedience of the eleven disciples in going to the unnamed mountain in Galilee as Jesus has commanded

B. vs. 17 the reunion – the worship of the Master by most of the disciples (see Luke 24:38-39 and John 20:24-25 for the hesitant response of some of the disciples, specifically Thomas)

2. 28:18 **to submit to His authority**

A. the Person – the presence of the risen Christ

B. the power – the personal statement by Jesus of His complete authority in heaven and on earth (“all authority”)

3. 28:19-20 **to spread the message**

A. vs. 19 “all nations” – the command by Jesus to evangelize the world and to baptize the disciples under the authority of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit

B. vs. 20a “all things” (KJV) – the command by Jesus to teach disciples the way of obedience

C. vs. 20b “always” – the assurance of the eternal presence of the risen Lord

Points to Emphasize:

1. 28:16-17 On Friday afternoon, following the disposal of the remnants of a cruel cross, everything seemed like eternal darkness to the dejected disciples. Do you remember the response of the Emmaus disciples who were returning home on Sunday: “But we were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel” (Luke 24:21). But with the empty tomb and the resurrected Lord, everything has changed. No more eternal darkness. No more dashed hopes of dispirited followers. No more empty lives awaiting a Redeemer. He is risen! ***Just as the apostles worshipped the resurrected Jesus, we, too, must “go to Galilee” to worship, to be given assurance in the midst of our doubts, and to receive our instruction for service.***
2. 28:18 Our commission is only as good as the authority of the person who is commissioning us. Jesus makes it very clear—He has all authority. Paul in Ephesians 1:22 writes: “And He put all things in subjection under His feet . . .” and Colossians 2:10 “and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority”. ***Anytime we witness in the Name of Jesus, we know, without a doubt, that all the authority of heaven itself stands behind that Name.***
3. 28:19-20 Those who witness to the lost about Jesus affirm His words in John 11:25-26: “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die”. Jesus, who has “all authority”, commissions believers to tell “all nations” about “all things” that He has commanded. The pattern of faith begins with the cross, proceeds to the empty tomb, and reaches its destination in service to the risen Lord, who assures us of His “forever” presence. Someone has well said that our commission is to “make disciples, mark them, and mature them”. ***The mandate of believers never changes—tell lost people about Jesus Christ.***

Personal Applications:

1. 28:16-17 Am I currently identified with the group who worships the Lord, or the ones who doubt? If I am a doubter, will I allow the Lord, as He did Thomas, to reassure me? Do I prayerfully stay in the fellowship of His presence—the “mountain” which Jesus had “designated”?

2. 28:18 Do I receive assurance that the Lord I worship has “all authority”? Do I remember that God “highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name”? Do I joyously anticipate that time when “every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord” (see Philippians 2:9-11)?
3. 28:19-20 Do I realize how much my priorities in life change when I say “yes” to the Lord’s Great Commission? Have I chosen to affirm the empty tomb, the resurrected Lord, and the Great Commission? If not, why not today?

Parting Thought:

Greg Laurie elaborates on effective witnessing: “Remember, different types of people come to faith in different ways. . . So listen carefully and speak appropriately. Learn to fish for men in a way more appropriate to the fish swimming before you. That was always the Apostle Paul’s strategy in reaching people: ‘To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some’ (1 Corinthians 9:22, NIV).

And don’t forget the most important lesson of all. When we get right down to it, we all come to Christ in different ways. but God does essentially the same thing for all of us. He tells us that we are separated from Him by sin, that we are all missing out on heaven, and that we must come to God through the cross of Jesus.

That message has never changed. And it never will.”

Prayer of Commitment:

Dear Father,

Thank You for reminding me that there really was nothing good about “Good Friday” for Christ, but everything miraculous about Sunday morning. Enable me to revisit the empty tomb, to worship at Your feet, and to obey the Great Commission. And Lord, when I need reassurance, remind me of the trash heap of the “used” cross, the burial in the “unused” tomb, and the absence of the stone which revealed the risen Lord.

In the Name of the One who both calls me to follow Him and sends me to tell the world,

PENTECOST AND THE BIRTH OF THE CHURCH

Part One

Acts 1-2

Background: The book, *The Acts of the Apostles*, is authored by the Gentile physician, Luke, who also wrote the gospel bearing his name. The writing centers on the activities of Peter (chapters 1-12) and Paul (chapters 13-28). Most scholars consider the date of writing to be around 61 A. D. As Genesis records the creation of a physical body (man), Acts records the creation of a spiritual body (the church). The key verse is Acts 1:8, which serves as an outline for the study.

Today's Lesson: The apostles wait in expectancy in the upper room following the ascension of Jesus, as they evidence the equipping of the Holy Spirit.

I. 1:1-26 THE EXPECTANCY

II. 2:1-36 THE EQUIPPING

III. 2:37-47 THE EVIDENCING

Introduction: Many writers compare their lives to a house with many rooms. For example, there is a kitchen where people's physical needs are met. Then, there is the cellar, where people's secrets are carefully hidden from a prying world. People may find refuge in the attic, where memories of happy times are safely stored. And, of course, there are those rooms where strength is restored, where fellowship is enjoyed, and where appearances are refreshed. But there is one room where Christians can experience spiritual renewal—the Upper Room. Unlike its architectural counterpart, this room is accessible, available, and transportable, for it is encased in the heart of the believer.

In our lesson today, God invites us to dwell in the Upper Room where we can live in expectancy, by equipping, and through evidencing the power of the Holy Spirit.

I. 1:1-26 THE EXPECTANCY

Passage: The disciples experience a spirit of expectancy with patience, by prayer, and for perception.

Pattern:

1. 1:1-8 **with patience**

A. vs. 1-3 the appearance – the references by Luke to Theophilus of the validated post-resurrection appearances of Jesus, who teaches the apostles about kingdom life

B. vs. 4-5 the admonition – the revealing of the coming baptism of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles by Jesus, who commands them to remain in Jerusalem in anticipation of the event

C. vs. 6-8 the announcement – the commissioning of the disciples to be “my witnesses” in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria, and “the remotest part of the earth” by Jesus, who refuses to set a time-table on the restoration of the Messianic kingdom, and who promises the Holy Spirit, who “will come upon you”

2. 1:9-14 **by prayer**

A. vs. 9-11 the hope – the verbal assurance of the Lord's return by “two men in white clothing” following the ascension of Jesus on “a cloud”, as the apostles witness the miracle (read Luke 24:50-53 which also refers to the ascension of Christ)

B. vs. 12-13 the faith – the obedience of the named eleven apostles to gather in the Upper Room in Jerusalem, which is a “Sabbath day’s journey away” from the Mount of Olives (about half-a-mile which was allowable under Jewish law)

C. vs. 14 the love – the evidencing of unity (“all with one mind”), including the dedication to continual prayer, the faithfulness of the women (including Mary, mother of Jesus) who had witnessed the crucifixion and the empty tomb, and the inclusion of the Lord’s brothers (who had previously rejected His divinity)

3. 1:15-26 **for perception**

A. vs. 15-20 from prophecy – the reminder by Peter, the spokesman, to a group which now numbers about 120 people, of the prophecy fulfillment from Psalms concerning the betrayal of Judas, who has committed suicide in his own field purchased with “blood money”, and who is to be replaced with “another man”

B. vs. 21-23 from personal experience – the naming of Joseph and Matthias as candidates for apostleship following Peter’s presentation of the qualifications, including a personal involvement in the ministry of Jesus from the point of His baptism by John (the Baptist) until the ascension, and a witness of His resurrection

C. vs. 24-26 from prayerful guidance – the drawing of lots by the apostles, who prayerfully acknowledge the Lord’s omniscience (“know the hearts of all men”), who ask the Lord to reveal the person whom “You have chosen” to replace Judas, and who discern that Matthias is His choice

Points to Emphasize:

1. 1:1-8 Regardless of the function of the rooms in our house, the place where we find true sustenance and peace is in the Upper Room—that place where we can rid our minds of distractions by focusing on God. He is waiting for us to get to that point where telephones, television, and text messaging are off limits. He wants just the two of us to communicate through prayer, stillness, and scripture reading. Perhaps the apostles in today’s lesson were searching for this place. They must have felt a sense of bewilderment mixed with awe following the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. Now, what happens next? Is this a time of political restoration for Israel? The Lord rebukes them: “It is not for you to know.” Jesus mentions the Holy Spirit two times in this passage—first, the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and the receiving of power through the Holy Spirit. There are two specific directions: “stay in Jerusalem” and “wait.” There is a promise: “you will receive power.” There is a commission: “you shall be My witnesses” locally, nationally, and internationally. ***The commission to believers today has not changed: wait with patient expectancy for God’s timing, and share the message of Jesus.***
2. 1:9-14 This is the second time that angels have questioned the seekers. First, in Luke 24:5 to the women at the tomb, “why do you seek the living One among the dead?” And now, to the disciples: “Why do you stand looking into the sky?” The pattern of events? The Lord is crucified. The Lord is resurrected. The Lord is alive. The Lord is “taken up from you into heaven.” The eleven disciples, who are listed by name, obey the Lord’s command to remain in Jerusalem, where they wait in a protected upper room free from distractions. They pray with the faithful followers, including the women, Mary (mother of Jesus), and His brothers. The meeting is characterized by unity and unceasing prayer. Is this the same upper room where the apostles had observed Passover with the Lord (see Luke 22:12)? We are not told.

When unexplainable circumstances occur in our lives, we, too, must spiritually return to the Upper Room, which is accessible through oneness of mind in unceasing prayer.

3. 1:15-26 Peter, the once impulsive, over-confident, arrogant apostle, now assumes leadership. The apostle has one irrefutable characteristic—he loves the Lord Jesus wholeheartedly. Now is the time when he obeys the Lord’s last personal instructions to him in John 21:16, “Shepherd My sheep.” Their group has some unfinished business. Following the betrayal and subsequent suicide of Judas, another apostle must be named in accordance with scripture (see Psalm 109:8). Peter refers to the qualifications: total involvement with the ministry of the Lord since His baptism, and a witness of His resurrection. Two names emerge—Joseph (or Justus) and Matthias. The group prays for discernment—not that *they* will make the right choice, but that God’s choice will be made known. The number now is twelve with the divine selection of Matthias. ***When we need to experience the wisdom and divine perception of the Lord, we, too, must wait expectantly with faith, with assurance, and with peace.***

Personal Applications:

1. 1:1-8 Am I spiritually living in the Upper Room where the Lord’s instructions become real to me? Do I acknowledge that the baptism of the Holy Spirit occurs in my life at the point in which I invite Jesus into my heart (see 1 Corinthians 12:13)? Do I accept that many times I quench the Spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:19) through unbelief, or that I grieve the Spirit (Ephesians 4:30) through “unwholesome” words? Do I humbly remember that I need subsequent fillings of the Holy Spirit (one baptism; many fillings)? Do I prayerfully, patiently, and expectantly await divine appointments to evidence Christ to others through the power of the Holy Spirit?
2. 1:9-14 Do I remember that I am not to just “stand looking into the sky”, but I am to act in obedience to the Lord’s commission? Am I clinging to my eternal hope, which is the Lord’s return? Will I set aside any differences that I might have with others by focusing on commonalities? Will I refuse to drop out, to exclude myself, or to be uninvolved? Will I instead prayerfully seek the fellowship of others in genuine love?
3. 1:15-26 Do I, like Peter, take a stand for truth “in the midst of the brethren”? Do I familiarize myself with scripture so that I can recognize prophecy fulfillment? Do I acknowledge that while I did not visually witness the resurrection of the Lord, I have experienced it through my new life in Christ? Am I willing to have my name submitted for service in the Lord’s kingdom? Do I follow the example of the early believers when making a decision—establish biblical standards, pray for guidance, and wait for the Lord’s answer?

II. 2:1-36 THE EQUIPPING

Passage: Believers are spiritually equipped with supernatural power, with prophecy fulfillment, and with a personal perspective as preached by Peter.

Pattern:

1. 2:1-13 ***with supernatural power***

A. vs. 1-3 the manifestation – the awareness of a sound “like a violent rushing wind” and the appearance of individual “tongues as of fire”, which descend on the group of believers as they are assembled for the observance of Pentecost (notice that the sound from heaven is *like* “a violent rushing wind”)

B. vs. 4-12 the miracle – the perplexed amazement of the crowd when believers begin speaking through the power of the Holy Spirit in the native languages of a named national group of people, including proselytes

C. vs. 13 the mockery – the cynical suggestion by some in the crowd that those speaking in known languages are intoxicated

2. 2:14-21 **with prophecy fulfillment**

A. vs. 14-15 the emphasis – the public repudiation by Peter of the assertion that these Spirit-filled believers are not drunk, for it is only 9:00 in the morning

B. vs. 16-21 the evidence – the recalling of the words of the prophet Joel concerning the pouring forth of “My Spirit on all mankind”, complete with prophecy by “sons and daughters”, visions of “young men”, and “dreams” of old men, as well as cosmic and earthly signs which will precede “the day of the Lord” (Warren Wiersbe in *Outline Studies from Acts* believes that verses 17-18 were fulfilled at Pentecost, while verses 19-20 will be fulfilled at the Second Coming of Christ. Thus the entire church age takes place between verses 18-19.)

3. 2:22-36 **with personal perspective**

A. vs. 22-23 of His humanity – the preaching to “the men of Israel” by Peter in his sermon concerning the earthly life of Jesus, who ministered miraculously in their midst, and to His death on the cross by godless men in fulfillment of “a predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God”

B. vs. 24-32 of His deity – the authoritative reference by Peter to the resurrection of Jesus by God in fulfillment of David’s prophecy in Psalm 16:8-11 and from eyewitness accounts, including his own (The phrase “nor allow Your Holy One to undergo decay” is a Messianic reference.)

C. vs. 33-36 of His exaltation – the references by Peter to the ascended Christ being seated “at My right hand” in fulfillment of God’s promise to send the Holy Spirit, in affirmation of David’s prophecy concerning the exalted Lord (Psalm 110:1), and in authenticating the presence of the Messiah “whom you crucified”

Points to Emphasize:

1. 2:1-13 As the old hymn says “Pentecostal Power”! Luke describes the supernatural event with natural words: “like a violent rushing wind” and “tongues as of fire.” Those assembled, possibly the same group which Peter addressed in 1:15, experience an overwhelming filling of the house with the “tongues” resting on each individual. Following this “filling”, the group presumably moves to the temple, where an assembled group is amazed to hear their own languages being spoken. This passage gives a listing of the national origins, which include all the countries surrounding the Mediterranean Sea. Luke mentions the presence of devout Jews living in Jerusalem at this time, which is one more opportunity for God’s mercy to be extended to His people. The nation Israel has rejected God the Father through the death of John the Baptist, the last of the Old Testament prophets. The nation has rejected God the Son through the crucifixion of Jesus. And now, the last avenue of God’s redemptive plan is revealed—God the Holy Spirit (with the stoning of Stephen, the nation Israel rejects the Holy Spirit—see Acts 7:54-60). ***Just as God created man by “breathing into his nostrils the breath of life” (Genesis 2:7), He creates the church by “breathing” the Holy Spirit initially into these early believers, and successively on each person at the point of his/her conversion.***

2. 2:14-21 Just as Jesus did in the temptation, Peter uses scripture to reveal the truth. The prophet Joel tells of a time when God will send His Spirit “on all mankind”. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit equips believers, both today and in the future, to fulfill the Great Commission,

which is to evangelize the world. The cosmic disturbances that Joel describes are fulfilled in the “day of the Lord”, which precedes the Second Coming of Christ (see Revelation 6:12).

Regardless of the future time or details of these events, we can know and experience with assurance and the authority of God’s word that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved”.

3. 2:22-36 Peter now turns from the prophet Joel to David in revealing to the “Men of Israel” the life, the death, the resurrection, and the exaltation of Jesus Christ. He reminds them that Jesus of Nazareth lived among men and was used by God to perform miracles in their presence. This Man was crucified, not because the godless men were stronger, but because His death was in God’s plan. In one glorious act, God won the victory over evil through the resurrection of His Son. Because of His resurrection, we can say with David, “You will not abandon my soul to Hades” (a place of torment). This passage cites four proofs of the reality of Jesus Christ: the historical record of a Man named Jesus of Nazareth who performed miracles; the fulfillment of Old Testament scripture through the person of Jesus Christ; the eyewitness accounts of believers; and the presence of the Holy Spirit (see John 15:26--“When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, that is the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will bear witness of Me”). Peter authenticates the resurrection of Jesus from God’s word and from the mouth of one of Israel’s great heroes—David. In Psalm 110:1 David clearly identifies the resurrected Lord as his own Lord, who has been exalted to the right hand of God the Father. **The same Holy Spirit, who changed Peter from a coward who denied His Lord to a bold preacher who stands against the enemy, is available to us today, not only to save us, but also to equip us for service.**

Personal Applications:

1. 2:1-13 Do I remember that the most important decision that I will ever make is to accept Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior? While my salvation experience may not involve literal windstorms and flaming tongues, do I acknowledge that it will involve the supernatural manifestation of the Holy Spirit in my life? Do I acknowledge that I am “baptized” with the Holy Spirit at the time of my conversion, but that I am continually being “filled”, which is actually a yielding of my own will to the will of Jesus through the indwelling Spirit? Do I remember to pray for missionaries in foreign lands, who are bringing the gospel message to people in their own languages?
2. 2:14-21 Will I align myself spiritually with the apostles, with the Old Testament prophets, and with every person who teaches the truth of God’s word? Do I obey the words of Paul in Galatians 5:25, “If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit”? Do I acknowledge the reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ through the authority of God’s word: “He is not here, for He has risen, just as He said”? (see Matthew 28:6)
3. 2:22-36 Do I know the resurrected Lord as my Savior? Do I remember that death has no hold over me because of His resurrection? Do I receive daily assurance in knowing that the Lord Jesus sits at the right hand of God, where He is interceding on my behalf (see Hebrews 7:25)? Do I remember that positionally, I am seated “in the heavenly places” with Christ (see Ephesians 2:6)?

III. 2:37-47 THE EVIDENCING

Passage: The evidence of Spirit-filled living is revealed by Peter through the plan of salvation, through the promise of the availability of salvation for all people, and through the process of spiritual growth, which results in 3000 people being saved.

Pattern:

1. 2:37-38 ***through the plan of salvation***

A. vs. 37 the conviction – the genuine sorrow (“pierced to the heart”) which is evidenced by the people, who ask Peter and the apostles “Brethren, what shall we do?”

B. vs. 38a the choice – the answer by Peter, which is to repent of their sins (meaning to change directions)

C. vs. 38b the confession – the call for a profession of faith by the people in Jesus Christ, who forgives sins and comes to dwell within through “the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Water baptism is a public act of obedience and identification with a local church, while the baptism of the Holy Spirit occurs at salvation and evidences an inner change.)

2. 2:39-40 ***through the promise of God***

A. vs. 39 the people – the promise of God for salvation to “you and your children and for all who are far off”, which includes “as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself”

B. vs. 40 the plea – the continued pleading by Peter for the people to be saved from a “perverse generation”

3. 2:41-47 ***through the process of growth***

A. vs. 41 by baptism – the public identification through the baptism of 3000 people

B. vs. 42 with fellowship – the continual participation of the believers in learning from the apostles, in fellowshiping with each other through observing the Lord’s Supper, and in praying

C. vs. 43-47 in unity – the daily rejoicing and meeting together “with gladness and sincerity of heart”, including a sense of awe in experiencing the miracles of God and in the selling of possessions to help those in need

Points to Emphasize:

1. 2:37-38 The process of Spirit-filled living resonates from every verse in this concluding section—beginning with sorrow over sin, a desire to change, asking for help, and a willingness to be born again (see John 3:3-7). The evidence of a changed life is the presence of the Holy Spirit, which is a gift—an eternal gift given to all believers at their conversion. ***The plan of salvation is presented very simply through the words of Peter and they are meant for us today: repent, accept forgiveness through Jesus Christ, and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*** Is the Lord speaking to you today?

2. 2:39-40 The promise of salvation is available to every adult, every child, every Jew, every Gentile, every man, every woman. The invitation never changes: “Be saved!” ***We cannot be too “far off” geographically or spiritually for the Lord to call us “to Himself”.***

3. 2:41-47 ***The evidence of spiritual growth comes through the changed lives of believers.*** Instead of rejecting Jesus, He is their Lord. Instead of untouchable hearts, they have a hunger and thirst for godly teachings. Instead of self-sufficiency, they humble themselves in prayer. Instead of greed, they generously sacrifice to help the needy. Instead of division, there is a oneness of purpose. The results? Winning the lost to Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Personal Applications:

1. 2:37-38 How long has it been since I have been “pierced to the heart” about my spiritual condition? Will I humbly go to the Lord in genuine repentance, either for salvation or for spiritual renewal? Am I living in daily expectancy of what the Lord is planning for me?
2. 2:39-40 Do I remember to thank God that there is “neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave or free man, there is neither male or female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28)? Do I pray for opportunities to tell others to “be saved” through the gospel message?
3. 2:41-47 Does my life give evidence of supernatural living? Is the fruit of the Spirit in my life evident to others (see Galatians 5:22-23)? Do I devote myself to Bible study, prayer, worship, praising God, witnessing to the lost? Will I pray, as David does in Psalm 51:12, “Restore to me the joy of your salvation and sustain me with a willing spirit”?

Parting Thought:

Max Lucado in his book *The Great House of God* writes: “Your home is familiar to you. No one has to tell you how to locate your bedroom; you don’t need directions to the kitchen. After a hard day scrambling to find your way around in the world, it’s assuring to come home to a place you know. God can be equally familiar to you. With time you can learn where to go for nourishment, where to hide for protection, where to turn for guidance. Just as your earthly house is a place of refuge, so God’s house is a place of peace. God’s house has never been plundered, his walls have never been breached. God can be your dwelling place. God *wants* to be your dwelling place”. It is called Upper Room living!

Prayer of Commitment:

Dear Father,

Thank You for allowing me to live in the Upper Room in my daily walk—a place you have prepared for me here on earth. Enable me not only to live my life *in* the power of the Holy Spirit, but also to share the gospel message to others *through* the power of the Holy Spirit.

In Your precious Name,

PENTECOST AND THE BIRTH OF THE CHURCH

Part Two

Acts 2:13-47

Background: The gift of the Holy Spirit has come at Pentecost. Evidence of the miracle is the ability to speak in many languages—the native languages of the people whose land borders the Mediterranean Sea. The replacement for Judas is selected by the prayerful apostles. Matthias is chosen. The birth of the church is recorded as Peter preaches a sermon calling the people to salvation.

Today's Lesson: Peter addresses the people concerning prophecy fulfillment, the focus on salvation, and the ensuing fellowship of the saved.

I. 2:13-36 THE FULFILLMENT

II. 2:37-42 THE FOCUS

III. 2:43-47 THE FELLOWSHIP

Introduction: Dr. Ray Stedman, pastor of the Peninsula Bible Church in Palo Alto, California, writes very bluntly about the perception of the modern day church in his book *Body Life*: “The word ‘church’ conjures up many widely differing images. To some, the church is nothing but a snooty religious country club with traditional rituals as sacred as those at a fox hunt. To others the church is a political action group, a pressure bloc of do-gooders, waging battle against social ills. Some see the church as a kind of non-segregated waiting room for people expecting to take the next bus for heaven. Some view it as a kind of a low-calorie dessert for any who want something nice that won’t hurt their public image . . . Nevertheless, despite its many weaknesses and its tragic sins, the church has been, in every century since its inception, the most powerful force for good on the face of the earth. It has been light in the midst of a darkness so dense it could be felt. It has been salt in society, retarding the spread of moral corruption and adding zest and flavor to human life.”

In our lesson today, Peter focuses on the birth of Christ’s church, as evidenced by the fulfillment of prophecy, and true fellowship among believers.

I. 2:13-36 THE FULFILLMENT

Passage: Peter preaches on prophecy fulfillment, including God’s promise through Joel, God’s plan through David, and the authentication of the Person of Jesus as Messiah.

Pattern:

1. 2:13-21 *of the promise*

A. vs. 13-15 the present – the denial by Peter to the accusers that the Spirit-filled apostles were drunk (notice the defense that the hour was 9:00 a.m.)

B. vs. 16-18 the past – the presentation of the Holy Spirit “on all mankind,” including all levels of society by the Lord, including people of differing ages to prophesy “dreams” and “to see visions”

C. vs. 19-21 the future – the description by Peter of the supernatural signs (“blood, fire, and vapor of smoke”); cosmic disturbances including a darkened sun and a moon of blood which will precede the Second Coming of the Lord; and the promise of salvation to those who seek Him (see Matthew 24:29 and Revelation 6:12)

2. 2:22-28 *of the plan*

A. vs. 22 His life – the affirmation by Peter of the earthly life of Jesus the Nazarene, who performed miracles “in your midst”

B. vs. 23 His death – the acknowledgement to “godless men”, who crucified “this Man” according to God’s “predetermined plan”

C. vs. 24-28 His authenticity – the affirmation of Christ’s victory over death, as prophesied by David, who exalts in His presence “with hope and gladness” (notice the phrase: “will not allow Your Holy One to undergo decay”)

3. 2:29-36 *of the Person*

A. vs. 29-31 the distinction – the affirmation by Peter that King David’s death is authenticated by his tomb, while Christ’s resurrection is authenticated by God’s promise that one of David’s descendants will sit on the throne

B. vs. 32-33 the designation – the affirmation by Peter that Jesus, who is positioned at God’s right hand, is the One who “poured forth the Holy Spirit”

C. vs. 34-36 the declaration – the reminder of David’s words that Jesus (“my Lord”) is seated at the right hand of the Father, which verifies that Christ, “whom you crucified”, is the Messiah

Points to Emphasize:

1. 2:13-21 Almost as a skilled attorney presenting his case concerning the identity of his client, Peter carefully avows that the church is the most powerful force on earth. It is the bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:25-27). It has been counterfeited many times. It has been the object of persecution, savagery, even death to its members. But praise God, it is still the body of believers with Christ as its head (see Colossians 1:18). Peter, who has been restored by the Lord following his denial, is now “feeding His sheep” (see John 21:15-17). He, in God’s mercy, is giving the nation Israel, another chance to accept Christ as Messiah. He is using Old Testament prophecy to verify his claim. Some scholars see the church age as occurring between vs. 18-19; that is, between Pentecost and the Second Coming. Regardless of one’s viewpoint, vs. 17-18 of Joel’s prophecy are evidenced by the blessings of the Holy Spirit. The last verses of Joel’s prophecy are characterized both by the darkness of cosmic disturbances and the eventuality of salvation for everyone “who calls on the Name of the Lord.” ***The power of the Holy Spirit is available to all people, regardless of age or status, who sincerely seek the Lord.***
2. 2:22-28 Peter now verifies the earthly existence of “this Man”—Jesus the Nazarene. His presence is accompanied by miracles among the people. His life and death is not just a happenstance, but rather as a part of God’s plan which has been from the beginning. His life? Miracles, signs, and wonders. His death? Crucifixion. But there is more to God’s plan—the resurrection. With the resurrection of our Lord, death has lost its power—“thanks be to God who gives us victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 15:57). Notice the present tense verbs in David’s Psalm: “I will not be shaken” (vs. 25); “will live in hope” (vs. 26); “You will not abandon” (vs. 27); “You will make me full of gladness with Your presence” (vs. 28). ***God’s plan is perfected in His Son, who said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man comes to the Father but through Me” (John 14:6).***
3. 2:29-36 While the nation Israel has its “hall of fame” honorees, none is greater than King David. After quoting from prophetic words, Peter now closes his “case” with additional emphasis on

the distinction between David and Jesus. David died. He was buried in a still-existing tomb. He was promised a legacy—a royal descendant. Jesus died. His tomb is empty. He reigns on the throne. In addition, which no mortal did, has done, or ever will do, He fulfilled the promise of God through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. In one final point, Peter uses David's own words to verify that Jesus, not David, ascended to heaven, where He sits at the right hand of God. With these closing words, Peter can say with all certainty: Jesus, Lord and Christ, is the Messiah "whom you crucified". ***Jesus wants to be my Savior, who calls me to salvation and discipleship, so that I will not be guilty of "crucifying" Him through my unbelief.***

Personal Applications:

1. 2:13-21 Do I acknowledge that salvation includes being filled with the Holy Spirit (see 1 Corinthians 3:16)? Am I walking by the Spirit so "I will not carry out the deeds of the flesh" (Galatians 5:19-21)? Am I going through a trial which is filled with darkness? Do I depend on the supernatural "signs" of God's grace and mercy to sustain me during these times?
2. 2:22-28 Do I accept by faith that the death and resurrection of Jesus is God's plan for my benefit? Do I accept the words of the old hymn that says: "Because He lives, I will live tomorrow"? Do I accept that, right now, I can be "full of gladness with Your presence"?
3. 2:29-36 Do I praise God that, as a believer, I have the gift of the Holy Spirit through Jesus Christ? Do I acknowledge that the veracity of prophecy is in its fulfillment? Do I "know for certain" that Jesus is my Lord and Savior? If not, why not today?

II. 2:37-42 THE FOCUS

Passage: Peter closes his sermon by focusing on forgiveness, on faithfulness, and on freedom.

Pattern:

1. 2:37-38 ***on forgiveness***

- A. vs. 37 the grief – the remorse of the people ("pierced to the heart"), who inquire of the apostles what they should do
- B. vs.38 the gift – the word of Peter, who calls the people to repentance and to be baptized "for the forgiveness of your sins," resulting in the receiving of the Holy Spirit

2. 2:39 ***on faithfulness***

- A. of the promise – the word of Peter verifying the inclusion of Israelites as well as those who are "far off"
- B. of the promiser – the reference to the source of the promise as "the Lord our God", who will call the number of recipients to Himself

3. 2:40-42 ***on the freedom***

- A. vs. 40 the urgency – the exhortation by Peter for the Israelites to "Be saved from this perverse generation"
- B. vs. 41 the uniting – the responding to the message of God by 3000 people, who are baptized
- C. vs. 42 the unity – the continual learning from the apostles, resulting in fellowship, the observance of the Lord's Supper, and prayer

Points to Emphasize:

1. 2:37-38 Charles Colson in his book, *The Body*, writes: “Indeed, growth may be a sign of God’s blessing. It surely was when Peter preached after Pentecost. People were convicted, repented, and were baptized—3000 on the first day—and the Lord was ‘adding to their number day by day,’ with five thousand in one day alone. That’s the kind of growth that would be the envy of even the slickest professionals in the CGM (Church Growth Movement). But it was the Lord adding to the numbers, not marketing experts.” Peter, in this passage without any marketing specialists, is delivering God’s message to lost people—“Be saved”. His call harkens back to the message of John the Baptist: “Repent and be baptized.” (This baptism was a person’s declaration for the need for forgiveness.) As John says in Matthew 3:11, “I baptize you with water for repentance . . . He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit . . .” ***The words of the apostle Peter are as timely today as they were over 2000 years ago: “Repent and be forgiven; and receive the Holy Spirit.”***
2. 2:39 And then, as an admonition to those who consider themselves exclusively chosen, Peter reminds them that God’s promise is available to “all who are far off.” Praise God for Peter’s call, for we, as Gentiles, are considered as those “far off.” Warren Wiersbe in his commentary on Acts writes: “Only by repenting and believing on Christ could they receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Galatians 3:2, 14), and this promise was for both the Jews and the ‘far off’ Gentiles (Ephesians 2:13-18). God is always faithful to this promise. ***There is one word for those who are modern-day witnesses: “Inclusiveness”.***
3. 2:40-42 One phrase characterizes Peter’s preaching: he “kept on.” His invitation? “Be saved.” The “perverse” world in which we live in today calls for evangelistic urgency. We must remember that while God’s call is mercifully patient, it is finite. There will come a day when He will say “Enough.” But the Holy Spirit is moving among Peter’s audience—3000 new converts to Christianity. The result? New desires, open hearts, “hunger and thirst for righteousness” (Matthew 5:6). The fellowship which they enjoy with the other new Christians includes the observance of the Lord’s Supper and prayer—a “continual devotion.” ***The Holy Spirit, today, brings a new lifestyle and freedom from “this perverse generation”.***

Personal Applications:

1. 2:37-38 Do I accept that my sins “crucified” Jesus at the hands of the Roman soldiers? Do I “grieve” over my sins with repentance? Do I apply the Second Beatitude (Matthew 5:4) as I mourn over my sin? Do I allow the Lord to “comfort” me with His forgiveness? As a believer, is the power of the Holy Spirit real to me?
2. 2:39 Do I receive assurance from God’s promise in accepting me, even though I may be “far off” from His chosen people? Even if I am considered “far off” as a Gentile, do I pray that I will not stay “far off” from God spiritually? Do I count myself, as one of the “many” whom a merciful God has chosen as His own?
3. 2:40-42 Am I persistent in revealing Christ’s love to others? Do I acknowledge that, as Satan is the “ruler of this world” (John 12:31), the world will become increasingly “perverse”? Do I take time to reflect on the price which Christ paid for my salvation? Do I acknowledge the urgency of spreading the gospel message to the lost?

III. 2:43-47 THE FELLOWSHIP

Passage: Luke describes the fellowship of the Pentecost believers, including their unity in worship, generosity, and joy.

Pattern:

1. 2:43 **in worship**

- A. the intensity – the “sense of awe” among all the people
- B. the inspiration – the presence of many miracles “through the apostles”

2. 2:44-45 **in generosity**

- A. vs. 44 the commonality – the one-ness of mind which is evidenced among believers
- B. vs. 45 the concern – the generous nature of the believers, who both sell their possessions and share them with those in need

3. 2:46-47 **in joy**

- A. vs. 46 the sincerity – the sense of community among believers, as evidenced by joyously sharing meals “day by day” (“Let love of the brethren continue”—Hebrews 13:1)
- B. vs. 47 the soul-winning – the continual addition of new believers (notice the worship of the people through praising God, as evidenced by their unity of purpose)

Points to Emphasize:

1. 2:43 Worship. Friendship. Miracles. These characteristics give new meaning to the phrase: “Fellowship of Believers.” Remember that Peter’s sermon is addressed to Jewish people, who previously had rejected Christ. But then, Pentecost happened. They now are born-again believers, who have received the gift of Jesus Christ Himself through the indwelling Holy Spirit. The gift of the Holy Spirit also manifests itself in spiritual gifts among these believers: teaching, service, giving, mercy, and hospitality. A sense of joyous expectancy permeates the group. **Evidence of a vibrant body of believers includes a desire to worship God in unity and to share the gospel message with others.**
2. 2:44-45 Mission offerings are abundant to the point of personal sacrifice. The early church not only sees the need, but also meets the need. Why? Because they are good stewards of God’s blessings. **While we may not be called to the mission field, it is a privilege to participate through offerings and prayer.**
3. 2:45-47 Happiness is certainly a part of the joyous harmony which the early believers share. But there is more. It is a sense of joy which has nothing to do with circumstances. Remember these early believers lived under the oppressive Roman government. They were poor. They were fearful. They certainly were without hope. But now, their lives, their despair, and their life-styles have changed—all because of accepting Jesus as their Lord. Gone are the resentment, anger, and jealousy. Why? “Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple.” It is no wonder that thousands of “new members” were being added “day by day.” **Needless to say, “marketing” can help because it brings awareness, but only the Holy Spirit can bring dynamic and sustained growth.**

Personal Applications:

1. 2:43 What does the word “continually” mean to me spiritually? How would I characterize my worship? Do I still have “a sense of awe” at the miracles which God brings into my life?
2. 2:44-45 Do I take to heart the words of James (1:17) by accepting that everything I have is a gift from God which is to be shared—my talents, my time, my possessions? Am I being diligent “to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (read Ephesians 4:1-6)? Who, in my life right now, do I need to share Christ’s love?

3. 2:46-47 Do I remember that a spirit of joy draws others to Christ? Is commitment a part of my daily routine—commitment to prayer, to praise, to gratitude, to sensitivity to others' needs? As a member of the body of believers, how do others characterize my faithfulness?

Parting Thought:

Alan Redpath, in his book *Victorious Christian Living* writes: "One of the things we all need is to feel convinced that our place in the Body of Christ is not of our choosing. Neither is it the result of the appointment of others. I am where I am, and what I am, by the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit. . . . Therefore I will not hand in my resignation when the pressure gets hot . . . Only the assurance of God's assignment in a man's heart can enable him to take the pressures."

Prayer of Commitment:

Dear Father,

Thank You for the privilege of being a member of the body of believers. Thank You for the beautiful presentation in the lesson describing the birthday of the "bride of Christ." Please remind me daily that joy and gladness are hallmarks of Your church.

In the Name of the One who is the Bridegroom,

THE CONVERSION OF THE APOSTLE PAUL

Acts 9

Background: The church has been established following Pentecost. The first sermon has been presented by Peter. The result has been many converts, unity of purpose, and fellowship among believers. Peter's message is to the people who have not only rejected Jesus, but also crucified Him. The people respond with deep sorrow over their actions, repent of their sins, and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Peter is quick to point out that the invitation is "Be saved!" The inclusion is to all people, even those who are "far off"; that is, the Gentiles. A sweet spirit exists among the early church, as evidenced by their love for one another, the discipling from the apostles, and their generosity toward the needy. These words characterize the early church: gladness and joy.

Today's Lesson: Saul experiences the life-changing experience of a new life in Christ, despite darkness, danger, and discouragement.

I. 9:1-18 THE DARKNESS

II. 9:19-26 THE DANGER

III. 9:27-31 THE DISCOURAGEMENT

Introduction: Rick Warren, in his book, *God's Power to Change Your Life*, writes: "We go to seminars and conferences looking for a painless cure by which our lives can be zapped and changed by instant self-discipline. We join health clubs, and our enthusiasm runs strong for about two weeks. Then we fall back into the same old rut. We don't change. We read self-help books, yet the problem with self-help books is that they tell us *what* to do, but can't give us the *power* to do it. They say things like: 'Get rid of all your bad habits. Be positive; don't be negative.' *But how?* Where do we get the power to change? How do we get our lives out of neutral? How do we break out of the mold we're in? The good news is: Christianity offers the power we need."

In our lesson today, Saul experiences this life-changing power through his encounter with Jesus, despite periods of darkness, danger, and discouragement.

I. 9:1-18 THE DARKNESS

Passage: Saul is belligerent before experiencing blindness and a new beginning through his encounter with Jesus.

Pattern:

1. 9:1-2 *The belligerence*

A. vs. 1a the rage – the animosity by Saul against believers

B. vs. 1b-2 the request – the permission from the high priest authorizing Saul to arrest believers in Damascus and to bring them bound in chains to Jerusalem

2. 9:3-9 *The blindness*

A. vs. 3-6 the encounter

a. vs. 3 the light – the presence of a light from heaven, which surrounds Saul as he is approaching Damascus

b. vs. 4 the voice – the questioning of a stricken Saul concerning his persecution of the person who is speaking ("Why are you persecuting Me?")

c. vs. 5 the Person – the identification of the voice as belonging to Jesus, in response to Saul's inquiry

- d. vs. 6 the command – the call by Jesus for Saul to “get up and enter the city”, where further instructions will be given
- B. vs. 7 the effect – the speechlessness of Saul’s traveling companions, as they hear the voice, but see no one
- C. vs. 8-9 the experience – the blindness of Saul, who, with the help of others, proceeds to Damascus, where he is “without sight, and neither ate nor drank”

3. 9:10-18 *The beginning*

- A. vs. 10-12 the request – the directions of Jesus for Ananias to go to Straight Street, where Saul of Tarsus, who is staying at the home of Judas, has had a vision concerning the restoration of his sight by “a man named Ananias”
- B. vs. 13-16 the reassurance – the initial resistance by Ananias, who, after voicing his concern to the Lord, is reminded that Saul is indeed a “chosen instrument of Mine”, who will be a witness to the Gentiles and will suffer for his faith (see 2 Corinthians 11:23ff, 12:10)
- C. vs. 17-18 the restoration – the laying on of hands by Ananias, who identifies himself to Saul as the one sent by Jesus to restore his sight (“there fell from his eyes something like scales”), and to experience a spiritual birth (notice that he is baptized)

Points to Emphasize:

1. 9:1-2 Saul has the credentials. The education (learned from one of the leading rabbis—Gamaliel). The status (member of the Pharisees). The heritage (read 22:3 and Philippians 3:5). But most of all, Saul has motivation: “. . . as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless.” (Philippians 3:6). What, then, is missing? Just as Warren writes: Power! “Yes, the same power that raised Jesus Christ from the dead two thousand years ago is available to us right now. . . The Bible describes resurrection power as the power to cancel our past, the power to conquer our problems, and the power to change our personality.” We could say that Saul is the Pharisee’s Man-of-the-Year. But he is stuck. Uncontrollably stuck in the mire of Pharisee-ism. Legalism but no compassion. Judgmentalism, but no mercy. The Law, but no Jesus. Only when he meets an immovable force, the Lord Jesus Himself, is he able to extricate himself from his impossible situation. Saul of Tarsus had become a poster child for zealotry and a passionate hatred for anyone bearing the name of Christian. He was not content to limit his ravaging outbursts to Jerusalem, but sought to widen his campaign to other locations. His goal was to arrest all people, who belonged to “the Way”, and to bring them to Jerusalem to stand trial. The one thing God wanted from Saul’s old life, and wants from us today, is passion—a passion for Him. ***Past belligerence, previous hostility, and even murderous persecution never stand in the way of salvation through God’s grace and the individual’s repentance.***
2. 9:3-9 Oh yes, Saul had power. But it was the power of what the world considers success. Jesus wants to give him a new power—resurrection power. Isn’t it interesting that the first words to a prostrate Saul are “Get up, go, and listen”. Get up and go present no problems to Saul. Wasn’t he on the Damascus Road to continue his work of persecuting Christians? But, Saul has a problem with listening. He is used to people listening to him! The “getting up” spiritually means putting aside the old way of life, and arising to a new Master. The “going” includes stepping out in faith, even when spiritual sight is completely blinded. The “listening” means trusting Someone we cannot see. ***Faith always involves going without knowing.***
3. 9:10-19 The Damascus Road experience of Saul includes another person by the name of Ananias. Why would God choose to wait three days, and then use an intermediary to bring

sight to Saul? Could He not have accomplished the miracle instantaneously without help? The introduction of Ananias, a man of faith, is a wonderful reminder that God uses real people to accomplish His purpose, and of course, to identify the former persecutor with His own people. Ananias is characterized by His sensitivity to God's voice, his willingness to allow God to reassure him, and his immediate, if reluctant obedience. Notice the tenderness with which Ananias greets Saul ("Brother Saul"); the awareness of his mission ("that you may regain your sight"); and the availability of spiritual wholeness ("be filled with the Holy Spirit"). Not only do scales of darkness fall from Saul's eyes, but also scales of unbelief, which transform him into a person of "the Way", the very people whom he had persecuted. After receiving physical restoration, Saul "got up" from a life of unbelief, of passionate vengeance, and of extreme legalism to a life of humility, submission, and obedience through baptism. ***All of us, as Christians, are "chosen instruments" of the Lord, to "bear My name" to those who do not know Jesus.***

Personal Applications:

1. 9:1-2 As a Christian, do I reflect on my life before I met the Lord with gratitude for what I have become through Him? While I may not have experienced the depths of hatred, active persecution, and persistent belligerence of Saul, do I recall my preoccupation with "self"? Do I acknowledge that, just as in Saul's day, Satan is still trying to silence the voice of Jesus Christ?
2. 9:3-9 What does the Lord have to do to get my attention? If Jesus is calling me through a Damascus Road experience, either for salvation, or for repentance, will I listen to Him, respond in obedience, and trust Him for the outcome, regardless of the circumstances? Do I realize that unbelievers are like Saul; that is, their eyes are open, but spiritually, they are blinded? Do I accept that spiritual restoration always involves spiritual emptying as well as filling with the Holy Spirit?
3. 9:10-18 Do I acknowledge that the Lord prepares the hearts of both the miracle-worker (Ananias), and the miracle recipient (Saul)? Am I willing to be used as an instrument of healing (like Ananias) through the spoken word or through an act of kindness? Is my home available to be used for the Lord's work (like Judas)? Do I take my doubts to the Lord for His reassurance? Is my spiritual vision, even as a believer, clouded by "scales" of legalism, a critical spirit, or self-righteousness? Am I willing to help someone make a new beginning, by "touching" them with the love of Jesus? Am I walking in His "light" during times of darkness, like Saul, or during times of spiritual uncertainty, like Ananias?

II. 9:19-26 THE DANGER

Passage: Saul experiences a changed life, a confident testimony, and a dangerous crisis following his Damascus Road experience.

Pattern:

1. 9:19-21 *The change*

A. vs. 19-20 in personal belief – the physical restoration and spiritual transformation of Saul, who "immediately" begins to preach Jesus as "the Son of God" in the synagogues

B. vs. 21 in perception – the people's amazement over the change in this one, who had made a name for himself by persecuting believers

2. 9:22 *The confidence*

A. the confounding – the consternation of the Jews living in Damascus because of the increasing commitment of Saul

B. the confirmation – the proving that “this Jesus is the Christ” by the preaching of Saul (possibly by designating Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies)

3. 9:23-26 **The crisis**

A. vs. 23-25 from Damascus Jews – the death threat to Saul, which results in local disciples enabling him to escape by being lowered through an opening in the wall in a large basket

B. vs. 26 from Jerusalem disciples – the rejection by believers, who refuse to associate with him because of fear and distrust

Points to Emphasize:

1. 9:19-21 Oswald Chambers in his classic, *My Utmost for His Highest*, writes: “Through the miracle of redemption, Saul of Tarsus was instantly changed from a strong-willed and forceful Pharisee into a humble and devoted bondservant of the Lord Jesus . . . Many people begin coming to God once they stop being religious, because there is only one master of the human heart—Jesus Christ, not religion.” Yes, this Saul of Tarsus, who is proclaiming Jesus as “the Son of God”, is the same one who approved of the stoning of Stephen (Acts 8:1). How can such a transformation take place? Paul describes it himself in Galatians 2:20, “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me”. **When Christ enters our lives, He changes our hearts so that we become “a new creature”, the old things passed away; behold, new things have come” (2 Corinthians 5:17).**
2. 9:22 The “strength” which Saul once used to persecute the church has been redirected toward evangelism. His passion for hunting down Christians to arrest has become a zeal for introducing the lost to Christ. Saul’s confidence in the Law, his position, and his credentials has now been changed to the extent that he says, “our adequacy is from God” (2 Corinthians 3:4-5). **God is calling us today to evidence this same confidence, which can only come from the Lord.**
3. 9:23-26 A new life “in Christ” may not involve physical danger as with Saul, but it certainly includes such emotional concerns as exclusion, estrangement, and intimidation by the world. Satan is still looking for ways to silence the messengers of Christ. However, we can rest in the promise that God will provide “an opening in the wall” (1 Corinthians 10:13). We can know that when we belong to Him, God will provide a “large basket” of His grace. We can be certain that “when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:10). **Regardless of the pressures or trials which we may face as Christians, we have the assurance that God “will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you” (Joshua 1:5).**

Personal Applications:

1. 9:19-21 Am I as conscientious about my spiritual sustenance as I am about my physical food? Do I realize that prayer and Bible study are nutrients for my soul, so that my spirit may be strengthened? Do I acknowledge that the evidence of a changed life is telling others about Jesus Christ? Do other people see that my life as a believer is different from unbelievers? If they do not, do I realize how much I am hurting the cause of Christ?
2. 9:22 Am I disciplined and committed to keep “increasing in strength” in my faith? Does my life “prove” that there is a Christ? Do I back up my claims that “this Jesus is the Christ” through a

knowledge of the scriptures? As I mature in my faith, am I a more confident witness for the Lord?

3. 9:23-26 What crises am I facing in my life because of my faith? Am I subject to misunderstandings, slurs, or premeditated indifference because I try to emulate my Lord? Am I a faithful disciple who shelters my Christian leaders from “plots”, verbal attacks, and outright slander? As a Christian who may be under attack, am I sensitive to the “opening in the wall” which God provides for my protection, or am I too determined to knock down the wall? Am I alert and compassionate to the new Christian, especially the former rebel, who needs some acceptance, a little encouragement, and my friendship?

III. 9:27-31 THE DISCOURAGEMENT

Passage: Even though discouraged from a negative reaction by Christians in Jerusalem, Saul responds to the reassurance of Barnabas by boldly proclaiming Christ, as the early church enjoys peace and growth, resulting from God’s grace.

Pattern:

1. 9:27 *The reassurance*

- A. the concern – the encouragement by Barnabas, who seeks out Saul and personally presents him to the apostles
- B. the credentials – the relating by Barnabas of Saul’s encounter on the Damascus Road with the risen Lord, who reveals Himself and talks to His former persecutor
- C. the confirmation – the revealing by Barnabas of the active evangelism of Saul in Damascus

2. 9:28-30 *The response*

- A. vs. 28 of confidence – the free movement in Jerusalem by Saul, who speaks out with a boldness concerning Christ
- B. vs. 29 of confrontation – the risking, by Saul, of persecution, even death, in arguing with Hellenistic Jews (Greek-speaking Jews, who are not native-born Israelites)
- C. vs. 30 of concern – the awareness of Saul’s persecution by the Jerusalem believers, who bring Saul to Caesarea and then send him to Tarsus (The *Ryrie Study Bible* reminds us that Saul “remained there about five years before being called by Barnabas to the work at Antioch”—notes on 11:25-26)

3. 9:31 *The results*

- A. of peace – a time of freedom from persecution for the church
- B. of maturity – the building up of the churches throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria
- C. of boldness – the forward progress of the evangelistic movement “in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit”

Points to Emphasize:

1. 9:27 Can you just imagine the welcome which Saul received in Jerusalem—suspicion, whispers, fear? Can you hear the comments—“Have you heard who is back in town? Did you know he now says that he is one of us? Just how gullible does he think that we are?” Now keep in mind that this thinking is prevalent among the apostles, as well as other believers. At this point, a very special person steps up to befriend this former enemy of “the Way”—Barnabas, who has sold his land in order to contribute to the early church. This “Son of Encouragement” not only acknowledges the presence of Saul in a welcoming manner, but also acts as an authenticator of his Damascus Road experience. He relates the effective evangelism work which Saul has done in Damascus, and includes him in the circle of

believers. ***We are never more Christ-like than we include others, pave the way to friendship for outsiders, and bestow unconditional love and acceptance on those who may be new to the group.***

2. 9:28-30 Because of the welcome that Barnabas has initiated and the apostles have continued, Saul is able to move about Jerusalem freely. He uses this opportunity to speak boldly about his Lord. Someone has well said that when Jesus revealed Himself to Saul, the apostle was blinded to everything else except his Master. He did not talk about the weather, the traveling conditions, the seasons of the year, the relatives, or the temple elections. His focus is plain—Jesus Christ. He is so bold that he never backs away from confrontations if someone disagrees with him. The Hellenistic Jews are particularly incensed about this person who has experienced such a spiritual turn-around in his life. In fact, they even plot to kill him. Proof of the believers' acceptance of Saul is evident in their protection of him by sending him first to Caesarea and then to Tarsus, his birthplace. ***We should emulate the example of Saul by being willing to change our place of service, if necessary.***
3. 9:31 A brief time of peace characterizes the early church at this time. The persecutions have resulted in the dispersion of many believers, who have started fellowships in other parts of Judea, Galilee, and Samaria. Not only is the church growing in numbers, but also in spiritual maturity. ***God sends periods of peace to us as believers, so that we will not become discouraged, so that we can experience His rest, and so that we can be prepared for the coming periods of turmoil.***

Personal Applications:

1. 9:27 Are there times in my life when I feel “outside the loop”—perhaps a feeling of not being in on the conversation, not being aware of the secret, not being invited to lunch? Will I use Barnabas as my example of openness, friendliness, and inclusion? Will I not only include those outsiders, but also make them feel welcome by acting as a bridge that can bring people together? Will I affirm where necessary, authenticate when possible, and accept whenever and however? Do I tell others of the good things which others accomplish, or does my own pride get in the way? Do I realize how hungry the world is for people who will reassure them in their times of discouragement?
2. 9:28-30 Do I realize the positive effect of one person who responds to another with reassurance? Am I aware that my message of assurance may be the catalyst for another's effective ministry? Am I sensitive about being bold, without being obnoxious, argumentative, or overbearing? Do I pray for discernment about when to move forward in my witnessing, and when to back off?
3. 9:31 Do I savor those special times in my life, as well as in my church life, when everything is on an even keel, when peace seems to reign, and the fires of dissension seem to be extinguished? Do I use these times as preparation for coming storms, as periods of spiritual maturing, and as times of rest? Do I realize that any power I may have is based on my “fear” or holy reverence for the Lord, as well as the comfort of the Holy Spirit?

Parting Thought:

Warren continues: “Maybe you are overwhelmed by your problems. Jesus' resurrection reminds us that no situation is hopeless. Relax. Trust God, You don't have to be controlled by your circumstances. No problem is too big for God. He is still in the resurrection business. What are you waiting for? Right now you can say, 'Jesus Christ, take my life. Take the good, the bad, and the

ugly. Take every part of me.' ” Open your heart to his love right now and let his transforming resurrection power become a reality in your life.”

Prayer of Commitment:

Dear Father,

Thank You for allowing me to walk in faith with You as my Friend, my Redeemer, and my Savior. Enable me to use my “Damascus Road” experience as a renewed challenge to reach out to those who may be in spiritual darkness, in physical danger, or in emotional discouragement.

In the Name of the One who calls my name,

CHURCH GROWTH

Acts 13-19

Background: Paul's life has been drastically changed—all because of one event. He had a personal encounter with the risen Lord. The impact of the meeting leaves him temporarily blinded, dependent on other people, and facing the leaders in the Jerusalem church, which are, to say the least, skeptical. His commission is to those who are “far off” (2:39); that is, the Gentiles. The spiritual journey which Paul travels begins in Acts 8:3: “But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison”, and ends with “For me to live is Christ and to die is gain.” (Philippians 1:21).

Today's Lesson: Paul spreads the gospel message beginning with the preparation, the preaching, and the problems.

I. ACTS 13:1-48 THE PREPARATION

II. ACTS 16:11-36, 17:1-9; 18:1-11 THE PREACHING

III. ACTS 19:1-41 THE PROBLEMS

Introduction: The following description is given in *1000 Stories and Quotations of Famous People* of the departure to Africa of the great missionary, David Livingstone: “When David Livingstone sailed for Africa the first time, a group of his friends accompanied him to the pier to wish him ‘bon voyage’. Some of them concerned for the safety of the missionary, reminded him of the dangers which would confront him in the dark land to which he was journeying. In fact, one man urged Livingstone to remain in England. In response, David Livingstone opened his Bible and read aloud a portion of our Lord's last recorded words in Matthew's Gospel, chapter 28: ‘Lo, I am with you always.’ Turning to the one who would have prevented his going, the missionary said: ‘So let us be going.’”

I. 13:1-48 THE PREPARATION

Passage: Saul prepares for service as he is commissioned, and as he reveals his commitment amidst controversy.

Pattern:

1. 13:1-12 ***The commissioning***

A. vs. 1-3 the call – the anointing by the Holy Spirit at Antioch for Barnabas and Saul to be “set apart for Me . . . for the work to which I have called them”, which is followed by a special commissioning service by the church leaders

B. vs. 4-5 the consent – the preaching in the synagogues by Barnabas, Saul, and John Mark at Seleucia and Cyprus

C. vs. 6-12 the controversy – the experiencing of problems in Cyprus, which involves the support of the proconsul, and the opposition of false prophets, including a magician (notice the governor's comment: “the hand of God is on you”) Note: Saul is now referred to as Paul.

2. 13:13-41 ***The commitment***

A. vs. 13-15 the setting – the invitation at the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch for Paul and Barnabas to speak (notice the departure of Mark--see Acts 15:36-40)

B. vs. 16-37 the sermon – the address to the “men of Israel and you who fear God” by Paul, who focuses on the privileges given to Israel and the prophecy concerning the availability of salvation through Jesus

C. vs. 38-41 the significance – the emphasis on forgiveness and freedom together with an Old Testament warning to unbelievers that they will eternally perish if they reject God through Christ

3. 13:42-48 *The controversy*

A. vs. 42-45 the conflict – the jealousy (which is caused by the crowd’s responsiveness to Paul’s message) of the Jewish leaders who contradict the teachings of Paul, even to the point of blasphemy

B. vs. 46-47 the cause – the bold statement of Paul and Barnabas, based on Old Testament prophecy (Isaiah 42:6, 49:6), against the Jews for rejecting God’s word, which results in evangelizing the Gentiles

C. vs. 48 the converts – the rejoicing by the Gentiles over hearing God’s word, which results in many new converts

Points to Emphasize:

1. 13:1-12 All believers are “set apart for service” through the bestowal of spiritual gifts by the Holy Spirit (see Romans 12:6-8). This is certainly true of the Antioch church, which is characterized by its spiritual vitality, including the prayers and fasting of its members. In the midst of a worship experience, two members, Barnabas and Saul, are specifically called by the Holy Spirit for special service to minister in “the remotest parts of the world” (1:8). God still sets us apart “to do the work to which I have called them”—foreign missions, home missions, Sunday School teachers, benevolence, preaching, children’s work, music ministry, visitation, and on and on. As the early missionaries experience, anytime God’s word is being proclaimed, Satan is present and actively “accusing the brethren” (Revelation 12:10). In this passage Satan is using Bar-Jesus in order “to turn the proconsul away from the faith.” The pre-eminent power of the Lord over evil is evident as Paul confronts the problem through the power of the Holy Spirit (“fixed his gaze on him”), verbally exposes the evil in the person (deceitful, fraudulent, demonic, unrighteous, and perverse), and dismantles his power through God’s hand of judgment. ***When God sets us apart for service, we must be ready to follow His leadership, even when he takes us into unfamiliar places.***

2. 13:13-41 When we answer God’s call, He always provides direction and opportunity. He provides both for Paul’s sermon to the “men of Israel and you who fear God”, which unites Old Testament prophecy with New Testament fulfillment. (The recording of Mark’s return to Jerusalem implies some kind of disagreement--Paul calls it desertion in 15:38, but we do know from 2 Timothy 4:11 that Paul again will consider Mark “useful to me for service.”) What would you say if you were traveling to another country, attended a religious meeting, and were called on to give “a word of exhortation”? The sermon of Paul is a practical example of effectively presenting the gospel message. It has a beginning—the past privileges of Israel from the Old Testament (vs. 16-25). It has a present focus—the prophecy fulfillment in the Person of Jesus Christ (vs. 26-37). It has a conclusion—accept forgiveness and freedom or perish (vs. 38-41). Jesus is the only way to freedom “from all things”, and He warns us of the eternal consequences of rejecting His Son, which is perishing. ***God is calling us today, through Paul’s sermon, to accept Jesus, who the way to forgiveness for sins and freedom from condemnation.***

3. 13:42-48 Conflicts are a part of the picture wherever God’s work is moving forward. There are always those who are hungry for the word, and those who are threatened by workers in the

kingdom (see John 16:33). Holy boldness is required when the spread of the gospel message is resisted. Paul and Barnabas do not defend their own position, efforts, or abilities; but instead, they stand on the word of God that announces Jesus as “a light for the Gentiles”. This statement evokes great excitement among the Gentile believers, who receive eternal life through their faith and the promise of God. Can you imagine their joy? An eternal way of life through the Person of Jesus Christ, a Jew, is now being offered to them, as confirmed by scripture. No wonder a great revival follows. The result for those who obey the word of God, in spite of problems, is that they are “continually filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.” ***When believers are confronted with conflict, they must heed the words of Paul and Barnabas to “continue in the grace of God.”***

Personal Applications:

1. 13:1-12 Do I show how much I value the leaders in my church through prayer, encouragement, and loving support? Am I willing to be a Barnabas and a Saul in my own home, neighborhood, and community? Do I remember that there will always be a “Bar-Jesus” in my life, as the presence of false prophets will intensify during the last days? Do I pray for discernment and wisdom through faith (see (James 1:5-6) in order to recognize the presence of Satan, who masquerades as an “angel of light” (2 Corinthians 11:14)?
2. 13:13-41 Am I always sensitive to opportunities to share a word about Jesus Christ? Am I ready to give my testimony (a “word of exhortation”) when asked? Do I accept by faith the significance of the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus on my life? Do I acknowledge that true freedom results from forgiveness—freedom from guilt, freedom through grace, and freedom to forgive others as I have been forgiven?
3. 13:42-48 Do I allow pride over another’s success in the ministry to interfere with my joy in service? Do I acknowledge the divine order—first the gospel message to the Jews, and then the message to the world by the Jews? Do I accept that my commission on earth is to be a conduit through which salvation may be brought to the world? Do I remember that, as a Christian, I am to let my life reflect the Light of the world, who is Jesus (see John 8:12)?

II. ACTS 16:11-36; 17:1-9; 18:1-11 THE PREACHING

Passage: Paul and his companions preach God’s word in Philippi, in Thessalonica, and in Corinth.

Pattern:

1. 16:11-36 in *Philippi*

A. vs. 11-26 the opportunities – the preaching by Paul, resulting in the salvation of Lydia, the healing of a demon-possessed girl, and the missionaries’ imprisonment

B. vs. 27-31 the obedience – the response to the supernaturally-opened jail doors by a terrified jailer, who asks a reassuring Paul, “What must I do to be saved?” to which Paul responds: “Believe in the Lord Jesus . . . and you will be saved”

C. vs. 32-36 the outcome – the baptism of his responsive household as well as the jailer, with instructions by the chief magistrate to release the prisoners

2. 17:1-9 in *Thessalonica*

A. vs. 1-4 the response – the preaching in the synagogue by Paul, who focuses on the suffering and the resurrection of “This Jesus,” who is the Messiah, resulting in the salvation of “some” of the Jews, as well as “a large number” of Gentiles, including prominent women

B. vs. 5-8 the rejection - the jealousy of the Jews, which results in mob attacks on Jason, the missionaries’ defender, who, along with others, is dragged before the authorities with

accusations of insurrection against Caesar (“They all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus”)

C. vs. 9 the release – the pledge by Jason, who promises no further disturbance to the Jews from Paul and his group in exchange for their freedom

3. 18:1-11 *in Corinth*

A. vs. 1-3 the people – the arrival in Corinth from Athens, where Paul makes friends with Aquila and Priscilla, who offer him living accommodations and a joint venture as a tent-maker

B. vs. 4-8 the proximity – the relocation of Paul from the synagogue (because of Jewish opposition) to the next-door home of a believer, Titius Justus, where many Corinthians are converted, including the leader of the synagogue, Crispus and his family

C. vs. 9-11 the promise – the reassurance for Paul by the Lord to continue preaching without fear, because He will be divinely protected (notice that Paul remains in Corinth for eighteen months)

Points to Emphasize:

1. 16:11-36 When God reveals new areas of opportunity, He opens doors of salvation, of cleansing, and of deliverance. The three recipients in Philippi--Lydia, the unnamed slave-girl, and the prison guard--exemplify the power of God to change lives. Apparently Lydia, a Gentile worshipper of God, had never experienced a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. The Lord not only opens the door to her heart, but also the door to her home in providing a place for the missionaries to stay. Then, Paul and Silas encounter the presence of evil through the demonic slave-girl, as they are going to pray. She typifies the bondage of people, who become pawns of an evil world. Anytime the pocketbooks of greedy people are affected, their tolerance becomes non-existent. This time, their victims are Paul and Silas, whom the magistrate unjustly imprisons. The setting provides a captivating moment for this event: prayers and the singing of hymns by the prisoners; an awakened jailer who becomes suicidal at the sight of opened prison doors; a voice of assurance from the darkness of the inner prison; the dispelling of darkness by lights; the traumatized jailer who throws himself at the feet of the missionaries; and finally, the opening of his heart to salvation. ***God also wants to open the doors for people who are living in spiritual prisons so that they, too, can experience deliverance from a life which has lost its purpose.***

2. 17:1-9 Paul, as is his custom, goes to the Jewish synagogue upon his arrival in Thessalonica from Philippi. The obedience to his call is so evident as he continues to preach the message of scripture that Jesus Christ is the Messiah. While the gospel message is accepted by some Jews and a large number of Gentiles, Paul experiences the jealousy of the Jewish opposition, who form a mob with “some wicked men from the market”, and who attack the residence of Jason, a fellow believer. The incident is resolved by Jason agreeing to post a bond, thereby guaranteeing that Paul and Silas will cause no more trouble. ***When believers face challenges of opposition, many times God provides a “Jason” to intercede for them, but He always provides the Holy Spirit for strength and courage to continue.***

3. 18:1-11 After being, for the most part, rejected in Athens, Paul travels to Corinth, where he not only works, but also lives with Aquila and Priscilla, who are refugee Jews from Rome. We learn from this passage that Paul is a tentmaker, a craft he probably learned from his father in Tarsus, which was known for this trade. In recalling Paul’s search for new prospects of the faith, we find that he always goes first to the local synagogue. His focus in Corinth, upon the arrival of Silas and Timothy from Berea, is “devoting himself completely to the word, solemnly testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ.” The Corinthians Jews’ lack of responsiveness to the gospel message erases any patience left in Paul, who spiritually (“shook out his garments”) and physically (“I will

go to the Gentiles”) separates himself from his own people. This decision must have been traumatic for the apostle, who so longed for his own people to know the Lord Jesus as their Savior and Messiah. As the apostle preaches the gospel message to willing listeners, an unexpected event occurs. The head of the synagogue, Crispus, who previously had resisted Paul, accepts the risen Lord as Savior, along with his household and many fellow Corinthians. This passage is a wonderful reminder to us that God knows when we need a little reassurance, and a challenge to keep going. ***God reminds us often through our circumstances, even though they may be tough, that “I am with you”.***

Personal Applications:

1. 16:11-36 Do I realize what happens when people pray—hearts are opened for salvation as with Lydia; lives are spiritually cleansed as with the demon-possessed slave girl; and imprisoned souls are freed as with the jailer? Do I acknowledge that the only true freedom comes when Jesus Christ releases me from bondage to sin? Do I accept that when I am spiritually free, I can “go in peace”, even though there are battles yet to be fought? Have I answered the question, “Lord, what must I do to be saved?” If not, will I ask Jesus to come into my heart by believing that Jesus is the Son of God?
2. 17:1-9 Do I thank God often for positioning me in a land where the gospel may be taught freely? Do I pray that, in an increasingly secularized society, God will protect that precious right? Even in Christian circles where genuine fellowship exists, do I realize that issues of jealousy and emotional turbulence can occur? Do I emulate the attitudes and actions of Jason, who defends the faith as well as the faithful?
3. 18:1-11 Do I, like Aquila and Priscilla, reach out to the newcomer with friendship and hospitality? Do I acknowledge that God never wastes my skills—He just uses them for His purposes? Do I emulate the graciousness of Titius Justus in sharing my home, my influence, and my love for God with others? Am I, like Crispus, willing to risk rejection from others by accepting the Lord Jesus? Do I allow the Lord to reassure me during times of discouragement? Do I obey His command to “go on speaking and do not be silent”? Do I receive the help of fellow believers when I am working for the Lord, or am I too prideful? Do I, on the other hand, reveal the Lord’s compassion to people who may be too overwhelmed by personal circumstances to experience it?

III. ACTS 19:1-41 THE PROBLEMS

Passage: Paul evidences courageous godliness among the detached, the deceived, and the distracted.

Pattern:

1. 19:1-10 ***The detached***

A. vs. 1-7 the transformation – the arrival by Paul in Ephesus, where he baptizes twelve disciples who had only heard of John’s baptism of repentance, and who begin “speaking with tongues and prophesying”

B. vs. 8-10 the trouble – the unconcern of the synagogue attendees, who force Paul to move to a lecture hall (Tyrannus), where he preaches the word of God daily for a two-year period to both Jews and Greeks from Asia

2. 19:11-20 ***The deceived***

A. vs. 11-12 the confirmation – the presence of “extraordinary miracles” performed by God through Paul, including both physical and spiritual healing

B. vs. 13-14 the counterfeits – the designation of the seven sons of the Jewish chief priest as the counterfeits, who use the name of Jesus “whom Paul preaches” (imitating the power without experiencing the transformation)

C. vs. 15-20 the cleansings – the exposing of the counterfeits, resulting in changed lives of many of the Ephesian Jews and Greeks, who fear the Lord, who magnify the name of Jesus, who confess their sins, who burn their magic books (valued at more than \$10,000), and who experience revival in their midst

3. 19:21-41 *The distracted*

A. vs. vs. 21-27 the conspiracy – the decision to go first to Jerusalem and then to Rome by Paul, who experiences unrest that is instigated by Demetrius (a silversmith) because of concerns that his source of income would disappear

B. vs. 28-34 the chaos – the riotous actions of the crowd, including a two-hour outcry praising their god Artemis, involving Paul’s traveling companions, Gaius and Aristarchus (notice that Paul is urged to stay away from the mob)

C. vs. 35-41 the calming – the intervention by the mayor of Ephesus on behalf of Gaius and Aristarchus (“neither robbers of temple nor blasphemers of our goddess”) by reminding the crowd that they might be held responsible for riotous behavior by Roman officials

Points to Emphasize:

1. 19:1-10 Concurrent with the ministry of Apollos in Corinth is the return of Paul to Ephesus. He meets twelve men, who may have been disciples of Apollos because their spiritual maturity is limited to the baptism of repentance. Paul clarifies their uncertainties and baptizes them “in the name of the Lord Jesus.” Sadly, some people are spiritually detached, not because of unawareness or of uncertainty, but because of wrong choices. Their hearts become hardened to God’s word to the extent that they become a part of the opposition. In Ephesus, Paul preaches for three months in the synagogue, urging people to accept the kingdom of God in their lives. He is forced, once again, to move his ministry to another location, the public lecture hall of Tyrannus. During this time, a period of two years, Luke records that “all who lived in Asia” heard the gospel message. What an amazing statement in an age when “texting and tweeting” lay dormant for another two thousand years. What was their “information age”? Word of mouth, personal evangelism, and changed lives! ***Even in our day of instant access, the most powerful tool for changing the lives of the unconcerned is still personal evangelism.***

2. 19:11-20 Anytime miracles of God are in evidence, Satan hastens to deceive people with his evil works. Certainly Paul is the conduit for “extraordinary miracles” in Ephesus, even to the extent that a piece of material which has been touched by him produces a healing effect. Just imagine the side-show of the seven brothers—a traveling family of exorcists, a “promise” of healing to the demon-possessed, and the use of the name of Jesus as a kind of magical cure-all. What makes the situation even worse is that the family is a part of the Jewish leadership. The inadequacy of the counterfeits is so evident in this passage that even the evil spirits overpower them. This episode impresses the people of Ephesus to the extent that revival breaks loose. ***We must never underestimate the desire of Satan to counterfeit the works of an all-powerful God.***

3. 19:21-41 Nothing is as distracting to the Christian cause as greed—both among believers and in the world. The silversmith, Demetrius, typifies the person who will tolerate religion as long as it does not affect his balance sheet. The picture of Ephesus is one of the pagan world—confused, enraged, fearful, out-of-control. It is the kind of world that prompted Matthew to say, “Seeing the people He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd” (9:36). God uses the mayor of this idolatrous city to calm the explosive

situation. ***Perhaps God is calling you today to evidence courageous godliness among your family or acquaintances by remaining calm in the midst of conflict, by sticking to the facts instead of confusion, and by remembering the consequences of unbridled anger.***

Personal Applications:

1. 19:1-10 Am I inspired by the tenacity of Paul in overcoming rejection? Do I continue to pray for those unconcerned friends, even when I discontinue active witnessing? Are there people in my sphere of influence who are detached from the gospel because of unawareness, uncertainty, or unconcern, and will I pray for courageous godliness in reaching them?
2. 19:11-20 Do I allow the Lord to perform “extraordinary miracles” in my life? Do I pray for discernment concerning spiritual counterfeits in the world today? Do I realize how many people use the name of Jesus as a “good-luck charm”, rather than having a personal relationship with the Person? Is there anything in my life which needs to be removed? Do I refuse to have anything to do with magic, sorcery, witchcraft, the occult, or astrology, realizing that all Satan needs is a foothold to enter my life?
3. 10:21-41 Am I grateful that my spiritual prosperity does not depend on my business profits? Do I realize how little rumor-mongering it takes to incite a mob? If there is chaos in my family, in my work, or in my classroom, will I pray for God’s resolution? Do I pray for people in leadership positions that they will have God-given wisdom and discernment?

Parting Thought:

Warren Wiersbe in *Be Daring* cites the following illustration:

A man was shoveling snow from his driveway when two boys carrying snow shovels approached him. ‘Shovel your snow, Mister?’ one of them asked. ‘Only two dollars!’ Puzzled, the man replied, ‘Can’t you see that I’m doing it myself?’ ‘Sure,’ said the enterprising lad, ‘that’s why we asked. We get most of our business from people like you who are half through and feel like quitting!’ ”

Paul, the original “church planter”, was never “half through”. “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith.” (2 Timothy 4:7)

Prayer of Commitment:

Dear Father,

Thank You for giving me the courage to continue when I feel like giving up. Enable me to live by the words of Paul who said “It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me.” (Galatians 2:20)

In the precious Name of Your Son,

REVELATION—THE FINAL VICTORY OF CHRIST

Revelation 1-3

Background: The recording by Luke of the conversion of Paul and his establishment of Gentile churches includes the latter part of Acts, plus individual epistles written to these churches. Some of the letters are referred to as “the prison epistles”, which were written while Paul was imprisoned in a Roman jail. The personal letter in 2 Timothy to Paul’s son “in the faith” is the last of Paul’s writings, which comprise a large portion of the New Testament, apart from the apostolic writings. The book of the Revelation is an apocalyptic recording by the aging apostle John, who is exiled on the Isle of Patmos. The Revelation is both a warning to the apathetic and an assurance to the faithful.

Today’s Lesson: John introduces the book of the Revelation, which is followed by a description of the vision, and specific directions to the churches at Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.

I. 1:1-8 THE INTRODUCTION

II. 1:9-20 THE DESCRIPTION

III. 2:1-3:22 THE DIRECTIONS

Introduction: Billy Graham, in his book *Approaching Hoofbeats*, describes the chaos surrounding the anticipated eruption of the volcano, Mt. St. Helens, which is located in the state of Washington. Fortunately, most nearby residents heeded the warning of the experts and moved to a safer location. However, an old man by the name of Harry Truman ignored the alarms and went about his daily activities. Many people tried to impress upon him the danger of staying on the mountain. Because his confidence was based on past safety and refuge on the mountain where he had lived his entire life, he decided to ignore the warnings. Sadly to say, Mr. Truman perished in the volcanic eruptions.

In our lesson today, John introduces the book of the Revelation which calls people to heed the warnings of Christ by describing the vision of the Lord, and by giving specific directions to the churches.

I. 1:1-8 THE INTRODUCTION

Passage: John reveals details concerning the process of communicating the Revelation, the promise of blessing, and the personal greeting.

Pattern:

1. 1:1-2 **The process** (of communicating)

A. vs. 1a the message – the designation of the writing as the Revelation from Jesus Christ, who will “show to His bondservant” the events “which must soon take place”

B. vs. 1b the method (of communicating)

a. from Jesus Christ – the revelation to Jesus from God

b. through an angel – the reference to the angel (an intermediary), who delivers the message

c. to His bond-servant – the recipient of the divine message, who is identified as John (the apostle)

C. vs. 2 the messenger – the description of John as a person who told everyone with whom he came into contact about “the word of God . . . and the testimony of Jesus Christ”

2. 1:3 **The promise** (of blessing)

A. to the readers – the assurance of blessing to those believers who read the book of Revelation (preferably aloud in the churches)

B. to the listeners – the assurance of blessing to those believers who hear the words of the prophecy

C. to the obedient – the assurance of blessing to those believers who heed the words of the prophecy because of the suddenness of the Lord’s coming (The time frame may be imminent or distant; but once the event happens, it will be sudden and will be too late for any person to accept the Lord.)

3. 1:4-8 **The personal greeting**

A. vs. 4a the acknowledgment – the writing of the Lord’s message by John to the seven churches in Asia with the customary greeting of grace and peace (The number seven in scripture is used to designate completeness or perfection.)

B. vs. 4b-6 the affirmation (of the Trinity)

a. vs. 4b God the Father – the source of the message who is the Eternal God; that is, the present, the past, and the future

b. vs. 4c God the Holy Spirit – the source of the message, who is the Holy Spirit, described as “seven Spirits before His throne” (Some scholars believe that this reference is to the seven angels who surround God’s throne. The designation of the Spirit may include the complete nature as indicated by the number seven or to the seven-fold fullness of the Spirit as described in Isaiah 11:2)

c. vs. 5-6 God the Son – the praise for Jesus Christ as a “faithful witness”, “first-born of the dead”, ruler of earthly kings, the One who loves us, the Deliverer, and the One who has promised believers that they will eternally serve God the Father in a kingdom (with Israel --see Exodus 19:6) and as priests (with both Israel and the church—see 1 Peter 2:9- 10)

C. vs. 7-8 the authenticity

a. vs. 7 of Christ – the assurance that Christ is coming again when He will be universally acknowledged, even by those who crucified Him and by those who mourn (because of their rejection of Him as Savior)

b. vs. 8 of God – the affirmation of God as complete (“I am the Alpha and Omega”), as eternal (“who is and who was and who is to come”), and as Sovereign (“the Almighty”)

Points to Emphasize:

1. 1:1-2 The Revelation is God’s last recorded word to us as believers. It is a message that was given to the beloved apostle, John, from the Lord Jesus Himself through an angel. It is a message of urgency because it describes events that could happen at any time. As with most prophecy, the emphasis is not on specific details concerning the time and the place, but rather on the imperative of individual preparedness. ***We should all emulate the example of John as he faithfully tells about the word of God and the life of Jesus Christ to everyone he/she meets.***

2. 1:3 ***The book of the Revelation contains a specific blessing for those who read it, who hear it, and most importantly, who heed it.*** While it is addressed to the seven churches in Asia (modern-day Turkey), the message is both a confirmation and a warning to Twenty-first century believers. Do you want to receive a blessing? Then, read, spiritually appropriate, and

apply the message of the Revelation to your life (remember that it is the Revelation, not Revelations).

3. 1:4-8 John makes it very clear in his greeting that he is just the messenger of an eternal God. If the seven Spirits refer to the seven-fold completeness of the Holy Spirit, then we are reminded of His indwelling, wisdom, understanding, counsel, strength, knowledge, and reverence for God. Jesus Christ is referred to as a faithful witness here on earth (see John 8:18), as the “first-born of all creation” (see Colossians 1:15), as Sovereign King, as loving Savior, and as a Guarantor of a place in His kingdom as priests to God the Father. What else can we say, but “to God be the glory”. ***God’s word assures us with all the sovereign power of the Lord Himself that Jesus is coming again—what a day that will be!***

Personal Applications:

1. 1:1-2 Do I allow Jesus to reveal Himself to me through His word? Do I pray for opportunities to tell others about my Lord? Do I emulate the example of John as a bondservant?
2. 1:3 Am I ready for a blessing (some scholars believe that this blessing is reserved for those who are obedient to God’s *entire* word)? Do I remember the way to blessing—the way of reading God’s word, the way of knowing God’s word, and the way of obeying God’s word (this is actually the inductive style of Bible study that many of us use; that is, what does God’s word say, read; what does God’s word mean, hear; and how can I apply God’s word to my life, heed)?
3. 1:4-8 Do I realize that the word of God is authenticated by the Trinity—God the Father who originates the word; God the Son who both delivers and patterns God’s word for us; and God the Holy Spirit who indwells us? Do I take time to praise the God for His eternal plan for His children?

II. 1:9-20 THE DESCRIPTION

Passage: John describes the reality of the revelation, and the reassurance from Jesus.

Pattern:

1. 1:9-11 ***of the reality***

A. vs. 1-9 of the relationship – the reference by John, a fellow believer, who has not only suffered greatly because of his preaching of God’s word, but also his exile to the island of Patmos (a small island in the Aegean Sea which is near Ephesus)

B. vs. 10 of the spiritual circumstances – the personal description by John of his spiritual condition as being “in the Spirit on the Lord’s day” (Charles Ryrie suggests “a state of spiritual ecstasy”), which is accompanied by a loud voice “like the sound of a trumpet” coming from behind him (Notice the word *like*, which indicates symbolic language. The sound was not a trumpet, but rather a powerfully rich, indescribable voice.)

C. vs. 11 of the spoken words – the instruction by the voice of the Lord for John to record “what you see”, and to send the message to the churches at Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea

2. 1:12 -16 ***of the revelation***

A. s. 12-13a the setting – John’s response to the voice which was coming from one “like a son of man” (“one who looked like Jesus who called himself the Son of Man” LB), who was standing in the midst of seven golden lampstands (the seven churches)

B. vs. 13b-16 the Person

- a. vs. 13b His clothing – the apparel which included a long robe that was girded “with a golden sash around his chest” (NEV) Note: The robe indicates Christ’s position as Judge and the golden band indicates His position as High Priest.
- b. vs. 14a His hair – the description of His head and hair as being *like* white wool or snow (an indication of purity—see Daniel 7:9 for a similar description of God or “the Ancient of Days”)
- c. vs. 14b His eyes – the description of His eyes as sharp and penetrating “like a flame of fire” (indicates judgment—see 1 Corinthians 3:13)
- d. vs. 15a His feet – the description of His feet as burnished bronze (indicating the suffering of our Lord here on earth)
- e. vs. 15b His voice – the description of His voice as a sound like “many waters” (*The Living Bible* says “thundered like the waves against the shore”, indicating power)
- f. vs. 16a His right hand – the holding of seven stars in His right hand (The stars are identified in 1:20 as the “angels of the seven churches” which may be messengers, guardian angels, or the pastors of the churches.)
- g. vs. 16b His mouth – the description of a “sharp two-edged sword” which came out of His mouth (indicates the truth of God’s word—see Hebrews 4:12)
- h. vs. 16c His face – the description of His countenance as “the sun shining in its strength”

3. 1:17-20 *of the reassurance*

- A. vs. 17a the response (of John) – the recognition of the Lord by John, who reacts humbly and dramatically by falling at His feet “like a dead man”
- B. vs. 17b-18 the response (of Jesus) – the calming of John by Jesus with a touch, with reassuring words (“do not be afraid”), and with a reminder of His pre-eminence (“the first and the last”), His eternal life, and His authority over death and hell (the keys represent authority)
- C. vs. 19-20 the recording – the instructions for John to record the vision (“the things which you have seen”), the present condition of the churches (“the things which are”), and the future events (“the things which will take place after these things”) by Jesus, who identifies the seven stars as the “angels” of the seven churches (vs. 16) and the seven lampstands as the seven churches (vs. 12)

Points to Emphasize:

1. 1:9-11 John is uniquely qualified to record the book of the Revelation because of his personal walk with the Incarnate Lord, because of his longevity which has given him perspective and wisdom, and because of his faithfulness to tell others about His Savior, even though his testimony results in personal exile. While we may not audibly hear His voice, God assures us that He hears our prayers (see Psalm 5:3). While we must never add to or take from God’s written record (see Revelation 22:18-19), we can emulate John’s example of sharing God’s word. ***We can be assured that, as the old hymn says, “My God is Real”—a message which we can evidence to others.***
2. 1:12-16 How would you describe the risen Lord? Oh, you could mention His nail-scarred hands, His authoritative voice, His penetrating eyes, and the Shekinah glory at the Transfiguration. Realistically, though, we would have to describe Him through His attributes, such as His power, wisdom, love, purity, humility, authority, holiness, faithfulness, and justice. How reassuring it is to us, as believers, that He reveals Himself to us individually, that He stands in the midst of our church life, and that He holds our churches in the place of honor, which is

His right hand. Jesus Christ is our Head and we are the members of the body of believers. ***Certainly we can describe His position—King, Priest, and Judge, but He also is our Savior, our Redeemer, and our Deliverer.***

3. 1:17-20 The only response which we can make when we experience the abiding presence of our Lord is humility. Those intimate times when His presence is overpowering in our lives may not occur very often; but we can, in retrospect, remember when He unobtrusively guided us through our valleys, when He interceded in miraculous interventions, and when His word leaped off the pages of His word in the midst of our circumstances. His encouraging words of “Fear not” should empower us in our walk of faith. (The directions for John in verse 19 form the outline of Revelation.) We must remember that there are several interpretations for the remainder of the book. ***Rather than become dogmatic about our particular interpretation, we should focus on the promise that Jesus Christ is alive and that one day He is coming for us (“Come, Lord Jesus”—see Revelation 22:20).***

Personal Applications:

1. 1:9-11 Do I pray that I may absorb the words of those who literally and historically walked with the Master, such as John? Do I identify with their passion for introducing others to Jesus? Do I take the time to hear “the still, small voice” of God? Do I really meditate on the truth that my heart is the dwelling place for the Holy Spirit of God (see 1 Corinthians 6:19)?
2. 1:12-16 Will I ask the Lord for His power in becoming more like Him? Will I emulate His righteousness (the robe), His purity, and His wisdom? Will I appropriate His word of truth, which is “inspired by God. . . so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work” (see 2 Timothy 3:16-17)? Will I allow His light to shine in my life so that others “may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven” (see Matthew 5:16)?
3. 1:17-20 Do I spiritually humble myself by giving Jesus Christ lordship in every area of my life? In those times of suffering and of feelings of loneliness and abandonment, do I allow the Lord to comfort me with His words, to assure me with His presence, and to renew me with the promise of eternal life? Do I spend time in God’s message of prophecy, always remembering to keep a balanced perspective? Instead of being consumed with the details surrounding His coming, do I just rest in His promise that He *is* coming?

III. 2:1-3:22 THE DIRECTIONS

Passage: John reveals the Lord’s messages to the churches at Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philippi, and Laodicea.

Pattern:

1. 2:1-7 to Ephesus

A. vs. 1-3 the commendation – the instructions for John to write to the church at Ephesus by Jesus, who commends them for their good deeds, diligence, patience, spiritual discernment concerning false prophets, and dependability in service

B. vs. 4-6 the characteristics (of the church) – the indictment of apathy (“you have left your first love”) Note: The attributes and characteristics of the Lord Jesus are also included in the Bible passages for each of the churches.

C. vs. 7 the challenge – the call for believers to acknowledge the message of the Holy Spirit, to conquer their spirit of complacency, and to anticipate the promise of eternal life with God (The Tree of Life was one of two trees given special significance in the Garden of Eden. By eating of the tree, Adam and Eve would be promised eternal life—see Genesis 2:9).

2. 2:8-29 to Smyrna, Pergamum, and Thyatira

A. vs. 8-11 Smyrna – *the commendation*: the spiritual richness of the church in the midst of poverty and persecution; *the characteristics*: the existence of suffering for the church as a time of testing by Satan; *the challenge*: remain faithful, which will result in a reward—the “crown of life” (see James 1:12)

B. vs. 12-17 Pergamum – *the commendation*: the steadfastness of the church in the presence of evil; *the characteristics*: the influence of the satanic cults (notice the martyring of one of the faithful members, Antipas, by the satanic cults); *the challenge*: to repent and to adhere to the message of the Holy Spirit which will result in the Lord’s provision (“hidden manna”) and divine acceptance

C. vs. 18-29 Thyatira – *the commendation*: the praise by the Lord for their good deeds and for increasing “love, faith, service and perseverance”; *the characteristics*: the toleration of the evil teachings of a false prophetess either named Jezebel or used as a symbol of the wicked queen of Ahab (see 1 Kings 16:29-34); *the challenge*: to overcome the enemies by the Lord’s power and the promise of the “Morning Star”, who is Christ Himself

3. 3:1-22 to Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea

A. vs. 1-6 Sardis – *the commendation*: the recognition of a few people who have remained faithful; *the characteristics*: a church with an outward structure but no inner life (“you are dead”); *the challenge*: the plea for the church to remember their past dedication, to retain it, and to repent (Warren Wiersbe comments: “The ‘book of life’ contains the names of all who are born. Those who reject Christ have their names blotted out of the book.”)

B. vs. 7-13 Philadelphia – *the commendation*: their good deeds, faithfulness, and refusal to deny the Lord; *the characteristics*: their “little power” (a smaller church than the others that have been mentioned), the protection during “the hour of testing” (possibly a reference to the Great Tribulation which some believe applies to the rapture of the church before this seven-year period begins); *the challenge*: to “hold fast to what you have” (NEV)

C. vs. 14-22 Laodicea - *the commendation*: none; *the characteristics*: indifferent, condemned (“I will spit you out of my mouth”), self-sufficient, and spiritually impoverished; *the challenge*: to be spiritually rich, pure, covered in righteousness with perceptive eyes (a reference to the eye salve which was made in Laodicea), and to be zealous and repentant or else face the discipline of the Lord on “those whom I love” Note: The three main industries in Laodicea were banking, textiles, and medicines, which explain John’s analogies. Notice the repeated call by the Lord for the churches to personally apply the message of the Holy Spirit.

Points to Emphasize:

1. 2:1-7 The picture of Christ standing in the middle of the churches (“the golden lampstands”) with the church leaders being upheld by His right hand is a source of both encouragement and trepidation as the body of Christ enters the twenty-first century. John is quick to point out the positive qualities which characterize the church at Ephesus. Certainly it was a busy one with a full scope of activities. But John moves abruptly from commendation to criticism—the missing ingredient is love! The distinction between the words “left” and “lost” enables John to provide an answer to their problem—reconsider, repent, and return. The Ephesian church is a backslidden church—all labor, no love; great programs, no passion; impressive statistics, no zeal. What an opportunity for Satan! ***Jesus is calling us today to listen, to heed, and to apply the message of the Holy Spirit to our own lives before God removes His power, His presence, and ultimately the church itself.***

2. 2:8-29 Smyrna, which means “bitter”, represents the persecuted church. The identification by Christ as the “first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life” is a source of encouragement to any group or individual who is experiencing persecution and poverty. ***The Lord’s reminders to “fear not” and to be faithful are sources of assurance and strength to those who are undergoing any kind of testing.***

Pergamum, which means “married”, represents the worldly church. The identification by Christ as the “two-edged sword” is a warning to return to the teaching of God’s word of truth. The urgent call is to repent or face the consequences. ***While the Lord commends those who remain faithful, He cautions against the destructive natures of the “gospel of prosperity” and the theology of worldliness.***

Thyatira, a city known for its trade guilds and industry, represents the idolatrous or unrepentant church. The identification by Jesus as a God of judgment should jolt the stubborn from their thrones of pride. John describes in brutal terms the consequences of tolerating sin, which are sickness, death, and justice (“I will give to each one of you according to your deeds”) to those who continue in immorality with no thought of repentance. ***Despite the Lord’s commendation of the church for good deeds and loving service, He strongly denounces them for tolerating both evil and evil people.***

3. 3:1-22 Sardis, which means “escaped ones”, represents the dying church. It is the church of the Reformation Era which featured denominationalism without much life. There is no commendation for this church apart from the recognition given to a small group of believers. The challenge by the Lord is to remember, to restore, and to repent, or else face the consequences of rejection when the Lord comes. ***The identification of the Lord as the fullness of the Holy Spirit is a wake-up call to those churches that are operating under their own limited sufficiency and in reality are dying.***

Philadelphia, which means “brotherly love”, represents the serving or missionary church. There is no criticism for this church (or for Smyrna). The Lord promises to protect them from a unique time of testing because of their faithfulness and perseverance and reassures them of the reality of His coming. ***The identification of the Lord as holy, as true, and as One with all authority is certainly an encouragement to the small church which is striving to emulate the Master.***

Laodicea, which means “rule of the people”, represents the apostate church. It is the wealthy church which has grown lukewarm in its commitment to God’s truth. It is both hot and cold—a mixture of “truth diluted with error” (Wiersbe). There is no commendation for this church. Yet, the merciful Lord stands outside a locked door waiting to be invited into the hearts of the congregation. He wants to fellowship with the body of believers, but He will not force His presence. ***The identification of the Lord as firm in faithfulness, in truth, and in His pre-existent power and presence stands in stark contrast to the church which has no constancy, little commitment, and a smattering of truth that is diluted by compromise.***

Personal Applications:

1. 2:1-7 If backsliding is a problem, will I take the time to remember those days when my spiritual life was exciting, refreshing, and joyful? If I feel like my spiritual life is imprisoned in chains of sameness, weariness, and hollow ritualism, will I ask the Lord to “Restore the joy of Thy salvation and sustain me with a willing spirit” (see Psalm 51:12)? Will I ask God for His power to keep my faith dynamic?
2. 2:8-29 Will I be vigilant against the spiritual enemies of discouragement, self-pity, bitterness, and faultfinding which can so easily accompany times of testing? Will I pray for guidance in

testing the spirits “to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (see 1 John 4:1)? Do I realize the subtlety of Satan in getting people, even believers, to substitute the word *tolerance* for *truth*? Will I be sure that I, as an individual and as a member of the body of believers, am not being seduced by the false teaching of compromise?

3. 3:1-22 Is my life characterized by little vitality, no zeal, and just an outward structure? If so, will I pray for a recommitment to “walk by the spirit”? Can my present life be characterized as a part of the Philadelphian church which, even though small, sincerely desires to obey God’s word and to honor His name? Do I strive to have the “mind of Christ” as described in Philippians 2:1-4? Is my desire to be spiritually rich or materially wealthy? Am I falsely secure because of my self-sufficiency? Will I give Jesus the keys to every area of my life so that He never has to stand outside the door of my heart?

Parting Thought:

The message of the Revelation is one of hope because Jesus Christ lives and is preparing a place for “His bride”. Because it is a glimpse “into the heavenlies”, the book is sometimes viewed with apprehension. William Barclay in his commentary describes the writing this way: “It (apocalyptic literature) is continually trying to describe the indescribable, to say the unsayable, to paint the unpaintable”. However, with the help of the indwelling Holy Spirit, the Revelation promises a rich source of encouragement for the persecuted, deliverance for the spiritually imprisoned, and victory for the defeated. May we receive assurance from 1 Corinthians 13:12, “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I shall know fully, just as I also have been fully known”.

Prayer of Commitment:

Dear Father,

Thank You for the book of Revelation and for John’s obedience to Your command to record it. Enable me to heed Your warnings, to receive Your encouragement, and to experience Your blessing.

In the Name of the One who is coming again,

GROWING IN CHRIST

John 15

Background: Today's lesson concludes the study in the New Testament Survey, entitled *The King and His Community*, written by Dr. J. Kie Bowman. It is a lesson on how to continually live a spiritually fruitful life in the community of the King of Kings. In this chapter, the Lord Jesus, who is preparing His followers for the time following His death, uses three familiar word pictures: "the vine," "the vine-dresser," and "the branches".

Today's Lesson: Jesus teaches His disciples about growing in Christ, including the source of their security, despite the scorn of the world.

I. 15:1-8 THE SOURCE

II. 15:9-17 THE SECURITY

III. 15:18-27 THE SCORN

Introduction: Herschel Ford, in his book *Simple Sermons from the Gospel of John*, tells about the parenting techniques of Dr. J. A. Campbell, a preacher in North Carolina for whom Campbell College is named. "When his two boys were ready for college, he took them to Wake Forest. They had never been away from home before. It was hard for him to tear himself away from them. Just before he left, he handed the older one a checkbook, and he said to both of them: 'As long as you believe as I do and stand for the things that I believe in, as long as you live up to my teachings, you can write out your own checks and I will honor them at the bank.' He said that he often had a hard time meeting these checks, but that somehow he was able to take care of everything for his boys. Both of them became college presidents. Jesus was saying just what this father was saying: 'As long as you live in Me and stand for the things that I stand for, I will answer your prayers.' "

In our lesson today, Jesus prepares His followers for living "away from home," which focuses on Him as the source of their security in a world filled with scorn.

I. 15:1-8 THE SOURCE

Passage: Jesus teaches the apostles about the relationship, the results, and the rewards of spiritual growth.

Pattern:

1. 15:1-3 *The relationship*

A. vs. 1 the comparison – the self-identification by Jesus as the "true vine" with the designation of God the Father as the "vinedresser" (the last of the seven "I AM" statements of Jesus in the book of John) Note: Israel is described in the Old Testament as the vine in Psalms 80:8-9, but here, Jesus is designating Himself as the genuine vine.

B. vs. 2 the caution – the warning that every fruitless "branch" will be removed and fruitful believers will be "pruned" (The phrase "in Me" seems to indicate that the "branches" are believers. Regardless of the interpretation, the emphasis in this passage is on spiritual growth.)

C. vs. 3 the confirmation – the reference to the spiritual condition of the apostles as having been cleansed "because of the word that I have spoken to you" (NEV)

2. 15:4-6 *The results*

A. vs. 4 the priority – the teaching of the imperative of a reciprocal relationship between the believer and Jesus, resulting in spiritual effectiveness (The teaching states that without this relationship, there is no growth in Christ.)

B. vs. 5 the productivity – the reference to the spiritual growth for those who remain in fellowship with Jesus, which is vital for any kind of spiritual activity (“apart from Me you can do nothing”)

C. vs. 6 the peril – the reality of the separation which awaits those who are unproductive (“he is thrown away like a branch and withers” NEV) Note: This teaching may refer to the destruction of works (hay, wood, and stubble), which is described in 1 Corinthians 3:11-15. The Bible does not teach the loss of salvation for believers—see John 6:37.

3. 15:7-8 **The rewards**

A. vs.7 of answered prayer – the reference to the benefit of the granting of petitions to those who remain (“abide”) in fellowship with Jesus through His word

B. vs. 8a of glorifying the Father – the teaching by Jesus that spiritual fruitfulness brings glory to God

C. vs. 8b of increasing works – the confirmation of true discipleship through continuing to bear “much fruit”

Points to Emphasize:

1. 15:1-3 The time is short. His betrayal is near. The disciples must be overwhelmed. Therefore, the teaching is direct: “Abide in Me.” Dr. Campbell uses another phrase: “Remember what I have taught you.” Since the word “abide” is not part of today’s vernacular, what does it mean? Warren Wiersbe, in his book *Be Transformed*, writes: “It means to keep in fellowship with Christ so that His life can work in and through us to produce fruit. This certainly involves the Word of God and the confession of sin so that nothing hinders our communion with Him (vs. 3).” What then is “fruit”? Wiersbe uses the word “results.” He adds: “A machine can produce results and so can a robot, but it takes a living organism to produce fruit.” The abiding life in Christ is the deepest relationship which exists—deeper than parental love, marital love, or the love of a friend. Jesus is teaching His disciples that this relationship will exist after His death through the provision of the Holy Spirit (14:16-17). The specific fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). God keeps these graces viable by doing two things with the branches: if they are non-productive, they are considered worthless and He removes them from His fellowship or areas of service; if they are fruit-bearing, they are pruned to become more productive. This pruning is accomplished with His word (vs.3) and with circumstances, which may involve suffering. Again, God uses His word to reassure us during these times.

When we understand our position in Christ as branches of the vine, then we can begin the process of growing in Christ.

2. 15:4-6 *The New Century Version* interprets “abide in Jesus” as “remain in Me.” *The Life Application Bible* elaborates on this command: “1) believing he is God’s Son--1 John 4:15; 2) receiving him as Savior and Lord--John 1:12; 3) doing what God says--John 3:24; 4) continuing in faith--1 John 2:24; and 5) relating to the community of believers, Christ’s body.” Only when believers empty themselves of self-sufficiency and realize that their spiritual productivity comes from a close communion with Jesus do they experience growth as Christians. Believers may produce good, benevolent deeds which are beneficial to others; but without the provision and dependence on Jesus Christ for power, their works are spiritually meaningless. ***When we say yes to Jesus Christ for salvation, we are positioned to bear fruit,***

which is a life-long process of daily yielding to the Father, of appropriating the teachings of our Lord, and of allowing our fruitfulness to draw others to Him.

3. 15:7-8 The rewards for allowing Jesus to live in us include answered prayer. This “living in Christ” (LB) involves the assimilation of His word into our lives through diligent study, a teachable spirit, and a commitment to obedience. God’s word teaches us how to “wish” for whatever Christ’s desire is for our lives. This is a dilemma for even committed prayer warriors. We pray for a loved one to be healed; yet he dies. We pray for a successful ministry; yet no one seems to care. We pray for a position of service; yet all doors seem closed. In retrospect, we can thank God for *not* answering our prayers according to our own limited vision. Instead, He guides our prayers through His word so that He will be glorified. Charles Ryrie in the *Ryrie Study Bible* notes the progress from bearing fruit to bearing “more fruit” to “bearing much fruit.” ***We must remember that spiritual fruitfulness is not something we work for, but rather the evidence of what we have been given (a personal relationship with Jesus Christ).***

Personal Applications:

1. 15:1-3 Do I take the time to reflect on the essence of Jesus Christ, who is my source of power, my sustainer, my salvation? In the midst of so many false “vines”, do I acknowledge Jesus as the “true vine” in every area of my life? Do I allow God the Father to work in my life as a gardener does in his garden—sowing, watering, “weed-eating”? Do I pray that God will give me the grace to accept the suffering which God’s pruning often involves? Do I remember that the secret of spiritual abiding involves forsaking anything which interferes with fellowship with the Lord Jesus?
2. 15:4-6 Am I “taking care to live in Me, and let Me live in you” (verse 4 LB)? Am I futilely trying to raise my own spiritual crop in the desert of stubbornness and good intentions? Will I, right now, pray that God will give me the grace to let go of the controls of my life and enter into the most life-changing experiences I could ever imagine? Will I exchange my pride for His power, my selfishness for His sustenance, and my ambition for His abundance?
3. 15:7-8 Does my life evidence “enduring faith” which is built on constant fellowship with Jesus? Do I have the assurance that God answers my prayers according to His will and not my own? Do I ask the Lord Jesus to “teach us to pray”, as His disciples requested (Luke 11:1)? Do I acknowledge that answered prayer is evidence of a life which glorifies God? Do other people see Jesus in my life through my spiritual dependency on Him?

II. 15:9-17 THE SECURITY

Passage: Jesus describes the security of His love, of a greater love, and of a deeper relationship.

Pattern:

1. 15:9-11 ***of His love***

A. vs. 9 the precedent – the reminder by Jesus of the Father’s love for Him, which transfers to His love for His disciples, resulting in the commandment for believers to dwell in His love (“abide in My love”)

B. vs. 10 the priority – the teaching by Jesus of the imperative of spiritual obedience, as exemplified by His own life, which has been spent in obedience to the Father’s command to remain “in His love”

C. vs. 11 the promise – the stating by Jesus of the purpose of His teaching, which is to bring not only His joy, but also “the fullness of joy” to believers

2. 15:12-13 ***of a greater love***

A. vs. 12 the commandment – the call by Jesus for the disciples to love “one another” as He loves them

B. vs. 13 the characteristic – the definition of divine love which willingly sacrifices, even to death, for friends

3. 15:14-17 ***of a deeper relationship***

A. vs. 14-15 the confirmation – the description by Jesus of the new relationship with His disciples—not as Master-to-slave, which is based on minimal contact, but as friend-to-friend, which is based on obedience to His commands and open communication emanating from the Father through Him

B. vs. 16 the call – the divine initiative by Jesus, who not only chose us (for salvation), but also appoints us for service, so that we will accept His call to produce enduring spiritual effectiveness (notice the result of answered prayer)

C. vs. 17 the command – the repeated emphasis by Jesus on believers loving each other (see 13:35, 15:12, 15:17)

Points to Emphasize:

1. 15:9-11 Because of the love of the Father and the Son, we are free to love “the Lord your God” (Deuteronomy 6:5), to love our neighbor (Leviticus 19:18), and to love our enemies (Matthew 5:44). How? Through obedience. Obedience which is willing, loving, and grateful. The security which comes from loving obedience is joy—a fruit of the Spirit. It is interesting that the Lord emphasizes this grace at a critical time in His life. Why? He knows that there is no witness quite like a joyful Christian in a gloomy world. Genuine joy is impossible apart from the imparted joy of our Lord—joy which is not contrived, skimpy, or based on circumstances. His joy is overflowing, uncontainable, without restraint, and evident to all. What an evangelistic resource! The abiding life is, in effect, the exchanged life of which Paul refers to in Romans 12:2, “And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” It is the life which Paul talks about in Ephesians 3:19: “to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.” It is the life which Paul refers to in Galatians 2:20, “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.” ***We are commanded to “abide in Me” (verse 4) so that God may be glorified, so that His purpose may be fulfilled, and so that our joy will be evident to all we meet.***
2. 15:12-13 The “new commandment” to love one another is essential for spiritual growth. The choice is not dependent on emotions or on the other person’s “love-ability”. It is predicated on obedience to the command by Jesus. Love is not an option! The depth of a person’s love is measured by that person’s willingness to sacrifice for another. Jesus showed His love by “laying down His life for us”. ***While we may never be called to give our life for another, we can sacrifice our petty ambitions, pride, and convenience in expressing our love.***
3. 15:14-17 Jesus, through His word, extends friendship to everyone who trusts Him by faith. While the old relationship of servant-to-master is based on force and fear, the relationship of friend-to-friend is based on mutual love. Friendships are characterized by openness, availability, truth, respect, and genuine affection. Jesus chose us before time began to be His friend. Whether or not we accept His invitation to friendship through salvation and fellowship is a personal choice. Jesus never forces His friendship on anyone, but through His loving availability, awaits our decision. ***When I accept this love relationship with Him and for***

others, He reveals a divine plan for my life to go into the world and extend His friendship to a lonely and forlorn world.

Personal Applications:

1. 15:9-11 Do I acknowledge the mercy of God who says to “abide in My love”, which is unconditional, available, and the basis of my security? Do I obey the Lord out of a grateful heart for what He has done for me? Is my joy evident to other people, even when my circumstances are less than positive? Do I choose to be joyful because I have access to the joy of the Lord?
2. 15:12-13 Is there a loved one with whom I am estranged? Even if I have been unfairly treated, will I pray that Jesus will love that person through me? Will I allow Jesus to encourage, to build up, and to re-establish a special relationship through me to that person? Am I willing to sacrifice past disappointments, unfair actions, unloving attitudes in order to renew friendships?
3. 15:14-17 Do others know that I am a “friend” of the Master’s, because of my obedience? Do I praise God that, no longer do I need to live in the valley of a dominating taskmaster, but I now have the privilege of living in the palace with the King? Because of my inability to ever be “good enough”, do I praise God that He chose me, not because of who I am, but because of who He is? Do I praise God for His provision of the greatest love to me, even if I am totally unworthy? Do I praise God for His availability to both love me and to enable me to love others?

III. 15:18-27 THE SCORN

Passage: Jesus reveals His assurance to persecuted believers through the promise of “the Helper,” as well as His awareness of the animosity of the world system and the presence of sin in the world.

Pattern:

1. 15:18-21 ***The animosity***
 - A. vs. 18 the response – the reference by Jesus to the precedent of the world’s hatred for Him, which perpetuates itself in the life of believers
 - B. vs. 19 the rejection – the reminder by Jesus that believers are not “of this world,” but chosen by Him from “out of the world” because the world only loves its own
 - C. vs. 20-21 the result – the reminder by Jesus that persecution from the world involves slaves, masters, disciples, and even Christ “because they do not know the One who sent Me”
2. 15:22-25 ***The awareness (of sin)***
 - A. vs. 22-23 through His word – the teaching by Jesus that unbelievers no longer have excuses because of His exposure of their sinful condition (notice the reminder that the person who rejects the Son also rejects the Father)
 - B. vs. 24 through His works – the teaching by Jesus that unbelievers no longer have excuses for their sin because of His miraculous works among them (notice the reminder that unbelievers have also witnessed His works and still have rejected both the Son and the Father)
 - C. vs. 25 through prophecy – the reference by Jesus to the hatred of the world both toward Him and toward believers, in fulfillment of the prophecy from Psalm 69:4, “They hated Me without a cause”
3. 15:26-27 ***The assurance***

- A. vs. 26 through the Holy Spirit - the coming from the Father of the Holy Spirit (also known as the Helper, and the Comforter), who will reveal the reality of Jesus (“to bear witness”)
- B. vs. 27 through the disciples – the authority of the disciples to reveal Jesus through their personal involvement with His ministry and through the close fellowship which they have experienced since the inception of His public ministry

Points to Emphasize:

1. 15:18-21 The love which Jesus commands for the brethren stands in stark contrast to the hatred of the world for believers. Jesus reminds us that we are not alone in this circumstance, because the world hated Him also—enough to kill Him on a cruel cross. Why is Jesus discussing hatred at this point? He is preparing His disciples as He prepares us that hatred is a reality in a world of evil. How sad it is when Satan divides the Christian community, which needs to be united in its battle against the enemy. Satan, who did everything he could do to kill Jesus, now focuses on removing the presence of Jesus in the lives of believers. Because of the pervasiveness of hate, believers must remember that God has chosen them out of a darkened world to reflect His love, His light, and His truth as one body. The world, as dominated by Satan, wants no part of Christian love—preferring hatred, bitterness, and conflict. The world wants no part of the “light of the world”, who is Jesus--preferring the darkness of its own willful ignorance. The world wants no part of truth, as personified by Christ--preferring the lies, manipulation, and innuendoes of hardened hearts. What the citizens of the world will not accept is that Jesus would like to “choose” them out of their spiritual unbelief, if they would only open the door of their hearts to salvation. The disciples must not think that just because the Master is on the Most Wanted List, they will somehow escape suffering. He is also reminding us that we, too, live in a polarized world—those who persecute believers, and those who accept God’s word of truth. Jesus wants to share our burden by reminding us that the persecution of the world is aimed at Him and “for My name’s sake”. The reason for the world’s animosity toward believers? They “do not know the One who sent Me”. ***The good news for true believers is that while Satan can affect our fellowship with Jesus, He cannot affect our spiritual position in Christ.***
2. 15:22-25 Jesus presents His case. The world is without excuse, because He has exposed their sin through His word. If a person goes through an unmarked intersection without stopping, there is no problem. But once a sign instructing people to “stop” is installed, motorists can no longer speed through without a penalty. Not only do these spiritual trespassers hate God the Son, but also God the Father. Jesus presents His case through His works as well as through His words. He mentions that His works are not only extraordinary, they are unique—that is, miraculous. How could anyone witness (or read about) the healing of the blind, the lame, even the resurrection of Lazarus without believing that Jesus is the Messiah, God’s Son? Yet, people, then and now, witness the miracles of Christ and continue to harden their hearts in unbelief. Jesus presents His case through fulfillment of prophecy. He refers to the reason behind the hatred of the world for Him, for His Father, and for believers. It is part of God’s plan. Why would God place us in a world filled with both blessing and suffering? So that we will praise Him for the blessings and depend on His power during the suffering. ***When we personally appropriate the greatest love of our Heavenly Father, then our lives will become so permeated with it that we can love our friends, our enemies, and most important, the Lord Jesus.***
3. 15:26-27 Jesus has already promised that He will not leave the apostles as orphans, but “I will come to you” (John 14:18). Now He speaks with assurance concerning the coming of the

Helper, saying “When” —not if. “The Helper” or “Spirit of truth” will be sent by Jesus from the Father to “bear witness of Me”. Because of the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we have the power to “bear witness” of our Lord and Savior to a lost world. When people are hurting, we can comfort them. When people are frustrated, we can enlighten them. When people feel helpless, we can strengthen them. Not through our own limited ability, but through the power of the indwelling Spirit of God Himself. ***We may not have been with our Lord “from the beginning” as the apostles had, but we have the historical record of His life through His word, the presence of the Spirit, and the power of prayer to enable us to present authentic Christianity to a world of unbelief.***

Personal Applications:

1. 15:18-21 Will I refuse to be surprised or depressed when unbelievers avoid me, exclude me from their functions, or start whispering campaigns behind my back because of my relationship with Christ? Will I praise God that He chose me to be His own through Christ? Do I realize that once I was part of the world system, but because of the greatest love of God, I am now in His kingdom? If the world is not rejecting me for my faith, do I need to re-examine my commitment? Am I prepared for both blessings and sufferings in my walk with the Lord (read John 16:33 for assurance)?
2. 15:22-25 Do I allow the teachings of Jesus to convict me of sin in my life? Do I allow His word to remove any defensiveness or excuse-making from my life? Do I accept with sadness and prayer that some people will witness, even experience the mercy of God, but still reject Him? Do I allow fulfilled prophecy to assure me in times of suffering? Do I realize that many times, unbelievers reveal their rejection of Jesus by rejecting the believer?
3. 15:26-27 Do I acknowledge that I have the indwelling Spirit of truth “who proceeds from the Father”? Do I refuse to allow self-pity, bitterness, or an avenging spirit to interfere with the fellowship of God’s Spirit? Do I acknowledge the relationship chain of the Holy Spirit: sent by the Son from the Father (verse 26) through me and then to others? Do I pray for opportunities to be used by the Holy Spirit, which is evidence of growing in Christ?

Parting Thought:

In *Through the Wilderness of Loneliness*, Tim Hansel tells the story of two men who were asked by their pastor to read the Twenty-third Psalm at a special service. The first man was a gifted speaker who had “a voice like an angel”. He knew how to stand, how to speak in measured steps, and how to look his best in front of an audience. “He was good. In fact, very good.” The audience responded with a murmuring of approval. The second man was older, wore clothes which were rumpled, and had trouble keeping up with the place. “On some words he almost slowed to a stop, as if to savor their fullness of meaning. There were unmeasured pauses, and then very deliberately he would begin again, emphasizing certain words with a power that was not his own”. At the conclusion, people responded initially with a “stunned silence” and then with a two-minute standing ovation. A young man, on the way out of the church, asked his friend what was the difference. The friend replied, “The first man knew the Twenty-third Psalm. The second man knew the Shepherd”.

Our prayer:

Lord, as we conclude this series of lessons from the New Testament, may we not only read Your word, but may we also be the one who knows the Shepherd.