

The 4 GOSPELS
in one story

Part One

Introduction

All four gospels are combined to read as one story rather than four separate ones.

Nothing is left out of any of the four gospel accounts, and the story flow and sequence of action are as accurate as possible.

A few background/historical details are added along the way to fill in the picture.

The four gospels in one story

Chapter 1 - Luke writes a letter....

My dear Theophilus,

It's your good friend Luke writing and I've got great news. I've been looking into these stories floating around about Jesus, checked them out for myself, connected all the bits and pieces together and come up with the most detailed account yet of what Jesus actually said and did.

But listen to this - it all comes from those who walked and talked with Jesus, who saw and heard what happened - so rest assured, my friend, our belief in Jesus isn't based on hearsay, it's backed up by facts.

Anyway, it's all here for you to read, so, without more ado, may I present to you an accurate blow-by-blow account of Jesus' life on this earth from beginning to end.

The obvious place to start is to ask, "Where did Jesus come from in the first place?" And the simple answer is: he came from God. And how do we know that? By his ancestors. You simply count 14 generations back from Jesus to the Babylonian conquest, another 14 generations back from there to King David and another 14 back from David to Abraham, and from Abraham it's a clear line straight back to Adam. And who created Adam? God did. So that's one way of tracing Jesus back to God.

There's another much more important way, though, because John talks of Jesus being in existence before our universe began. He talks of Jesus living with God, sharing the same powers as God, and of Jesus being the one who created our universe, who gave it life and light for the first time and who now keeps it ticking over every day, as well. In asking where Jesus came from, then, it has a simple answer: he came from God, because he is God.

Did Jesus stop being God when he came to live with us, then? No, he's always been God and he always will be, but he could also take on a human body. He could be God and human at the same time. He's an amazing being, one-of-a-kind, so it's not surprising that his life here with us started off in an amazing way, too.

Chapter 2 - Zechariah gets a shock....

The story begins a couple of years before Herod the Great, king of Judea, died. An elderly priest named Zechariah was going about his duties in the Temple at Jerusalem and he was just about to burn incense on the Altar of Incense in the inner Sanctuary, a once-in-a-lifetime honour for a priest, when all of a sudden an angel appeared out of nowhere on the right hand side of the Altar and stood there in front of him. Zechariah

was scared out of his wits, so you can imagine how relieved he was when he found out he wasn't in trouble.

"I didn't mean to frighten you," the angel said, "I came instead with great news. For years you and your wife Elizabeth have been begging God for a child of your own - well your prayers have been heard. Elizabeth is going to have a baby boy, and a very special boy, too. From the moment he's born he'll be filled with the Spirit and later on, when he grows up, he'll burst on the scene with all the power and spirit of Elijah, bringing many people in Israel back to their God."

And if that wasn't enough to shock the sandals off Zechariah, what the angel said next certainly did. "All this is going to happen to your son because the Messiah is coming and God has chosen your son to prepare the way for him. You've been waiting and hoping for this day to come. Well, it's coming, and the proof of it will be your son. That's why God is giving him all the powers of Elijah, and why he's given him the name John, meaning 'God is gracious,' because God's going to bring great happiness and joy to Israel through your son. Normally a child's own father would choose his son's name, but God has set apart your son for his purpose. It's for that very same reason that John mustn't drink any alcohol, because when people see all these different things going on in John's life, it will clue them in that the Messiah must truly be on his way. And that will cause some serious soul-searching, which will prepare them very nicely for the Messiah's coming."

You'd think Zechariah would be delighted by this incredible news, but he was neither impressed nor convinced. "But how are we supposed to have a child at our age?" he replied, "I mean, look at us, Elizabeth and I are way past our child-bearing years."

Which was true, but the angel came straight to the point in reply. "Let me tell who I am, Zechariah. I am the angel Gabriel. A few moments ago I stood in the very presence of God himself and it was on his direct orders that I'm now standing here with you. If that isn't enough to convince you, then perhaps striking you dumb will. From this moment on, then, until the day your son is born, you won't be able to utter another word to anyone."

While Zechariah was absorbing the shock of Gabriel's words, the people waiting in the outer Court of the Israelites were beginning to wonder what was keeping Zechariah so long. But when at last he reappeared the poor man couldn't say a word. He tried to explain what had happened by waving his arms around and pointing with his fingers but the people had no idea what he was getting at. They assumed he'd had a vision of some sort in the Sanctuary and that's why he couldn't speak. So, with no further communication possible Zechariah finished off his duties in the Temple and trudged off home, wondering as he went how he was going to tell his wife she was going to have a baby when, first of all, he couldn't speak, and secondly he'd have to explain why he couldn't speak too, and how embarrassing that would be.

Chapter 3 - Mary gets a shock....

Elizabeth was utterly delighted, though, especially when she realized she really was pregnant, and for the next five months she tucked herself away, almost as dumbfounded as her husband as she felt the little bundle growing in her womb. "Just look what the Lord has done for me," she chuckled, patting the expanding lump down below, "I wonder who's going to tease me now about not having children."

Elizabeth wasn't the only one to get a shock, though. Just as she was passing the five months mark of her pregnancy God sent Gabriel on another secret errand, this time to the town of Nazareth to Elizabeth's cousin Mary, who was engaged to be married to Joseph, a direct descendant of King David.

The angel appeared out of the blue at the front door of Mary's house one day and with great gusto announced to the startled woman, "My dear Mary, you are a very, very special lady and may the great God be with you."

Mary stared rather blankly at the stranger for a few moments, and then her eyes popped open in alarm. A feeling of dread swept through her. This was clearly no ordinary stranger - and it was no ordinary greeting, either. She immediately assumed the worst and cowered back in fear.

"It's all right, Mary, nothing terrible is going to happen to you; quite the opposite, in fact. I'm here to tell you that God has great things in mind for you. You, my dear, are about to have a son, a boy of true greatness and a future king whose reign over the house of Jacob will never end. I'm talking about the great Messiah, the Son of the Most High God himself, and God has chosen you out of all women to give birth to him. He's already chosen a name for him, too, the name Jesus."

Staggering though this news was Mary had one rather practical and very obvious concern. "Please don't think I'm not deeply grateful for everything you've just said, but could you tell me how I'm supposed to have a baby when I'm still a virgin?"

"No need to worry about that," Gabriel replied. "Remember what happened to your cousin Elizabeth? She was way past her childbearing days but now she's into her sixth month of pregnancy already. And keep in mind that this baby of yours is not just your son, he's God's Son too, so it's God that's making this happen, and God's not exactly known for failing, is he?"

"No, no, of course not," Mary replied quickly, "I remain God's humble servant, so let things unfold exactly as he wishes."

As soon as the angel left, Mary quickly packed a few things and hurried off to the hill country town where Zechariah and Elizabeth lived. When she arrived and began to pour out her story, Elizabeth's baby suddenly began bouncing around inside her womb and Elizabeth herself was filled with the Holy Spirit. "Oh Mary," she cried, "think how greatly God has blessed you and how amazing your child is going to be. Who am I to even be in

the presence of the mother of my Lord? Just the sound of your voice made my baby jump around for joy inside me. And well done, my dear cousin, for believing God is true to his promises."

Elizabeth's joy was so infectious, that Mary couldn't resist bursting into song, the words of which went like this:

"My heart is overflowing with love for my Lord
And with joy in God my Saviour
To think he picked me even though I'm so poor
And he gave me such wonderful favour

People will talk of me from this day on
Of my happiness that I was the one
Who was chosen by God the Almighty
To mother his marvellous Son

How holy he is and so merciful
To so many again and again
How strong he is and so bountiful
To those who trust and love him

But to proud and arrogant people
He's a strength to be mightily feared
Even great among men become feeble
And at the rich he merely sneered

Away they went empty-handed
But the poor and the hungry he fed
He lifts up the meek and the humble
To stay true to what he said:

Did he not promise Abraham our father
He would be true to Israel his son?
Well he's done it over and over
His mercy is never done."

With so many things to talk about Mary stayed with Elizabeth for another three months, during which time it began to dawn on Mary that she was pregnant as well. It

couldn't be, she thought; she wasn't married yet. How on earth was she going to break the news to Joseph when she got back home? But she couldn't hide the growing bulge much longer. Another few months and everyone would know. She would have to tell him right away.

Joseph was very upset when Mary finally told him, but he wasn't upset for himself. He had every right to feel sorry for himself, but he was far more concerned about what people would say about Mary. Engagement was as good as being married in Jewish custom so Mary would be raked over the coals for sneaking behind Joseph's back and getting pregnant. He couldn't stand the thought of seeing her flayed alive in public so he toyed with the idea of ending their marriage vows, but not letting anyone know. It still wouldn't hide the fact, though, that Mary had got herself pregnant before she was married, so she was up to her eyebrows in trouble no matter what.

Joseph didn't know what to do. While tossing these things over and over in his mind he fell asleep, and in his sleep he had a dream and in his dream an angel spoke to him. "Mary is not in trouble, Joseph, because it wasn't her fault she's pregnant. She has a child on the way because of the Holy Spirit, not a man. And in a few months time she'll give birth to a very special boy. His name will be Jesus and he's going to rescue the human race from the horrible mess it's in."

But wasn't this what the prophet Isaiah had said so long ago, that a virgin would give birth to a son and call him Emmanuel, 'God With Us'?

Joseph woke up with a start. In that case, if what the angel was saying was true, then God was already with them as the unborn baby of his pregnant virgin, Mary. The greatest prophecy of all time was being fulfilled right at that very moment inside his wife-to-be. It was all so mind-boggling it took a while for the shock to settle, but Joseph didn't doubt what the angel said for one moment. He immediately set out to take Mary back home with him so he could take care of her, but he didn't live with Mary as her husband until after Jesus was born.

Chapter 4 - The birth of John....

By now Elizabeth was due and to the delight and hearty congratulations of her family and friends for being so wonderfully favoured by God, she gave birth to a healthy baby boy. Eight days later they all gathered together to witness the child being circumcised according to the Jewish law and they all assumed that Elizabeth would follow tradition by naming the baby Zechariah after his father.

But Elizabeth announced firmly that the baby's name would be John.

"But you can't call him John," one of them protested, "Nobody in your family has ever been called John."

There were several mutterings of agreement but Elizabeth wouldn't budge; the boy's name was John, and that was that.

So all heads turned to Zechariah to see what he had to say about this flagrant breach of tradition. Zechariah still couldn't utter a word, however, so he asked for a writing pad. They all waited in anxious suspense as he slowly scratched out a few words and turned the pad around for them all to see. There was a gasp of surprise for there on the pad Zechariah had written, "His name is John."

And it was at that very moment that Zechariah got his voice back, and the emotion that had backed up like a logjam over the last few months burst from him in an explosive cry of thanks to God for his son. The startled crowd shrank back in fright, but, like Zechariah, it didn't take them long to get their voices back either, because the news soon spread throughout the entire hill country of Judea that John was no ordinary child.

"What do you make of our little John then?" was the hot topic of discussion for many a month and many a year to come, as it rapidly became obvious to everyone in that region that God was watching over this child in a very special way.

Zechariah, meanwhile, back in full voice and filled with the Holy Spirit, was blurting out some extraordinary statements. "Our hearty thanks go to the great God of Israel," he shouted, "for remembering the promises he made so long ago through his prophets, that he would provide his people with a mighty Saviour from the descendants of his servant David. Yes, a mighty Saviour to rescue us from our enemies and from all those who hate us and lock us in their grip. All through the centuries our merciful God never forgot the covenant he made with our dear father Abraham, because our Saviour is on his way to us right now, flying to our rescue to send our enemies packing and free us from our helplessness and despair. At last we can all live the kind of upright, holy lives we've always dreamed of living."

To the gawping crowd Zechariah was clean out of his mind. But he hadn't finished yet; there was more to come. They froze in silent fascination as he turned to Elizabeth, gently lifted his son into his arms and spoke again. "As for you, my son, you are the one the Most High God has chosen to prepare the way for the Messiah's arrival. You will become a great prophet in this country, shouting from the rooftops one day that God in his most tender mercy has brought forgiveness and salvation to us all. Through you, my boy, it will feel like the dawning of a brand new day for all those who have known nothing but darkness and death. Think of it, we'll soon be on the road to peace at last."

Zechariah's outburst riveted the region for many moons to come. But the years passed and John was almost forgotten. Few people attached much significance to the boy anymore as he grew into a fine, strong lad both physically and spiritually. God, meanwhile, was secretly getting him ready for the moment his mission to Israel would be revealed. But before we progress any further in John's story, we need to go back to the time John was six months old, because this is where Jesus comes into the picture.

Chapter 5 - The birth of Jesus....

As you know, Jesus was born in Bethlehem rather than his hometown of Nazareth. That came about because the Roman Emperor, Caesar Augustus, decided it was time he updated the number of people who should be paying taxes in various parts of the empire. He began with Syria, which included the area of Judea and the town of Nazareth. Every family in Judea had to report in at one of the towns with a taxation centre and register their names. For Joseph it meant leaving Nazareth and travelling many days through brutally rugged country with his very pregnant Mary all the way south past Jerusalem to Bethlehem, since Bethlehem was known as the city of David and Joseph was a descendant of David.

They staggered into Bethlehem just in time because Mary was showing all the signs of giving birth at any moment. Joseph quickly hunted around for a room they could stay in but the town was packed with travellers and every room was taken. The only mildly suitable shelter he could find was a stable at the back of one of the hostels where the animals were kept. What a place to deliver a baby, he thought, but it would have to do. It wasn't a second too soon either, because just as they were settling in Mary announced the baby was coming.

In the snuffling company of animals in a barn full of animal smells, Mary gave birth to the Saviour of the world. She wrapped the baby in some warm blankets and laid him in a feeding trough lined with straw. As the baby slept the townsfolk slept as well, blissfully unaware that their Saviour had just been born in a makeshift delivery room in a stable, with only animals to witness his birth.

But God had other witnesses in mind, too. On the same night Jesus was born there were several shepherds camped out in the hills close by keeping an eye on their sheep. All was quiet and peaceful when suddenly, the sky lit up in front of them in a flash of light and there stood an angel, piercing the darkness all around them with the brilliant, flaring brightness of Divine Presence. The shepherds staggered back in abject terror, buckled at the knees and fell to the ground.

"I didn't come to frighten you," the angel said, "I come, instead, with great news for everyone in Israel. Just a few moments ago, in Bethlehem, David's city, the Saviour was born, the Lord's Messiah. You can see him for yourself if you like, he's bundled up in blankets sleeping soundly in a feeding trough in a stable."

The angel was then joined by a whole host of heavenly beings, who in one great chorus of delight shouted to the sky, "Glory to God in the highest heavens for the peace and the joy he now brings to every human being." And then they were gone.

The shepherds could do nothing but blink for several minutes, but it helped their eyes adjust to the darkness again, and then they all began babbling at once. They talked for

some time about what they should do next, but the conclusion was obvious: "We've got to check this out, right? So come on, let's go down to Bethlehem and see for ourselves."

Tingling with excitement they scampered out of the hills and into the city, where they rushed through the streets peeking into every animal stable they could find. The murmuring of voices from one of the stables tipped them off and there inside they found what they were looking for, exactly as the angel had described it. Peering through the soft light of a lantern they could see Joseph and Mary and the outline of a bundle wrapped in blankets in one of the feeding troughs. They were beside themselves with joy. It had happened, it had really, really happened. The long-awaited Messiah had been born.

They couldn't contain their joy. They stayed long enough in the stable to let Joseph and Mary know everything the angel had told them but then they bolted out of there as fast as they could to tell anyone else they found awake that the Messiah had been born exactly as the angel had said.

Many jaws clanked open that night and many eyes opened wide with surprise as the astounding news from these lowly shepherds sunk home. Leaving a wake of astonishment behind them the shepherds headed back to the hills, thanking God loudly that everything they'd been told was true. Mary's mind was reeling too, because the shepherds had just confirmed it as fact that her little boy snoring away in the feeding trough was none other than the promised Messiah himself.

Eight days later Mary had her son circumcised and officially given the name Jesus. Forty days after Jesus was born she and Joseph took Jesus to Jerusalem to offer him to God, since every firstborn son belonged to God. Rather than offer the child himself in sacrifice, though, the Law of Moses allowed a sacrifice of two pigeons to cover the price of buying the child back.

It was while they were in the Temple that a remarkable thing happened, to confirm yet again to Mary and Joseph that this son of theirs really was the Messiah. A man named Simeon was also in the Temple at the time. He'd been told by the Holy Spirit that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah for himself. Simeon was a good man, whose entire life had been guided by the Holy Spirit. His greatest hope was to see the Saviour come to Israel in his lifetime.

Simeon's dream was about to come true - but a whole lot sooner than he expected, because the Spirit made sure he was at the Temple on the very day Joseph and Mary arrived with Jesus for the dedication ceremony. When they handed over their son to Simeon the old man suddenly found himself staring down at a face he'd never seen before, but he knew who it was.

To Joseph's and Mary's astonishment Simeon swung the boy up high in his arms and in a voice choking with emotion he thanked God and cried: "You can take my life any time now, my Master, because all that I longed for in this life of mine is right here in my arms. Here is the Saviour you promised I would see before I died, the Saviour that all

nations will know about one day, Gentiles included, but destined for a special place of honour among your beloved people, Israel."

He lowered his arms, eyes glued to that little face for a few more moments. He tore his eyes away to look at Joseph and Mary standing there with their mouths open, so he smiled and pronounced a blessing on them too.

"Now let me tell you something, Mary," Simeon said, gently rocking Jesus, "When this boy grows up he's going to create quite a stir. Some people will love him but most people will hate him, because he's going to expose the garbage that fills their heads and hearts. Even your own heart, Mary, will feel like it's been stabbed by a sword at times."

As Simeon was speaking an old prophetess named Anna joined them. She was really old, too. Add up the years before she was married to the seven years she spent as a wife and the eighty-four years she spent as a widow and she must've been at least 105 years old. But even at her ripe old age she had remained utterly devoted to God, spending most of her time in the Temple fasting and praying.

When Jesus entered the Temple she'd been drawn to him like a magnet, and on catching sight of him she too gasped with joy and immediately began telling anyone and everyone who had been hoping for this very moment that their Saviour had arrived. This was all quite overwhelming for Joseph and Mary as the evidence kept mounting up as to who their son really was.

Chapter 6 - Herod's murderous plan....

What really got tongues wagging about Jesus was the arrival in Jerusalem of several regally dressed astrologers from Persia. They roamed the streets asking everyone they met where the newly born king of the Jews could be found. They had seen his star rising, they said, and had come to pay their respects.

News of their search spread like fire through dry brush, reaching all the way up to King Herod. He became extremely agitated, just like everyone else in the city. A deep sense of foreboding settled upon him. Was the rumour true? Had the Messiah these Jews were always talking about really come, or was this just more wishful thinking by a conquered nation looking for yet another excuse to rise up in rebellion against Rome?

He wasn't sure, but either way it spelt trouble. He'd better stamp out the rumours right away, he thought, or better still stamp out the Messiah himself. Yes that was it, get rid of their Messiah before he got the chance to show his face in public. But where was he? Nobody seemed to know. Ah, but if anyone knew the Jewish chief priests and scribes surely did. Smiling at his brilliance, Herod spat out orders to his staff to fetch the religious leaders at once and bring them to the palace.

He tapped his fingers impatiently as he awaited their arrival. A short time later they shuffled in and stood in front of him looking very uncomfortable. He got to the point immediately, asking them if they knew where their Messiah would be born.

"Oh, that's easy, Your Excellency," one of them replied, sighing with relief that this was all Herod had summoned them for, "our scriptures indicate that the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem. There's a prophecy in the scripture which reads like this: 'You, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are not among the least of the princes of Judah for out of you shall come forth a great leader who will shepherd my people Israel.'"

So the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, was he? Well, well, well, Herod thought, smiling slyly to himself. That certainly narrowed down the search a bit; but where in Bethlehem? That was next question.

Then it struck him: the astrologers from Persia who'd caused all this stir in the first place; they'd know. Hadn't they been telling everyone they met they'd been following a star, which they said was taking them to the place where the Messiah was born? All he had to do, then, was find out where the star was headed and follow it. But why weren't the astrologers themselves following it? They must have lost sight of it somewhere. So, when and where did they last see it? It was high time he summoned the astrologers to the palace to find out.

When they arrived they told Herod they'd last seen the star just a short while ago, which made Herod's eyes light up with evil glee because that meant the baby and his parents were probably still down in Bethlehem. All Herod needed now was the actual location of the house where they were staying and he had them. Just one more little clue was all he needed - and a few seconds later it came to him.

He almost leapt out of his throne in triumph, because the last clue was standing right there in front of him. If he told the astrologers that they'd find who they were looking for in Bethlehem and there really was a star guiding them, then the star should take them to the exact spot, right? It was certainly worth a try at least.

"I may be able to help you," Herod smiled, trying to contain his excitement so he wouldn't arouse their suspicions. "The Jewish leaders were here just a while ago and they told me their king would be born in Bethlehem. Perhaps you could try looking there, and if you do happen to find the child, would you mind bringing back news of his whereabouts to me so I can pay my respects to him, too?"

It worked like a charm. The astrologers immediately loaded up their camels and headed for Bethlehem, totally unaware that Herod had blood on his mind, not worship. As they left the city on the southbound road the star appeared to guide them on their way again. This time the star took them straight to the house where Jesus was, just as Herod had hoped.

For them it was the magic moment they had travelled so long and so far for. They unstrapped a treasure chest from one of the camels' backs and nervously announced their arrival. When they entered the room and saw Jesus they all fell to their knees,

touching their foreheads to the ground in a spontaneous gesture of respect and wonder. Then they rose and approached the child, lay the treasure chest on the floor in front of him and opened the lid. Inside were three precious gifts that perfectly pictured the roles Jesus would play in his life - gold, the traditional gift for kings for his role as king; frankincense, the sweet perfume of the Temple for his role as priest, and the exotic perfume myrrh used for embalming to picture his sacrifice on the cross as Saviour.

At which point Herod's foxy little plan immediately backfired because God warned the astrologers in a dream not to return to Jerusalem, but to go back home to Persia by another route, which is exactly what they did and Herod never saw them again. But God knew Herod would not be put off that easily. The king's evil game may have been scuttled for the moment, but he still had his quarry in sight and he was closing in fast.

It wasn't long after the astrologers left that Joseph was given a warning by an angel in a dream. "Joseph, Joseph, listen to me, there's no time to lose," the angel urged. "It's absolutely critical that you take your wife and child out of this place immediately. Hurry on down to Egypt as fast as you can and don't move from there until you hear again from me. Have you got that? Go to Egypt and stay there because Herod will soon be sending out search parties to find the boy and kill him."

The dream was so vivid that Joseph was awake in an instant. He nudged Mary awake, explaining to his startled wife as he hurried round the room gathering up clothes and bedding, that God wanted them out of there and on the road to Egypt while the night would hide their escape. "Why Egypt?" they must've wondered, but God was fulfilling yet another prophecy made long ago about the Messiah. "Out of Egypt did I call my son," Hosea had written. But who could've known that the Saviour of the world would be a fugitive on the run to Egypt as God's way of making sure Hosea's prophecy was fulfilled?

Mary's main concern at that moment, however, wasn't the fulfillment of a prophecy, it was making sure Jesus was bundled up in warm clothes and blankets while Joseph loaded up the donkey as quietly as he could. Then, like shadows, they silently slipped out of Bethlehem.

Chapter 7 - Jesus in the Temple....

What a contrast their quiet escape was to the furious action exploding in Herod's palace. By now Herod realized the astrologers weren't coming back and he was furious. In a purple fit he yelled out orders for an armed gang of soldiers to ride like the wind to Bethlehem and storm every home in the neighbourhood in search of every baby boy they could find up to two years old. When they found such a boy, he yelled to them, they were to kill him on the spot.

But even this horrible act of barbarism was a fulfillment of a prophecy about the Messiah too. This time it was the words of the prophet Jeremiah that sounded their distant toll of doom: "The sad crying of Rachel weeping for her children could be heard in Ramah, and no-one could comfort her because of the terrible suffering her children were going through."

But the suffering did end because it wasn't long after this terrible massacre of innocent children that Herod himself collapsed and died, and the search for Jesus was called off.

The news of Herod's death was duly passed on to Joseph by the angel in another dream. The way was now clear for them to return home to Palestine. It was music to their ears.

But all was not well when they arrived. Herod's son Archelaus had succeeded his father as King of Judea, and Joseph smelt danger hanging in the air still in Bethlehem. With God as their guide they headed north and ended up in Nazareth in Galilee, which was nice because Nazareth was home for both of them. But it wasn't home so much that God had in mind, it was the fulfillment of yet another prophecy, that one day Jesus would be called a Nazarene, the man from Nazareth.

So it was Nazareth where Jesus spent his childhood. He grew up strong in both body and mind under the ever-watchful eye of God, who took great interest in grooming the lad personally. This soon became apparent when Jesus was only 12 years old. He and his parents were in Jerusalem at the time, on their annual trip for the Passover festival, only this time Jesus was with them as well, because at age 12 he was expected to attend the festival every year now with his parents.

The festival lasted a whole week after which the huge crowd of people automatically split off into their various hometown groups and wound their way back home again. Back in Jerusalem Joseph and Mary had seen Jesus happily chatting to some children his age and assumed he'd latched on to one of their families as they left the city. He was a sensible boy and they trusted him.

But the caravan had been weaving its dusty way back to Nazareth a whole day already when it dawned on Joseph and Mary that they hadn't even seen their son, let alone talk with him. So at camp that evening they hurried from tent to tent in search of the boy, but none of their friends or neighbours had seen him either. How very strange. Somehow or other he must have wandered off in Jerusalem and missed the time of departure. It was most unlike Jesus to do a thing like that, but what else could've happened?

They had no choice but to trek back to Jerusalem that night and find out. Red-eyed with worry and fatigue they arrived back in the city hoping they'd find Jesus anxiously looking out for them in an obvious spot. But there was no sign of him and no familiar face darting from an alleyway in the early morning light either. For two days they searched asking everyone they met if they'd seen him, until, at last, someone

mentioned there was a young lad in the Temple in serious discussion with the teachers there.

They rushed into the Temple and slid to a startled stop because there in front of them was their son, safe and sound, sitting on the floor surrounded by the Temple teachers and a hushed crowd of onlookers. They were so relieved they wanted to shout to him, but the voice of their son rising above the hush made them pause and listen. They crept closer to find out what he was saying. He was asking a question and it was obvious that the whole crowd was hanging on his every word, because on finishing his question, there was a murmur of approval and all eyes immediately turned to the teachers to see what they had to say in response.

Jesus then asked more questions and eyebrows were rising up and down in astonishment that questions of such depth and clarity could proceed from the mind of a 12 year old. He even offered some thoughts of his own, which only made the eyebrows rise up and down faster, because his understanding and intelligence were amazing.

Joseph and Mary watched their son in action with a growing sense of wonder, but they couldn't stay there forever so they caught Jesus' eye and beckoned him over. Mary's relief had turned to anger by now and she was very upset with him. "Why did you do this to us, you silly child? Your father and I have been frantically searching everywhere for you."

"But why were you searching for me at all?" Jesus replied, sounding genuinely surprised, "Surely you knew I'd be here in my Father's house going about my Father's business. Where else would I be?"

They both looked at him rather blankly because neither of them had any idea what he was talking about. How could the Temple be his Father's house? His father's house was back in Nazareth, not here in Jerusalem. What was the silly boy getting at? Mary wasn't exactly sure, but as she glared into those big round innocent eyes of her son looking back up at her, she shivered slightly and decided she would not forget what Jesus had just said. She would tuck it away for future reference with all the other treasures she was storing up in her heart about this remarkable son of hers.

Jesus didn't upset his parents like that again all through his teenage. He made sure he did exactly what his parents wanted and he grew up strong and bright, the apple of God's eye and a favourite among his friends.

Chapter 8 - John appears with a bang....

Over the next twenty years or so, following his chat with the teachers in the Temple, there's not much written about Jesus' life, so we jump ahead to the unveiling of his cousin John, which brings us to the fifteenth year of the Emperor Tiberius Caesar in Rome. Pontius Pilate is the Roman governor of Judea, Herod Antipas is ruling Galilee,

and Annas, followed by Caiaphas, are the high priests in office in Jerusalem. John, meanwhile, is waiting in the desert for his mission to begin, and just as he passes his thirtieth birthday God launches him on his way.

What a sight John was. Out of the Judean desert he catapulted wearing a camel's hair sackcloth outfit tied round his waist with a leather belt, and all he ate was locusts and wild honey. He toured up and down the Jordan Valley preaching to all and sundry that God's rule over the earth was on its way, so they'd all better get ready for it by cleaning up their hearts and being baptized so that the mess they had made of their lives could be forgiven and washed away.

It was like hearing an echo bouncing its way through the centuries of Malachi's prediction that God would send a messenger to prepare the way for the Messiah, and of Isaiah's marvelous prophecy that "a voice will cry out one day: Make a road through the desert in preparation for the Lord's coming. Fill up the valleys, flatten out the hills and mountains, straighten out the curves and smooth off the rough spots, so that the way is made clear for every human being to see God's salvation coming."

What those two great prophets had said would happen was now actually happening, and the impact on the people who heard John preaching was huge. His reputation soon spread throughout Judea and they came out in droves to hear him, openly admitting their need to change their ways and thanking God for his forgiveness as John baptized them in the river Jordan.

At one point in the proceedings John's mood changed dramatically, however, when several religious leaders from among the Pharisees and Sadducees turned up. A murmur rippling through the crowd alerted John to their arrival. He looked up and there they stood on the riverbank, all dressed up in their fine religious garb and peering haughtily down their noses at him.

John's reaction was immediate. He strode out of the river, yelling and stabbing his finger at them as he swished his way to the shore: "You slimy sons of snakes!" he roared, "Who gave you reptiles the idea you could escape God's judgment? Oh, I know you think you're special because you're Abraham's descendants, but God doesn't give a hoot about that. See these stones here? God could make descendants of Abraham out of simple chunks of rock like this if he wanted to, and he might just do that to prove to you serpents he couldn't care less where you came from, or how important you think you are. What God's interested in is your heart and the proof from how you live that your heart is good. And don't you snake eyes ever forget that, do you hear? God has his axe poised high above his head ready to hack any tree down that doesn't produce good fruit and he'll burn it like a pile of rubbish, and that includes you."

The impact of John's stinging rebuke tumbled through the crowd with a mighty wallop. He'd aimed it straight at the religious leaders, but it was the people who got the point. First one voice, and then many voices, cried out, "What should we do then, John? Please, tell us what God would have us do."

"Well, that's not so hard to grasp," John replied, turning his attention to the sea of anxious faces before him. "Go share what you've got with others if they're worse off than you. If you've got two jackets donate one of them to someone who doesn't have a jacket at all. If your cupboards are full of food don't hog all that food to yourself; think of those who are only just scraping by and share what you don't need with them."

Lots of nodding of heads and murmurs of agreement met his remarks.

What John was saying made obvious sense. Of course this was what God wanted. All through the crowd thoughts of how selfish their lives had been began to flood their minds with loathing and disgust. Seeing John up to his waist in the river offering them the chance to wash away all their guilt in baptism suddenly became very inviting. They could put the past behind them and bury it forever in the swirling water of the river Jordan. Many of them, therefore, were baptized then and there. Down they went under the water and up they came again, and what a relief it was to rise up out of the water and know that God had forgiven them and they could stand before him absolutely clean. It was just like starting out on a whole new life.

A wonderful spirit of humility and eagerness to please God settled upon the crowd. Many asked John what changes they could make in their lives when it came their turn to be baptized, including several well-off looking people who identified themselves as tax collectors.

"Please tell us John," they pleaded, "is there anything you can see in our lives that we need to change?"

"Oh, yes," John chuckled, knowing all too well what some of these tax collectors got up to. "Stop adding a bit to the figures and pocketing the difference when you're billing people for their taxes. Just bill them for what they are legally required to pay and don't demand a penny more."

Several soldiers then waded up to him wanting to know what they should be doing to please God too.

"Stop abusing the power you've been given," John replied. "Don't treat people harshly or force them into admitting guilt for things they never did. Always treat people fairly and honestly, even at their worst. I imagine there are times when you get fed up with people and their stupid behaviour and you're tempted to take out your frustration on them. Well, in a word, don't."

It was this kind of advice, spelt out in such clarity and wisdom and ladled out with such confidence and care to people from all sorts of different backgrounds, that made people wonder if John himself was the Messiah.

The implications were enormous, though, because if John really was the Messiah then he had his axe in hand ready to deal a deathblow to anyone not taking what he was saying to heart.

Chapter 9 - Jesus very quietly appears....

John's preaching created some serious soul-searching, and it spread through the countryside with such speed and momentum that the religious authorities in Jerusalem decided it was high time they sent some priests and Levites to go ask John if he really was the Messiah, or not.

"Me? The Messiah? Absolutely not," John snorted, almost choking with shock when they asked him.

"Well, if you're not the Messiah," one of the priests snorted back, "I suppose you think you're Elijah, do you?"

"No. I'm not Elijah either," John replied.

"Well, who are you, then? Come on, help us out here, we have to get back to the powers-that-be in Jerusalem with some answers as to who you are, and with some sort of proof to back it up, too."

"All right," John replied, "When you meet with your superiors suggest that they look up the prophecy Isaiah made about a voice crying out, 'Make straight the way of the Lord through the desert,' because that's the scripture that identifies who I am. I am that voice."

"Is that so?" one of them sneered sarcastically, "You're not the Messiah and you're not Elijah, you're a voice. Well, if all you are is a voice what makes you think you have the authority to baptize people?"

John sighed.

"You just don't get it, do you? I'm baptizing people because, unlike you, they do believe what I'm saying, that someone far greater than me is coming who wants to see their lives cleaned up. It's all in Isaiah's prophecy, like I told you, that a voice would announce his coming just before he comes. Well, here I am, doing exactly what Isaiah said, which proves, by the way, that the Messiah must be here already. But I'm not him; I'm just the voice preparing the way for him. I arrive on the scene first, yes, but I'm nothing compared to him. I wouldn't even rank as his shoe-lacer, so don't waste your time on me. He's the one you should be asking about, because," John added, his voice rising, "he's going to do a whole lot more than just baptize people with water. He's going to baptize people with the Holy Spirit and fire. He's coming like the wind to separate the wheat from the chaff, and only the wheat will he store in his barn, but the chaff he's going to burn with a fire so fierce that no one will be able to put it out. Can you not believe that, too?"

No they couldn't, but the proof that John was right was on its way because the moment had arrived at last for Jesus to make his presence known. Just like his cousin John, Jesus wasn't long past his thirtieth birthday when he also left the confines of home to fulfill his destiny. He travelled eighty miles south from Nazareth to the spot where John was baptizing people, at a place called Bethabara.

Jesus sat on the riverbank watching the proceedings with interest, and then he rose and joined the line-up of those waiting to be baptized.

When it came to Jesus' turn John didn't recognize him at first, but then suddenly he knew who Jesus was. He shivered with instant shock as their eyes met, but instead of baptizing Jesus, John left him standing there, bounded out of the water and onto the shore, yelling, "Look; look this way everybody. There's the man I've been telling you about," and jumping back into the water he splashed up beside Jesus, pointing and shouting, "Here he is, just as I said, the one who's coming after me, the one who's so much greater than I. I told you he was coming. He came after me, yes, but he was alive long before I was ever born, all the way back to the very beginning of time."

He paused, and then shouted to the dumbstruck crowd, "Do you realize who this man is? It is from this man and the utterly inexhaustible supply of his divine being that every good thing comes to us in a never-ending supply of blessings. Take the Law of Moses, for instance, how wonderful that has been for us - but God has something even greater in mind. Through this man here, Jesus Christ, God is going to pour out his amazing grace and life-giving truth on us, and all for free too. And he came all the way from the Father himself to tell us that, because we haven't seen God, but he has. We haven't got a clue what amazing things God has in mind for us, but he does, because he's the Father's son and he's come to us from that very special place of affection right beside his Father to make his Father's wishes known."

The crowd stood transfixed, already shocked beyond belief that their long-awaited Messiah was standing there, right beside John.

But John hadn't finished yet. "This man here, Jesus Christ, is the light of our world. It is he who gave life to us; it is he who designed us and everything else on this planet, but how many of us even recognized him when he came to visit his creation? How many of us, his very own people, welcomed him with open arms? Shame on us, because to all those who do accept who he is and put their trust in his divinity, he gives them the right and the power to become God's very own children."

John paused.

What an incredible statement he'd just made. He scanned the crowd for a few seconds, his own thoughts racing. "Imagine that," he continued, with a huge grin, "actually being born all over again, a second time, only this time you've been conceived by the great God himself and not by any human parents. But here's your proof it's about to happen," John cried, pointing again to Jesus, "because the great God is right here in a human body just like ours, so we can see for ourselves what the Father is like, in the love and the wisdom he has poured out on his Son."

He looked at Jesus, at which point Jesus said, "So, when are you going to baptize me, then?" which made John jump back a step in alarm.

"Eh?" John stammered, "You're coming to me to be baptized? Surely, I'm the one who needs to be baptized by you."

"Just do as I ask," Jesus replied gently. "Don't worry, this is all part of God's will, so go ahead and baptize me." John hesitated for a moment and then slowly he lowered Jesus under the water.

This was the moment Jesus had waited so many years for. This was it; his mission was about to begin. As the water gushed over him and engulfed him in its watery grip Jesus suddenly felt the weight of his mission press in on him and he pleaded with God, as he plunged under the water, for help to see him through to success.

As Jesus came bursting through the surface again the help he had asked for was already on its way, for high above him the skies opened up and he saw the Holy Spirit like a dove flutter down and land on him. At the same time he heard a voice from heaven saying: "You are my Son, my lovely, lovely Son, my absolute delight."

Chapter 10 - The Devil's temptations....

Hearing his Father's voice was just the boost Jesus needed. Armed now with his Father's love and the Spirit's power Jesus was ready for the first leg of his mission, a face-to-face confrontation with the Devil. What a way to kick off his ministry but that's where the Spirit took him, away from the lush Jordan valley and high into the hills. It was there in the heat of the desert with only rocks and scrub for company that Jesus prepared himself for combat with the Devil himself.

For 40 days and 40 nights Jesus was alone and without food. He was in an awful state after forty days, racked by stomach cramps and shivering uncontrollably in the bitter cold of night. He was curled up and near death when the Devil finally appeared, eager and ready for battle.

As the Devil looked down on the pathetic figure of Jesus hugging the rocks for warmth, it looked like an easy contest with an obvious winner. But the Devil felt no sympathy, and without more ado he fired his first shot.

"So, you're the great Son of God, are you?" the Devil purred, "Well, with that kind of power you could easily tell those rocks you're lying on to turn into steamy soft loaves of bread, couldn't you?"

The impact of the Devil's words sliced into Jesus' senses creating instant desire for satisfaction. Of course he could turn those rocks into bread, and the temptation to do so was huge, because in one fell swoop he could end his terrible hunger and put the Devil down a peg or two as well.

But that wasn't what Jesus did. As the Son of God it was his Father's desires he answered to, not his own.

"According to God's Word," Jesus croaked in reply, "it isn't food that keeps us alive, it's God. It's what comes out of God's mouth that counts, not what we put into ours."

No chink in the armour there, the Devil thought, but he had other tricks up his sleeve. He reached down and lifted the prostrate body of Jesus off the ground, skimmed him through the air to the Temple in Jerusalem where he deposited Jesus on the roof at the high end of Solomon's Porch, hundreds of feet above the ground. Jesus was already dizzy from hunger and now he found himself perched on a pinnacle with a sheer drop to oblivion only one slip away.

As Jesus hung on the Devil whispered in his ear, "What's the problem? If you're really the Son of God you could let go, couldn't you? No harm would come to you because scripture says God has angels protecting you and supporting you, so you won't even stub your toe on a rock."

"Yes," Jesus whispered back, "that's true, but scripture also says you should never try to force God to do something for you, even if he promised it."

How deliciously satisfying it would have been, though, for Jesus to prove who he was by relaxing his grip, falling off the spire and letting the angels waft him off to safety. But Jesus wasn't going to put his Father on the spot like that, of having to step in and save him. It would be like twisting God's arm or putting God over a barrel, which was utterly unthinkable. So Jesus said no more and grimly hung on.

The Devil had sorely underestimated Jesus' devotion to his Father. It was proof positive that Jesus really was the Son of God, but that wasn't what the Devil was interested in anyway. That soon became obvious by what happened next.

Jesus felt himself being lifted off the roof and whisked up higher still, back into the desert where the Devil dropped him on the peak of the highest mountain. The view all around was magnificent, stretching off in all directions, and the sky was so clear it felt like the whole world could be seen below them.

"Look at that wonderful sight," the Devil burst out enthusiastically, "Isn't it just marvelous? And it's all mine. It was all given to me." He paused as he looked around, and then he continued softly, "It's in my power to give all this splendour to anyone I choose." Another pause. And then he said with a winning smile, "And I choose to give it all to you. Yes, to you. It's all yours, every bit of it. All I ask in return is your devotion to me."

So that was the Devil's game. It was a trade-off. Tempt Jesus with a carrot big enough and he'd transfer his loyalty from his Father to the Devil. Well, it didn't work. Jesus swung round and with what little strength he had left, he shouted, "Get out of my sight, Satan. Scripture says we should serve and worship God and no one else but him."

Jesus' loyalty to his Father was clearly unshakeable. Offered the world Jesus still wouldn't bite, so the Devil gave up and left him alone. As soon as Satan was gone, several angels immediately rushed to Jesus' aid. By next morning his strength was coming back, so he hurried down the craggy slopes to go see John again down by the Jordan River.

Chapter 11 - The first miracle....

John caught sight of Jesus striding along the bank and immediately began yelling and pointing to the startled crowd, "Hey everybody, look, there he is. See? Yes, that man there. That's the Lamb of God and he's here to rescue us out of this horrible mess we're in. He's the man I was telling you about who ranks so much higher than me, even though he came after me, because he existed long before I did. It's my job to point out who he is and that's why I've been here baptizing people. I know he's the Son of God because I saw the Holy Spirit come down from heaven like a dove and rest on him after I baptized him. I didn't recognize who he was at first either, but the same power that sent me on my mission told me who he was. He told me, just as the Spirit rested on him, that Jesus would also be baptizing people, only he'd be baptizing with the Holy Spirit."

Next day John was with a couple of his disciples when Jesus dropped by again.

"See?" John said, nudging one of the men, "there's the Lamb of God I was telling you about."

They watched Jesus for a few seconds as he walked past them and then the two men ran after him. Hearing them coming, Jesus turned and asked them what they wanted.

"Rabbi, we'd like to talk with you. Could you tell us where you're staying?"

"Well, come along and find out," Jesus replied. So off they went with him, arriving at his place at four in the afternoon and they talked with him for several hours.

Andrew was so impressed by what he heard Jesus say that he rushed off to find his brother Simon. "You'll never guess who I've just been talking to," Andrew gasped, "the Messiah, the very Christ himself. If you don't believe me, come and see for yourself." So, they hurried back to see Jesus together.

Simon didn't even get the chance to introduce himself, because as soon as he walked into the room, Jesus looked at him very intently and said, "Ah ha, you're Simon the son of Jonah, right? Yes, I know all about you, Simon. I know enough about you to change your name right now to Peter. From now on you're Peter the rock."

Peter was a rather shocked rock at that moment, but Jesus sat and talked with him long enough for Peter to grasp who Jesus was too, so when Jesus decided next morning to head back to Galilee, he and Andrew went with him. On the way they met Philip, who also lived in their hometown of Bethsaida, and after talking with him for a while, Jesus invited Philip to join them as well.

Philip immediately rushed off to call on his friend Nathanael. "We've found the man that Moses and the prophets were talking about," Philip yelled between gasps. "He's called Jesus. He's the son of Joseph, and he lives at Nazareth."

"Really?" Nathanael sniffed, "Since when did any good come out of a poky little place like Nazareth, I'd like to know?"

"But won't you at least come and see him?" Philip begged.

When Jesus saw Nathanael coming, he turned to the others and smiled. "Now here comes a true son of Israel if ever there was one. There's no hiding what's on this man's mind. No deceit or lies in this one. He says it like it is. Isn't that true, Nathanael?"

Jesus' hearty greeting caught Nathanael completely off guard.

"But how do you know who I am?" Nathanael asked him.

"Well," Jesus replied, "before Philip arrived at your place to tell you about me, I could already see where you were from here. You were sitting under a fig tree, right?"

Jesus' statement knocked the resistance right out of Nathanael. No way could Jesus see that far, or know where he was sitting. Nathanael looked at him rather quizzically, and then smiled in return. "You really are the Messiah, aren't you? Yes, Rabbi, I believe you're the King of Israel and here you are already."

"Good for you," Jesus replied. "You believe me, Nathanael, because I told you I could see you under the fig tree. But that's nothing. You're going to see much more than that. One day you'll see the very heavens open up and God's angels coming down from heaven to me and returning."

It was enough to convince Nathanael, or Bartholomew as he came to be known, that Jesus was worth following. Two days later they all reached Nathanael's hometown of Cana in Galilee, where they were invited to a wedding. Among the guests was Jesus' mother, Mary, who later on during the festivities approached Jesus very upset, because she'd just been told the wine had run out, which was a terrible embarrassment for the hosts.

"Oh, Jesus," she cried, "the wine's run out. Isn't that awful? Oh dear, what can we do? Surely, there's something you can do, isn't there?"

"My dear mother, I'm not supposed to be dealing with things like this," Jesus replied, "not yet at least, because no-one's supposed to know who I am for a while."

But Mary wasn't put off that easily. She quickly rounded up the waiters, pointed to Jesus and told them to do whatever he said.

Jesus immediately took the waiters over to six stone jars, each of which contained at least twenty gallons of water when full, the water normally being used for ceremonial cleansings. He told them to fill all six jars to the rim with water. He watched as they filled the jars and then he said, "Dip your jugs into the water and take them to the master of ceremonies for a taste test."

Somewhere in between the time they dipped their jugs in the water and the time the master of ceremonies tasted it, the water had miraculously changed into wine. The waiters, of course, knew what had happened, but the master of ceremonies didn't. On tasting the wine, he smacked his lips, turned to the bridegroom and said, "Well, this is a nice surprise. Most people offer their best wine at the beginning of the ceremony and leave the worst grog 'til later when the guests are too drunk to notice. But you've kept the best wine for now." Jesus had saved the day.

Chapter 12 - Night visit by Nicodemus....

It was the first of many miracles to come, and it certainly gave his disciples a clear demonstration of the kind of power Jesus had. They would see more of that power very soon, too, because a few days after spending some time with his family in Capernaum, Jesus took his disciples to Jerusalem for the Passover, where he performed several more miracles. The people were so amazed by what they saw that they asked him outright if he was the Messiah. Well, there was no hiding the fact anymore, so Jesus admitted he was.

The cat was now out of the bag, but the people believed him. On the other hand, it wasn't so difficult believing him after all those miracles he'd just done. But Jesus knew miracles didn't always change people's hearts, so he didn't place a great deal of weight on the people's response.

There was a man in the city, however, who did show some promise, a top Pharisee named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish High Council. At some risk to his position, Nicodemus came to Jesus under cover of darkness to talk with him.

"We've been watching you," Nicodemus whispered enthusiastically, "and there's no doubt in any of our minds that you're a teacher sent by God, because no-one could perform miracles like you do unless God was with him."

The miracles had obviously impressed Nicodemus too, but Jesus ignored all that and went straight for the jugular. "The miracles aren't what I'm here for, Nicodemus. I'm here to tell you that no one can see the kingdom of God unless he's born again."

Well, that set Nicodemus back on his heels for a few seconds. He pondered for a moment or two as the cogs cranked away in his head, but he had no idea what Jesus was talking about.

"But how can someone be born when he's old already?" he asked eventually, "Are you saying we can literally go through another physical birth for the second time?"

"No," Jesus replied, "what I'm saying is that no one enters the kingdom of God if he isn't born of both water and Spirit. That's because a physical birth can only produce physical life, but Spirit birth produces spiritual life, and you need spiritual life to enter the kingdom. So, don't be surprised when I say people have to go through another birth by the Spirit. I know it seems strange because you can't see the Spirit, it's like the wind, you can hear it without knowing where it came from or where it's going to, but it's there all right and you know it. And the Spirit is just as real to all those who are born by it, too."

"But how can the Spirit give birth to people?" Nicodemus sputtered.

"You mean you don't know?" Jesus replied. "Surely you're not telling me that a leader in Jewish thought like yourself doesn't understand what I'm saying? Look, I'm only telling you what some of us have already experienced, but you people still won't

accept what we say. You can't even accept what we say about things taking place here on earth, so you're hardly likely to believe what I say takes place in heaven, are you? But I of all people ought to know what goes on in heaven because I've seen it. Heaven is my home. It's where I came from. So, please believe me when I say you need a complete change of heart created by the Spirit to enter the kingdom, because I know."

Chapter 13 - Jesus' ministry grows....

Soon after this enlightening discussion with Nicodemus, Jesus left Jerusalem and toured Judea with his disciples, who baptized all those who came to join them. John was also baptizing people from among the huge crowds who came to see him at Aenon, near Salim, but it soon became obvious that Jesus' disciples were baptizing more people than John was. During an argument between some of John's disciples and one of the Jews over ceremonial purification, both matters were brought to John, but the main concern was the swing from John to Jesus. "By the way, John," one of them said, "the man you kept pointing us to is also baptizing people, but have you noticed that everyone seems to be running after him now?"

Which wasn't quite true because Jesus wasn't doing the baptizing, his disciples were, but John wasn't perturbed in the least by the man's comment. "For a man to be successful in the work God gives him to do," John replied "God has to provide the power, so it's clear that Jesus' success is God's doing, and besides, he's the one chosen by God, not me. I never was the Christ and you heard me say that lots of times. My job was simply to prepare the way for him, so I'm delighted that he's so successful, just like the bridegroom's friend who arranges the wedding takes great delight when the wedding comes off successfully. Just hearing the bridegroom's voice at the ceremony is proof enough of its success, and just seeing the union between Christ and his followers is proof enough of my success, too. It gives me huge delight, then, seeing him grow the way he is."

For John it was marvellous seeing Jesus' work blossom because everything he'd been saying about Jesus was happening. "As I told you, I'm not the Christ," he continued, "so it was bound to happen that he would increase in strength and fame and I would decrease. And remember, he came down from heaven, so unlike me he has all the power of heaven and earth behind him. Ordinary people like you and me can only work with and talk about earthly powers and forces, but he's far above all that because he can talk about what he's actually seen and heard going on in heaven. Most people think that's rubbish, of course, but we don't. We stake our lives on the belief that God gave Jesus the Holy Spirit without limit, so that everything Jesus says is God's absolute truth. We believe the Father loves the Son so much he's given the whole power of heaven to him. That's how great Jesus is, and that's why we place our trust so totally in him. But

God is so pleased with us for trusting in his Son that as far as he's concerned we've got eternal life already! It also makes him very angry, though, when people don't trust in his Son. They can forget all about eternal life. Which all goes to show how important Jesus is. Our eternal life is entirely in his hands."

Chapter 14 - The woman at the well....

It was clear, then, that John had no problem with Jesus' disciples baptizing more people than he did, but to avoid any hint of competition between them Jesus left Judea with his disciples and headed north again to Galilee. They took the shortest route through Samaria, to the small town of Askar, near Nablus, where the disciples went off to buy food, leaving Jesus by himself.

He was tired so he took a rest in the shade of Jacob's well, the same well on the same piece of land that Jacob had given to his son Joseph many centuries ago. A short while later, around midday, a Samaritan woman came to the well to draw water and Jesus asked her if she could pour him a drink.

She glanced at him and then rather huffily said, "Why would a Jew like you ask a favour of the likes of me, a Samaritan?" Her surly attitude was understandable, though, because Jews and Samaritans were not supposed to be on speaking terms. In fact, Hebrew law did not allow Jews to be friendly to people of any other nationality.

But Jesus wasn't bothered with any of that, so he wasn't put out by her challenge. Instead, he responded with a challenge of his own. "If you only knew what God is freely giving people right now and who it is who just asked you for a favour, you would've answered me very differently. You could've asked me for living water and I would have given it to you."

"But you haven't got a bucket or a rope to get the water with," the woman replied a little testily, "and this well is very deep, so how exactly were you going to give me this living water, may I ask? And besides," she said with an icy stare, "this well was dug by our father Jacob and the water was good enough for him and his family, so are you saying you're greater than him?"

To her, Jesus was insulting the name of the great patriarch Jacob and the sacredness of this site by hinting that he was the source of the water that kept them alive, not the well. Hadn't the well kept them all alive ever since Jacob dug it, though? So how dare this upstart stranger say he was the source of living water instead?

But Jesus only pressed the point further. "I know how you feel about this place, but if you drink the water from this well it won't be long before you're thirsty again, right? But anyone who drinks the water I give them will never be thirsty again. That's the difference. The living water I supply is like an ever-flowing spring right within the person himself, filling him to the brim for eternity."

“Well I’ll take that kind of water any day,” she said, with a trace of sarcasm in her voice, “if it means I’ll never be thirsty or ever have to drag myself out here for water again.”

She obviously didn’t understand what Jesus was getting at, or she didn’t want to, so he tried another tack.

“Would you go and fetch your husband and bring him here?” he said.

Now that got her attention.

“I don’t have a husband,” she replied quickly, her eyes blazing a trail of fire in his direction.

“Yes,” Jesus chuckled, “you’re certainly right about that. But I also happen to know you’ve had five husbands already and the man you’re living with right now isn’t your husband. So you’re right when you say you don’t have a husband - not at the moment you don’t.”

She felt her cheeks flush. If he already knew all the embarrassing details about the men in her life, what other skeletons in her closet did he know about? She didn’t like where this conversation was going at all, so she tried to put Jesus off the scent by coming back with a challenge of her own.

“I see you fancy yourself as a bit of a prophet. All right, since you think you’re so clever, answer me this: Why it is that our ancestors worshipped God on this mountain but you Jews say he should only be worshipped in Jerusalem?”

Nice try, Jesus thought. She was certainly a bright one, bringing up an old rivalry between the Jews and Samaritans to draw attention off herself, but Jesus had an immediate comeback.

“Since you brought up the subject of where we should be worshipping God, you’ll be interested to know the time’s coming soon when worshipping the Father won’t be limited to any specific location like this precious mountain of yours - or Jerusalem either, for that matter. You people don’t know much about who it is you’re worshipping anyway, but at least we Jews have some knowledge of the God we worship because he revealed his plan of salvation through us. That’s about to change, though, in fact it already has, because real worship is all about the spirit. God is spirit, so he’s looking for people who worship him in spirit, from their hearts, that is, not from mountains.”

She came back with a surprising reply. “Well, I happen to know a Messiah is coming called Christ, so I’ll just wait ‘til he comes to explain these things to me, thank you very much, not you.”

“Well, you don’t need to wait much longer,” Jesus smiled, “because you’re looking at him. I am the Messiah, so go on, ask me whatever you like.”

Her eyes opened wide with shock, but any comment she had in mind in return was interrupted by the sudden arrival of Jesus’ disciples with food and supplies. When they caught sight of Jesus talking to a woman, and one of those awful Samaritans too, they

were stunned into silence. It was an awkward moment but the woman suddenly turned away and ran off, and in such a hurry she left her water jug behind.

As she scuttled out of sight, the disciples recovered their voices. "We found some food, Master," one of them said, turning to Jesus, "Would you like some?"

"Not for me," Jesus replied, "I've got food of my own already. Ah, but you didn't know about that, did you?" They certainly didn't, but Jesus was full of surprises, so they wondered if he'd arranged with someone else to bring supplies while they were away.

Jesus could see the puzzled looks on their faces. "Let me explain," he said, "My food and what I live for is simply and always to do whatever God wants, because he sent me here with a job to do. Remember that saying of yours: Four months 'til harvest? Well, that may be true for an ordinary harvest, but there's no four months wait here in Samaria, I can tell you. The crop of people ripe for eternity was ready in an instant. Open your eyes and look around you, the harvest of people is as ready and ripe as this crop of corn."

It was true, too, because a stream of people dressed in white robes was pouring out of the nearby town and up the hill toward them like a waving crop of ripened corn, prompting Jesus to add, "See? The fields are white for harvest."

The news about Jesus had obviously spread fast. But that's not surprising because the woman at the well had rushed through town shouting at the top of her voice, "Listen everybody, there's a stranger down by the well who knows all about me. But I've never seen the man in my life. He turned up out of nowhere and talks as though he's known me for ever. But how could he? It's weird. But you know what else he told me? Listen to this: he said he's the Christ, the Anointed One of God. Can you believe that? There's something about him, though, that tells me it's true. But don't take my word for it; come and see for yourselves."

The excitement in her face and voice were enough to send them out in droves to see what Jesus was all about.

The disciples watched in fascination as the crowd closed in. Jesus was ecstatic: "See what I mean? There's a whole crop of people just waiting to be harvested. What a great time this is for those bringing in the harvest, and for those who did the gruelling work of planting the seed, too, because look at all these people ripe for the picking now, ready and willing to seek out the source of eternal life for themselves. And it's wonderful for you, especially. Remember that saying: Someone sows but another person harvests? Well, you didn't sow any of the seed for this harvest, did you? In fact, you didn't do any work to bring in this harvest at all, but look at them coming. But that's why I sent you, to enjoy the fruits of someone else's labours" - referring, of course, to himself and the huge harvest of people his own life and death would produce.

The front-runners in the crowd arrived at the well huffing and puffing, and the questions began. It was a taste of things to come as people gobbled up his answers and begged him to stay another day to teach them some more. They were ripe for harvest

all right, so Jesus stayed for two days with them, during which time many came to believe he really was the Saviour sent by God.

For some people the lady's story and the amazing transformation they could see in her were all they needed to believe who Jesus was, but there were others who told her later on, "We admit we didn't believe in him at first based on what you said, because you don't exactly have a great reputation round here. But since we came out to hear him for ourselves, we have no doubt at all now that he is who he says he is."

Chapter 15 - The first healing....

Two days later Jesus and his disciples left the Nablus district and resumed their journey north to Galilee. The Galileans welcomed him with open arms, having seen the miracles he'd performed during the festival at Jerusalem, which came as a bit of a surprise to Jesus because he told his disciples on the way that prophets usually don't get much respect on their own turf.

First stop in Galilee was Cana, where he'd previously changed the water into wine. They'd only just arrived when a high-ranking official in King Herod's court rushed up to them. He was frantic. His son was desperately ill back home in Capernaum, so he'd travelled the twenty miles to Cana purely in the hope of catching Jesus, to beg him to please get down there as soon as possible to make his son well again.

"Now isn't that just typical?" Jesus said, shaking his head slowly from side to side, "You people only turn to me when you want a miracle done."

"Oh, but sir, it's not like that," the man hastily replied, "I come to you simply because I trust you; I know that you can heal him, so please come quickly or the boy will die."

For a man of such prominence to express such humble trust, and in front of others of much lower estate too, touched Jesus deeply. "There's no need for me to come with you," Jesus replied, with a smile, "Your son won't die. In fact, he's on the way to recovery right at this very moment."

The man didn't doubt Jesus for one second. He hugged him, yelled his thanks and raced for home. But news of his son reached him well before he arrived, because at some point along the way he was met by his servants shouting at the tops of their voices: "Sir, sir, wonderful news," one of them gasped, "your son is fine. It was amazing, he just sat up all of a sudden, got out of bed and he's running around like nothing happened. You should see him, he's completely recovered."

"Really?" the man cried, grabbing the servant by the shoulders, "But when did it happen?"

"Yesterday, about one o'clock in the afternoon," the servant replied.

Well, well, well, the man thought, that was exactly the time Jesus had told him his son would start to recover. "Come on, then," he shouted, "let's get home, I've got news I want you all to hear."

So, off they hurried, and a few hours later out came the story of what Jesus had done. In an instant they all became believers.

Jesus had now made two trips to Cana, and on both occasions he'd performed a remarkable miracle.

But Jesus didn't stay long there after news came that his cousin John had been arrested and thrown in the dungeons at the Castle of Machaerus by Herod Antipas, the Governor of Galilee. John had never been one to hold back when it came to exposing wrong, and that included tyrants in high places like Herod. When Herod went to Rome and seduced his brother Philip's wife, Herodias, into marrying him instead, John did not hesitate in accusing him of illegal and immoral behaviour.

Well, it was true. Herod was already married to a daughter of the king of the Nabatean Arabs, but he dumped her in favour of Herodias. And Herodias had divorced her husband for no other reason than preferring to be married to Herod. So, John let them both have it. It was like signing his own death warrant, though, because the newlyweds had him arrested and would have had him executed immediately if it wasn't for the fact that Herod actually admired John for his honesty and his integrity. He'd heard John speak on occasion and even been moved to make several changes in his own life as a result of John's preaching. But more pressing was Herod's fear of the violent reaction it would create if the Jewish people found out he'd just killed their latest prophet, so he settled for shutting John up by throwing him behind bars in the castle, for now.

Chapter 16 - So many fish....

With things heating up in Galilee, Jesus left the region, made a quick visit to Nazareth, and took up residence in Capernaum at the north end of the Sea of Galilee.

It was in that same area that the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali had lived 1500 years earlier after Joshua and the Israelites had conquered the land. Jesus' arrival in that very spot was no coincidence, therefore. He was there because of an ancient prophecy by Isaiah which went like this: "The people living in the land of Zebulun and Naphtali by Galilee were in total darkness but suddenly the whole area shone with the brightest light."

Well, the moment had arrived for that light to shine, because with John languishing in prison it was time now for Jesus' ministry to blossom. Strengthened and led by the Holy Spirit, Jesus immediately began teaching in the synagogues with great certainty and authority.

"God's appointed time is here at last," he said. "God is now setting up his Kingdom on this earth, so stop walking away from him and start walking toward him. Believe me, this is great news, so turn to God with all your heart."

People responded well, and news of his enthusiastic preaching spread rapidly through the surrounding area. Huge crowds followed him, all the way down to the shore of Lake Galilee.

It was there on the beach that Jesus met up with Simon and Andrew again. They and another crew of fishermen, Zebedee and his two sons James and John, had been casting their nets from the shoreline and were now in the process of washing and mending them. The five of them owned a couple of fishing boats and often worked together, along with a few paid employees.

The crowd soon filled the beach leaving no room for Jesus, so he climbed into Simon's boat and had him and Andrew row off shore a little way so he could speak to the people from there.

On finishing what he had to say, he then told Simon, or Peter as Jesus called him: "Head for deeper water, Peter, we're going fishing."

"Going fishing? We've been fishing all night and we didn't catch a thing," Simon protested. "But if you say so, we'll give it another try."

So they lowered the net and to their delight they brought in a huge haul of fish. But their delight soon turned to dismay, because the net was so heavy it began to slip through their fingers. They quickly whistled to the other crew on shore to hurry their boat alongside and give them a hand, which they did just in time. But the weight of the fish on board was so heavy that both boats were now in danger of capsizing. They'd never had such a catch before.

Both crews could hardly believe their eyes, but to Simon it was a sudden blast of insight into who Jesus was. Fearing for his life in the presence of the divine, he fell to his knees at Jesus' feet, crying: "Keep well away from me, Master, for I'm a rotten person through and through."

"Now don't you be frightened of me," Jesus said, resting a hand on Simon's shoulder. "Come with me and I'll show you how to catch a net full of people, not just fish."

By the time their boat touched shore, Simon and Andrew had both decided they were going to pack up their bags and follow Jesus. As James and John approached the shore in the other boat Jesus yelled out to them, asking them if they wanted to come with him as well, which they certainly did, so the four of them left their boats in the hands of Zebedee and the hired hands and hurried off after Jesus.

The Kingdom of God was growing already.

The five of them then walked back to Capernaum and attended the synagogue on the Jewish Sabbath that week, and that's when something else remarkable happened.

Chapter 17 - Power over demons...

The audience was amazed at the power and confidence of Jesus' preaching, so different to what they usually got from their own preachers. Among those listening, though, was a man possessed by demons and he became very agitated.

"Jesus of Nazareth," he yelled out, "I know who you are, you're God's Messiah," which seemed strangely accurate from a man so obviously unstable. But then his voice changed pitch and suddenly he started talking about "we," not "I," as though another voice was speaking through him. "So, how come you turned up on our turf, Jesus of Nazareth?" the voice cried, dripping with sarcasm, "Trying to kill us, are you?"

"Shut up," Jesus yelled back, talking directly to the demonic voice, "and leave that poor man alone."

The man immediately collapsed and started writhing on the ground, screaming at the top of his voice. But the screaming gradually tailed off, and so did the thrashing of his body. He quietened down, stood up, looked around and to the complete astonishment of those gazing at him he became quite normal. He'd been completely cured.

People stood gaping at him for several minutes, their thoughts racing through uncharted territory, because they'd never witnessed anything like this before.

"How about that, then?" one man shouted out excitedly, "This man actually tells demons what to do, and they do it."

It was miracles like this one that soon made Jesus the talk of the town, but it also meant the call upon his powers increased. He'd only walked a short distance from the synagogue with James and John on his way to Peter's and Andrew's house for lunch, when he was met with the frantic news that Peter's mother-in-law was dangerously ill, her temperature had soared sky high, and would he please come and help her? .

He followed right behind them as they hurried back to her room. He stood by her bedside for a few moments, then took her hand and gently began to lift her. As soon as her head left the pillow the fever was gone. She was up and about in moments and off to the kitchen she went to help out with lunch. But lunch was the last thing on the minds of several others, who shot out of the house telling everybody they met what had happened to her. It was news that was too good not to spread.

And spread it did, because just before sunset people by the dozen were turning up on the doorstep with friends and family who were sick and demon-possessed. At one point it seemed like the whole town had turned up, but to Jesus it was a pleasure to be able to help. He invited them all in, one by one, and they all left the house completely healed of whatever ailment or demon was troubling them. It was just what the prophet Isaiah had predicted long ago when he wrote: "He willingly took all our troubles on himself." There was the usual outburst by a demon loudly broadcasting, "You're the Messiah," but evil spirits didn't get very far with Jesus. He fired back a quick rebuke and refused to let them ramble on any further.

It was still dark when Jesus got up the following morning. Early morning was the only time he got any peace and time alone with God. The days were so busy now he needed some Fatherly strength to keep himself in shape, so he headed for the wilds where no one would likely find him.

It was not to be, however, because a whole crowd of people seeking Jesus' help was up early too, and banging on Peter's door asking for Jesus. So Peter and a few friends went out searching for him 'til eventually they found him. "There's a whole crowd of people looking for you already," Peter gasped, and sure enough there they were, a whole string of people weaving their way through the darkness right to where Jesus was.

He didn't turn them away, but he couldn't stay with them forever, either. "I have to keep moving," he told them, "I've got to reach all the other villages with the good news about God's Kingdom, because that's what God sent me to do." So, village by village and synagogue by synagogue he spread the news through Galilee, which must've taken several months to complete because there were at least two hundred villages and towns to cover, and he was healing the sick and driving out demons all along the way as well.

Chapter 18 - Why Jesus came....

Their tour also took them through Nazareth, that bustling town full of history where Jesus grew up as a child. It was his pattern now, in every town and village, to head straight for the local synagogue on the Sabbath to talk about God setting up his Kingdom. He did the same thing in Nazareth, where the scripture to be read aloud at the service that week was a prophecy from Isaiah detailing the very work Jesus was doing right then on the tour. And, what's more, Jesus himself got to read it.

Jesus stood up, took the scroll and began to read: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He sent me to announce release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind and liberty for the bruised, and to proclaim that the year everyone has been waiting for has come." He then folded up the scroll, handed it back to the attendant and sat down.

Those who wished to comment could now say their piece. But no one spoke a word. Jesus waited but the hush was deafening. All eyes were glued on him, the entire room sensing something unusual was afoot. And it was, because Jesus then said, "Isaiah was talking about today, and that prophecy of his is being fulfilled right now." He then gathered them around to show them how those verses were talking about him.

To begin with they were very impressed with his explanation, but crude logic began to interfere. "Wait a minute," one of them muttered to a friend, "he's Joseph the carpenter's son, isn't he? I know his family well. I know his mother Mary, his brothers

James, Joseph, Judas and Simon, and his sisters. So, how come an ordinary chap like him suddenly has all this great wisdom and inside knowledge about prophecy? And all this stuff I hear about miracles he's supposed to be doing; that sounds highly suspicious to me as well."

Several people listening in agreed that it was downright presumptuous of Jesus to make such claims, and the mood of the room quickly turned to hostile.

Jesus was ready for them, however: "Don't tell me you're going to quote that old saying 'Doctor, heal yourself', are you?"

He then mimicked their own sarcastic tone of voice: "We heard what you did in Capernaum so let's see you do a miracle here, then. Maybe then we'll believe you."

He stared at them despairingly. "That old saying is right, isn't it, that a prophet gets respect in every country but his own. I shouldn't be surprised, I suppose, because it was just the same in Elijah's time when the famine struck Israel for three and a half years. Out of all those starving Israelites needing help, who was Elijah sent to? It wasn't to an Israelite. It was to a foreigner, a widow living in Surafend in Sidon. And when leprosy struck down hundreds of Israelites in Elisha's time, who was the only person he healed? It was another foreigner, Naaman the Syrian. Elijah and Elisha had to turn to foreigners to find people who believed them, because their own people didn't. Maybe I should do that too, go to non-Israelites, because you don't believe me, either, do you?"

They were furious. How dare he compare them to those foreign Gentile dogs? They were so angry a riot broke out. Some of the angriest charged across the room and leapt on Jesus, dragging him out of the synagogue and out toward the closest cliff to toss him over. In the great muddle of bodies, however, they lost their grip on Jesus and he slipped through the crowd to safety.

Chapter 19 – Thirty-eight years of pain over....

It amazed Jesus how deeply they mistrusted him. Only a few sick people in town came to him for healing after that. The rest didn't believe he could do miracles, so they didn't get any. Since his help clearly wasn't needed or appreciated he headed for Jerusalem instead, to a place where he knew he'd find all kinds of sick people seeking help, at the pool of Bethesda.

He travelled alone, arriving in Jerusalem on one of the Festival days. He ambled his way toward the pool near the sheep gate at the north east corner of the city. Just as he thought, the five arched approaches to the pool were jammed with the blind, lame and paralyzed, all hoping the rumour was true that an angel would occasionally stir up the water and the first person into the pool when it happened would be cured. It was really only a subterranean stream bubbling up from below, but to those in desperate need it was, they believed, a life-saver sent from the spirit world.

One man in particular caught Jesus' attention as he stepped among the pathetic mass of waiting people. The poor man was stretched out on his mat, always hopeful that one day he'd reach the water first. But after 38 years of excruciating pain he was hardly able to crawl and he had no friends along to help him.

Jesus, however, was fully aware of the man's suffering and helplessness, so he stopped beside him, knelt down and asked him, "Would you still like to be healed?"

It seemed like an odd question, but perhaps all hope of a cure had died in the man by now and he was only there for pity, not healing. But not this man; he looked up at Jesus with a mixture of hope and despair: "Oh yes, I want to be cured, but I'm so slow on my knees now that every time the water bubbles up someone always dives in before me. It's heartbreaking."

"Well, that's coming to an end right now," Jesus replied with a smile. "Get up, pick up your bed mat and walk out of here."

The man didn't doubt Jesus for a second, unlike the folks in Nazareth. He concentrated all his attention on getting up, just as Jesus said, and discovered to his astonishment that his crippled limbs responded. His body rose off the ground and there he stood completely healed.

For the first time in his life he could bend down without pain and pick up his mat. He wrapped it up with a flourish, threw it over his shoulder and strode out of the building. But he was stopped along the way by someone yelling after him: "Oi you; yes you with the mat. Don't you know what day it is? You shouldn't be carrying a bed on the Sabbath, you know that."

"But I was told to by the man who healed me," the man protested.

"Oh? And who was that, then?" came the snooty reply.

The man scanned the crowd but he couldn't see Jesus anywhere. "I'm sorry, I have no idea who he was, and I can't see him either."

He was given strict orders, therefore, to go find out who it was who'd told him to carry his mat on the Sabbath and report back without delay. But instead he made a beeline for the Temple. It was hard not breaking into a run to see what having legs was like again, but he was in enough trouble already from the Jews and their Sabbath rules.

To his surprise and delight he found Jesus at the Temple as well. "Just look at you," Jesus grinned, "you're as good as new again. But don't think you got away with sin just because you were healed. Now that you can walk again, start out on the right foot spiritually too, or you could end up even worse off than you were before, and you wouldn't want that, would you?"

No, he certainly wouldn't; thirty-eight years of pain was enough for one lifetime. Thinking it was the right thing to do, then, he immediately reported back to the Jewish authorities that it was Jesus who'd healed him.

But they didn't thank him, nor did it register in their heads that Jesus' marvellous ability to heal incurable diseases might very well mean he was the promised Messiah. All

they could think about was Jesus breaking their Sabbath regulations. In their minds healing was classed as work, and any work done on the Sabbath was a crime worthy of death. From that moment on, then, the Jews did everything they could to find fault with Jesus and embarrass him in public. They even began plotting how to get him killed.

They dismissed the cripple with a stern warning about not working on the Sabbath, and then went out looking for Jesus to confront him about not working on the Sabbath too. They soon found him, but Jesus wasn't the least bit intimidated by them. Rather than them lecturing him, he launched into a lecture of his own.

Chapter 20 - Jesus makes it very clear who he is....

"Let me tell you something," Jesus told them, "From the beginning of time my Father and I have never stopped working. We work hard every day, Sabbaths included. You stop working on Sabbaths, and rightly so, in memory of God resting on the seventh day at Creation, but, take note, God only rested from his work of creating on that day. His work of caring for his creation didn't stop on the seventh day, and his love and compassion for human pain and distress have never stopped since then either. While human need exists we'll always be working to meet it, no matter what day it is."

The Jewish authorities nearly had a fit. They were angry enough already at Jesus for his flagrant disregard for their Sabbath regulations, but now he was daring to claim that his work and God's work were one and the same as well. And to call God his Father was like saying he was equal to God, which was utterly unthinkable.

"But I'm not saying that," Jesus replied hastily, "because sons are subject to their fathers' wishes, and so is the Son of God. He would never go off and do his own thing. How could he, when he knows how much his Father loves him? The Son only does what his Father does, but that's why the Father trusts him with the same powers he's got. This little miracle with the cripple, for instance, is only an inkling of what the Son can do, because he also has the power to raise anyone he chooses from the dead, just like the Father can - and be their final judge too. That's the kind of power and authority the Father has given him. But does that not ring a large bell in your heads that these are the same powers the Messiah is supposed to have? Has it not dawned on you yet, that the Son really is the Messiah and the great new age of God has actually begun already? If I was you I'd treat the Son with a bit more respect, because not giving due honour to the Son is like thumbing your nose at the Father who sent him."

Jesus knew what he was saying would infuriate the Jewish leaders, but it was time to hit them with the facts. To see him was to see God, because in heart, mind and action he and the Father were identical. But to see him was to see their future as well, because God had sent him to lay the foundation for his Kingdom, and nothing, including those who wanted him dead, could foul it up. If the Jews got upset at him, so be it, the future

wasn't in their hands anyway, it was in God's. And to kill him would only seal God's purpose, because Jesus knew his death would draw people to him and send them on their way to eternity. So with nothing to lose and everything to gain, Jesus gave it to them right between the eyeballs.

"The truth of the matter is this," he continued, "If you take to heart what I'm saying and you believe the Father who sent me is behind every word of it, you will have eternal life. That's right, you'll have no reason to fear judgment anymore; you've literally crossed the bridge from death to life. And one day millions of people, just like people today, will come alive from the dead having taken to heart what the Son is saying, because they could see that the Son has the same life in himself that the Father has. Don't be surprised, then, when one day the Son calls to people in their graves and out they pop, some to eternal life and some to judgment, depending on their actions in this life now, because he's the one with the power to raise people from the dead and he's the one with the authority to be their judge. But aren't those the very powers that God's chosen one, the Son of Man, was predicted to have? So, face the facts, gentlemen; you either accept him to your eternal benefit or reject him to your peril. Please rest assured, though, that my judgment will be just because it's not mine, it's God's. I judge, therefore, as he judges, which is always with absolute fairness, perfect love and total sympathy. But that's why he's given me the job of being your judge because he and I think alike; his mind and mine are exactly the same."

Well, that stirred a few comments from the audience, but as one man brought out quite rightly, any old geezer with a Messiah complex could make similar claims about himself, so what proof did Jesus have to offer?

Jesus admitted it was a fair question. "Yes, I agree," he replied. "If I'm the only witness speaking on my behalf you have every right to dismiss my claims because of insufficient evidence. But what if I come up with another witness who'll tell you everything I'm saying is true? Take John the Baptist, for instance. You certainly took notice of him and what he had to say about me because you sent out envoys from Jerusalem to check him out. But I'm not calling on him or any other human witness. I'm offering you much more than just human backing to support my case. And besides, you didn't think much of John anyway. He was a bright, shining light, but you only took pleasure in his light while he pleased you, like people appreciating the sun only when it warms them. So I call on someone far more qualified than John to substantiate my claims. I hereby call on God the Father as my witness, and on him and what he does through me I rest my case. You've seen and heard the incredible things I can do. Well, what more proof do you need that it's the Father's power behind what I'm doing, and that he's the one who sent me?"

But all Jesus got for an answer was more frowns and mutterings, so he ploughed on. "The Father has good reason for doing all these amazing miracles through me. He wants you to take notice of me, because in me you can see him. None of you, for instance, has

ever seen or heard him in person, right? Right. So he sent me. See me and you see him. Hearing what I say is like hearing what he would say if he was here. My love for you is really just an expression of his love for you. Everything I am is everything he is, and he's drawing your attention to that fact through the miracles he does through me, to open up your eyes and hearts to him. But you won't accept the one whom God sent to reveal himself through because you think you've got eternal life sown up already from all your great study of the scriptures. But it hasn't done you much good, has it, when the purpose of scripture in the first place was to point to me as the way to eternity. You still won't come to me though, will you?"

Jesus stared at their glum looking faces for a few seconds, before continuing. "Look, I'm not like all those other pretenders claiming they're the Messiah to get people to follow them and make a name for themselves. I'm not in this for myself. I'm in this because I love you and I want you saved, but in all this great exercise of religion you put yourselves through, you don't see that, do you? It's no surprise, then, that you don't love God in return. You love Scripture, yes, but scripture can't give you life like God can. And here I come as his envoy to express his love for you and to open up the doors to eternity, but you totally reject me. Which is odd because you readily accept all those other impostors promising you the world, none of whom offer you anywhere near the proof I do that they have the power or the authority of God behind them. On the other hand, why would you want to follow me when you can set yourselves up as great religious authorities and get all kinds of perks for yourselves along the way like power, recognition and the best seats in the synagogue? I mean, why bother searching for the incredible glory only God can offer when admiration and applause are so much easier to find from each other right now?"

Lots of huffing and puffing met that last remark. How dare he accuse them of having suspect motives and not loving God?

"But I'm not running off to the Father to accuse you of anything," Jesus replied. "You already stand accused by Moses. You hold up his writings as the ultimate, right? Well, let his words be a witness against you, because if you really valued what he wrote you wouldn't have any trouble accepting me, because it was me he was writing about. If you won't believe him, though, how on earth are you going to accept what I say?"

That really struck home because the Jews worshipped every word Moses wrote, and they also believed it was the words themselves that saved them. Study the Law of Moses and eternal life was theirs, they thought. But here was Jesus saying it wasn't Moses' writings that saved them, it was him, and it was Moses himself who'd said it. In other words, they'd missed the entire point of Scripture. The function of the scriptures is not to give life, but to point to him who could give life. But that tore right at the very heart of the Jews' religion, because they not only thought they had eternal life all nicely wrapped up already in their strict keeping of the Law, they'd also created a nice little empire for themselves too.

Of all the witnesses Jesus could've called on, then, the two most highly revered by the Jews were the Father and Moses, and Jesus had just called on them both. The Jewish leaders were now faced with quite a choice. Would they accept Jesus' evidence, or stick with their own cherished beliefs? Would they admit, at last, that the source of their salvation was standing there right in front of them? Would they? No, they wouldn't.

Chapter 21 - Through the roof....

The Jewish leaders weren't about to admit anything to Jesus at that point in time, so Jesus left Jerusalem and returned to Galilee.

As usual, crowds poured out to hear him, this time from as far away as Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and Transjordan. His fame even spread to the outer limits of Syria. They'd all heard of his extraordinary power to heal, so in they came like moths to lamplight bringing their sick with them. Every day a long trail of people suffering from demons and from all kinds of painful illnesses and debilitating diseases like epilepsy and paralysis, awaited him.

It was exhausting work but he didn't refuse anyone; all who trusted him for healing were healed.

But one case in particular stood out on this trip. It was a man horribly gnarled by leprosy. On spying Jesus he hobbled up to him and fell on his hands and knees in front of him. "Lord," he wheezed through ulcerated vocal chords, "I have no doubt at all you can heal me, if you choose to."

Jesus knelt down beside him and placed his hand on the man's shoulder, which brought a gasp from the crowd because contact with lepers was forbidden by Jewish law. But Jesus ignored all that. No law or prized tradition stood in his way when people in need came to him for help. "Of course I'm willing to heal you," Jesus replied, "and may you be healed right now to prove it."

In an instant the man was completely healed. Missing fingers and toes grew back and so did his eyebrows, which had fallen out long ago. His claw-like fingers uncurled and the awful stench of his open sores evaporated. The long days of slowly rotting to death were over.

As new energy surged through his wasted muscles, he wanted to leap up and yell to the world he'd been healed, but Jesus quickly whispered to him, "No, not yet. Don't you tell anyone, until you've talked to a priest first. I want people to know I'm not against the Law of Moses, so go make the offerings the Law requires and get the priest to officially pronounce you cured."

But after all those years of humiliation and hating his own ugliness, it was too much for the man to restrain himself. He darted around telling everyone he met what Jesus

had done. The news soon spread and people poured out of their homes hoping Jesus would heal them too. Huge crowds gathered in every town as soon as news leaked out he was coming. And when he slipped away for some peace and quiet, it was no use; they still managed to find him.

In Capernaum, they filled the house where he was staying. From every village in Galilee they came, including many Pharisees and teachers of the law too - some of whom had even travelled up from Jerusalem to see this remarkable show of God's power.

When four men arrived at the house carrying a paralyzed man on a stretcher the crowd was so tightly packed they couldn't squeeze through or even get close to the entrance door. So they found their way up to the roof instead, ripped off a few tiles and lowered their friend through the hole.

The sudden shaft of sunlight and bits of roofing material falling on the crowd riveted the crowd's attention on the stretcher as it gently rocked its way down to the floor. Jesus cleared a space, steadied the stretcher's sway until it clunked to rest at his feet. He shouted up to the men on the roof to relax the ropes and chuckled at their cheek. Here was a trust that scoffed at obstacles.

He looked down and smiled at the crippled man on the stretcher who was looking up at him, anxious to know how Jesus was going to react. He needn't have worried; Jesus was delighted. "Cheer up, my friend," he smiled. "You've got nothing to fear from me. Even if it was sin that brought on your illness, your sins are forgiven."

To the Pharisees and teachers of the law, however, this was outrageous. Only God could forgive sin. Who did Jesus think he was, the almighty God himself? But Jesus sensed their scowling indignation and turned from the cripple to face them instead.

"Why do you people think such awful thoughts?" he asked them. "Can't you see it's just as easy for me to tell this man his sins are forgiven as it is to tell him to get up and walk? As the Son of man I have the power and the authority to do either one, and I can prove it, too. Here, let me show you." And with that, he turned back to the man on the stretcher and in one crisp order shouted for all to hear, "Get up. Go on, get up, grab your stretcher and get off home."

The paralytic was up like a shot, shouting his thanks to God as he rose. He dived down to grab his stretcher and he was out of there, pushing his way through the crowd to meet his friends hurrying down from the roof to meet him. As they collided in one huge rapturous hug, the shock in the room gave way to a buzz of chattering voices.

"Well, I've never seen anything like that before, have you?" somebody asked.

"Absolutely not," someone answered, "we've never seen a man with such power."

It was marvelous to behold, but it was more than a little frightening too. They felt terribly humble all of a sudden.

Chapter 22 - A tax collector for a disciple?...

Jesus knew that news of the miracle with the cripple would quickly spread and bring even more people rushing to see him, so he announced he was heading down to the beach where there was much more space. He weaved his way through the room, out into the open and onto the main road passing through Capernaum, the great Way of the Sea, stretching all the way from Damascus to Egypt.

To get to the beach Jesus had to pass through the border post and customs office where duty on all goods passing in and out of Herod Antipas' territory was collected. The officer on duty that day was Levi Matthew Bar-Alphaeus.

To the surprise and dismay of those tagging along behind him, Jesus veered off the road, strode up to Matthew's desk, looked him square in the eye and said, "Matthew, come with me."

It was almost as shocking as healing the paralytic. But from Matthew there was no "What, me? You mean right now?" He rose from his seat, announced to his superior he was chucking his job, and took off after Jesus.

Jesus was no stranger to Matthew, though. Everything about Jesus, his message, his easy mixing with ordinary folk and healing their most fearsome diseases had struck Matthew such a wallop he was really a follower of Jesus already. Unfortunately, people's loathing for Matthew had kept him on the edge of the crowds whenever Jesus passed through town. As a tax collector he wasn't even allowed in the synagogue, let alone talk personally to a Rabbi of Jesus' standing.

But suddenly, here was Jesus himself standing in front of him with a huge grin, offering him a challenge he would never have believed possible.

Matthew, of course, was no stranger to Jesus either. Tax-collectors were well-known and much gossiped about for ripping off their fellow countrymen by overcharging on their taxes, pocketing the difference and making themselves very rich in the bargain. Matthew was just as guilty, but Jesus saw a diamond in the rough. There was more going on in Matthew's heart and head than making money, and his trade had taught him to write as well, which would prove very useful in keeping a journal of Jesus' teachings and their travels together.

But the first thing Matthew did as a disciple of Jesus was celebrate. He invited Jesus and the other disciples to a huge banquet, along with a whole crew of Matthew's friends from work who'd also thrown in their lot with Jesus and turned their backs on the Pharisees and their ridiculous rituals.

Word soon got out about what was going on, however, and several Pharisees turned up at the banquet in a huff. They cornered a couple of the disciples demanding to know "what you and Jesus think you're doing carousing around with tax collectors and law breakers."

When Jesus heard what they were muttering about he confronted them directly: “Look, it’s not healthy people who need a doctor, it’s sick people, right? Well, those are the people I’m here for, the sick. Remember that old saying ‘I prefer mercy over sacrifice’? Do a little study on it for yourselves, because it describes my job perfectly. I came to offer forgiveness and understanding to the marginalized in society like Matthew, not treat them as criminals like you do. Unlike you, I make no demands on people. All they need do is admit their need and accept my invitation to help them. That’s why I spend my time with the ‘Matthews’ of this world and not the likes of you. They at least recognize I’m the only hope they’ve got and they rush to my door for help. And like any good Doctor, my door swings wide open to those in need, no matter how ugly and awful their problems are, because it’s the needy I’m after, not those like you who think they’re perfectly healthy.”

It was an obvious reference to the Pharisees themselves, because in their minds they were in great shape spiritually. They fasted every Monday and Thursday and prayed three times every day, because that’s what ‘being spiritual’ meant to them. It was all about rules and rituals, which some of John the Baptist’s disciples believed too, because a group of them turned up just after the banquet at Matthew’s home ended demanding to know from Jesus: “Why aren’t your followers praying and fasting like we and the Pharisees do?”

In other words, why weren’t Jesus’ followers being more religious? It was an understandable question, though, because John’s disciples had been following Jesus with great interest and noticed that Jesus’ disciples lived quite ordinary lives.

Chapter 23 - Old beliefs die hard....

“Come now,” Jesus answered them, “you wouldn’t expect people to fast at a wedding, would you? It’s not the time to get all sad and serious, and certainly not if the bridegroom’s still around. While he’s still present it’s all joy and celebration, and the same goes for my followers while I’m still here too. Life is a joy; it’s like a constant wedding feast. Unfortunately, like all wedding feasts, the bridegroom has to leave and the celebrations come to an end. And that’s the same for my disciples, because I won’t be around forever either. In fact, the time’s not far off when I’ll be taken away and that’s when my followers will fast, because they’re going to miss me terribly. They’ll wish me back for just one more day, but I’ll be gone. They’ll be glum then, all right, but not right now they aren’t, not while I’m still with them.”

To John’s disciples and the Pharisees, however, experiencing joy in God’s presence was a totally foreign concept. Religion and joy go together? The two didn’t mix at all.

“Yes, I can see it’s not an easy concept to grasp, is it?” Jesus continued. “What I’m teaching doesn’t mix well with your old ideas about religion, does it? It’s like mending a

hole in an old shirt with a patch from a new one. The old shirt now has a patch in it that doesn't match, and the new shirt has a hole in it. You can't patch the old with the new, so don't try patching my teaching with yours, or yours with mine, because the two don't mix. It's like patching up an old shirt with a piece of brand new unwashed material. It ends up a mess too, because the patch will shrink in the wash and rip away from the old material, making the hole even worse. My point being, that with what I'm teaching it's best you simply chuck out all your old ideas about religion and start afresh."

Old beliefs die hard, though, especially religious ones, so Jesus pressed the point further.

"Who in his right mind, for instance, would pour new wine still bubbling into an old, tough, unyielding wineskin? You know what happens as well as I do. The pressure from the fermenting wine bursts the skin wide open. Out spills all that lovely new wine and the old skin is wrecked. So for new wine you always use a new wineskin, right? It's obvious. But the obvious isn't always obvious, even to experts. Some religious folk round here, for instance, aren't even interested in new ideas at all. That old wine tastes so good they won't even try a sniff of the new. In their minds, though, who even wants to taste the new when the old is quite good enough, thank you very much?"

And just to prove his point it was only a few days later on the Sabbath day that the Pharisees got all upset at Jesus' disciples for plucking corn cobs while strolling through a cornfield, and daring to eat them simply because they were hungry.

For the Pharisees tracking Jesus' every move this was a blatant breach of the law. Out they shot from their observation post among the corn stalks and up they puffed in protest to Jesus.

"Did you see what your disciples just did?" one of them squawked. "They're working on the Sabbath. And let's ask them why they think they can work on the Sabbath, shall we? It's you and your radical new ideas, that's why."

"Oh, come now," Jesus replied, "haven't you ever read what king David did? Remember the time when he and his men were so hungry they entered the Tabernacle housing the ark when Abiathar was high priest and they actually ate the twelve loaves of shewbread? According to the Law of Moses, only the priests could eat that bread, so what do you make of that, then? David and his men broke the law. But which came first, the law or human need? And what about all the work that the priests themselves did in the Temple on the Sabbath day too? Double offerings, kindling fires, slaughtering animals for sacrifice, all infractions of the law for the ordinary folk, but fine for the priests to do. That's because worship came before rules and regulations. And it's all there in the Scripture you know so well, so what's your problem? Even if my disciples did break the law, therefore, Scripture makes it clear that the law can be broken when human need in hunger or worship is calling. Besides, I'm here now and I take precedence over the Temple, and the Sabbath. And I say the Sabbath wasn't made to rule over people, it was made to serve them. But that's nothing new either. It's all

mentioned back in Hosea, if you could bring yourselves to look into it, because Hosea wrote, 'I prefer kindness over ceremony.' It's as much a part of God's law, then, to put human need ahead of religious ritual. Perhaps, with that in mind, you won't be so quick to condemn my disciples next time they get hungry and eat corn on the Sabbath, eh?"

They missed his point entirely, though, because they were soon at him again about their Sabbath rules.

Chapter 24 - Keep the law or save a life?....

This time, Jesus was preaching in a synagogue on the Sabbath, and among those listening was a man whose right hand was paralyzed.

It was a tricky situation. If Jesus attempted to heal the man, the scribes and Pharisees would immediately pounce on him and squawk about it "not being right performing cures on the Sabbath." But so what? The man was in need and that's what counted.

So Jesus ignored the Pharisees and called out to the man, "Hey, you, yes, you my friend, the one with the paralyzed hand. Come up here to the front, would you?"

The man didn't hesitate; up to the front he went and stood beside Jesus.

"Tell me," Jesus said, turning to the scribes and Pharisees. "What would the law approve of most - doing a service on the Sabbath, or withholding it? Saving a life or losing it?"

A pause while he waited for them to answer.

But not one person dared say a thing.

"All right, then," Jesus continued, trying another approach. "If one of your sheep falls into a deep, mud-filled hole on the Sabbath, what would you do? Would you leave it in the hole to suffer, or would you try to get it out? Well, naturally you'd want to end the poor animal's suffering by pulling it out, right? And the law even allows it too. But what if it's a man that falls into that same hole on the Sabbath and can't climb out, now what would you do? Would it be wrong according to the law to pull a man out, taking into account a man being more important than a sheep? So what could be wrong in me ending a man's suffering on the Sabbath too, then? If it's right doing a service on the Sabbath for a sheep, then surely it's just as right doing a service on the Sabbath for a man, isn't it?"

But they all sat there in stony silence. Still no one said a thing.

Jesus glared at them with a mixture of sadness and anger at their stubbornness. The law, the law, the law - that's all that counted to these people. Legally, though, the Pharisees were within their rights in this case because the law stated a man should only be attended to on the Sabbath if his life was in danger, and this man's life wasn't in danger.

But Jesus was offering new wine, a new way of thinking that put human need first. A paralyzed hand, for instance, was a horrible handicap, especially for a stonemason as this man was, who depended on his hands for his livelihood. And that's what Jesus saw. He saw the man's pressing and critical need. Oh, he knew what the law said, but why wait until the Sabbath was over to end the poor man's suffering when his suffering could be ended right away?

And there was clearly no point in waiting any longer anyway, because the Pharisees weren't about to change their minds. To them the law was the law, and that was that.

So Jesus turned back to the man and said, "Stretch out your right arm."

Again, the man didn't hesitate. As he extended his arm, he felt a strange tingling in his hand and to his astonishment he found he could wiggle his fingers. When he flexed the muscles all through his hand he discovered it was as strong and supple as his left hand was.

The Pharisees, however, incensed at what they considered a flagrant breach of regulations, felt no joy at all seeing the man's abilities so wonderfully restored. They spun on their heels and strutted out of the synagogue. Not long after the Sabbath ended they hurried over to speak with some of King Herod's officials to see how they could silence Jesus for good.

Jesus, of course, was fully aware of what they were up to, so he left the synagogue where most such conflicts with the Pharisees began, and he headed for the open skies instead. He wasn't afraid of what the Pharisees might do to him, but preaching in the synagogues was heating things up too quickly and he had a lot to do yet before his final showdown with them.

Outside the walls of the synagogues, however, Jesus was often confronted by demons who would throw their human hosts at his feet screeching, "You're the Messiah, you're the Messiah," a clever little trick meant to rouse the people to look to Jesus as a conquering hero. Jesus bluntly told the demons to shut up and keep his identity a secret because that wasn't what he was there for. Yes, he was the Messiah and yes, he'd come to conquer - but by love, service and by death on a cross, not by violence and war. He'd come to heal, not destroy, and it was his incredible power to heal that brought people flocking to him, not a call to rise up and fight.

At that very moment, as he and his disciples were walking back to the lakeshore, an enormous crowd had already been gathering on the beach to await his arrival. They'd come from all over Galilee and from Jerusalem, a hundred miles away to the south. But they came from even further afield than that, from east of the Jordan River, from the southern kingdom of Idumea, and from the coastal cities of Tyre and Sidon, deep in foreign Phoenician territory.

There they were, a huge mixed bag of sick and lost people, Jews and Gentiles side by side, all packed together in their shared misery waiting for Jesus.

Chapter 25 - The twelve apostles...

To wade into that desperate, frantic crowd would be dangerous, though. People would rush at Jesus, hoping that by just touching him they'd be healed, and with a crowd that size he could easily be crushed.

So he asked his disciples to find him a boat and to anchor him offshore in water deep enough that people couldn't reach him but they could still hear him speak.

As he stood there in the boat with that vast crowd stretched out before him, echoes of an old prophecy by Isaiah rippled across the water: "Look, there he is, the one whom I chose and love so very much, full of my Spirit, reaching even Gentile outcasts with my message of love. He doesn't yell at them for being weak and helpless. He doesn't treat them with contempt. He doesn't add to their bruises or snuff out what little flame still flickers. No, he loves them and encourages them because even the weakest Gentile finds hope and strength when seeing through my servant that God is love."

But to get that message to the whole world, Jesus needed others with the same heart to spread it. He couldn't do it alone, and soon he'd be gone.

So that evening he took his disciples into the hills and while they slept he spent the night talking to the Father and tossing it over in his mind as to which of them he could personally train to carry on after him.

The twelve men he finally chose were an odd bunch because none of them had any of the skills and qualifications normally looked for in people being groomed for leadership. Simon, for instance, was an unpredictable firebrand, a nationalistic, patriotic Zealot who wouldn't think twice about assassinating an enemy.

The brothers James and John weren't much better either. They'd been nicknamed "the Sons of Thunder" by none other than Jesus himself. On the other end of the spectrum was Levi Matthew the tax collector viewed by the likes of Simon as a servile, groveling traitor. And in between those two extremes came the brothers Peter and Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas, another James, Judas Thaddeus and the other Judas, Judas Iscariot, the one who really was a traitor.

Looking at them you'd wonder why Jesus chose such a motley crew. There was nothing special about any of them. They weren't wealthy, well educated or high up in the social or political scenes, and none of them had any training for the priesthood. But these were the men Jesus picked to follow him around wherever he went, absorbing everything he said and did, because in time they would come to know him, love him and love his message so much they would speak openly and boldly about him wherever they went.

They would be his twelve apostles, his right-hand men, sharing the preaching with him and casting out demons. He announced his choice of the twelve the following

morning and then it was back down the hill to the waiting crowds for another day of healing the sick.

All those healings served a wonderful purpose - to show people God's love, not just tell them about it. But in among the healings Jesus also did a lot of teaching because people needed their heads, not just their bodies, sorting out as well. They hadn't got a clue, for instance, what God was really like or what true religion was, so while he had such large crowds in tow Jesus spent much of his time unraveling the muddle in their minds.

But it was his chosen twelve apostles he concentrated on most. He would often take them aside, head for the hills to a favourite spot, and for many hours he would sit with them and pour out his heart to them.

Chapter 26 - The Sermon on the Mount....

Thanks to Matthew, we have a handy little summary of what Jesus talked about in those private sessions with his apostles. And notice how radically and wonderfully different his teachings were, especially compared to the usual gloomy stuff religion churns out, because first on Jesus' list was joy - but joy from the most surprising sources.

"Do you realize the joy there is," he exclaimed, "when a person loses all confidence in himself and he turns in desperation to God? There's joy in that? Oh yes, because that's when he takes his first step into God's marvelous world and a whole new dimension of life and experience he never knew existed."

"And what joy," Jesus continued enthusiastically, "when it finally hits a person that all his great accomplishments in life actually amount to a big, fat zero, and he looks to God to make something of his life instead. Because that's when he finds the real path to happiness and success."

"And the joy," he went on, "when a person gets so sick of life and all its suffering and pain that it drives him into the comforting arms of God. Because he'll find a peace there that will see him through anything, no matter how bad life becomes."

"And there's more," Jesus continued, "like the joy a person experiences when the big-headed image he has of himself finally disintegrates and he longs to be like God instead. Because that's when his life really turns from empty to full."

"And what joy when a person admits he doesn't really care much for people at all and wishes he had the heartfelt, genuine feeling and care for people that God has. Because God will return to him all the encouragement and care he himself needs."

"There's such joy, too, when a person admits that even his noblest deeds of service and sacrifice are tinged with self-interest and he desperately wishes his motives could be as pure as God's, because God will grant him his wish. He'll be able, at last, to love freely and generously with a heart that's completely genuine."

“And, of course, there’s the supreme joy of the peace-maker who’s had his fill of arguments and fights and all the other rubbish that splits people apart, and commits himself instead to bringing people together, no matter how difficult it may be. He wants to resolve their differences, soften their bitterness, bridge the gaps and heal the breaches, because he’ll realize ‘Wow, I’m becoming more like my heavenly Father, because that’s exactly what he does too.’”

“And there’s even joy in being picked on for doing what’s right,” Jesus continued. “You can be insulted, lied about, given the cold shoulder from relatives and even tortured and killed, and face it all with joy because you know God makes up for all of it. He lets us go through troubles, yes - he put the prophets of old through hell at times too - but in God’s service the rewards are always great in the end.”

“How pathetic, by comparison, are those poor creatures who think money is everything, because who, or what, can they turn to, when - whoosh - their money suddenly disappears? And the same goes for those who spend and spend, and live for pleasure and entertainment, because none of it gives them any lasting satisfaction and they’ll always be craving for more.”

“And what about those who spend their entire lives trying to be popular and admired, and stoop to anything to make themselves look good and others look bad? They end up terribly alone because people can’t stand being around them.”

Chapter 27 - Be salt and light....

“Don’t be like those poor, poor creatures,” Jesus continued. “Be like salt, because salt is the great preserver, and I mean preserver of the whole human race, because without people like you around, things start falling apart at the seams. Think of yourselves, then, as the ‘salt of the earth,’ because it’s true - wherever you go you bring a wonderful flavour to life, just like salt does to food. Without salt, food can be terribly bland, and so will you be if you end up like everyone else.”

“Realize you’re the only light there is in this darkened world, so show off what you’ve got. Light up the whole world with it. Stand out like stars in a night sky, radiating joy and serenity. You don’t light a lamp and cover it up, do you? No, you place it on a table so it fills the room with as much light as possible, just like people build towns on hills to make them visible from miles away. Well, the same goes for you. God meant you to stand out too, to be a guiding light to others and to make the right way so obviously right that others will follow you, rather than you follow them. Any old fish can swim with the current, but not you. God made you to be different, but also to be attractive. So be attractive. Don’t hide yourself away, get out in public and be seen for what you are, an inspiring, charming, wonderful person, where people who get to know you say, ‘If that’s God, that’s great.’ Because that’s the way it’s supposed to happen, that people realize

your heavenly Father is real and at work on this earth through experiencing his mind and heart in you.”

“So, ask yourself, and be honest: ‘Are people going to be attracted to God because of me?’ If you think people are all a bit below you, for instance, or you judge them before you know what they’re really like, or you haven’t got a kind word to say about anyone and your heart seems frozen to their needs, how attractive is that? Go on, be honest with yourself, because you might think you’re a great shining beacon of light but if people don’t mean much to you, your lamp’s not even lit. On the other hand, if you’re always on the lookout for ways to help people, and you have that lovely, generous, ungrudging spirit that delights in seeing people flourish and blossom, then, believe me, you’re going to have quite an impact on people.”

Chapter 28 - The real meaning of the Law....

“But wasn’t that the whole point of the Law of Moses and the prophets? It’s always been about love and respecting one’s fellow travelers on this earth. So I didn’t come to dilute the Law in the slightest way either; far from it. The Law stands firm, every last bit of it. It’s as unshakeable as heaven and earth, and it won’t budge until respect and love fill this earth. Which is why I came, to take that law of love and give it a brand new coat of paint, make it shine with fresh meaning and power and show you what love for God and respect for each other are really like.”

“When I talk about the Law, then, I mean what it is down deep. I’m not talking about the rules and regulations, which the Scribes and Pharisees keep perfectly; I’m talking about the heart of the Law, which is love. Anyone not teaching love and living it - well, they might as well give up their spot in God’s Kingdom because it won’t amount to much anyway. The same goes for you too. If you can’t keep the Law any better than the Scribes and Pharisees, you might as well kiss eternity goodbye as well, because the Law and the Kingdom are hugely important forever. But they’re much more than just obeying a list of do’s and don’ts, they’re about love. To miss love is to miss everything, but if you live love and teach it God will deeply honour you.”

“The law says, ‘Do not murder’, for instance, but I’d have you dragged into court for simply being angry at someone. In fact, I’d have you up before the highest court of the land if you as much as insult someone, like calling him a ‘brainless idiot’. And if you’re a gossip, well, even hell’s not hot enough for gossips. You may think you’re not guilty of murder, therefore, just because you haven’t actually killed anyone yet, but murder begins in the heart. Murder comes about for a reason. Murder is just the end result. It has a history that began, perhaps, way back in your desire to hurt someone who’s just hurt you. Or it came about because of a nasty temper you’ve got that you cannot control, or because you bear grudges. All those things lead to murder, just as seeking

revenge or talking behind someone's back do. These are what cause murderous thoughts in the first place. Can you see, then, how keeping the Law involves so much more than merely doing what it says? It reaches right down into your innermost being where even the desire to do harm shouldn't exist, let alone actually killing someone."

"If you happen to hear you've upset someone, then, drop everything, even a trip to the Temple with a gift for God if necessary, and go talk to the poor chap, give him a chance to voice his feelings and offer some sort of compensation for any damage done. But act quickly, while he's still willing to talk to you, because he could easily turn bitter and have you charged and thrown in jail if you leave it too long. Mark my words, when a person gets all huffy about justice being done, he won't stop until he's drained you for every penny you've got. So, don't say I didn't warn you. It's best, of course, not to make him upset in the first place, but if you do happen to hurt someone, apologize quickly, admit you were wrong and make amends."

Chapter 29 - Adultery, vows, rights and hate....

"You won't find much of this specifically mentioned in the Law, of course, because the Law only touches the surface. It only covers actions, not thoughts, like the old Law about not committing adultery. You weren't breaking that law either, so long as you didn't actually commit the act, but in reality you've already broken it if you look at another woman too long, because that's how adultery begins, isn't it? It starts in the mind. So, if you can't get your eyes off the woman, go rip your eyes out. I don't mean literally rip your eyes out, but I hope you get the point. Better to enter the Kingdom with one eye than go to hell with two. Oh, I know resisting temptation is tough, yes, but what would you prefer - hacking off an offending hand or foot or having your whole body chucked in hellfire? I say that in all seriousness, because in eternal terms it's what you're thinking that counts. If you really loved your wife, for instance, you wouldn't even be thinking adultery in the first place. And if all married couples loved each other there'd be no need for a law about adultery at all, would there?"

"I realize that's not the way most Greeks and Romans think. They dump their wives for simply losing interest in them. Their divorce laws allow it too. But God's Law also allows divorce. It's very easy, in fact. All a man has to do is provide a written statement to prove the divorce is official, and that's it, the marriage is finished. And yes, there are times when divorce can be justified, like a mate being unfaithful, but my question is, 'Would you even need a law allowing divorce in the first place if husbands and wives really cared for each other?' If you deeply loved each other, you wouldn't even contemplate divorce, which would do away with that law too, wouldn't it?"

"It's the same with making vows. The Law forbids the breaking of a promise, because making a promise is like making a promise to God. It's that serious. But let me ask you

this: 'Should you even need to make vows and promises in the first place?' Oh, I'm sure it feels very noble making grand pronouncements like, "I swear by heaven and earth I'll never leave you" or "I swear by the last hair on my head I'll stand by your side for ever." But why do people say things like that when they know in their heart of hearts they can't guarantee such promises? Things happen that make such promises impossible to keep. And how can you promise the earth when it isn't yours to give either? It's a clever tactic to get what one wants but it's also highly deceptive if you can't come through with the goods. There'd be no need for that Law in the first place too, if when you said "yes" or "no" to a commitment, your word was good enough. But that's my point; if you really cared for someone, your word would be good enough, wouldn't it? Do you see what I'm saying here? If you've got a good heart and you really care for people, you wouldn't need all these laws in the first place."

"The old 'eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth' law is another good example. On the surface it sounds good because a victim gets the justice he deserves. But why do people seek justice in the first place? Getting back at someone never really satisfies anyway; resentment still lingers and the hurt still hurts, no matter how much you make the other person suffer. That's why I say, 'Forget justice, dump your rights, and take the hurt.' If someone thumps you on the right cheek, give him the left cheek to thump too. And if he sues you for something you're supposed to have done to him and he wants the shirt off your back, give it to him - and your coat too. You can demand your rights if you wish, but it only leads to more hurt, strained relationships and a terrible bitterness that keeps coming back to haunt you."

"Oh, I know it hurts when you've been treated unfairly and wrongly. Your boss treats you like dirt, for instance, and gives you all the lousy jobs to do. So, you get angry. You grit your teeth, mutter under your breath and do as little work as you can to get back at him. But what does that accomplish? Your boss bristles at your attitude and he looks for any excuse to fire you. You could lose your job. It was his fault to begin with that he treated you unfairly, yes, but who gets hurt in the end? You do. Allow resentment a free rein and it will always kick back at you."

"But what if you kept doing your job well, went the extra mile and far exceeded the boss's expectations, and did it with a smile too? He becomes happy, and you keep your job, so you're happy too. It's so much better, right? And so what if he takes advantage of you? You can't do anything about it anyway. It's like lending money to people who never grasp the need to pay you back. You can chase them down and demand they pay up, but it only makes things worse. You're upset, he's upset, and you could end up really hating each other. So let it go. It's not worth the damage to yourself or to your friendship or, in the case of your Boss, your job as well."

"Never let hate eat you up inside, that's my point. This may sound strange and new to you, but I understand that because hate wasn't an issue in the Law, only actions were. Under the old law of 'loving your neighbour' you could hate a person so long as

you didn't actually harm him. But I'm saying hate is what causes the hurt in the first place. Yes, there are people who are easy to hate, like a persistent bully, but if all you can think of in dealing with him is nailing him to the wall it could easily lead to a nasty fight with serious injury to either or both of you - and injuries you may never recover from too."

"So take my advice and instead of daydreaming about ways of tearing the brute apart, ask God to help him because in reality he's the one in a mess, not you. It helps too, if you can be to him what he needs to become. Show him by your actions to him how much better it is to act that way. Do him a good turn, for instance, and instead of mouthing off at him, be friendly and respectful. Even if he doesn't change, you will, and much to your benefit too, because it's hate that causes harm, so less hate means less harm all round, doesn't it? Including, of course, less hurt for you."

"It would be nice if everyone was fair and friendly, because it's so much easier getting along with fair and friendly people, but even criminals get along together. And if all you do is help those who help you, or you only give to those you know will return the favour, or you only respect those who share your opinions - well, even thugs can do that."

"But what if you do something wildly different like lend a hand to an enemy, or expect nothing in return when you help someone? It's not the done thing, I know, but think about it for a second - isn't that what your heavenly Father does? He's as generous to the wicked and ungrateful as he is to the honest. He gives sunshine and rain to rogues and rascals as equally as he does to good people. It's the Father's marvellous ability to love stupid, imperfect people that keeps our world going. And aren't we glad of it? If, instead, he let himself hate us for our stupid actions, where would any of us be right now?"

"We have a heavenly Father whose nature it is to be generous, and he doesn't do it to be noticed or appreciated either. You can imagine his pleasure, then, when we're just like him.

Chapter 30 - Being like God and trusting him....

God loves it when we're just like him, especially in a world where people use their giving to be noticed. It's all very impressive, isn't it, when you're out there in the public eye giving to charity and doing wonderful things for people? You can make quite a name for yourself being a jolly nice person. All your friends are duly impressed and you get a host of adoring fans too. But if it's applause and admiration you're after then you're not really giving, are you? You're only giving to get, and there's a name for that - it's just plain, old hypocrisy."

"God, on the other hand, just loves it when we're like him, when we give without the slightest thought as to what we get out of it, or we give without anyone knowing it was us doing the giving. There isn't much applause or reward from people for that kind of

giving, but guaranteed, there isn't a single gift done in secret that God misses. He sees them all."

"Some people like praying where they can be seen too. They sound very pious and spiritual, and very impressive. The Father, on the other hand, would rather we talk to him one on one, and talk quite normally too, not in all that flowery, religious prattle the heathen use. They go on and on believing that the more they prattle on the more likely they are to get an answer. Can you imagine being God and having to listen to all that rubbish? So, please don't feel you have to pray like them to get what you need out of God. He doesn't need all that lengthy reminding of your needs anyway, because he already knows what's good for you."

"So when you pray picture in your mind the kind of God you're talking to. He already knows everything there is to know about us, and he deeply cares. That's why he calls himself 'Father.' We have this wonderful Father in heaven, then, the most incredible being in existence, who loves us. We're his children, and being his children he'd love us to experience life as he experiences it. He'd love the entire universe to live as he does, but for now he's opening up his world and his way to us. How? By helping you think and act like he does every day of your lives. He'll help you forgive people just as he forgives you. He'll help you resist what so typically motivates people, and help you fend off the insane thinking of the Devil. You can ask God for all these things and for certain he'll answer. Make sure you forgive people, though, because if God forgives you for messing up but you can't forgive others for messing up, you're a hypocrite too, right?"

"And talking of hypocrisy, please don't be like those people who, when they fast, actually scratch and pinch their faces to make sure everyone knows they're suffering. It's just another publicity stunt, of course, and it doesn't amount to anything as far as God's concerned; he's not the least bit impressed. On the other hand, God loves it if you miss a couple of meals to give that extra time to him and no one but you and he know about it. You give no obvious clue to others that you're fasting, because you're all washed and combed like any other day, but that's because it's done with him in mind, and that's what he deeply appreciates."

"And don't get hooked on accumulating possessions either. Why not? Because in time they tarnish, rust and fall apart, or get chewed up by moths and mice. And the more you own the more can be stolen too, so why not sell off your surplus and use the cash to do some good? You'd be building up some treasure in heaven that way too, which is far more valuable, and it's never in danger of being stolen or destroyed either."

"It all boils down eventually to what you value most. Is it what God values or what the world values? Either way, it tells you a lot about yourself, because whatever you treasure, that's where your heart is. And where your heart is, that's what you'll give all your attention and loyalty to. So. Is it God or the world? It can't be both because the two don't mix at all. You either love God and hate the world, or revere the world and scoff at God, it's a clear choice."

“But isn’t God the better choice? Why waste all your time and energy worrying about physical things, for instance, like what you’re going to eat, drink or get dressed in, when God can easily take care of all that for you. Look at the birds. They don’t spend their time and energy worrying about what they’re going to eat, and they aren’t out there all day sowing seed, harvesting it and storing it up in barns, are they? And why aren’t they? Because your heavenly Father’s taken care of all that for them.”

“Well, if God can take care of a bird’s needs, he can certainly take care of yours. You’re much more valuable than a bird, so why fritter your life away worrying about where the next day’s necessities are coming from? What good does worrying do anyway? It doesn’t add a day to your life. And if you’re worried about clothes, think of flowers. They can’t spin or weave cloth, yet Solomon in all his magnificence wasn’t decked out as they are. So if God can give such beauty to plants, which only last a few days, what do you suppose he’ll do for you, my faint-hearted ones? Of course, God can take care of you.”

“So don’t get in a sweat over your physical needs. People spend all their time worrying about physical things, but you don’t have to. The Father has so much more in mind for you. He wants you free to live life as he meant it to be lived, not all bothered about things that he can easily take care of for you. And, what’s more, you’re my little flock of sheep now too, so there’s another reason for not worrying. Just think: you can live in a world where there are no worries at all. In this world people are so worried about tomorrow, but in God’s world ‘tomorrow takes care of itself’. And why are you worrying about tomorrow anyway? Hasn’t today given you enough to worry about?”

Chapter 31 - How to get along with people....

“There are things so much more important than food and clothing anyway,” Jesus continued, “like how people treat each other. Now that really is important because people don’t seem to have a clue how to get along. Have you noticed, for instance, how quick people are to blame each other? It’s crazy because it only starts a vicious cycle. If you blame someone he’ll find reason to blame you back. If you get uptight about a person’s behaviour he’ll find reason to get uptight about yours. And if you’re highly demanding of people, they’ll expect you to be perfect too. Negative breeds negative in return.”

“On the other hand, positive breeds positive. If you’re quick to forgive, for instance, people will be quick to forgive you, and if you’re kind, encouraging and generous, it’s amazing how people treat you in return. Give and it just comes pouring back to you. It’s so simple: how you treat people is how they treat you back. So do to others what you’d like them to do to you, which pretty well summarizes the entire teaching of scripture. It’s all about mercy and love. Think mercy and love in all your dealings with people and

you're well on the way to becoming like your heavenly Father, because that's exactly how he is in all his dealings with you."

"But people still think they have the right to blame and judge others. Well, on that point have you ever seen a blind man trying to be a blind man's guide? It would be funny - if it wasn't so pathetic - because they both end up in the ditch. So, why would a person with his own weaknesses, imperfections and blind spots think he's some sort of expert on life and in a position to guide other people? Can the blind lead the blind? It's like kids in school who think they know everything. But what student knows more than his teacher? Oh, maybe by the time a student's finished his schooling he knows a few things, but up 'til then he's in no position to teach or guide people."

"It's amazing, though, how people concentrate on some tiny, infinitesimal dust-size fault in their friend's life, but totally ignore the tree-trunk size faults in their own lives. Can you imagine going up to your friend when you've got this dirty great big log sticking out of your eyeball and saying, 'I see you've got a speck of dust in your eye, do you want me to get it out?' He looks at you and thinks, 'He's nuts. How on earth is he going to see clearly enough to get a speck of dust out of my eye when his own eye is so full of log he can't see a thing?' It's ludicrous."

"It's also blatantly hypocritical, because how can you expect your friend to shape up when you're in no great shape yourself? Get the mess in your own life sorted out first, and then you're in a position to help your friend. But if you try to straighten him out while you're still a mess, then don't be surprised if he treats your great 'pearls of wisdom' as rubbish and he tells you to get lost. You may think you've got something of value to offer, but why should he think you have any great wisdom to offer when you're more of a mess than he is?"

"It's like giving an object you treasure to a dog, or handing a string of pearls to a pig. They don't see any value in what you have to offer. A dog might sniff at it, but then walk away and ignore it. And pearls to a pig mean nothing. A pig would tread on pearls and not even notice. And if you persist in the dog and pig valuing what you offer them, they might even get frustrated and bite you, just like your friend might."

"Here's my point: You can be a typical human being if you like, shelling out advice, criticism and blame like you're some kind of expert. It's an easy thing to do. Millions of people go this route. They love it. They can judge and condemn others without having to do a thing about themselves. They can hand out all kinds of advice, which makes them feel very important, and they might even impress people with how clever and wise they are. In reality, though, they haven't got a clue what they're talking about and they're wrecking people's lives with their infantile nonsense. But, unfortunately, that's the road most people follow."

"There's another road, though. It's a whole lot tougher and only a few take it, but it's the road that gets you to what life is really all about. It's about treating people with respect. It's about forgiving and encouraging. It's about treating others as you'd like to

be treated. It's about practicing what you preach, doing in your own life what you expect others to do in theirs, and straightening out your own life first before you'd even consider handing out advice to others."

"There aren't many people who travel this route, but this is the life your heavenly Father would love you to experience, because this is life as he meant it to be, not that other foolishness."

Chapter 32 - What decides a good life....

"Watch out, though," Jesus warned, "because there is a lot of junk about life being pushed by people who think they've got the right to teach. They don't, but they sound good. They are ever so smooth too. They creep up on you like wolves in sheep's clothing, all humble and harmless, but deep down they're slaving like hungry wolves, looking for a kill."

"Fortunately, they're easy to spot, by their fruits. Just as you can tell a tree by the fruit it produces, it's the same with people. A grape vine, for example, produces grapes. A fig tree produces figs. You don't get grapes from a bramble or figs from a thistle. It makes identifying a tree really easy. If it's got figs hanging from it, it's a fig tree."

"You can easily identify a person by the same observation. A good person produces good fruit; a rotten person produces rotten fruit. It's also a fact of life that rotten trees can never produce good fruit, nor do good trees ever produce rotten fruit. Apply that to people and it's very enlightening, because what a person is at his heart and core, that's what he produces. He can't help it. What's in his head will always come out in his words and actions. If his head is full of self-centred rubbish, then all he can produce is self-centred rubbish, and it soon becomes obvious. A good head, on the other hand, can only produce good thoughts, good actions and good words. And that soon becomes obvious, too."

"So it's easy knowing what people are really like. Look at their lives. Do their words and actions reveal an interest in what their heavenly Father thinks, or are they totally wrapped up in themselves and only spout their own ideas on life? That's the key, because if there's no interest in the Father they're useless to you. Don't waste your time on them. When a tree doesn't produce healthy fruit it's cut down and burnt. It's useless."

"Some of these people really have a high opinion of themselves, though. When they and I finally get to meet face-to-face, they are quick to point out to me how much they included me in their lives. 'Lord, Lord,' they ask, almost sounding offended, 'did we not regularly use your name in our teaching? And what about all those demons we drove out, and all those miracles we did in your name, too?' Yes, I'm thinking, but anyone can attach my name to what they say and do. The real question is: 'Are you doing my

Father's will?' And if you are, then you'll be teaching what I'm teaching and doing what I say. That's the vital key. To anyone not teaching what I say, therefore, my answer is: 'I'm not the least bit interested in what you have to say because your life betrays you. You only used me for your own ends. In other words, you're a fake and a fraud, so get out of here, I don't even know you.'

"It's a wise man who hears what I'm saying - and does it. He's like the house builder who dug right down to the bedrock and stood his house on that. The foundation was so solid that when a raging storm hit the house and the rain poured down in torrents, and it even got flooded, it didn't budge an inch. It stood firm on that bedrock, as solid as ever. But think what would've happened if the silly man had built his house on sand, instead. The storm would've ripped the house right off its foundation and ruined it. Well, that's the kind of house you'll end up with if you're just listening to me but not doing what I say."

And with that, Jesus finished his sermon, left the hill country and went back to the crowds, who still followed him wherever he went, not only amazed at his teaching but also his total confidence and certainty in everything he said, so unlike their own teachers.

End of Part 1