

The 4 GOSPELS in one story

Part 2

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.

Chapter 1 – Different reactions to miracles...

It was time for another trip to Capernaum, where an army officer with a much-loved servant was stationed. The servant had been hit with a horrible illness, and any minute he could die. So when the officer heard that Jesus was in town he asked the Jewish leaders to go to Jesus on his behalf and ask him to come and save his servant's life.

The leaders were more than willing to do as the officer asked, because, as they told Jesus later, "The officer is not only a good man, he's also a good friend to us Jews. He even built our synagogue."

Jesus immediately set out for the officer's house, to be met soon after by some of the officer's friends, and then by the officer himself. The news wasn't good. "My servant is paralyzed and in terrible shape," the officer reported. "He's lying down and clearly in great pain."

"Well, that's exactly why I'm here," Jesus replied. "I've come to cure him."

"Yes, I realize that," said the officer, "but I feel so unworthy inviting you into my home. I had trouble enough just asking you for help, so, please, say the word right here and I know my servant will be cured. I understand that kind of power - and that you have it too - because in my job I have similar power. I have soldiers under my command, and when I tell them what to do they do it."

Jesus was amazed and delighted at the officer's response. "Now that's real faith," he cried, "something I haven't seen so simply and brilliantly expressed by any Israelite I've met so far. What a great, great example, that tells of the day when millions of people just like this Gentile soldier will find themselves in the Kingdom of God with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, for having such simple faith too. That's all it takes, my friends, but so many in this Jewish nation of ours just don't get it. They think they have the Kingdom all sewn up without having to trust in me, so imagine their anguish when they find themselves out in the dark instead."

Jesus turned to the officer and said, "I will do exactly what you believe I can do, so go back to whatever you were doing, your servant is cured." And that was the very moment the servant's paralysis disappeared, as they found out later on their arrival back home.

Shortly after this, Jesus, his disciples and the huge crowd following them, took the road to the town of Nain, a twenty-five mile journey from Capernaum. When they arrived, a long funeral procession was weaving its way slowly out of the town through the main gate. A widow's only son had died, and she was in obvious distress, so much so that Jesus was deeply touched. "Please don't cry," he said to her, and he put his hand on the stretcher bringing the stretcher-bearers to a halt. At which point Jesus cried out, "Young man, I command you to rise."

And that's exactly what the man did. He sat up on the stretcher and started talking. Jesus helped him off the stretcher and escorted him to his mother. From the distress of death to the joy of life, and it was all in just a few moments. It was an astonishing miracle, and it rippled through the crowd in both startled fright and excitement.

"He must be a great prophet from God," someone said, and another said, "God certainly hasn't forgotten us, has he?" And the comments kept coming, as news of this amazing miracle spread like wildfire through the region, and beyond.

Chapter 2 – A new chapter in history...

News of Jesus' miracles filtered back to John the Baptist too, who was still in prison. His own disciples had been keeping up a steady report of all the wonderful things Jesus had been doing, so John sent two of them to Jesus to ask if he was the Messiah, or should they be looking elsewhere for him?

In answer to their question, Jesus did some more healings in their presence. They watched as incurable diseases were cured, intense pain was eradicated, demons were driven out and blind people got their sight back.

"So now that you've seen for yourselves what I'm up to," Jesus told John's disciples, "go back to John and tell him the facts. Crippled people are now walking, deaf people are now hearing, blind people can now see, and lepers are completely cured. What he's heard about me is clearly true, then, isn't it? And happy is the man who believes it."

After they left, Jesus grabbed the opportunity to talk to the crowd about John.

"Tell me," he said. "What exactly did you expect to find when you went out to see John in the desert? Was it a frail reed blown by the wind? Was it someone well dressed and important, living the life of luxury in a palace? Or was it a great prophet perhaps? Well, talking of prophets, a great prophet actually wrote about John. And what a prophecy it was too, the one about God sending his messenger to pave the way for me. So John being that messenger made him a great man, yes, and maybe even the greatest man who's ever lived too, but listen to this: even if you're the lowest person on the ladder in the Kingdom of God you are greater even than John."

"And why is that? Because up to the time of John, no one even knew about the Kingdom of God. All people knew was Moses' Law and the Prophets, which stood like weathered statues, firm and unyielding. But they acted like locks on the gates to the Kingdom, because no one can gain entry into the Kingdom of God by keeping the Law, no matter how well he or she kept it. Since John,

however, the locks have been blown off and people are streaming into the Kingdom of God, something that even John himself didn't do."

"But John was still a great man because God chose him to prepare the way for all this to happen. God gave him the same spirit and power that Elijah had, because John was the great watershed between no Kingdom on one side, and people knocking down the gates and pouring into the Kingdom on the other. So if you're hearing what I'm saying, think about it: It's because of John that you too can blast through into the Kingdom. Now do you see why John was so important?"

And yes, many of those listening did see, including many tax gatherers, who'd heard John's message, believed it and been baptized. Suddenly, it had all made sense. God had launched a new chapter in their history through John, and here now was Jesus doing incredible miracles to prove it.

But some listening did not see it that way at all, like the scribes and Pharisees, who'd also witnessed Jesus' miracles, but it hadn't even stirred them ask if he was the Messiah, or not.

So Jesus had some scathing words for them: "Who can we compare you unbelieving people to, I wonder?" he asked. "Let's see - like children, perhaps? Like the sort of children who whine and moan because the other kids won't join in the games that they want to play. But you wouldn't join in with John the Baptist either, would you - even when it was clear by all kinds of obvious signs that he'd been chosen by God for something very special? You just said he was crazy. So in your minds that justified ignoring him, didn't it? And now you do the same to me. You dismiss me as a glutton and an alcoholic. You dig up reasons for refusing to listen to me, like your recent criticism that I mix with the rejects of society. You sly old dogs, you found a way of dismissing me. You certainly don't lack cunning, I'll give you that."

Even in the towns where Jesus' greatest miracles had been done, like Chorazin and Bethsaida, people had sneered and dug in their heels against him.

And that let loose another tirade from Jesus: "How pitiful you are," he yelled, "because if great cities like Tyre and Sidon had witnessed the same miracles you saw, they would have turned to God long ago in humble acceptance of his power. Their hearts would have softened, unlike you arrogant lot here in Capernaum. I suppose you think you're on the way to a top job the kingdom to come, eh? Well, forget it. You're on your way straight down to hell. I think back to the city of Sodom, the worst of the worst. I believe even they would have responded to the miracles better than you, and their city would be standing today if they had. If I had to choose between you and Sodom, therefore, I'd give Sodom a better chance in the day of judgment than you."

Chapter 3 – Your sins are forgiven...

Soon after Jesus nailed the Jews for resisting him, one of the Pharisees invited him to dinner. But just as they began the meal one of the city's prostitutes turned up on the doorstep and walked right into the dining room. She went straight up to Jesus and stood at his feet. She started crying so much that her tears made his feet wet. So she dried his feet with her hair, kissed his feet many times, and poured perfume on his feet as well.

Simon, the host, was understandably a little put out, not so much at the prostitute but at Jesus not knowing she was a prostitute. Surely a prophet would have known what kind of woman she was.

But Jesus could see what the man was thinking, so he told Simon he'd like to say something. He told the story of a money lender who had two people who owed him money. One of them owed fifty in cash, the other just five, but neither of them had the cash on hand. Surprisingly, the lender forgave them both and cancelled their debts completely. "So tell me," Jesus said to Simon, "which of the two men would love that lender most?"

"Well obviously the one who was forgiven the most, the one with the biggest debt."

"Exactly," Jesus replied, and then turning to face the woman, he said, "See this lady here? You, Simon, gave me no water for my feet when I arrived at your house, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them dry with her hair. You didn't give me a kiss of any kind anywhere, but she hasn't stopped kissing my feet since she arrived in here. You poured no oil on my head, but she poured perfume on my feet. She has many sins, as you and I well know, but she acknowledges them and desperately seeks forgiveness."

"And look at the result, which you can see for yourself. She has a burning love that made her do all that she just did. Huge sins get huge forgiveness, and huge forgiveness creates huge love. Those who think they have few sins don't value forgiveness, and therefore don't experience the love they would have when their sins are forgiven." At which point Jesus paused, then looked at the lady and said, "All your sins are forgiven."

Well, that caused an uproar among all those present, not of excitement and happy applause at the prostitute's sudden release from all her guilt and self-disgust, but of anger and shock at Jesus thinking he had the authority to forgive sins at all.

Jesus ignored their bickering, however, escorted the woman to the door and told her, "It's because you trusted in me that you're utterly forgiven. And

remember that whenever pangs of guilt try to wreck the peace of mind you have right now.”

Chapter 4 – Whose side are you on?...

After a brief rest, Jesus continued his tour through the towns and villages, telling everyone who came out to hear him that the Kingdom of God had arrived. With him on the journey were his twelve disciples and several women whose illnesses he'd cured. Among the women were Mary Magdalene, from whom he'd driven out 7 demons, Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod's estate agent, and Susanna. It was these women who were funding Jesus' mission.

They stopped at a house along the way, but the crowd pressed in on them so strongly that they couldn't even find room to eat. Reports of such incidents, meanwhile, including this one, had been trickling back to Jesus' relatives, but this time they did something about it. They immediately set off from home to persuade Jesus to stop what he was doing, because all this religious frenzy was driving him crazy and they were really scared for him.

While they were on their way, a man who'd been possessed by a demon that had rendered him both dumb and blind, was brought by friends to Jesus. Jesus immediately drove out the demon, and the man could both see and speak again. As the healed man and his friends weaved their way through the crowd to head for home, a buzz of whispers and comments followed them. Many people began to ask, just like John's disciples had, if this Jesus fellow might actually be the Messiah.

Some scribes and Pharisees from Jerusalem had also seen the miracle, which really made them think, because how could an ordinary man cast out demons? They decided among themselves, therefore, that Jesus was “possessed by Satan, the ruler of the demons, and that's how he drives demons out.”

But Jesus knew exactly what they were thinking and he called them over.

“You're saying that Satan is the one casting out demons through me, right? But why on earth would Satan drive out Satan? That's like a country being ravaged by civil war. To turn against your own people is a recipe for disaster, just like a city is torn apart by rival factions, or a family is ripped apart by stupid quarrels and bickering. They all risk ripping themselves to shreds. So why would Satan take that risk too, by driving his demons out of people? He'd be fighting against himself, wouldn't he? He'd be creating his own civil war, and that would put his entire kingdom at risk. It would die by its own hand, like suicide.”

“And, what's more,” Jesus continued, “if it's true what you say that I drive out demons by the power of Satan, then whose power is it that you try to drive out

demons by? It's not by their demon power you're doing it, is it? So, if it isn't demon power you're using to drive out demons, why are you accusing me of driving out demons by demonic power? And if it's obviously not demon power I'm using, then by what power are the demons being driven out instead? Clearly, it's by God's power, which proves yet again that God is setting up his kingdom right now through me."

"But," Jesus continued, "assuming you're right, that I'm calling on Satan to cast out his demons. Have you thought what Satan might have to say about that? No way is he going to let a mere human break into his kingdom and get his demons thrown out. Satan's way too strong for any human to pull that off. The only way anyone can break through Satan's defenses is to be stronger than him. So, if demons are being driven out of people against Satan's wishes it's because he's been outmuscled by a power greater than his. But you know that already, don't you, because you call on that same power yourself. And now you see that same power in me, which surely proves I'm operating by the same power you are, and that's why I'm able to drive demons out."

"So now that it's obvious I'm operating by God's power, will you now support me? If not, then you're working directly against me. You're like the man who had several demons driven out of him, but his mind was still open to them, so when the demons who'd left him returned to find his mind still open, they invited many more demons to join them, and even more evil ones too, leaving the poor man in a much worse state than he was before. Well, that's where you're headed too if you keep accusing me of things you know are wrong."

"And remember, it's not me you're accusing anyway, because the power behind what I do isn't Satan's, it's the Holy Spirit's. When you accuse me of operating by the power of Satan, then, what you're actually doing is accusing the Holy Spirit of being Satan, and I don't fancy your chances of being forgiven if you stick to that kind of nonsense. It's just that kind of arrogant stupidity that prevents you being forgiven."

"But you're so totally wrapped up in thinking you're so clever, aren't you? And you love impressing people with your cunning arguments. But eventually it will all come out in the wash as to how evil you really are, because you cannot stop what's in your heart spilling out in what you say. You can cover it up for a while but look at you now. You accuse me of being demon-possessed and accuse the Holy Spirit of being Satan. You've done it already for all to see, therefore; you've revealed yourselves for exactly who you are, just like a tree reveals itself by the quality of its fruit. A good tree produces good fruit, a diseased tree rotten fruit, and your venom towards me clearly reveals which tree you are. You really are a pit of snakes, and one day you'll have to answer for every stupid, ridiculous word you've said."

Chapter 5 – We want a sign...

The crowd was impressed, and some of the scribes and Pharisees could see it too, so they shouted at Jesus to show the people some sort of ‘sign from heaven’ to prove his power came from God.

To which Jesus replied, “You silly people, you’ve just gone and proved my point, that you’re a diseased tree producing rotten fruit, because you blatantly ignore the obvious. I’ve already done spectacular miracles that are clear signs God is the power behind me, but nothing I do makes you believe it, does it? So why on earth would I do another spectacular sign when you’ve already decided every miracle I do comes from Satan? Be honest; you aren’t the least bit interested in signs proving God is behind me. You just want me to lose face in the eyes of the crowd if I don’t come up with a miracle right away, because you know just as I do that people only trust God if he does what they want immediately. But you being religious leaders know that already, that God doesn’t answer on demand. Never should we try to manipulate God into getting what we want, or make him feel obligated to answer on our timing.”

“But we Jews do love our signs, so I’ll give you a sign. It’s actually the same sign God gave to the city of Nineveh, which as you know was full of brutal, immoral Assyrian gentiles who posed a serious threat to our country. The Ninevites were so awful that God threatened to wipe them out, but they believed the sign God gave them and their city was spared.”

“So what was the sign? It was Jonah arriving in their country having just spent three days inside the stomach of a huge fish. It was enough to convince those God-ignoring gentiles that both God and his warning to them were real. So if I told you that after I die I will only spend three days in my grave, and that’s it, no more, will you then believe God sent me to you? Will you? Because there’s your clear sign that God is the power behind me. And you’d do well to believe it so you are spared as well.”

“And as you well know It wasn’t just those gentile Ninevites who believed God either. The great Queen of the South, another gentile, believed God was the power behind Solomon when she heard about and witnessed his wisdom. Well, now it’s your turn, and you’ve got someone far greater than either Jonah or Solomon as your sign too. So what will you do? Will you blunder ahead in your arrogance and stubbornly hold out against me? Imagine what those Ninevites will say, then, when they come up in the judgment with you, and they hear what you did.

“What stupid, blind, stubborn fools’ they’ll probably say. But out of your own mouths you’re already condemning yourselves. It’s not just you either, it’s the whole nation that’s being stupid, but you scribes and Pharisees take first prize.”

A woman then shouted out, “Blessed is the mother who gave birth to you and nursed you.”

To which Jesus replied, “But far more blessed is the person who sees God’s power so clearly displayed and takes to heart what God says and does it, unlike some standing here.”

It was just at this moment that Jesus’ mother and brothers finally arrived after their long trek from home to see and hear for themselves what Jesus was up to, and if the reports were correct. But the crowd was so tightly packed inside the house they couldn’t get near him, so they sent a message to him through the crowd that they’d arrived, and they waited outside for his reply.

His reply wasn’t anything like they’d hoped for, however, because when Jesus got the message that his mother and brothers were waiting nearby to see him, he looked up and said, “But who are my real family now?” And then spying his disciples he pointed to them and said, “There they are, that’s my family, because they’re the ones who care about what God wants, not what they themselves want. Those are the people I relate to.”

Chapter 6 – The sower and the seed...

Later that day, Jesus headed back down again to the lakeshore. The crowd, again, was so huge, including representatives from all the neighbouring towns, that Jesus had to take a boat offshore and speak from there.

His voice carried well over the water. “I’ve got another story to tell you,” he called out. “It’s about a farmer who went out to seed his field. Some of his seed missed the field all together and landed on the path beside the field instead. Some of it fell on ground that was so hard the seed stayed on the surface and the birds soon pecked that up. Some seed fell on rock that only had a thin cover of soil, so the seed grew but with little moisture and no deep roots to sustain it the sun soon burnt it to a crisp. Some seed fell among weeds, which smothered it to death as it grew. But some seed, finally, fell on good ground and produced a wonderful crop, multiplying the original seed thirty, sixty and even a hundred times over. So, what do you think the lesson is in that story? Think it over for yourselves because it’s important.”

And that was it. He didn’t say any more.

So, later on, when his disciples were alone with him, they asked him why he did that. Why tell the people a story with an important lesson to learn from it, if

he didn't tell them what the lesson was? The disciples didn't know what the lesson was themselves either, which was also good reason from them asking.

"All right," Jesus said, "I'll tell you why I do that. The story reveals something about the Kingdom of God, and another wonderful secret that God sent me to unlock. But only those with the key can get at it - like you, for instance, because you being my disciples have got the key. And that's another secret to the Kingdom of God. You have to be given the key to understand it, but it's only given to those who are eager to learn and their minds are open, unlike those Pharisees I was talking to earlier. To people like them, who are only trying to find fault and an excuse not to listen and learn, I stop short of telling them what the lesson in my stories is, because they aren't the least bit interested in learning anything from me. They're so stupid they wouldn't understand the lesson anyway, even if I spelled it out in words of two syllables or less."

"Remember what Isaiah wrote, about people who are able to listen, but they're not interested in learning, and people with eyes to see, but cannot grasp the significance of what they're looking at? That's because they set their hearts against me from the start. They don't want to learn from me. So why give them a key they don't want? Why give them the key that unlocks the secrets of the Kingdom of God when they're not interested? Why even offer them the key that would open up their eyes, ears and hearts to me so I could heal them, when they've already shown they don't want it? I'm the key, but as they've made abundantly clear, and you've now witnessed for yourselves, they've sealed their hearts against me."

"Think how fortunate you are, then, because now is the time that the secrets to the Kingdom of God are being unlocked, and you have the key. Even the great prophets and saints of old didn't have what you've got. They desperately wanted to see what the future looked like when what they predicted about me finally happened, but it wasn't for them to see. It's for you to see, because that time is now here, and you are literally living in it."

"I suppose you'd like to hear what that story was all about, then, right? Well it's really very simple once you've got the key. Without it you'll never understand where I'm going with any of my stories, so listen up and I'll explain."

"The key, simply put, is me. And what I unlock is the Kingdom. That's what God sent me for, to unlock the secrets of his Kingdom. And one of those secrets is revealed in the story I told, the secret being how people respond to me, because that's the first and only step for a human to experience the life of God's Kingdom."

"So here's all this seed being scattered by the farmers, the seed representing me. What happens to the seed describes the different responses people have to me. Some people simply have no clue what I'm about or why I came, so they go

their merry way none the wiser. Some people, on the other hand, do get a handle on who I am and what I came from, but it doesn't really sink into their heads with any real meaning for their lives in the here and now, so they get distracted by Satan onto other things. Others meanwhile, get what I'm all about and love it, but their roots are shallow and they easily get discouraged and give up when life becomes difficult and it's not such a joy anymore. Then there are those, like seed sown among weeds, whose minds are taken up with worldly worries and dreams. Money and pleasure are still very important to them. But last of all, there are those who understand I'm the key to experiencing the life of God's Kingdom and they stick to me like limpets, because they want to see how it all plays out in real life until the day they die. And for those people it's a life of new discoveries, that keeps growing to thirty, sixty and a hundred times more than what they understood to begin with."

"The message is pretty obvious, then, isn't it? - that the key that unlocks such a life is only given to people whose minds and hearts are open to me being the source of it. One day everyone will understand that I came to bring the life of God's Kingdom to this planet, but for now the lights only go on in the minds of those who really want to experience it now. These are the people who realize they're holding a jewel, so they'd rather see it shine and sparkle than hide it away in a box. I mean, who lights a lamp and then puts it in a closet and closes the door? I came to light up a whole new way of life, and those who believe it want it to shine as brightly as possible so the life of the Kingdom becomes real."

Chapter 7 – The Kingdom of God has an open door...

"What we're talking about here is what God sent me to tell everyone about, that now is the time his Kingdom really begins to grow. But there's another secret to add to that, as to how it grows. The first analogy was simply about where seed grows well. Or in which human minds what I came for really bears fruit.'

"But did you also notice that the farmer only sowed the seed and nothing else? How did the seed then grow? Well, even in poor soil the seed automatically grew, without any help from the farmer. Without any effort or help on his part, the seed begins to swell in the ground, then it sprouts a stalk and leaves, and over the summer it develops its own seed head ready for harvesting. All the farmer did was plant and harvest and the rest just happened."

"It's a perfect analogy of seed sown in an open mind automatically growing and bearing fruit. That's the way God has set things up, that in those who love what God sent me for and want more of what God has to offer through me, fruit in them will automatically grow."

“There’s another seed-sowing analogy that helps explain what God has set up too. A farmer plants his field with some really good wheat seed, but some dolt comes in at night and sows thistle seeds all over the farmer’s field as well. The wheat grows up strong and healthy, but so do the thistles with it. When some of the farmer’s workers see what’s happened they tell the farmer and ask him if he’d like them to rip the thistles out. ‘No need,’ the farmer replies, ‘because you might rip out some of the wheat too, so let the wheat and thistles grow together and we’ll wait ‘til harvest time to separate them, and then stack the thistles in bundles and burn them.’”

Jesus told this last story to the whole crowd, not just to his disciples, and again he left the crowd hanging as to what it meant, but alone with his disciples he explained how the farmer pictures him and the farmer’s field pictures the world. The good seed the farmer sowed pictures all those people who respond to Jesus’ message and belong to the Kingdom of God, and the thistles all those who reject his message and belong to the kingdom of Satan. The harvest pictures the end of the world, when the angels, pictured by the harvesters, separate out the thistles and burn them.

“Do you see what all this means, then?” Jesus asks his disciples. “Right now God is putting his Kingdom together on this Earth, and some people want to be part of it and others don’t. The day then comes when I send my angels to separate out all who want nothing to do with God’s Kingdom, and place them in bundles, so to speak, ready for burning. At that point they realize what they’ve missed out on by allowing Satan’s rotten attitudes to fill their heads, and it will be a time of horrible self-recrimination, especially as they see those who responded to Jesus’ message shining like suns in the Father’s Kingdom. I say this now to get people’s attention, because there’s no fooling around here. This is real. God has opened up his Kingdom to people, and Satan doesn’t like that one bit, so he’s going to pick off people wherever he can along the way.”

Chapter 8 – Like a mustard seed...

Jesus then went back to speaking to the crowd.

“You keep hearing me talk of the Kingdom of God, but what is it actually like? Well, picture a mustard seed. It is tiny to begin with, but it can grow into a tree big enough for birds to roost in. And look what a few tiny yeast spores can do to a batch of bread dough. From tiny specks they expand enormously. Well, take how those seeds and spores automatically grow and expand to much greater size, and apply it to a man who’s just unearthed a bag of ancient gold coins while digging in

a field. It was just an ordinary field, but now he's found treasure in it its value has increased enormously, so he sells everything he owns and he buys the field."

"And wouldn't you do that too? Wouldn't you grab onto something that increased and expanded in value like that? But when you discover the potential value of something, it's like seeing the potential of spores expanding into bread and mustard seeds growing into trees. You see nothing but growth and increase, and something much greater and more valuable forming. It's like the man searching everywhere for the perfect pearl, because he knows what he's got when he finds it. He has something of immeasurable and increasing value, so he too sells off all his possessions to buy it."

"Well, the Kingdom of God is just like that; it has such enormous potential for growing and growing in value and size, to the point that when a person grasps what he's got it becomes an all-consuming quest to experience every bit of it. That's what understanding the Kingdom does to you."

"And right now that Kingdom is like a net being dragged along the seabed scooping up all kinds of fish to the surface, which the fishermen sort through, separating out the valuable fish and throwing the rest away. It's a fitting picture of the time coming when the angels will separate out those who listened to the message of the Kingdom of God, saw its potential and went for it, from those who didn't. And it won't be pleasant for those who didn't, because they face a much harder road breaking down their resistance."

He asked his disciples later if they understood what he was getting at, and they did, which to Jesus was grand because his disciples not only had all the treasures of the Old Testament in their possession already, they now had a double dose of treasure from his teachings as well. He was able, therefore, to fill them in on what those new treasures were like, while adapting his teaching to the crowds according to their desire to listen and understand, just as an Old Testament prophecy said he would, that he'd come telling stories like these to illustrate and reveal the secrets of the Kingdom of God hidden since time began, and some would love them, while others wouldn't.

Chapter 9 – Telling the wind what to do...

That same evening Jesus headed back to the lake to find a boat and escape from the crowds for a while, with just his disciples along for the ride. "Head for the opposite shore," Jesus told the rowers. It had been a long and exhausting day for him, so he took a cushion into the stern of the boat and he was soon fast asleep.

But out in the lake a sudden squall swept down from the hills, lifting the waves so high that the boat started taking on water. The disciples' frantic efforts at bailing weren't enough to stop the steady rise of water inside the boat, and it soon became obvious they could sink and that would be the end of them. Jesus was still asleep, however, despite the howling wind and the pounding of the waves on the sides of the boat. So they shook Jesus awake, frantically yelling, "We're sinking, we're sinking. Save us."

Jesus stood up, faced into the wind and yelled, "Quiet." And immediately the storm passed as quickly as it had risen. The wind died down to a calming breeze and the water lapped gently against the sides of the boat. "Why on earth were you so frightened?" Jesus asked. "Is your trust in God so meager still?"

To the disciples this was more than just amazing. It bordered on terrifying, because what kind of powers did Jesus have? On the surface he was like any other human being, but he could tell the wind and waves what to do, which no man they knew could do. This was another side of Jesus they were going to have to get used to.

Chapter 10 – Again, whose side are you on?...

When they arrived at the opposite shore in the country of the Gadarenes they were immediately confronted by a man from one of the neighbouring towns who had all sorts of demons controlling him. For a long time the poor man had been running around the hills and among the tombs totally naked, yelling and cutting himself with stones. He was so completely out of control that most people steered well clear of him, but occasionally he was so dangerous he had to be jumped on by a whole pile of people, tied up with chains and handcuffs, and carted off to jail. But he was so strong he had always broken free and escaped back into the hills again, or been driven by Satan out into the desert.

Seeing Jesus, the man ran over to him and stopped in front of him, glaring at him through his fearsome eyes.

"What is your name?" Jesus calmly asked him.

"We are Legion," the man replied, or rather the demons replied, because they were talking for the man, and they were many.

And then the man started shrieking, "What are you going to do to me, you Son of the Most High God? Please don't torment me before my time is up. I charge you by God not to do it."

Jesus put a stop to that right away, commanding the demons to leave the man immediately. In a flash the man came to his senses and fell at Jesus' feet. The

demons then begged Jesus to not banish them to the Abode of Evil Spirits, but let them enter thousands of pigs feeding on the mountainside instead.

“Go,” said Jesus, and on entering the pigs the entire herd stampeded down the slope and straight into the lake where they all drowned. The herdsmen ran for their lives, yelling to everyone they met what had happened, which brought yet another huge crowd of people to where Jesus was, where they found the former maniac sitting calmly at Jesus’ feet, properly dressed and perfectly sane.

Those who had seen what happened quickly filled in the details for those arriving, especially about the pigs charging into the lake in a huge, mad clump. But instead of excitement at this clear show of God’s power, there was fear. The people were so scared they wanted Jesus to leave.

There was no point in staying, so Jesus headed back to the boat to leave. The healed man pleaded with Jesus to take him along too, but Jesus said, “No. Go back home and tell your family and friends how merciful God has been to you.”

The man did exactly that, telling the story over and over again through the entire area, gathering amazed audiences wherever he went.

And then, just as Jesus was about to board the boat, another man ran up to him, a man named Jairus, an elder in the local synagogue. “Please, before you go,” Jairus begged, “my little daughter is at home near death. She’s my only girl and only twelve years old. Please, would you come and see her, and lay your hand on her, because I know then she’ll be totally cured.”

The crowd paused to watch this latest development, and as Jesus turned to follow Jairus, they crammed in behind him and followed along too. All of a sudden it wasn’t so important to them that he leave them alone.

As the crowd weaved its way slowly toward Jairus’ home, jostling and nearly crushing Jesus and his disciples along the way, a woman somehow managed to push in behind Jesus so she could touch the edge of his robe. For twelve years she’d suffered from internal bleeding, spent all her money on doctors and many painful treatments, which had only made her worse, not better. But she’d heard the stories of Jesus, so why not try him? Well, the instant she touched his robe she knew she was healed.

Jesus also knew in an instant that someone had touched him and been healed. He stopped in his tracks, turned to the crowd piling up behind him and yelled, “Who touched my robe? Come on, who was it who touched me?”

“But tons of people are touching you,” one of his disciples replied. “The crowd is banging up against you on all sides, so how could you ask who touched you?”

“Ah but someone did touch me, and someone who had a reason for touching me too,” Jesus persisted, “because I felt the loss of power.”

Peter tried to tell Jesus that no one in particular had touched him, and the other disciples chimed in with the same, but Jesus kept scanning the crowd to see who it was.

The woman realized she was obviously a first choice, being that close to Jesus, so she fell down at his feet, really frightened, and admitted it was she who had done it.

“Put your mind at rest, my dear,” Jesus told her, “it was your trust in me that cured you, so enjoy your new healthy body.”

Just then a messenger arrived from Jairus’ house to pass on the sad news that his daughter had just died, so there was no need to trouble Jesus any further.

“But why are you so sad?” Jesus asked, “Trust me; she’ll recover.”

So up to the house they all went anyway. Jesus then took Peter, James and John into the house with him, where they found it full of people making a horrible racket, wailing and moaning to the tune of professional mourners leading the fray on flutes.

“Stop that horrible racket,” Jesus yelled. “Why on earth are you creating such a hideous noise when the poor girl is asleep?”

Asleep? She’s dead, you silly man, some thought, and even voiced their thoughts as well. So Jesus shooed them all out of the room and into the outside courtyard, flutists and wailers included. The only people left in the room were the parents and the three disciples, at which point Jesus took one hand of the girl and said to her, “Little girl, wake up.”

It was just like watching someone awake out of a deep sleep. The girl stirred slightly as life flowed back into her, and then she sat on the side of the bed, stretched, and began to walk around. Jesus recommended she be given something to eat right away, which her amazed parents saw to as soon as they recovered. “And don’t you tell anyone what I just did,” he told them, but of course, as usual, news of it soon spread far and wide.

It wasn’t surprising, then, that just as Jesus was about to leave the girl’s house, two blind men came in crying, “Son of David, please have pity on us.”

“Yes, I do have pity on you,” Jesus replied. “But do you believe I can cure you?”

“Yes, we absolutely believe you can,” they both replied.

“Then request granted,” Jesus smiled, and he touched their eyes. Immediately their sight was restored. He also told them not to tell anyone, but they were off like a shot telling anyone who would listen.

And right after they left, another man was brought to Jesus, this time a man who’d been struck dumb by a demon. Jesus drove out the demon and the man’s speech was restored.

As news of these two astounding miracles trickled out to the crowd, there were two reactions: first of all, those who were astounded and said, “We’ve

never seen anything like it, ever,” and secondly, the Pharisees, who resorted to their old blab about Jesus’ power coming from Satan.

Chapter 11 – The harvest is huge...

Jesus soon set out on another tour of the surrounding towns and villages, to announce the arrival of God’s Kingdom, the clear proof of which was all the healings he was doing.

It was yet another distressing trip, though, because of how much and how many people were suffering. It wasn’t just the physical sicknesses they had and the demons messing up their minds, it was the helpless, lost look people had. They were like sheep without a shepherd. So where were the shepherds? Where were the skilled teachers who could explain what God was offering them instead? There was a huge harvest of lost and bewildered people out there just ripe for the picking.

It was time, therefore, for Jesus to get his disciples on board as to what their job would be.

“It’s amazing how the crowds follow and find us wherever we go, right?” he began. “Well, this is exactly according to God’s plan. It’s his doing that there are so many people desperately needing the help we have to offer. All we need now, then, is for God to provide the people who can help them. With his Kingdom growing at the rate it is right now we need a ton of labourers ready to hit the fields and bring in the harvest. There are millions of lost sheep out there needing shepherds.”

And as Jesus then explained, this was what his twelve disciples had been called to be, the first shepherds, and the first to be equipped to bring in the harvest. So that’s why he was now giving them the same power he had to drive out demons and cure every ailment and illness that people came to them for.

“I want you to go out in pairs to begin with, and for now stick to your fellow countrymen in trouble, not the Gentiles or Samaritans. And your message is simple. Tell people the Kingdom of God has arrived, bringing with it a whole new dimension of life that they can live and experience for themselves right now. To prove what you say is true, heal the sick, raise the dead, cure the incurable, and drive out demons. You’ve got the power, so use it, and don’t hold back one bit. And don’t worry about board and lodging, or living expenses, or taking a suitcase full of clothes with you. Just go as you are and all your needs will be taken care of.”

“You are going to people as shepherds, yes, but you’re also sheep in a world full of wolves, so tread carefully. Be as harmless as doves but wise like foxes too.

Learn as you go what it takes to get through to people, and know when to back off too. When you arrive in a town or village, be friendly and find someone who appreciates what you're saying, and hope he invites you to stay with him. Tell him he will experience a peace he's never known before. And if the rest of his family is supportive as well, promise them the same peace too. But if they get snarly, tell them you're leaving and you're taking your gift of peace with you."

"You may, unfortunately, arrive in a town where no one wants to hear what you have to say, so don't waste your time looking for a home to stay in. Or if someone invites you into his home but then he turns nasty, head for the door and kick the dust of that place off your sandals. It'll give them a picture they'll remember of God's reaction on the Day of Judgment to those who rejected his offer. Even such dreadful cities like Sodom of Gomorrah won't get the treatment those people will get. And don't be afraid to tell them that. Leave it ringing in their ears as you stomp off."

"In some towns you may find that everyone is out for your blood, so get out of there as fast as you can before things escalate. Don't waste your time on resisters. It's going to take long enough as it is to get through all the towns of Palestine before I return."

"And if hostile people accuse you of being evil deceivers and the Devil's henchmen, you're in good company because they accused me of the same thing. It can't be avoided when you're out there following in my footsteps and doing as I do. Just don't let them frighten you into backing off, because all will be revealed in the end as to who's on which side of the fence. Every secret plot ever hatched against God will be exposed for the world to see. But the things I tell you in secret, don't keep them a secret. Go and tell the world every secret I tell you. And whatever you hear from me, shout it from the rooftops. Go out there, be honest, be open and above all be utterly fearless in letting the truth be told. How are people ever going to hear the truth about God above the Devil's babble otherwise?"

"If people are willing to hear you out, that's good, because it means they're hearing me and they're hearing God too, because it's his words he sent me to speak. And when people hear you out they will be so glad they did, because of the difference it will make in their lives. Realize, then, the impact you're having on people. You really are rubbing off on them, so be confident and don't back down. God deeply appreciates any help you offer, even if it's just a glass of water for a thirsty child, because even the smallest show of his Kingdom proves there's a new world in the making. So keep in mind the good you are doing - and the pleasure it gives God as you're doing it."

"And realize you've got the power now to prove the Kingdom of God is alive and real as you drive out demons and cure the sick. You're ready, then, to go on

tour yourselves, so that many more people get to hear the message and thrill at what they hear and see God doing. And God's got people in a mood to listen too. The time is ripe. The crop is ready to harvest."

Chapter 12 – I want John the Baptist's head...

Meanwhile, King Herod had got wind of the strange happenings wherever Jesus went and he grew very uneasy. And for good reason too, because it wasn't long ago that John the Baptist had torn a strip off him for his illegal marriage to Herodias, which resulted in John being thrown in prison and Herodias seeking a way to get rid of him.

She managed it too. Herod had thrown a huge party on his birthday, inviting all his chief executives, high-ranking army officers and the top Galilean politicians and businessmen. It was a gathering of the high and mighty. To weasel her way into Herod's favour, Herodias had also planted her rather lovely daughter in front of this festive crowd to dance for them. Herod was delighted with her performance, and so were his guests. She was a hit. So Herod staggered to his feet and magnanimously declared before the assembled officials that he would give the girl whatever her heart desired.

"Tell me what you'd like," he beamed, to the approving cheers of the crowd, "and it's yours, even if it's half my kingdom." And if that wasn't rash enough, he also promised by oath that he would stick to his word. More roars of approval.

The trap had been set. Herod had merely been a pawn in Herodias' cunning game.

The girl quickly slipped back to her mother for some clues as to what she should do next.

"What shall I ask for, Mother?" she whispered.

"Ask for John the Baptist's head," Herodias hissed. "And ask for it here and now, on a dish."

A little startled, the girl hurried back to the banqueting hall. An expectant hush settled over the crowd as she approached the king.

"And what is it, my dear, that you wish to ask me for?" Herod asked, with a most becoming smile.

"I ask for John the Baptist's head, here and now, on a plate," she demanded.

Gasps of shock rippled through the crowd, but none compared to the rasping sound that issued from Herod. The smile was gone, and in its place some obvious signs of severe distress.

But he couldn't go back on his word, could he - not in front of all these people whose good opinions of him he'd nurtured so carefully for favours in return? He

had no choice but to order a soldier from his private bodyguard to carry out John's execution. Off to the prison the soldier went, chopped John's head off, and returned with John's head in a dish. He gave the dish to the girl, who handed it over to her Mother. Herodias' revenge was sweet.

When news of John's death got back to his disciples, they asked for John's body and buried it in a tomb, and hurried off to tell Jesus what had happened.

But rumours also hurriedly began that same day that John the Baptist had come back from the dead. Some said that Jesus was the resurrected John. Others said John had been resurrected into a new Elijah, or some other great prophet, and was now roaming the streets. For Herod, this was terrible news, because in some way or other it clearly spelt doom for him for what he'd done to John.

"But I had John's head chopped off," Herod insisted. But maybe it is John, he thought, as fear bubbled up from his conscience and burst into a fit of self-recrimination. "Yes, it is John," he concluded. "It has to be. John's come back from the dead to haunt me, and that's why he has all these new and frightful powers."

Chapter 13 – So many fed by so little...

Jesus and his disciples were now so busy they hardly had time to eat. "We need to get away for a bit," Jesus told them. "Let's find a secluded spot where we can rest for a while."

There was a nice spot they could retire to in the hills not far from Bethsaida, a boat ride away on the opposite shore of the lake. There weren't enough boats for the crowds to follow him either, but that didn't stop people tracking the boat's progress by walking round the shoreline of the lake, and arriving at what looked like the boat's point of landing before it even got there. They were hungry for Jesus' miraculous powers.

But this is what he had these powers for, so Jesus welcomed the crowds as they poured in from their trek round the lake. He waited for them to settle and again he talked to them about God's Kingdom arriving already, and proving it with more amazing healings. He simply could not ignore these poor people, wandering hopelessly through life like little lost lambs.

Evening was now rapidly approaching, however, and Jesus was now faced with a massive crowd of tired, hungry people.

"What do we do now?" one of the disciples asked. "We're stuck out here in this desolate outpost and it's way past supper time. Shouldn't we be telling these people to head off before dark to villages and farms so they can find a place to eat and sleep for the night?"

“No, there’s no need for that,” Jesus replied. “You can give them supper right here.”

“You mean go get enough food to feed this lot? But that will take ages,” Philip said.

Jesus turned to Philip. “So what do you suggest? Surely, you can find enough bread at least. That’s not too much to ask, is it?”

Philip wandered off, scratching his head and mumbling to himself that they’d never be able to find that much bread at such short notice anyway, and even if what they found was broken up into tiny pieces it wouldn’t feed that many people. “We’ve got at least five thousand men out there waiting to be fed,” he protested to Jesus, “and that’s not counting the women and children too. Oh, this is terrible.”

“Do we know how many loaves of bread we do actually have, then?” Jesus asked.

It was Andrew, Peter’s brother, who piped up, “Well, there’s a young lad here with five barley loaves and what looks like a couple of fish. But how far will those meager rations stretch with a crowd as large as this?”

“Bring what the boy has to me anyway,” Jesus said, “and get the people to sit in groups of fifty or so.”

It was a nice grassy spot for comfortable sitting and the crowd soon settled into their groups. Once everybody was sat and waiting to see what happened next, Jesus lifted the bread and fish high above his head, thanked God for another miracle in the making, and then he broke the bread and divided the fish into tiny fragments for the disciples to pass around.

Everyone ate as much as he or she wanted, and after they’d had their fill, Jesus told his disciples to gather up the leftovers so that nothing was wasted. They filled twelve baskets. It was another astounding miracle that convinced many watching that Jesus had to be the great prophet they’d all been hoping for.

Jesus quickly sensed they were about to crown him as their king right there and then, so he yelled to the disciples to get the boat back into the water and row themselves back across the lake post haste, and he would follow along later.

He turned to the crowd, told them that was enough for one day, and he hiked off on his own into the hills, to be alone by nightfall where he could pray in peace.

Chapter 14 – Peter walks on water...

The disciples, meanwhile, were in for another rough ride in the boat. The night turned wild. A vicious headwind nearly slowed them to a stop, the waves were

like mountains, and it was so dark they could hardly see. They rowed as hard as they could for several hours but all they managed was about four miles by 3 o'clock in the morning. They were smack in the middle of the lake, absolutely exhausted, and in dire danger of capsizing.

Jesus, however, even from where he was so far away, knew how dire their situation was, so he went to them, but not in a boat. He walked on the surface of the water, rising and falling with the rolling waves as they passed under his feet.

On catching sight of him the disciples recoiled in horror thinking it was an evil ghost of some sort, but just as it looked like it was going to pass right by them, Jesus yelled through the spray and howling wind, "Calm yourselves. I'm Jesus, not a ghost, so stop being so frightened."

Peter was the first to recover and respond.

"If it's really you," Peter shouted, "tell me to come to you walking on the water too."

"Come on, then," Jesus answered. "Do it."

Peter leapt overboard and found himself on top of the water, but the noise of the storm and the spray stinging his face took his eyes off Jesus, at which point he panicked and began to sink. "I'm drowning," he screamed to Jesus. "Save me, save me."

Jesus grabbed Peter's hand and pulled Peter up beside him. "Why oh why, Peter, did you let yourself doubt? You were doing so well and then you lost it. I was right beside you too. So why didn't you trust me?"

It was a good question, because it was only a few hours earlier that they'd witnessed the miracle of the loaves and fishes. But only now, as Peter and Jesus climbed into the boat, did the disciples all admit that Jesus truly was the Son of God. It was clearly taking time for it to register in their heads too, despite the obvious proof.

By now the wind had dropped, so it was back to the oars and a quieter trip back to Capernaum. As soon as they moored the boat, however, someone recognized Jesus and another crowd soon gathered. This time they just wanted to touch the tassel of his robe, believing that's all they needed to be healed. And they were.

Chapter 15 – Bread from heaven...

It wasn't exactly the rest, then, that Jesus had in mind for his disciples and himself. He'd been going full bore all the day before, all that night as well, and now it was morning and the crowds had found him already, and he was right back at work again.

And on the eastern shore of the lake more crowds of people were also searching for him. They knew the disciples had taken the only boat available and that Jesus hadn't gone with them, so where was he? He'd vanished. He would likely meet up again with his disciples, but how could they follow his disciples without a boat?

Meanwhile, news of Jesus' miraculous feeding of the thousands had reached Tiberias, and several people who did have boats had already set out across the lake, crammed to the gunnels with people, in hot pursuit of Jesus. They took aim at Capernaum, and their aim was good, because they found him there in the synagogue.

Someone asked him how he'd managed to get across the lake without a boat, unaware, of course, that Jesus had walked across the lake on the surface.

By way of reply Jesus simply asked, "But why are you following me in the first place? Is it just to see a miracle, or to get a free meal like all those thousands did earlier? Let me ask you frankly: Do you have any actual clue what I'm doing these miracles for? Is it just to make your physical lives easier by miraculously providing you with food? But even if I did produce another meal out of thin air, what would you gain by it? You'll soon need another meal, and another, because one meal won't fill you for a lifetime. Wouldn't you rather have food that sustains you forever? Because that's the kind of food I'm offering you, and the miracle of the bread and fish was only meant to illustrate that. What you should be chasing around after me for is the food that God wants for you, not just your stomach."

"But what exactly does God want for us?" someone asked

"Now that's the question you should be asking," Jesus replied. "And the answer is so simple: God wants you to trust me."

"But why should we trust you?" someone else asked. "And what proof can you offer that God even sent you at all? And if he did send you, what great service did he send you to us for? If it's not physical food God sent you to bring us, what food are you bringing us instead? Back when Israel was traipsing through the desert God gave them manna and called it 'bread from heaven', so what bread from heaven have you got to offer that's better than that?"

"But manna didn't feed anyone beyond keeping them alive physically," Jesus replied. "What the Father sent me to give you will feed you and keep you alive forever."

"Well, if it's that good," someone shouted, "then give us an endless supply of it."

"But that's exactly what I'm here for," Jesus replied, "because I am that bread. Look to me and you'll never be hungry again. Put your trust in me and you'll never be thirsty again either. That's what those miracles were meant to show you, but so far they haven't made you trust me for anything more than a better

life physically. And yes, I've helped you physically. I've healed and fed you, but is that all you want from me? Is that all you think I came to bring you, just a free lunch and a healthy body?"

"I healed and fed you to help you trust me, not for my sake but for yours. I didn't come from heaven doing all these miracles just to show off. I came to bring you news from the Father that he's raising you to eternal life in his Kingdom, and he gave me the key. That's why it's so important that you trust me because the only way into God's Kingdom is through me. And that's why I've been doing all these miracles, to help you see God's love and power in me, to convince you I really do have that power, and it's all for your benefit. When I say I'm 'bread from heaven', then, it's because I am all you need to enter eternity. All the Father is asking, therefore, is that you trust me, because anyone who trusts me won't be turned away, a point you've seen proved again and again in how I never turn away anyone who asks me for healing. You have a guarantee from the Father himself that none of you will lose out if you put your trust in me. Trust me with your life now and I'll make sure you get life forever as well. I'll even raise you up to eternal life myself."

There was some concentrated grumbling among the crowd, though, resulting from Jesus calling himself 'bread from heaven'. "What's all this nonsense about Jesus coming from heaven and God being his Father," one man muttered, "when we all know he came from Nazareth and his parents are Joseph and Mary? It sounds like a real scam to me to get attention for himself."

Jesus could see them huddled in their clumps moaning away, so he yelled out, "Stop your grumbling and listen, will you? Right now you face the most amazing opportunity, written down and predicted many years ago, that 'Everyone will be taught by God'. Well, that prophecy is being fulfilled right now, and the proof is right in front of you. You've seen amazing things happen to people when they listen to me and trust me. Clearly, then, the Father is reaching out to people in a huge way through me, attracting all kinds of people to me for teaching and healing. The evidence is overwhelming that he's thrown open the doors to his Kingdom to you, because he's so obviously given me the key. And that's why he's drawing attention to me, not for my sake but for yours. The reason he's given me the power to heal is simply to help you trust me, that's all."

"And he made his plan visible specifically through me, because I was with him. I've seen the Father. I know him. I came from where he is, which means you're totally safe trusting me. And I mean safe forever, because if you trust me you've already stepped into God's eternal Kingdom and received eternal life. That's why I say I'm the bread from heaven, because what I have to offer is for your eternal benefit, unlike the short-term manna your ancestors ate that only kept them

alive physically, and eventually they all died too. So I say, 'Eat me,' because I'm the bread that will keep you alive forever."

Well, that got the grumblers all stirred up again, because, as someone said in a sneery voice, "You mean we have to eat his body? What kind of claptrap is that?"

"I can assure it's not claptrap," Jesus replied, "because if you don't eat my body and you don't drink my blood, you're dead. There's not a speck of life in you. And when I say 'life' I mean eternal life, which is only possible through me, because I'm the one who raises you to it. That's why I say I'm the real food and drink you need. Eat and drink me, and you have the stuff of eternal life already in you, just as I have the Father, the Source of all life, living his life in me. And where else do you think that kind of life comes from? It can only come from heaven, right? But here it is, right in front of you right now, ready for the eating any time you like, just as manna was for the Israelites. So go ahead and tuck into me because whoever eats me won't die."

But this was too much, even for his disciples. "When he puts it like that," one of them muttered, "it sounds awful, repulsive even, so who's likely to accept it?"

Jesus was quite aware of what they were thinking, so he pulled them aside for a chat.

"You mean to tell me, after all you've seen me do, that you're upset at what I'm saying? But what if one day you see me going back to heaven, what will you think then? Is that what it will take to convince you? But think about it for a minute. Eternal life requires an eternal source, right? Well, that's who I am. I'm the source. You also know that no human is born with eternal life, nor can any human create eternal life either. That's why the Father is so actively and powerfully drawing people's attention to me, because I'm the one who can create eternal life too."

Jesus knew his disciples would have trouble trusting him, and that one of them would even turn him in to be arrested too. It didn't surprise him, therefore, when many of his followers started drifting away. It was too much for them to grasp what he was saying, especially about him being the bread and eating him. It was fine while he was doing miracles, but not when he talked like this.

So Jesus turned to the twelve and said, "You're not thinking of leaving as well, are you?"

"But where else would we go?" Peter replied. "And who else do we turn to for eternal life? Watching and hearing you it's clear to us you really are the Son of the Father, so whatever you say we take seriously."

"Good," Jesus replied, "but it still won't stop one of you being used by the Devil."

Chapter 16 – What’s in the heart...

There were many others being ‘used by the Devil’ in Judea too, who wanted Jesus dead, so he stayed away from Judea and concentrated his attention on Galilee. Wherever he travelled, in towns, villages, or just roaming the countryside, the sick and infirm found him or they were taken to him. And everyone who trusted him for healing was cured immediately.

But others hunted Jesus down for different reasons. He wasn’t being ‘Jewish’ enough according to several scribes and Pharisees who’d travelled out from Jerusalem to tell him off. Some of his disciples, they said, had been seen eating meals without the ceremonial washing of their hands first. Religious ritual demanded that hands be washed before eating, and there were all kinds of other rituals governing the cleaning of cups, pots and other utensils as well. And in the minds of these Jews, Jesus healing every incurable disease in existence didn’t rate nearly as highly as clean hands and a spotless saucepan.

They demanded to know from Jesus, therefore, “why your disciples flagrantly ignore the traditional religious rituals of our Jewish elders by eating without their hands being washed.”

“Well, what I’d like to know,” Jesus replied, glaring back, “is why you Jewish leaders flagrantly place your traditions and rituals above what God commands. Take the command, ‘Honour your father and mother’, for instance, or the one about ‘Anyone speaking evil of his father and mother should be put to death’. But you actually give children the excuse to dishonour their parents and not support them financially in their need, by telling them their ‘money should be given to God’, and it goes into your funds instead. So how dare you accuse me of breaking rules when you’re blatantly breaking God’s much bigger rules yourselves.”

“So what gives you the right, Jesus continued, “to come stomping up here accusing my disciples of wrongdoing when you’re a bunch of sniveling hypocrites yourselves. You’re the perfect, example of the people Isaiah wrote about when he said, ‘They honour God in word but not in heart. They’re more interested in all that religious stuff they make up themselves, none of which means anything to God. But they cling to their sacred rituals anyway, because they love them far more than they love God.’”

Before any of the Pharisees had a chance to argue back, Jesus turned to the crowd and cried out, “Listen up everyone, because you just saw where the trouble really lies. It’s not in what a person puts into his mouth, it’s rather what comes out of it, because that’s what shows him up for the dirtbag he really is.”

You’d think Jesus’ disciples would be pleased that Jesus stood up for them so strongly, but not so. Instead, they were really worried.

“You are aware, Jesus,” one of them told him, “that the Pharisees were very annoyed by what you said.”

“Not to worry,” Jesus replied, “because if God isn’t the one who created their religion, it won’t last. Think of them as just temporary bluster, the blind leading the blind on an inevitable trip straight into the ditch together.”

“But what did you mean when you talked about things coming in and out of people’s mouths?” Peter asked.”

“Oh, come on, Peter,” Jesus replied. “You mean you don’t understand what I meant any better than they did? It’s not what a man eats that makes him rotten to the core, because what he eats goes into the stomach and gets digested. But what comes out of a man’s mouth is different, because it came from his heart, and that’s where the rottenness in him comes from. It’s not unwashed hands that make a man ‘unclean’, it’s his unwashed heart. He is what his heart is, because that’s where our thoughts and behaviour spring from, like stealing, murder, adultery and other sex sins. It’s where jealousy, arrogance, lying to people - and about them – originate, and things like malicious gossip and false testimony in court, being totally taken up with one’s own appetites, wanting what’s not ours, and reckless, uncaring treatment of others. These are the things that make a man rotten to the core, not forgetting to wash his hands. So what those Pharisees are saying is nonsense. Ignore it.”

And that meant, of course, they could also ignore the old Mosaic laws differentiating between foods that were classed as ‘clean’ and ‘unclean’ too, something the Pharisees hadn’t realized yet either.

Chapter 17 – How can you be so dumb?...

Steering clear of Judea, Jesus dropped by a home for a private visit near the cities of Tyre and Sidon.

It soon leaked out that he was in the area, and a Gentile woman came banging on the door.

She rushed in when the door was opened, crying out to Jesus, “I beg your mercy, Son of David, I have a small daughter at home being cruelly tormented by a demon.”

To everyone’s surprise, Jesus totally ignored her.

So she kept on begging.

But still Jesus didn’t respond.

So she begged even louder and so persistently that one of Jesus’ disciples had to shout above the noise suggesting Jesus send her away or she’d go on crying forever.

“I’d like to help,” Jesus replied, “but I was sent to my own people in need, not to Gentiles like her.”

Well, that set the woman off again - only this time she threw herself at Jesus’ feet crying, “Help me.”

“But who gets fed in a family first?” Jesus asked her. “Is it the dog or the children? It’s the children, right? So what parent would take their child’s food and give it to the dog first?”

“I understand what you’re saying,” she replied. “And I accept that you came to your own people first, not to spend what time you have with us Gentiles. But even the family dog is allowed to eat at its owner’s table from the crumbs that his children drop.”

“Jolly well said!” Jesus cried. “It’s trust like that I love, that even if you only got scraps from coming to see me, you still believed something good would happen. So good for you, your wish is totally granted. Run on home, because you’ll find the demon is gone and your daughter totally recovered.”

She was gone like a flash, and raced home to find her daughter lying peacefully on her bed completely cured.

Jesus then returned to the Lake of Galilee and took a stroll up into the hills for a rest.

But somehow word leaked out again that he’d arrived back, and in among the crowd who found him was a man with a dreadful stammer and no hearing. One of those who brought him asked Jesus if he would lay his hands on their friend and heal him.

Instead of healing the man on the spot, however, Jesus took the man and his friends away from the crowd so that just the group of them was together.

Since the man was deaf, Jesus didn’t try speaking to him. Instead, he placed his fingers on the man’s ears, then spat into his own hand and touched the man’s mouth, and mouthed the word, “Open.”

Perhaps the man even heard the echo of that word, because his hearing immediately came back, and when he tried to express his thanks, he suddenly realized his stammer had gone as well.

Before anyone could shout for joy, Jesus quickly jumped in and told them not to say anything to anyone about what had just happened. But like all the other times he’d said that to people, the stronger he urged them not to say anything the more likely they’d be to say it.

And true to form these people ran off in all directions shouting, “Isn’t he wonderful? Do you see what he did? He makes deaf people hear and dumb people speak. It’s astonishing.”

Chapter 18 – Whose side are you on (yet again)?...

Not surprisingly, as news spread again of Jesus' miraculous powers, a huge crowd of people gathered wherever he was, bringing their sick friends and relatives for healing.

Many of the ill and infirm were unable to walk, so they were placed on stretchers at Jesus' feet and all of them were cured. But to actually be there and witness new arms and legs growing where people had none before, the blind gazing around in wonder, the deaf hearing their friends' voices for the first time, and people who couldn't even stand a moment ago now running around with limbs in perfect working order, was an amazing sight to see, and at that point people had no trouble thanking and trusting God.

But here they were again, up in the hills in the middle of nowhere with a crowd of thousands - and no food. Jesus really felt for them because they'd been up there with him for three days already and their food had run out. But many of these people were miles from home, and they'd be faint with hunger long before they got there. Jesus made it clear they needed to be fed.

"But where are we going to find food for thousands in a desert?" was the obvious question.

Jesus asked the disciples what food they could muster up from their own supplies. Seven loaves of bread and a few fish was the answer. So Jesus had the entire crowd sit down, he thanked God, divided up the bread and fish into small pieces and told the people to come up and take as much as they needed. Even after everyone had eaten, there were still seven basket loads of leftovers. Jesus then sent the crowd home and took a boat to the west shore with his disciples.

He was met by a group of angry Pharisees and Sadducees still demanding spectacular signs in the sky to prove he was the Messiah. Jesus' answer was the same as before. "The only sign you're getting from me is the sign of Jonah. And besides, why can't you read the obvious signs yourselves? You're always pointing to the sky for signs - red sky at night, for instance, meaning good weather tomorrow, red sky in the morning meaning lousy weather. You can read those signs easily enough, so why not the signs that clearly tell you who I am? But you refuse to even acknowledge them, don't you?" - and with that Jesus turned his back on them, walked down to the shore and took the boat back to the other side of the lake.

It had all happened so quickly that the disciples forgot to buy more food for the journey, and they only had one loaf of bread left for the lot of them. When they broke the news to Jesus, his answer was, "The only bread you need worry about is the yeast that inflates those bread-heads, King Herod and the Pharisees."

The disciples assumed there was some hidden meaning in that which tied in with them forgetting to buy bread, and that got Jesus stirred up again. "Oh, come on, why are you so worried about not having enough bread? You can't be that stupid, surely, because what did you see happen the other day? Thousands of people were fed on five loaves and a few fish, right? And how many baskets of leftovers were there?"

"Twelve," was the sheepish answer.

"And how many baskets of leftovers did we have when thousands more were fed just a few hours ago from seven loaves and a few more measly fish?"

"Seven," one of them mumbled.

"So, having just seen those two miracles with your very own eyes, why would you even be mildly worried that we're short a bit on bread? And do you think I'm annoyed at you for forgetting to get more supplies? I'm not the least bit concerned about being short on supplies. And why should you be, as well? You heard me call on God to feed those thousands and you saw what happened. Bread by the ton came out of nowhere. Bread isn't a worry, then, is it? But it is a worry when it's bread in the heads of people like Herod and those ridiculous Pharisees, and that's what I'm getting at. It's those inflated brains of theirs."

The blank expressions on the faces of the disciples and the gentle rocking of the boat created a meditative mood for a moment or two. And then came a smattering of "Oh's" and "Ah's" and "Oh, I get it," as it dawned on them that Jesus was using bread to describe the wrong-headed nonsense spewing out of the nation's worldly and religious leaders, which unfortunately had infiltrated the thinking of the entire Jewish nation, just like yeast in a loaf of bread.

"So don't let that yeast infect you too," was Jesus' obvious point, and with that safely tucked away in their heads they got back to rowing.

Chapter 19 – I think I see people moving...

They clambered onto shore at Bethsaida, where a blind man was brought to Jesus, and again Jesus wanted to be alone with him, away from the crowd. He took the man by the hand, out of the village entirely, and in a quiet spot Jesus spat on his hand, touched the man's eyes and asked him, "Do you see anything?"

The man stared with great concentration all around him. "I think I see people," he replied, "but they look more like trees moving about."

So Jesus spat and touched his eyes again. "How about now?" Jesus asked.

Again the man stared all around him, squinting his eyes and pushing his head forward. "Yes, yes," he cried, "things are coming into focus," and the more he

stared the more in focus everything became, until eventually he could see perfectly clearly.

Before the man ran off, Jesus told him, “Don’t go back to the village. Don’t even go close to it. Find another route, now that you can see where you’re going, and go straight home.”

Chapter 20 – Who do you say I am?...

It was off to the district of Caesarea Philippi next and the villages around there. Jesus had taken time out alone to pray, with his disciples sitting near by. He looked over at them chatting together and decided this was the time to see just what they thought about him so far. He started off with a general question about what other people were saying about him.

“You’ve heard people talk about me, so who are they saying I am?” he asked them.

Several replies came back. “Some say you’re John the Baptist,” one of them said.

“Or Elijah,” someone else said.

“Some think you’re one of the prophets of old, like Jeremiah, who’s come back from the dead,” another disciple said.

“Well that’s what other people are saying about me,” Jesus said, “but who do you say I am?”

In an instant Peter replied, “You’re Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

“That’s wonderful, Peter,” Jesus enthused, “because you know where you got that understanding from, don’t you? It came directly from my Father in heaven. You couldn’t have got it from any other source. So let me tell you something very personally from me too. You have a good name, Peter - ‘petros’ the rock - because it’s on a rock I am going to build my church, a rock so strong that even death and hell won’t shake it.”

“Imagine it, Peter,” Jesus continued, “a whole community of people who trust their lives to me, against whom the mightiest powers of evil submit. And you’ve seen it happen already, in how the demons do exactly what I tell them. So you’re right, Peter, I am God’s Son, the Anointed One, the Key to the Kingdom of God, the Unshakeable Rock that you and thousands like you will rest their hopes in, and never be disappointed. And since you’re the first to grasp who I am I pass on those keys of the Kingdom to you. From now on you too will have the power to unlock the gates to God’s Kingdom to others, with all the backing of heaven itself, as you make clear to people what that Kingdom permits and prohibits, just like I

do today. But don't tell this to anyone else yet, as to who I really am and what I'm passing on to you."

Chapter 21 – The third day I'll rise again...

It was a watershed moment in Jesus' relationship with his disciples, because he could speak openly now about what the future held, for both himself and for them.

"You're right, Peter, I am the Son of God sent by God, but I'm also the Son of Man, and as a man I'm going to suffer. I'm going to Jerusalem where I know I will be tortured, and none of the city elders or priests will come to my defense, or try to prevent my execution. But take note of this: they will kill me, yes, but I'll only be dead for three days. On the third day I'll come back to life, just as Jonah came out of the fish's stomach alive and well after three days inside it. Three days, that's the proof I'm the promised Messiah. And that's the sign of Jonah I'm giving to people. It will look like I'm dead and gone, but out of the grave I will come three days later."

Peter's mind was whirling while Jesus spoke. He took Jesus aside and whispered earnestly, "This is preposterous. You can't go through with this; it's ludicrous. It's not going to happen."

Jesus quickly glanced at the other disciples, noticed they weren't watching, so he grabbed Peter's arm and stared him in the face. "Get out of my sight, you Satan," he said, just inches from Peter's nose.

Peter's look of horror prompted Jesus to whisper urgently, "Peter, listen. You're not helping me at all by trying to persuade me out of what I have to do. I realize it doesn't make sense to you, but what must happen to me is all part of God's plan, so look at it from his point of view, not just from yours."

Chapter 22 – An amazing transformation...

Jesus left Peter to stew on his last comment and walked over to speak to the crowd of people that had gathered to see him.

"You've been following me around for some time now," he said to them, "so it's time you understood what following me really means. It means giving up what you want in life and trusting me with your life instead, because I'm the only one who can give you the life that God wants for you. If you're truly following me, therefore, it means accepting the raw fact that without me you have nothing. And it's important that you see that, because you could spend your life

seeking all the things this life has to offer, but what benefit are any of them to you when there's no life after you die?"

"You love life, right? Good. Then if you love your life, place it in my hands and see what happens. I challenge you to do that, because what does the world offer you instead? It doesn't care a hoot about you, and it offers you nothing after you die either. It lets you rot now, and it will let you rot into nothing later too. So if you're looking to the world to care for you, it's not listening. And if you're not looking to me instead, I have nothing to offer you either."

"I realize this is hard for you to grasp, because you look at me and it's obvious I'm just a human being like you, so how can I fill your life now and give you eternal life later? The time is coming, though, when I won't be anything like I am now. I will be coming in all the splendour and power of the Father and his angels, and won't you be glad you put your lives in my hands then? But that's not all there is to be glad about, because very soon the Holy Spirit will be coming too, and that's when those of you truly following me will get the chance to taste the life I have to offer forever in this life now."

A week later, Peter, James and John were in for a treat - an actual personal viewing of what Jesus' future splendour looked like.

Jesus took the three of them up a high mountain, where Jesus found a place to pray. The disciples, meanwhile, were feeling drowsy and they all fell asleep, so they didn't notice the amazing transformation in Jesus as he was praying. His face became as bright as the sun and his clothes sparkled and glittered with light, brighter and more vivid than anything seen on Earth. Two other beings appeared beside him too - Moses and Elijah - and the three of them talked about Jesus' coming death in Jerusalem and his resurrection.

The disciples woke to this vision shimmering before them. Peter wanted to say something but, unusually for him, words wouldn't come. But just as Moses and Elijah appeared to be leaving, Peter managed to blurt out, "Please, please, before you go; this is so amazing; can we build a shelter for each of you so you can stay longer with us?"

He was brought to total speechlessness again, though, as a bright, luminous cloud formed and hovered above them, and then slowly lowered to cover them. Never having experienced anything like this before, the disciples could only gape open-mouthed as they basked in what must have been God's presence. And yes, it must have been just that, because a voice in the cloud said, "Jesus is my Son. He is very dear to me and I love him very much. And I chose him just for you, so trust him with your life, and listen carefully to everything he tells you."

It was the voice that did it. All three disciples crumpled to the ground with their eyes tightly shut. Jesus waited and then reached over to them and gently

touched each in turn, saying, “You can get up now, there’s no need to be frightened.”

Peeking up at him they noticed he was no longer shining, the cloud was gone, and Jesus was alone again.

On their way down the mountain, Jesus told them not to breathe a word of what they’d just witnessed to anyone, not until he’d been raised from the dead. First, he had to die, but now the disciples knew what Jesus would be like after he died. It was true what he said, then, that one day he would be coming in power and splendour.

But why had Elijah appeared beside Jesus, one disciple wondered? Was it because of the prophecy the scribes often talked about, that Elijah would put in an appearance before the Messiah came?

“Yes, that’s right,” Jesus replied. “It’s Elijah’s job to get the Father’s great worldwide Plan of Restoration rolling, but no one seems to have realized that Elijah’s been here already and done it. No one realized the prophecy about Elijah has already been fulfilled. But that explains why they killed him. They had no idea who he was. They just saw him as a radical to be got rid of, just like me. People want me just as dead too. But that was also prophesied, that the Messiah would suffer greatly, be scoffed at and rejected, and finally killed as well. But if they missed the prophecy about Elijah it’s not surprising they’ll miss the other prophecy about me too.”

It didn’t take long for the disciples to make the connection between Elijah and John the Baptist, because it was John who had prepared the way for Jesus, and John who was already dead.

Chapter 23 – Moving mountains...

After coming down the mountain they found the other disciples in hot debate with a group of scribes, and a crowd of people listening in. When the crowd saw Jesus coming they hurried over to him.

Jesus wanted to know what the argument was all about, but just then a man from the crowd rushed up to Jesus crying, “I’m so glad you’re here. My only son is suffering horribly and your disciples couldn’t heal him. He’s constantly being thrown to the ground by an evil demon and he has terrible seizures. He grinds his teeth, foams at the mouth, and he writhes and screams in agony. By the time it’s all over he’s completely exhausted and he can’t speak.”

Jesus’ reaction was sharp. “Haven’t you learnt yet that you can trust me even when I’m not here in person with you? What will you do when I’m not here any longer, I wonder? I can hardly bear it watching you like this, because when are

you ever going to trust me? I won't be around here forever, you know, have you thought of that? Clearly you haven't, so bring the boy to me and watch."

As the young man was brought forward the demon in him caught sight of Jesus and threw the boy into another violent convulsion, with more foaming at the mouth.

Ignoring the boy for a moment, Jesus turned to the father and asked him, "How long has your son been like this?"

"It goes all the way back to his childhood," the father replied. "The demon would try to kill him by flinging him into a fire or by trying to drown him, so please, if you can do anything for my boy, we could do with your mercy and help desperately."

"You say 'if I can help'," Jesus snorted. "There's no 'if' or 'but' about it. The only limitation to your son being healed is whether or not you believe I can do it."

"But I do believe," the father pleaded, "and if my faith in you is not enough then please give me the faith I need."

Jesus looked at the man's pleading face and then at the silent, almost dumb-looking crowd, and in a loud voice he shouted, "You deaf and dumb demon, I command you to leave this boy and never come back to torture him again."

The boy screamed, and in one last awful convulsion the demon left him. The boy lay on the ground completely still. It looked like he was dead. Several people looked at him closely and actually said he was dead.

Jesus waited patiently while they made their diagnosis, then he pushed his way to the boy's side, took one of his hands and lifted him up. The boy stood up straight, completely cured. Jesus took him by the same hand to his father. It had been another astounding demonstration of God's power, and it caused quite a stir.

Later, the disciples asked Jesus privately why they hadn't been able to drive out the demon. "Because you still don't trust me enough," he replied. "You could move mountains if you did. Even if your faith was as tiny as a mustard seed you could tell a mountain to move somewhere else and it would do it. When you trust me there isn't an immovable obstacle in existence that you can't move. Just ask in trust and even a demon as strong as that one can be driven out."

"I've got something else for you to think about too," Jesus continued, "that not only do you have the power of heaven to drive out demons, you've also got all the support and wisdom of heaven too, when you come together seeking agreement on decisions you make as a community of believers. The Father hears your prayers when you're working together in harmony, and he guarantees an answer when you ask him for help. Think of me being right there with you with my guiding hand as well, even if it's only two or three of you meeting together

trying to sort out what's best. Never think you have to go it alone. We are always with you."

Chapter 24 – Paying taxes...

But now a new problem had arisen, because with all these miracles drawing huge crowds it was increasingly difficult for Jesus to keep his movements secret. Everywhere he went people found him and never left him alone. So one night he slipped away into Galilee with his disciples, to spend some time with them and to remind them of one thing especially, that he would be charged and sentenced to death, but three days later he would come back to life again. Why this had to happen didn't make any sense at all to the disciples yet. It was also very distressing for them to hear Jesus talk like this, so they avoided asking him to explain himself any further.

Despite slipping into Capernaum unnoticed, a group of temple tax collectors recognized Peter as he left the house they were staying in, and demanded to know if Jesus had been paying his Temple tax.

"Well, of course he has," Peter responded, but he quickly went back into the house to warn Jesus that the tax collectors were on his case and right outside the door.

But Jesus spoke first. "Tell me, Peter, how do you think kings and rulers get their pile of extra money in tolls and taxes? Is it by charging their own people or foreigners?"

"Well, if they're anything like the Roman rulers, they get it from foreigners."

"Exactly," Jesus replied, "which means their own people are under no obligation to pay those taxes. And as a loyal Jew I shouldn't be under any obligation to pay the Temple tax either - but - to avoid offending anyone, go down to the lake, bait your hook and inside the mouth of the first fish you catch you'll find a silver coin. That should cover the taxes nicely for both of us, don't you think?"

Chapter 25 – Like a little child...

While they were still indoors Jesus asked Peter, James and John what they'd been arguing about earlier in the day. This was a bit embarrassing because they'd been fighting over who would be 'top dog' among the three of them in God's Kingdom once it was established in power. Jesus already knew that, of course, which is why he brought the subject up in the first place. He could understand

why this was on their minds, though, because he'd chosen just the three of them to see him in his glory, so it looked like there was something very special in store for them.

It was time for a chat, therefore, about what really defines greatness, so he gathered them all together and pointing to Peter, James and John he said, "These three have been talking about who gets the top jobs in the Kingdom. In other words, who is the greatest and therefore deserves the top job? But God's Kingdom is not about being the man with the most; it's about the man with the least, the little guy who sees himself as everyone else's servant. It's not like the world, where it's so important to be the winner, or the one who gets all the applause. Rather, it's about being happy just helping."

"But if that's the case," one of the disciples chimed in, "who among us qualifies for the top jobs now?"

Before answering, Jesus looked round the room until he spied a young child. He beckoned to the child, knelt down beside him and said, "Take a good look at this child, because it's this little lad's lovely childlike nature that gets you a top spot in God's Kingdom. But if all you're interested in is your typical 'I'm entitled to the best and the greatest', the Kingdom's definitely not for you. With that kind of attitude you won't even get through the gate of God's Kingdom, let alone enter the front door."

Jesus then stood and lifted the child into his arms. He paused, looked around the room again, and then at the child and said, "A child like this couldn't care less how important or great he is. And if you appreciate that in a child, then you appreciate that same nature in me, and in my Father too. You've caught on to the very heart and essence of God's Kingdom, and what ranks highest there. It's not being important, it's being childlike. Greatness - as defined by God - is the childlike desire to please, serve and trust."

Chapter 26 – Don't squash a good man...

John jumped into the conversation at this point and, completely off subject, told Jesus they'd recently watched a man driving out demons in Jesus' name, but since the man wasn't one of them, or one of Jesus' close followers, they told the man to cease and desist.

"But why?" Jesus responded. "If he's actually doing miracles in my name he can't be working against us, surely, or working for the Devil, can he? And if he's not against us, he's for us, right? So, yes, he is one of us, and very much so too, because he's trusting in my name to help people, which is exactly what I've been getting at these last few days. With his kind of attitude that man has the power

and support of heaven itself behind him. He's living proof of it too, because look what he's able to do. He's moving mountains, just like I said trust would do."

"And think about the man's motive," Jesus continued. "He wasn't driving out demons to show off or get a following of people to himself. He wanted to help people get rid of their demons, and he trusted in my power to do it. That's why he used my name. Do you realize what that means, then? It means that anyone who trusts in my power for someone else's benefit has heaven on his side, because he's totally caught on to the heart and soul of God's nature and his Kingdom."

"If that same man offered you a glass of water in my name, would you take it? Of course you would, because it's obvious what his motive is. He knows you're one of my followers and wants to show his appreciation by offering you something you appreciate. He's just a humble man who loves to serve, so God gives him the power to serve. So why would you think that's wrong? He's doing what he thinks is right and good but along came you two and spoilt it for him. Well, go hang a large rock round each of your necks, jump off the closest bridge and hope you sink to the bottom and stay there, because holding back a good man from doing good makes you pitiful specimens not worth preserving."

"The world is full enough of people who squash and hinder those who want to do good for good motives. Unfortunately, that's to be expected in this self-centred culture, but those responsible for such flagrant idiocy will regret it, because one day they themselves will be in need and then they'll be slapping themselves for crushing the very people who could have helped them."

"So never look down on humble people who are sincerely trying to help in any way they can. These people all have angels to guide them, assigned to them by the Father himself, and the angels love reporting to the Father how good the people in their care are. And the Father loves to hear about them. He also loves rewarding them."

Chapter 27 – Pay up, or else...

Peter had a question as to how often he ought to forgive someone who'd hurt him. Maybe up to seven times was Peter's limit, but what did Jesus think?

"Only seven?" Jesus replied, with a shocked tone. "More like seventy times seven I'd say, because forgiveness has no limits or maximum quotas. But forgiveness is not the real issue here, is it? What you're really concerned about is that someone hurt you and you're angry with him, right? That being the case, forgiveness isn't the first thing on your list. If someone's upset you, the first thing to do is tell him you're upset. Have it out with him, so he knows what's up. He

needs to know why you're angry at him, and if he listens to you, realizes why you're offended and apologizes for it, that's when forgiveness kicks in. Forgive him with no conditions or reservations too, because you'll seal your friendship with him that way."

"And if that very same day he goes and upsets you again, maybe seven times or even seventy seven times, don't hold any of it against him if you can see he's truly sorry. On the other hand, if he refuses to hear you out and he clearly doesn't care about you or your friendship together, then it's time for Plan B. Take a couple of friends along with you and talk to him again, and see if that brings him round. If it doesn't, go to someone above him in authority and explain the situation, and let him deal with it."

"Now if all this happens between two of you in the Church and you've reached the second stage already where the other person clearly doesn't care, go to those in charge in the Church and tell them. Then if they can't make any headway with the person's attitude either, they can do whatever they think best to wake him up, which may include putting him out of the Church community for a while. And they have the total backing of Heaven in that decision too, because the Church is the Kingdom of God on Earth, so it's hugely important that it reflects the Kingdom as much as possible. And if that means not offering forgiveness to someone until he has a change of heart, so be it. The Church and Heaven work in complete harmony together to preserve the heart and spirit of God, especially in how fellow believers treat each other."

"I hope you're beginning to see how Heaven operates on a completely different wavelength to what most people are accustomed to. Forgiveness, for instance, is Heaven's number one priority in its dealings with people. Can I illustrate that with a story about the head of a company who had several customers who hadn't paid their bills yet. We'll call him John. So John contacts them and asks them to pay up, and with jolly good reason too because one of his customers, we'll call him James, had rolled up a massive debt to John in the millions."

"It was far too much for James to pay, 'but pay you must,' John said, 'even if it means selling everything you've got, including your wife and kids' - which was a ridiculous thing to say, but that's how upset he was."

"James knew he was in serious trouble and he could lose everything he held dear if he didn't pay up, but he hadn't got the money. So he begged John for more time to raise the money, promising he would pay what he owed."

"James was so obviously distraught that John's heart went out to him, and he felt so sorry for James that he not only forgave him for not paying his debts, he actually cancelled the entire debt too. All those millions, wiped off the ledger just like that, completely gone. James didn't have to pay a thing."

“Imagine the man’s relief. The story doesn’t end there, though, because by interesting coincidence James was also head of his own company, and he had several customers who owed him too. Like John, he contacted all his customers with outstanding debts and asked them to pay up, including one fellow, we’ll call him Peter, who had a debt so tiny it wouldn’t have been missed if it was never paid. Despite the paltry amount, however, James demanded that Peter pay up, and to the last penny. ‘You owe me, pay up, or else’ was his attitude.”

“‘I will,’ Peter pleaded, ‘if you could please give me a little more time to get the money together. I’ll do it, I really will, but I can’t do it right away.’ Which was all very interesting, because James was now in the same position as John had been with him. It was now James’ turn to have someone in dire straits begging for mercy.”

“So what would you have done? Well, the answer’s obvious, right? Forgive as you’ve been forgiven. But that isn’t what James did. Instead, he took Peter to court, had him charged for non-payment of debts, and sentenced to a prison cell until every pathetic penny was paid.”

“Well, you can imagine how Peter’s friends felt, but they weren’t the only ones who were furious. Several of James’ business friends were so incensed by his callous indifference that they shot off with a ‘justice for Peter’ appeal to John, the one who’d forgiven James’ huge debt. John turned several shades of purple when he heard what James had done to Peter and he immediately set up a meeting with him.”

“When they met, John wasted no time telling James what he thought of him. ‘You’re a putrefying blob of decayed human waste,’ and that was just the introduction to the tirade that followed. ‘I forgave you for the huge debt you piled up, James, and you know why I did it?’ John fumed. ‘I did it because you touched my heart. I could see how devastated you were and it really got to me. But you, well I bet if we opened you up we wouldn’t find you had a heart at all, just an empty, cold space, because you didn’t feel anything for Peter when he made the same appeal to you that you made to me.’”

“‘I am so angry at you, James,’ John continued, ‘that I’m suing you for every penny you owe, and I’m going to drag you through the courts until you haven’t got a penny left to your name.’”

“And that,” Jesus paused, “is what my Father thinks of people who don’t forgive. He will nail their scrawny, heartless hides to the wall. So think about that the next time you’re not in the mood to forgive someone. Especially when you’re brothers, remember? Do whatever it takes, then, to stay as brothers and never let anything get between you. Because that’s the Kingdom of God and the Church is that Kingdom on earth, and at the heart of both is forgiveness.”

And with that little insight into how things are in the Kingdom of God ringing in their ears, Jesus announced it was time they were on the move again, and on to their next tour of the towns.

Chapter 28 – Only one leper returns...

Amazingly, Jesus' very own blood brothers didn't believe he was the Messiah either, but they still had advice for him anyway.

"You should go to Judea," they advised him, "because that's where you'll get the most publicity. Advertise in the best markets, Jesus, that's the name of the game. You can't sell what you've got hidden away in pathetic backwaters like Galilee. Go for the big apple where people can really see what you're made of. Get yourself known, not paint masterpieces in locked up shacks. Think what a splash you'd make pulling off those stunts of yours in Jerusalem. Hey, the Feast of Tabernacles is coming up and the city will be crowded, so what better time to display your goods? Catch the fish when they're biting, brother, that's what we say. So what do you think?"

"I think you have no idea what hatred would pour out of the woodwork if I did that," Jesus replied, "because I'm telling people that the way they live and think is a mess. I'm exposing things they don't want to hear, and it makes people hate me. There'd be a massive outcry; they'd want my neck, and right now is not the time for that. For you it wouldn't be a problem going public because people wouldn't hate you. But you're not saying anything that would stir hate in the first place. So you go on to the festival, but I'm staying here for a bit longer."

Jesus waited on in Galilee until his brothers had left for Jerusalem. Little did they know that he was, in fact, going to follow them, but not in some huge public spectacle as they hoped. Jesus wanted to keep his journey as secret as possible to avoid huge crowds gathering before he got there, so he took the roundabout route through Samaria, where hardly anyone knew him.

But just as he reached a village on the border of Galilee and Samaria, he spied ten lepers huddled in a group by themselves, who, on seeing him, suddenly came to life yelling, "Jesus, Jesus, please have pity on us."

All Jesus said in return was, "Go to your local priest," because in Jewish law the priest was also the local sanitary officer, and a cure wasn't recognized without his official stamp of approval and a certificate to prove it.

If the lepers wondered why Jesus wanted them to go the priest when they still had leprosy, they were all jolly glad they did what Jesus said because on the way to the priest they felt the leprosy leave them and they were completely cured. All but one of them broke into a run to show the priest. The one remaining, the only Samaritan in the bunch, stopped in his tracks when he felt his body heal, gave

heartfelt thanks to God and turned back to go find Jesus and thank him too. When he found Jesus he fell at Jesus' feet, thanking him over and over again.

"But there were ten of you, weren't there?" Jesus asked him. "Where are the other nine? You mean you're the only one, and the only foreigner to boot, who comes back to thank God personally?" He helped the man to his feet and smiled. "Go on your way, my friend, and remember it was your trust in me that cured you. Remember it wherever you go."

Jesus and his disciples then crossed the border into Samaria, where Jesus had already arranged for a place to stay. But when the hotel management discovered they were a party of Jews on their way to Jerusalem, they treated them like hated traitors and ran them out of town.

James and John were apoplectic. "How dare they chuck us out, like we're some sort of vermin," they both yelled in similar statements of effrontery. "Give us permission, Jesus, to call down fire from heaven to burn them to a crisp."

Jesus was not amused. He told them in no uncertain terms that this wasn't what they'd been given power for. Their power was for healing people, not reducing them to charcoal.

Chapter 29 – To follow me means...

As they continued their journey looking for a place to stay, a scribe, a scholar of Jewish law joined them, along with several friends. Surprisingly, they weren't looking for an argument, nor to criticize. Instead, the scribe went up to Jesus and in a surprise move said, "Wherever you go, I'd like to come along with you."

"Do you now?" Jesus replied. "Well, if today's anything to go by you're in for a tough time of it, because we can't even find a place to sleep for the night. But that's life for us. We're not like birds or foxes that have nests and burrows they can curl up in. We have to find places to sleep, and even after making advance bookings they're sometimes cancelled, as they were in the last village we were in. But if you don't mind that sort of thing, then by all means, follow me."

And that's when the excuses came.

It was the scholar himself who came up with the first excuse. "Before I follow you, I need to bury my father first."

"Really?" Jesus responded. "But why take time out to bury dead people when we've got living people right now who desperately need to hear about the Kingdom of God? Let the dead bury their dead - and by dead people I mean those who are totally taken up by their earthly duties. There are plenty of them around, so let them bury your father. But if you're going to follow me you live for one

thing and one thing only, to lift these dead people out of their dead, empty lives into the life of the Kingdom of God, because they can experience right now.”

“Yes, but,” another man said, “if it means giving up everything in our old lives to follow you, shouldn’t I at least let my family and friends know I’m leaving and we can all have a proper send-off goodbye party?”

“This isn’t some fun adventure we’re on here,” Jesus replied. “When you follow me it’s like the farmer who knows he’ll get a good crop if he ploughs when it’s time to plough and he doesn’t stop for anything until the job is done. Once he’s started there’s no looking back, because he knows if he gets it done a good crop will follow. And that’s what my followers understand. They realize they’re sowing a crop for the Kingdom of God, and in their lifetime they know a crop will follow if they keep at it. To wander off chasing other interests is like the farmer stopping work because he’d rather have parties with his friends. He’s no use to his family, and nor are you to the spreading of the Kingdom of God if you’re not totally tuned in to the amazing changes that happen to people when they grasp through your help what I’ve come for.”

Chapter 30 – Martha and Mary...

They got as far as the village of Bethany, within easy reach of Jerusalem, without further incident. They were welcomed into the home of Martha, a long-time friend of Jesus, who lived with her sister Mary and brother Lazarus.

With so many visitors to feed, Martha was tearing round the kitchen trying to put a really nice meal together, but no one came out to help her. Instead, they all sat in the adjoining room listening to Jesus, including her sister Mary, her best helper. Mary was so enraptured by what Jesus was saying that she didn’t even hear the crashing of pots and pans in the kitchen.

Martha, meanwhile, was more enraptured with the splendid multi-course meal she had in mind for such honoured guests. But with no help she was falling behind, and she was missing out on what Jesus was saying too. At first she was just miffed, but then she got progressively exasperated until she could hold it in no longer. She burst into the room where they all were, strode up to Jesus and in flushed tones announced, “Yes, I’m upset. I’m sorry I’m upset, but I’m stuck out there in the kitchen trying to get a really nice meal together while my sister’s out here with you leaving me with all the work to do. I wish you’d tell her to come and help me.”

There was a stunned silence at the suddenness of Martha’s outburst.

Jesus was quick to respond: “Martha, we really appreciate what you’re trying to do for us, we really do. You’re putting on a real banquet for us, which is a very

kind gesture, but one of your easy to prepare dishes would have done just as well. And now you've got yourself all anxious and upset, and especially at your sister, which is a great pity because Mary wanted to grab the brief time we're here to catch up with everything we've been up to. That's just as important to her as the meal is to you, so why should she be tied up in the kitchen fulfilling only what you want and not what she wants? And what she wants is good, isn't it, so why deprive her of it?"

Chapter 31 – The first visit to Jerusalem...

The next day Jesus slipped into Jerusalem for the festival without being recognized. Crowds of people filled the city for the festival, but the 'most wanted' person on the 'watch out for' list of the Jewish authorities was Jesus, because they could hear his name being constantly mentioned in whispered conversations among the people. Some were saying Jesus was a good man, others weren't so sure. Some thought he was leading people astray, but no one dared speak too loudly because they knew the authorities had their ears open and spies out, looking for any signs of trouble.

Half way through the festival Jesus went to the Temple and there he began to speak to people, amazing anyone who stopped to listen as to how much he knew. "Where did this fellow come from?" was the thought of many, "And how come he knows so much when he hasn't attended any rabbi school?"

Jesus knew what they were thinking and saying to each other. "You're wondering where I got all my knowledge from, right? Well, it didn't come from my own head. It all comes to me from God who sent me. And it's easy to tell if something is from God or not, because if you're truly seeking to know God and what God wants for you, you'll find yourself loving what I have to say. You'll know it comes from God, because it stabs you in your heart. You just know it's right. It's like knowing when someone's speaking from his own head for his own self-glorification, and someone who's speaking openly and honestly from the heart."

There was no ignoring what Jesus was getting at. He was drawing a clear line in the sand between those who only want to present their own ideas because they seek all the praise for themselves, and those who give all the praise to God as the source of what they're saying.

"The difference is in their motive," Jesus continued. "Some teachers, for instance, expound great things about the Law of Moses, because they like being looked up to as wise and very clever - like some of you, perhaps, who have also become well-known for your knowledge of the Law. But it all becomes just hot air if in practice you show little interest in keeping the Law. And that really is what's

happening, isn't it? You're breaking the Law all over the place, but then you accuse me of breaking it, which all seems rather ironic, especially when some of you are out to kill me. So much for your love of the Law."

One man in the crowd immediately reacted. "So you think one of us is out to kill you, do you? What made you think a ridiculous idea like that? Are you nuts?"

Jesus pinpointed the caller, walked up to him and looked him in the eye. "So what would you say, 'oh great keeper and self-proclaimed upholder of the Law', if I healed a man on the Sabbath Day? How would you feel about that? You'd be frothing at the mouth like a mad man and tearing your hair out, right? And don't tell me you wouldn't be, because I cured a man on the Sabbath back in Bethesda and there were people like you in the crowd who would have thrown me off a high building and happily killed me. But the priests, meanwhile, were doing circumcisions on the Sabbath, and nobody got in a froth about that, did they? And you don't think circumcision is more important than healing, surely not? Are you nuts? And yet you bitterly resent me for healing people on the Sabbath while it's perfectly all right for you to circumcise people on the Sabbath. You call that fair-minded justice? I hardly think I'm the crazy one here."

Well, that got one man really charged up. "How come they're letting this idiot spout all this stuff against us, right out in the open too?" he shouted to the crowd. "And why aren't they carting him off?"

"Maybe they think he's the Christ," someone chortled.

"But they can't think that," someone else chimed in, "because we know this man and we know his parents, and Scripture says no one knows who the Messiah's parents are."

"And that's true," Jesus said, "you know my family, and I do have parents, but before my earthly family I came from God. I wasn't born like everyone else to earthly parents. God is my parent. And I'm here because God my Father sent me. I'm not here on some man-made mission of my own. I'm here on a mission from the Supreme Commander of the universe. He's the real family I came from, the God you know so little about, but I know so much about, because I came from him and I lived where he lives."

When several of the Temple authorities, who'd heard the disturbance and hurried over to where it was happening and caught that last statement Jesus made, they were ready to drag Jesus away right there and then, because this was utter lunacy. How could anyone think they knew God personally? But they didn't make a move against him, because it wasn't time yet for Jesus to be arrested.

There were many people in the crowd, however, who loved what Jesus was saying, and they believed it. As one person astutely remarked, "How could Jesus be anyone other than the Christ, because who can perform miracles like he does?"

It was remarks like that, though, that got back to the Pharisees. This was getting out of hand, they decided, especially as the comments kept rolling in, so they set off with the chief priests and officers to haul Jesus off for being a rabble-rouser.

When the first officer arrived on the scene, Jesus met him in person, took him aside and told him, “Look, I’m only here a little while longer and then I’m off back to him who sent me. And tell the rest of them not to bother looking for me because I’ll be in a place where none of them can touch me.”

When the officer reported back to his superiors what Jesus had said to him, it really stumped them.

“But where on earth can he go where we can’t find him?” one of them wondered. “What’s he going to do - hide out among the Gentiles in one of our Jewish colonies so he can preach to them instead? Does he really think he can just disappear from sight? And what kind of place is there that he can go to but we can’t? He’s not making sense.”

But it certainly got their minds off arresting him.

Chapter 32 – No man speaks like him...

A few days later, on the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus was back in full cry again, and this time telling people even more startling things like, “If you’re feeling empty and you’re thirsting for something you know is missing in your life, then come to me and trust me with your life. And I mean trust me with every need you’ve got. You know the Scripture that says, ‘Rivers of living water will flow from the hearts of those who trust me.’ Well, keep that in mind because one day, after I’m resurrected from the dead, the Holy Spirit will be given to those who trust me, and then watch what happens to your thirsty lives then.”

But instead of focusing on what Jesus was saying the crowd started arguing about who he might be.

“He’s the great Prophet in Scripture who paves the way for the Messiah,” one man said with certainty.

“No, he’s not,” someone argued, with just as much certainty, “I bet he’s the Messiah himself.”

“But how can the Messiah come from a dump like Galilee, where this chap comes from?” someone else asked. “And besides, doesn’t Scripture say the Messiah is one of King David’s descendants? Well, David came from Bethlehem, not Galilee.”

The argument raged on and got so loud that some in the crowd started demanding that Jesus be taken away for causing so much upset and bickering on

their special holy day. But for all their bravado, no one actually made any move to drag Jesus away.

The officers who'd been sent to arrest Jesus earlier left the crowd and returned to the chief priests empty-handed. "But what have you done with him?" one of the priests demanded. "You didn't just leave him there, did you? Why haven't you arrested him?"

"But we've never heard a man speak like he does," the chief officer protested.

"What?" one of the priests yelled. "Have you taken leave of your senses and been taken in by this man too? We priests weren't taken in by him one tiny bit, because anyone can see he's brazenly breaking the Law. Can't those stupid people out there see that too, then? Don't they know their own law? Can't they see that Jesus is trying to put himself above the Law, and he's getting people to look to him instead, like he's some kind of saviour or something? They're a hopeless rabble. Maybe we should arrest them too."

Nicodemus, one of the Jewish Council, jumped in at that point - the same Nicodemus who'd secretly met with Jesus several months ago.

"You lot talk of Jesus breaking the Law," he said, "but since when did our Law condemn a man without hearing what he had to say first?"

But the rest of the Council shouted him down. "Sounds like you're on his side, Nicodemus," one of them jeered, "so now we've got two Galilean fanatics to deal with. And look up your Scriptures, man, the bit you seem to have overlooked in your enthusiasm for this pretender, that plainly says no prophet of any merit will ever come from Galilee. That's the law we're talking about. Those are the facts you were demanding, Nicodemus, and we've got them."

Chapter 33 – The trap that failed...

Meanwhile, back at the Temple, the crowd had gone home for the evening and Jesus spent the night on the Mount of Olives. But bright and early next morning he was back at the Temple, and a crowd soon gathered, eagerly wondering what he would say next.

Rather than try to stop Jesus, the Pharisees saw an opportunity to trap him. One of them had suggested they catch him out on some aspect of the Mosaic Law, and that way they could officially charge him for either breaking the Law or teaching against it, and in front of dozens of witnesses too.

So just as Jesus began to speak, a large group of them barged up to Jesus and pushed a woman in front of him, where the crowd could see her.

"We found this woman in the very act of committing adultery," one of the Pharisees declared, looking appropriately disgusted, "and as we all well know,"

he continued with a haughty air, “the Law of Moses clearly states she should be put to death. So what do you say to that? Do you think she should be put to death?”

It was a clever trap, because if Jesus said, ‘No, she shouldn’t be,’ he’d be teaching open disobedience to the Jewish Law, and the Pharisees could rightly detain him, and even put him to death.

If, on the other hand, Jesus said, ‘Yes, she should be,’ he’d be taking the Roman Law into his own hands, and even condoning murder, and that could mean the death of him too. Whichever way Jesus went he risked breaking either Jewish or Roman Law. And he’d suffer public humiliation, loss of credibility and possibly even death.

But Jesus was good at smelling rats, and he didn’t say anything. Instead he totally ignored their arrogant faces, bent down and began writing something in the dust with his finger. The Pharisees took no notice of him and stayed standing with their chins in the air. They waited with bored looks until Jesus stopped writing and stood up, at which point they demanded that he answer them.

“If none of you have done anything wrong, you be the first to kill her,” he replied. And he bent down again to write something more.

All eyes began to focus on what he was writing. Suddenly, two Pharisees next to Jesus split away from the group and slid off through the crowd without a word, looking very offended and red-faced.

Jesus kept writing and another group of Pharisees left in a similar hurry, hiding their faces behind their hands. Jesus didn’t look up, he simply kept writing. By the time he stood up to admire his finished handiwork, the entire troupe of Pharisees had vanished and only the woman was left standing beside him.

Jesus looked at the empty spaces where the Pharisees had been and then at the woman. “Where did all your accusers go?” he asked her. “Isn’t there anyone left to condemn you?”

“No, there isn’t, they’ve all gone,” she replied.

“Well, I’m not going to condemn you either, but don’t go mess up again, OK?”

Chapter 34 – Backing up his claims...

The crowd had watched all this with interest, especially the aggressive antics of the Pharisees and their embarrassing retreat. But now that the excitement was over, Jesus turned to the crowd and carried on from where he’d left off.

“You can see from what just happened how people are stumbling around in the dark, confused, angry, morally corrupt, and unhappy in their relationships. But that’s life in this world. The trouble with that is - no life flourishes in the dark.

Life needs light and that includes your life. You need light both within and without, a light inside you to guide your thoughts and a light in front of you to guide your steps. I am that light for you, because wherever I am the darkness shrinks away, both in front of you and inside you. Follow me and you'll never lose your way. You'll know what path to take because I'll light it up for you. And no darkness will creep up inside you to mess up your thinking, either. Fill your life with my light and it flourishes. That's why the Father sent me to you, so that you trust me to make your life flourish."

Again, the Pharisees missed his point entirely, because in their ears it sounded like Jesus was boasting without evidence to support his claims. To them anyone could say, 'Trust me and I'll make it worth your while,' but what proof was Jesus offering that he had that kind of power?

As one of the Pharisees put it to him, "You are your only defense. You have no witnesses to back you up. It's your word and your word alone, and to us that's not enough. Nor would it hold up in a court of law."

"You're right about me being my own witness," Jesus replied, "but I rest my defense on what I've been telling you, that I came from God and to God I will return. I know my defense, but you won't accept it, because you only judge me by what you see. You see me as just another ordinary man like yourselves and you won't look any deeper. You won't even listen to what I'm saying, so you're in no position to make judgments of me. But my judgment of me is valid because it's not just my judgment it's also my Father's. I have his absolute support and backing because he sent me. So that's now two witnesses I've got as evidence, mine and my Father's, and in Scripture the evidence of two witnesses is evidence enough."

Stumped yet again by Jesus, the only question one of the Pharisees could think of asking him was, "So where is your Father, this supposed witness you say you've got? We've never met him so how do we know he even exists?"

"You haven't got a clue yet, have you," Jesus replied, "as to who I am or who my Father is? But this is why he sent me, to reveal himself to you through me. So once you understand who I am, you'll understand the Father too. But you refuse to even consider that, despite the obvious evidence of the Father in the miracles I'm doing, because no ordinary man could do what I do."

"The power I have is coming from my Father, yet you won't accept that. To answer your question, then, as to where the Father is, just watch me, because that's where he is. This isn't me doing what I do, it's him doing it in me."

The Pharisees didn't like this at all, but none of them lifted a finger to have him removed, despite the fact that Jesus was speaking in full view in the treasury hall of the Court of Women, where anyone could report him to the authorities and

have him removed. That too, then, was clear proof that God was the power behind him.

Chapter 35 – Resistance builds...

With complete freedom to speak, and another battle with the Pharisees over, Jesus went back to talking to the crowd.

“The day is coming,” he said, “when I won’t be around to help you like I can in person now. It’s then, of course, that you’ll suddenly realize you miss me and you’ll desperately start searching for me. But you won’t find me, nor can you follow me because I’m off to a place you cannot get at by yourselves. You’ll be left on your own without me, living the rest of your lives in the same empty, confused shell you’re living in right now. And then at the end of your empty lives you die, and that’s it.”

The immediate reaction among the listeners, however, wasn’t, ‘Then, please help us now while you’re still here with us,’ it was heads together to work out what possible place it could be that Jesus was going to that they couldn’t access themselves. One man somehow concluded that Jesus was about to commit suicide, and that’s why they couldn’t follow him.

Jesus waited for the general murmuring and useless discussions to die down, so that he’d have the people’s attention when he set about explaining what he meant.

“What I was getting at was this,” he said, and all eyes now turned back to him. “You and I come from different places. You come from here, the Earth, but I come from Heaven above. And since your life is restricted to this Earth, you live for earthly things. At the end of your earthly life you die, and you can’t take all those earthly things you lived for with you. So your entire life, as I said earlier, is really just an empty shell. But here I am to rescue you from your empty shell of a life, by opening up to you the world that I live in, the Kingdom of Heaven, where I come from. I know what life in that world is like because I lived it, and I can take you there if you trust me. You can’t get there on your own, but you can when you trust your life to me.”

“Nonsense,” one loudmouth yelled. “Who do you think you are?”

“Well, that’s exactly what I’ve been trying to tell you, but you just don’t get it, do you?” Jesus shouted back. “I wonder why I even bother talking to you at all, because all you do is accuse and condemn me. I could condemn you too, you know, because I know all kinds of things about you that would bury you. But I don’t go there because the message I was given by the one who sent me isn’t

about condemning. It's about truth, and he ought to know because he is truth itself."

But that didn't register in the people's heads either, that Jesus was talking about the Father, and what God as their Father had in mind for them from the beginning - and that he was actually doing it for them through Jesus at that very moment.

So Jesus ploughed on, knowing that seeds sown now would take root later, especially if what he predicted would happen to him then happened.

"You don't get it now," he continued, "but you will when you hang me on a cross. Then it will dawn on you who I am, that I truly did come from the Father, just as Scripture predicted, and everything I taught you was what he wanted you to hear. There was never a moment when I was operating on my own. All the time I've been with you it's been his will I've been doing, and his words I've been teaching. And it's also his will that I die for you."

For many of those listening this was crazy, but others loved it. They'd never heard anyone speak like this before.

"Remember when I said earlier," Jesus continued, "that where I go you couldn't follow me? But it's different if you become my disciple, because where I go you can follow me. And to be my disciple is simple: it means listening to everything I say because you believe it comes from the Father. That's the secret, the key that unlocks the storehouse door to truth, the truth being that the Father is offering you a life like his, that's full for eternity, not like the short-lived mess you're stuck in now. The Father is teaching you through me how you can be freed from this empty life into life as he lives it."

Some, however, objected strongly to the notion that they needed freeing from anything, because in their minds they were perfectly fine as they were.

"What do you mean?" one objector protested. "How can you say we've never been free? We're the descendants of Abraham, so the storehouse door to all God's blessings has always been open to us. We don't need you or this father of yours to open it for us. Our father Abraham did that for us a long time ago, and long before you turned up as well."

"But you're not experiencing those blessings, are you?" Jesus replied. "Your lives are empty, confused and morally bankrupt, and without me you'll stay that way until you die. Just because you're descendants of Abraham by physical ancestry won't change that either. You can see that for yourselves in how you treat me. You want to kill me, the very person God sent to lift you out of your miserable existence and free you to live as he lives. And I can do that for you because I've been living free in that existence forever. God sent me to share the freedom I've always had with you. Everything I have come from him. Everything I

teach I learnt from him. And now he wants it all for you too. That's the Father a disciple of mine believes in."

A voice from the crowd yelled, "But we've already got a father. Our father is Abraham."

"So, do you think your father Abraham would approve of his children wanting to kill someone whose only interest was passing on God's truth to people?" Jesus shot back. "I hardly think so. You're dancing to the tune of a much different father, one whose spiritual attitudes you've inherited."

"Our spiritual attitudes are just fine," the objector spat, "because our father is God, the one and only. Abraham may only be our father physically but God is our father spiritually."

"If what you say is true," Jesus replied, "then why is it so difficult for you to accept my teaching? I'm simply telling you that your Father and mine sent me to you for your sakes. So rather than hate me, surely you'd love me - and trust me, because I keep telling you that nothing I'm saying or doing is my idea. I didn't come here on my own initiative. I didn't come to boost my own ego, or get people to follow me. I came because the Father sent me with a message for you. So why do you refuse to accept it?"

"I'll tell you why," Jesus continued, not waiting for an answer. "It's because you've got all the morals of your real father, the Devil. It's his spiritual attitudes you've inherited, not God's, because you're only interested in gratifying your own evil desires. And that's all the Devil's ever been interested in too. He's not interested in the Father's plan for you; he just wants you dead. He doesn't want you even getting a glimpse of the truth of your destiny. So he hides it. He gets you to believe his lies instead, that you're just fine as you are. But lies are his speciality. He's a liar by nature. He loves lying and deceiving people, and seeing people like you resist and reject God to your own destruction."

"And here I come bearing truth from the very Father himself, with all kinds of evidence to back it up, and you close your minds tight against me. Why? Can you cite just one incident when I lied to you or tried to deceive you? I've been totally open with you, but you won't open your minds the tiniest bit to me. And you say God is your spiritual father? What nonsense, because if you're truly the Father's children you'd be eager to hear what he has to say."

The reaction was immediate and fierce. Several voices joined in a chorus of, "You're mad," "You're possessed by devils," and "You're evil." One man even shouted, "You're a Samaritan," whatever that was supposed to mean.

Jesus waited for the insults to die down.

"So you think I'm mad, do you? But isn't it a far greater madness to risk treating the Father like dirt by the way you treat me? And especially when you have no reason for treating me the way you do. I've told you a dozen times I'm

not seeking anything for myself. If there is honour to be had for what I'm doing I'm leaving that entirely in the Father's hands, because he knows best who to honour and how. I'm not trying to manipulate you into following me. But I am telling you that if you do follow me, and by that I mean follow my teaching, I can guarantee you won't live out an empty life with nothing but death to look forward to. In fact, you won't even suffer death at all."

Again the reaction was swift and just as nasty. "Now we're know you're mad, because everyone knows Abraham suffered death, and so did all the great prophets, but now you're saying we won't die if we follow your teaching. You say you aren't setting yourself up as anyone special, but are you not putting yourself above Abraham and the prophets by what you just said? So who do you think you are?"

"But I'm not setting myself up for anything," Jesus replied, "because what good would it do? The only honour I seek is from my Father, the same Father that you say is your Father too. But it's obvious you don't know the Father at all, whereas I do, and I'd be lying to you if I said I didn't know him, or what he wants done."

Jesus paused and then continued. "You talk of your father being Abraham. Well, Abraham your father was overjoyed at the prospect of my coming."

"But how could you have known that about Abraham?" one man demanded. "You weren't around when Abraham was alive, because you're not even fifty years old yet."

"But I did know Abraham," Jesus replied. "because I existed as 'I am' long before Abraham was born."

And that's what caused the explosion. How dare Jesus use that term, 'I am', to describe himself, when that was the ancient Jewish name for God. To call himself God, then, was a clear case of outright, blatant blasphemy.

Now they really felt justified in killing him.

So off they went to find rocks to throw at him.

And now Jesus really was in danger, as a dozen arms rose and the rocks were about to fly.....

End of Part 2