

The 4 GOSPELS in one story

Part 3

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 One – I was blind and now I see...

Jesus was right when he'd told his brothers earlier on that he'd be hated for speaking out in Jerusalem. He didn't mention nearly being killed, though, which at that moment was a very real possibility. His last remark had incensed some in the crowd so much they'd shot off in search of rocks to hurl at him.

Jesus made an easy target too so he quickly mingled with the crowd and his pursuers lost sight of him. There was no point in going back to the Temple later either, because they'd be waiting for him with a pile of rocks ready for throwing as soon as he appeared, so Jesus left the area and returned to his disciples.

The following Sabbath Day they were walking along together when they came across a beggar sitting on his own, who'd always been blind. And that prompted a question for Jesus from one of his disciples: "Who, exactly, is to blame for this man being born blind?" the disciple asked. "Was it his own fault, or the fault of his parents?"

"It wasn't anybody's fault," Jesus replied. "What's more important in his case is that God can use his blindness as a perfect demonstration of his power, and his love. By opening the eyes of a blind man God also opens up people's eyes to himself, to his compassion and his desire to see people healed." And for that reason Jesus approached the blind man, introduced himself and talked of healing.

Jesus wasn't quick to heal the man, though. He spat on the ground, made a ball of clay, rolled it around in his hands for a while until it was soft like an ointment, and smeared a dab on each of the man's eyelids, but still no healing. Instead, Jesus told the beggar to find his way to the Pool of Siloam - while the beggar was still blind - and wash the clay off his eyelids in the water.

The beggar scrambled to his feet and dashed off as fast as he dared in the right direction, dunked his head in the water when he arrived at the pool, and as the clay slithered off his eyelids so did the blindness from his eyes. Having never navigated by sight before he slowly returned to the spot where Jesus had been, this time not just feeling his way but actually seeing his way there.

And that's when several of his neighbours recognized him, or at least thought they recognized him, because how could this be? As one man remarked, watching the beggar walking straight and tall, "That can't be the blind man we see crouched down by the wall begging every day, is it?"

"It certainly looks like it," another replied.

Others weren't so sure, though. "No, it's got to be someone who just looks like him, because how can a totally blind man suddenly see? It's impossible."

They were peering at him from close enough range for the beggar to hear what they were saying. So he went up to them, eyes wide open, and looking into

each of their faces very intently he said, "Yes, I really am the blind beggar - or at least I was."

"But how did you get your sight back so suddenly, and so perfectly?" someone asked.

"It was Jesus who did it," he replied. "He made an ointment out of mud, applied it to my eyelids and told me to go and wash my face in the Pool of Siloam. So I did what he said, and as I washed off the clay my blindness was literally washed off too."

"But where is this Jesus fellow?" one of them asked. "Do you know which way he went?"

"I've no idea," the beggar replied. "By the time I found my way back here from the pool he was gone."

There was no point in them looking for a man they wouldn't recognize even if they saw him, so they took the beggar to some Pharisees they knew, to ask them what they thought, and to get an explanation from them as to how a blind man had suddenly been able to see after being blind for his entire life.

The beggar repeated his story for the Pharisees.

One of the Pharisees immediately reacted negatively. "There's no way this healing came from God," he snootily declared, "because making mud balls on the Sabbath Day is work, and work on the Sabbath is wrong, and God would not do a healing through a Sabbath-breaker."

"But that's ludicrous," snorted one of the beggar's neighbours. "A marvelous healing has been done and you dismiss it simply because the man who did it made a mud ball on the Sabbath? But if the healer is such a bad man for making mud balls, how could he pull off such a wonderful miracle without God doing it?"

But the Pharisees closed ranks and refused to budge on their ridiculous conclusion. And that caused a major argument, because the neighbours weren't at all satisfied with the Pharisees' explanation. So the two groups stood there snarling at each other until someone jumped in and suggested they call the beggar in and see what he thought about Sabbath-breakers being able to do miracles.

"So what have you got to say about the man who healed you, since you're the one who was healed?" he was asked.

"To me he's a prophet," the beggar replied.

"A prophet?" one of the Pharisees squawked, which wasn't surprising since a prophet was much more important than a mere rabbi like himself. "A prophet, my foot. What total rubbish. I bet you were never blind in the first place. You're just faking this whole thing to get attention."

That stupid statement set off another round of shouting and arm waving, until again someone jumped in with an easy way of finding out if the beggar was faking it, or not.

“Surely, all we need do is find the beggar’s parents and ask them if he was always blind.”

There was no denying the logic of that, and even the Pharisees had to agree. So they all trooped off in a determined crowd to the beggar’s parents, led, of course, by the fully-sighted beggar himself.

The shock for his parents was twofold. Firstly, that their son was standing in front of them with his sight completely restored, and secondly, that the rising cloud of dust and raised voices was aimed in their direction and had landed on their doorstep. One minute they were sitting peacefully at home, and now this.

One of the Pharisees stomped up to them, glared at them, pointed at their son and shouted, “Is that man your son?” The parents looked at their son and back at the Pharisee - still with his chin jutting out aggressively - and they both nodded.

“Well, in that case,” the Pharisee flared, “would you mind telling us how, if your son was truly born blind, he can now see?”

The parents had no idea, of course, how it came about that their son could suddenly see, so they concentrated on what they did know. “We know this man is our son. We also know for certain that he’s been blind from birth. But we don’t know how he suddenly got his sight back. Nor do we know who or what cured him. And anyway, why are you asking us? Our son is old enough to answer for himself, so ask him.”

This last comment was motivated more by fear than anything else, because the parents knew what the Pharisees did to people who believed Jesus was the Messiah. To even hint, then, that maybe it was Jesus who had done the healing would get them thrown out of the synagogue.

It was a good move, though, because the Pharisees swung their attention back to the beggar. In another cloud of dust and raised voices several Pharisees surrounded him, with one of them shouting louder than all the others, “You’d better honour your God by telling the truth. Did that man Jesus heal you, or not? And before you answer, we, your superiors, know that he is an evil man.”

The beggar’s reply was shatteringly simple. “Look, whether he’s evil or not, I don’t know. But one thing I do know: I was blind and now I see.”

“But how?” a Pharisee shouted, close to screeching point. “How on earth can a man be blind one minute and not the next, just like that?” And as an odd afterthought, he added, “What did that man do to you?”

“But I’ve told you already,” the beggar replied. “I told you exactly what he did, but you won’t believe me. Shall I go through it all again so you can check if my story is still the same?” And then with a smirk he added, “Or do you want me tell

you what happened all over again because you're thinking of becoming his disciples too?"

"That's outrageous," they all yelled at once. "You may be his disciple, but we certainly aren't. We're Moses' disciples, because we know God spoke to Moses. But who this Jesus is and if God's speaking to him, well, we don't even know where he came from."

"You don't know where he came from?" the beggar snorted. "That's a laugh. A prophet arrives on the scene and gives blind people their sight back and you have no idea who he is or if God is with him, or not? Who's the blind one now? Everyone knows that God wouldn't do such incredible miracles through someone who's evil - but he would through someone good. So if this man wasn't good or from God, he could never do a miracle. But here he's just given sight to a man born blind, something that no other man - good or bad - has ever done before, and you don't believe it."

There was no arguing with that, so the Pharisees resorted to insults.

"Who do you think you are - you, you scum you," one of them yelled. "Do you dare to teach us? No wonder you were born blind; you deserved it. You're rotten to the core, and you always have been, and you're a lying fake." And still muttering insults they all stomped off in a furious clump.

Word of this incident soon got back to Jesus, so he went to the beggar and asked him, "Do you believe in the Son of God?"

The beggar had proved himself very good at giving simple, honest answers, so he said, "I have no idea who the Son of God is. I've never seen him. But I'd love to believe in him so tell me who he is."

"But you have seen him," Jesus replied. "You've got the eyes to see him now too. And guess what? You're looking at him. He's the one talking to you."

"You are the Son of God?" the man cried. "Then of course I believe in you. How can I not believe after what you've just done for me?"

So why couldn't the Pharisees have believed that too, faced with the same obvious facts? And that was the question Jesus answered next: "I came as the Son of God to this world to show what God in his love and compassion is doing. He is healing people's spiritual blindness, because that's the real problem. And he's a just and fair God, because he gives sight, or insight, to those who admit they don't know which way is up when it comes to who God is and what he's up to. And to those who think they already have great spiritual insight, God exposes their blindness, as you all just witnessed when those who should have known better blinded themselves to the obvious."

Some Pharisees nearby overheard what Jesus just said, and pushed their way up to him, asking in an offended tone: "Are you saying we're blind?"

“It would be better for your sakes that you were blind,” Jesus replied, “because you couldn’t be blamed for your behaviour. But you say you aren’t blind, so that means you can see your stupidity, yet you remain in it.”

Chapter 2 – I’m a good shepherd...

Further explanation was obviously needed, so Jesus talked to them in familiar terms about the shepherd who sits all night in the doorway to the sheepfold to protect his sheep.

They knew, of course, what a sheepfold looked like. Each had a square of four walls and an open doorway in one of the walls. At night the shepherd sat in the open doorway with a fire always lit. He himself, therefore, acted like a protective gate, to keep the sheep in and predators out.

“Anyone trying to get into the sheepfold, other than through the doorway, is obviously up to no good, then, right? Only a true shepherd,” Jesus continued, “would approach through the doorway not leap over the walls.”

Some of those listening may already have cottoned on at this point in the story that Jesus was talking about the Pharisees who’d just left, who thought of themselves as the people’s shepherds but treated the sheep with disdain, as they just had in their attitude toward the blind beggar. The man had just had his sight restored, for heaven’s sake, but they cared more about Jesus making mud balls on the Sabbath.

“Where there’s a good shepherd the sheep automatically respond to him,” Jesus continued. “They immediately perk up if they hear his voice. When he calls to them, each by name too, they willingly and happily follow him out of the sheepfold. But if they hear a stranger calling to them to come out, they ignore him. That’s not their shepherd’s voice, so they don’t follow him.”

Jesus paused, because that was the end of the story. They stared at him rather blankly, expecting to hear more, but that was it. Even the obvious comparison between true and false shepherds right after the ugly incident with the Pharisees hadn’t registered yet as a comparison between the Pharisees and Jesus.

So Jesus had to explain that too.

To start off he asked them: “The shepherd acting like a protective gate - who do you think he pictures?” No one knew. “It’s me, of course,” Jesus said. “I am the gate. I’m the one the sheep depend on for protection. And they know they’re safe while I’m there in the doorway. Anyone trying to get into the sheepfold other than through the gate, the sheep shy away from, because they only feel safe with their own shepherd. While he’s there in the doorway they can depend on his protection, and when he calls to them to come out of the sheepfold, or

back in, it's always for their benefit. And that's what I am to you. I'm here to provide for you as a shepherd does his sheep. In my care you will flourish, just as sheep with a caring shepherd do. All their needs are met."

"You can count on me being a perfect shepherd, because I'd die to protect you from predators, just like any good shepherd would willingly give up his life for his sheep. But someone who's just employed to look after the sheep is off like a shot to protect his own life if a predator threatens the sheep. He has no personal attachment to the sheep, so he just abandons them. He lets a marauding wolf do whatever it likes to the sheep - scatter them, maul them, or chase them until they drop from fear and exhaustion."

"But I'm not like that," Jesus continued. "I'm a good shepherd. I know each of my sheep intimately and they know me because my voice has become so familiar to them, just as the Father knows me and his voice is so familiar to me. I have lots of other sheep too, not just you, who know my voice just like you do. So my sheep may be scattered in many different sheepfolds but you all share the same Shepherd. This is why the Father loves me so much - because I care for all of you with my life. It's something I want to do, too. Giving up my life wasn't forced on me; I chose it. And even if my life is taken, you still won't be alone because the Father never wants you left without a Shepherd. He's given me the power, therefore, to restore my life if I die."

The message was clear. In a contest between the Pharisees and Jesus, Jesus won hands down, because not only did he deeply care for his sheep he also had the power to keep his sheep safe, both of which they'd witnessed in the beggar getting his sight back. But that didn't stop an argument breaking out between those who still accused Jesus of being mad and demon-possessed and those who asked in return, "But how can a demon give sight to the blind?"

It was a repeat of what was becoming a familiar scene, of stupid accusations answered with devastatingly simple logic, and with no answer from the accusers except more insults. It certainly backed up what Jesus said earlier, about God exposing people's spiritual blindness. It was there for all to see in the Pharisees and their supporters. But this was the blindness that Jesus had come to heal.

Chapter 3 – Seventy more disciples...

To reach and care for the sheep in all those other sheepfolds he'd talked about, Jesus assigned seventy more disciples to go out in pairs to the villages and towns as advance parties preparing the people for his visit to those same villages and towns later.

He sat the seventy down and had a good talk with them first.

“There’s a huge harvest out there,” he told them, “so what you’re about to do is extremely valuable, and I wish we had more people like you to send out. God’s certainly sown a healthy crop of people ripe for the picking, and he also gives us people to harvest it when we ask him for them. He started with me, gave me twelve disciples to train up next, and now I’m sending you into the fray as well - as lambs among wolves I might add, because you’ve seen how people react to me. Expect much of the same reaction to yourselves, then.”

“You have a lot of places to go to and a lot of walking,” Jesus continued, “so travel light - no bags or extra clothing - and don’t dilly-dally in useless chat along the way. You don’t have time for that. The crop is ready for harvest and the sheep are in desperate need of a good shepherd, so keep that in mind as you go.”

“Keep in mind too, that you’re carrying a wonderful message of good news wherever you go, and a lot of those you talk to will love it. They will listen to you, and in listening to you all kinds of blessings will start coming their way. And if people don’t listen, don’t be discouraged, because their rejection doesn’t stop you personally being blessed, does it? You’re still at peace and happy because you listened to me, so don’t let their rejection spoil that for you.”

“When you enter a town or village, you’ll need a home base to work from, so what you’re after is a family who invites you to stay in their home for as long as you need to. Once you’ve got that home base don’t waste time staying at other people’s homes. You’ve got a job to get done. You’re not there to party. And consider the board and lodging your host provides as your wages for a job well done.”

“Some towns will welcome you with open arms, so accept their hospitality. Heal all their sick and injured as clear proof that what you’re saying is true, that the Kingdom of God has arrived on their doorsteps with power and healing because of their trust. Other towns, however, won’t like you at all, so make it known to them - and yell it if you have to - that they had their chance and they blew it. Bang the dust off your feet as you leave town to show them what you think of them. And if they think their little performance is going to hinder the Kingdom of God, they’ve got another think coming, just watch.”

“I pity that town, though, even more than Sodom, because if they reject you they’re rejecting me, and to reject me is to reject the very Father who sent me to them for their sakes. They were given a great gift but refused it. How pitiful is that?”

Full of excitement the seventy new recruits headed off to the surrounding towns and villages. They were amazed at the power they had. When they returned several days later they charged up to Jesus all talking at once, “You wouldn’t believe what happened. We only had to use your name and we drove out demons, tons of them.”

Jesus was overjoyed too. “Well, that’s a smack in the eye to Satan, isn’t it?” he laughed. “He’s on the run, his empire is already beginning to crumble, just like the time I saw him thrown out of heaven and off he disappeared like a lightning bolt. So take that as permission to stomp all over the Enemy, knowing he can’t fight back or hurt you in any way, because that’s the kind of power you’ve got.”

“But don’t get carried away with it,” Jesus added, “because power like that can go to your heads and make you think you’re something special. But you’re already as special as you can ever possibly be, because you’re already members of God’s family circle, dearly loved as his very own children. The power you’ve been given is to help other people now see that too, that they too are loved as members of God’s family. So use that power you have to show how close God is to them, and how easily they too can begin to experience the benefits of his Kingdom.”

With all these enthusiastic reports coming in of the headway the seventy disciples were making, Jesus felt so filled with the Holy Spirit that the joy just poured out of him.

“Thank you so very much, Father, Lord of all Heaven and Earth, that you’ve given the little people of the world the first taste of your Kingdom, and they can tuck into the banquet you prepared for humanity before all those worldly-wise and self-sufficient know-it-alls get a look in. You’ve prepared a marvelous feast and invited the humble and weak, who can hardly believe what’s piled up on the tables for them, and what a pleasure it is for me to see them gobble it up.”

“But this is what you in your Fatherly wisdom planned from the beginning, and here I am now watching it all unfold before my very eyes. And thank you that you entrusted so much to me. But that’s because you know me so well, just as I know you. As Father and Son we’re so close that you happily handed the reins to me fulfill your purpose. And top of my list is that many others come to know you as I do.”

His disciples had heard all this too, and seen the joy in Jesus’ face, so he asked them, “Do you see what all this means? It means God is doing amazing things through me. He’s entrusted me with everything concerning you. My door, therefore, is open to you at any time. If the world is weighing you down, or you’re burnt out by stress and worry, or you’re feeling spiritually empty, or buried under a pile of religious obligations, then come to me and I can lift you out of your misery. Trust me, because I can help you feel refreshed and ready to tackle life again.”

“I know it’s not the easiest thing to just hand your life to me to let me take care of it, and it’s certainly not something the world encourages either, but if you’re willing to try you’ll find out what I’m like. You’ll discover I’m not harsh and demanding like those Pharisees. I’m very gentle and understanding. I feel what

you feel, intimately. And as you discover what I can do for you, you'll find your anxiety and stress melting away, and in their place a growing inner peace and contentment."

"Trusting me may be hard to begin with but in time it gets easier, especially as you see what trusting me does. Trust, trust, trust; it all comes down to trust, but is it ever worth it. It makes life so much easier and more pleasant."

"You're so fortunate," Jesus continued, "because you're actually witnessing the difference it makes in people's lives when they trust me. You're out there telling people about me - and look what happens when they believe it. The prophets of old knew something like this was going to happen, but they never got to see it. But you're right in the middle of it, and here you come rushing back to me utterly amazed at how people respond. Well, this is what the Father sent me to experience too, the wonder of his plan unfolding before our very eyes. To watch the marvelous change that comes about in struggling people when they realize what the Father is making possible through me, is a joy to behold."

Chapter 4 – Who is my neighbour?...

It wasn't so much a joy to behold, however, to a lawyer who'd been listening in. His joy came from tripping Jesus up with an awkward question.

"You are a teacher, I see, who seems to know a lot about life," he said to Jesus, "so tell me, when it comes to eternal life, what must I do to get that?"

"And you, I see, are a lawyer," Jesus replied, "so tell me, what does the Law of Moses say on the subject? What law would you say applies to qualifying for eternal life?"

"Well, there's no difficulty answering that," the lawyer replied confidently. "It's the law that says, 'Love God with all your heart, with everything you've got, your talents, gifts, emotions and intelligence.' And right along with that the law that says, 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'"

"Well said," Jesus replied. "So go off and do what you just told me and eternal life is yours."

That set the lawyer back on his heels a bit, because he thought that just knowing and reciting the Law was enough for eternal life, but here was Jesus talking about doing it. And doing the law meant actually loving his neighbour in real life, including all those rather awkward people he'd rather avoid, so this wasn't at all what the lawyer had in mind when he answered Jesus' question.

But being a lawyer he was used to having his prosecution nearly derailed by unfavourable evidence from a witness, and he knew how to deflect a line of

questioning to put the witness back in the hot seat and take the heat off himself. Ask for more specific details, that was the key. So that's what he did next.

"And may I ask who my neighbour is, exactly?" the lawyer asked with a haughty air.

Jesus answered with a story.

"A man was on his way to Jericho from Jerusalem when a band of thugs attacked him, beat him up, took his money and left him half-dead in the middle of the road. A priest came by some time later, saw the man lying in the road bleeding, and deliberately went to the edge of the road to avoid him. A Levite not far behind him did the same thing. Then a Samaritan rode up on his mule, and when he saw the mess the man was in, he felt so sorry for him he patched the man up as best he could, put him on his mule and took him to the closest lodgings, where he rented a room, cleaned the man's wounds, put him to bed and watched over him all that night. Next morning, he went to the desk, gave them enough money to look after the man for several days, told them he'd be back later, and if the room and care cost even more he'd pay that too."

"So, my lawyer friend," Jesus said at the conclusion of his story, "which of those three men would you say was the injured man's neighbour?"

The lawyer knew there was only one answer to that. "Well, obviously the one who felt sorry for the man and helped him out," he said.

"Then do the same as he did," Jesus replied, "because the question isn't, 'Who is my neighbour?' but 'Am I being that neighbour, and am I being a good neighbour myself?'"

Chapter 5 – Ask, Seek and Knock...

One day, just after Jesus had finished praying, one of his disciples asked him about prayer. "Could you teach us to pray, just like John used to teach things to his disciples?"

"But I taught you about prayer already," Jesus answered. "I gave you a basic outline of things to pray about, remember? Pray to the Father, I said. Think on that name 'Father' and what it means to you. Think about what he's doing as a Father too, bringing his Kingdom to this Earth and filling people with his nature, compassion, mercy and wisdom. Think about how he forgives you every time you mess up and enables you to forgive each other too, so you can get along together even with your weaknesses. And think how he keeps your heads above water when times get tough. My whole focus while I've been with you is the greatness and love of the Father, because this entire plan to rescue and restore you was his

idea. The outline I gave you on prayer, then, gets your focus on the Father so you come to know him as I do.”

“And let me tell you what happens when you understand your Father’s love for you. Suppose you had a friend who dropped by at your home in the middle of the night after a long journey, and he’s tired and hungry, but you haven’t got anything for him to eat. So you go round to your neighbour next door, also a friend, knock on his door in the early hours of the morning and ask him for some food for your visitor. And his answer is, ‘No, my family’s in bed fast asleep and I don’t want to disturb them by clattering around in the kitchen.’ But you know if you ask him again and plead nicely he’ll back down and get some food for you, because you’re friends.”

“Now think of the Father in those terms. Because you’re his friend you can ask and he’ll give you what you ask for. If you need something he’ll provide for you. If you’re desperate for something, his door is always open. Anyone going to him can experience that because he looks upon us as his children.”

“So if you had a child how would you treat him if he came asking you for food at midnight because he’s hungry? Would you hand him a rock and say, ‘Eat that, son,’ or give him a snake or a scorpion? No, of course you wouldn’t. You’d try to give him what he asked for, provide for his needs and leave your door open if he’s desperate, with a welcome mat in the entrance. So if you, who aren’t perfect parents at the best of times, can do all that for your son, what do you think your perfect heavenly Father can and will do for you?”

“Do you think he’ll say, ‘No,’ if you ask him for whatever it is you need? Will he ignore you and leave you on the doorstep to fend for yourself? Will he expect you to survive on rocks and scorpions when he’s got an entire Kingdom full of blessings to give you?”

“No, because you know full well what he’s offering you through me. You see it happening every day we’re out there in the towns and villages. He’s offering healing, a total change in your attitude toward God and toward your neighbours, and freedom from stress, worry and anxiety. He’s even offering you the Holy Spirit, to share with you the same nature he has, and the same love that I and my Father have for each other.”

“With a Father like that who would have trouble going to him? I bet you’d be going to him all the time because you know you’d always be welcome, and every need you had he’d be on to it immediately. That’s why he loves you coming to him. He loves hearing what you have to say, what your needs are, and what you’re anxious about, like any loving Dad would. So there’s no formal way to pray, or that I can teach you. It’s simply realizing what kind of Father you’ve got and taking it from there.”

Chapter 6 – Clean hands but dirty hearts...

A Pharisee came to up to Jesus after he'd had finished speaking and asked him over for lunch.

But things didn't get off to a good start when Jesus took his place at the table without washing his hands first. The Pharisee, a stickler for Jewish ritual, was very upset at this scandalous breach of religious etiquette - and in front of his guests in his own home too. So he let his feelings be known, also in front of everyone.

Jesus waited until the Pharisee had said his piece. Then he stood up and looked the Pharisee square in the face, and with an equally raised voice said: "You Pharisees really have a problem, don't you? You make a great show of looking good. Your pots and pans are spotlessly clean, and your hands haven't got a speck of dirt on them. But what's more important, clean hands or clean hearts? And what are my unwashed hands compared to the greedy, malicious hearts of you Pharisees? What do you think God's most happy with - a home full of spotless saucepans, or hearts that care for the needy? Hasn't it dawned on you silly people yet that God gave you a heart too, not just hands to wash? Has it never crossed your mind that what makes you a good person through and through is a good heart, not a shiny plate?"

Jesus paused and sighed. "How is it that you people think you're so good while being so rotten? You're like those cemeteries with unmarked graves that people walk on without realizing the rotting decay beneath their feet."

No Pharisee at this point dared say anything in case Jesus thought of even worse things to say, but a lawyer piped up in protest instead. "Your comments are insulting," he told Jesus, "and I suppose you include us in your insults too, do you?"

"Too right I do," Jesus shot back. "You interpreters of the Law are as rotten to the core as these Pharisees. They push all their stupid, unnecessary rituals on people, but you make people think that only your interpretation of the Law is the right one, and you threaten people if they think differently. None of you people let folks out there think for themselves. You try to rule their lives with your useless rituals and obsolete traditions. The Pharisees have no heart at all, but your hearts are as cold and hard as rock."

Jesus looked at their stunned, glaring faces and sighed again. "The reason God sent me was to tell you people that he wants to lift your burdens off your backs. How? By you trusting me to take care of your needs, because he's given me the power to do it. But you slam that door shut in people's faces by demanding obedience only to your own interpretations and traditions, all of which came from your own heads, not from God."

“But here I am, inviting people into a vast and wonderful Kingdom of trust, but you want people locked in your tiny little world of tradition and ritual as you define it. I come to lift burdens, you love loading them on. I talk of trust; you talk only of slavish obedience. I come as the key unlocking God’s heart and mind and blessings to people, and you make people reject me. And you think your hands are clean? They’re as dirty as can be.”

Well, how could Jesus stay and eat after that? Who even felt like eating? So Jesus left the Pharisee’s house, and as the door closed behind him the Pharisees and lawyers swooped into a babbling group of hyenas, yelping away together for the next hour or so, trying to think of ways they could exact their revenge.

Coming up with a list of awkward questions for Jesus seemed like the best route to go, because that way they could embarrass him in public, just like he’d embarrassed them, and maybe they could trick him into saying something he could be officially charged for too.

Chapter 7 – Show no fear...

A huge crowd had gathered while Jesus was at the Pharisee’s house, hoping for a chance to ask questions and hear him speak. There were so many people packed together they were treading on each other.

Stirred by his confrontation with the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus took his disciples aside first and told them: “Don’t let the Pharisees fool you. They’re smooth, oh yes. They look and sound good. They have this air about them that makes them seem superior and oh so spiritual. They make you feel weak and guilty because of how strict and serious they are by comparison. They make you think you’re not doing enough, or not doing your part properly, and they give the impression that you’re only really a good person if you do as they do. And they talk in that smarmy voice that makes them sound so knowledgeable, and you know nothing.”

“But don’t you be fooled. It’s all a complete sham, a grand performance to make themselves feel righteous and superior. It gives them control over people too, because they know so much more than everyone else, so who can challenge them? But it’s all a big pretence, because underneath all that pomp and ceremony they don’t care about you or anyone else. They’re not interested in what’s best for people. But, unfortunately, most people can’t see it.”

“I do care for people, though, and for their sakes I’m exposing these Pharisees for the bunch of sniveling hypocrites that they are. They’re like an infectious disease spreading everything that the Kingdom of God isn’t, so don’t you be afraid to expose them either. You know what I’ve told you about them, so pass it

on. Warn people what they're like, and don't hold back the slightest bit. If you have to, shout from a rooftop to be heard above their arrogant waffle. Get the point across, publicly and fearlessly, that the Father is drawing a clear line in the sand, and he wants to know which side of the line each person is on. Will a person trust me with his life, or trust only in man-made rituals and traditions? It's a clear choice, with no middle ground. If a person trusts me I will gladly go to the Father and his angels in heaven and claim their full support for him. If, on other hand, he speaks against me, I will disown him in heaven, claiming nothing from God on his behalf. He's on his own. And make that clear to people so they don't die blind and ignorant."

These were fighting words, so Jesus knew what his disciples were in for. They truly would be lambs among wolves that would dearly love to tear them apart, and Jesus really felt for them because these men were his closest friends. All but one of them would gladly carry a flag with his name on it, and hold it high for all to see. And a lot of people would want that flag torn to shreds and burnt. So they were in for a real pounding. They'd be hated, misunderstood, and likely killed as well. It was to this loyal band of men, therefore, that Jesus directed his next words.

"You're my friends, and forever keep that in mind, because there'll be times when fear will nearly paralyze you, especially when you're surrounded by a screaming mob and death stares you in the face. But don't you show them an ounce of fear, because even if they do kill you, you're safely hidden away with me. Don't think of them think of me. And think of the day coming when they face me and the realization dawns on them that not only do I have the power to do to them what they did to you I can also wipe out all memory of them forever. So you may think they're winning, but they have hell to pay later."

"No harm will ever come to you without me knowing about it, because you are precious to me. You're worth a million times more than anything else in my creation. Hey, I know you so well I've even got names for each of the hairs on your head. So remember that next time somebody wants to rip your hair out, because that's my hair they're picking on too."

Chapter 8 – The trouble with money...

The crowd had been waiting for Jesus to finish talking to his disciples.

One man in particular had been keeping his eye on Jesus, so that when Jesus turned to face the crowd he was up there like a shot to be the first in line with his request. And what an odd request it was.

“I’d like you to talk to my brother,” the man said to Jesus, “because he won’t give me my share of the inheritance.”

Jesus looked at him for a moment in mild surprise. “You mean you’d like me to sort out your inheritance? Since when did I become your lawyer?”

What was Jesus supposed to do? Unleash some sort of mind-bending power on the man’s brother to get him to pay up?

But rather than dismiss the man entirely, Jesus saw an opportunity to point out the mind-bending power of money.

Turning to the crowd he said, “You live in a world that says life depends on money, and therefore you should be in constant panic if you don’t have enough of it. ‘Have I got enough money to pay the bills?’ you wonder. ‘Have I got enough for my retirement, etc?’ - the worries about money are endless. ‘If only I had more money’ becomes an obsession, because enough is never enough. The desire for more money consumes you, and you’ll justify whatever it takes to get it too.”

“Well, let me tell you about a man who had all the money he could ever want. He owned a large estate with hundreds of acres of prime, fertile farmland, and every year that land faithfully churned out a crop so huge it outgrew the bins and barns he’d built to store it in.”

“‘I know what I’ll do,’ he said, ‘I’ll rip out the old storage barns and build bigger ones so I don’t lose an ounce of what I produce, and that way I’ll be rich for life. I can tap into my supplies any time to buy whatever I want, and do whatever I want, and even do nothing if I so please.’ The man thought he had it made.”

“But what if one night God appeared and said to the man, ‘Tonight is the last night of your life’? What would all his money be worth then? It couldn’t buy him more time. It couldn’t stop him dying. It couldn’t extend his life one second beyond death - and now somebody else would get his money too. But while he was alive he never thought of those things, did he? He couldn’t see beyond the here and now. He was utterly blind to life coming to an end one day.”

“Now can you see now why I heal blindness? It’s because this world blinds people. It blinds people into thinking money is so important that they either worry themselves into an early grave because of it, or spend all their time and talent accumulating wealth that one day they can’t take with them. How stupid and blind can people be?”

“But that’s what money does to people. It makes them mad and sick in the head. So how on earth do you wake people up to that? How do you break a person’s obsession with money when he thinks it’s so important?”

“I’ll tell you how: by filling his thoughts with something much better to aim for, which is exactly what I’m doing. I’m getting into people’s heads, where all those obsessions with money, fame and useless religious rituals rule unchallenged, and

I hit them with the Kingdom of God. Because when people grasp the radical difference between how God's Kingdom operates and how their culture operates, that's what stops them in their tracks. They see what happens when people try God's way instead. It heals people, it changes lives, it unlocks a door to a whole new world in existence that sends demons packing, cures incurable diseases, restores lost limbs, frees people from the fear of religious bullies, and replaces hopelessness and emptiness with hope and joy. And it lodges something in a person's brain that wasn't there before, that there really is another dimension, another way of living, that's powerful stuff."

"It's so obviously much better, and all a person has to do to get it is trust. It's not like this life where to get what you want you have to work yourself to the bone, cheat and lie to get to the top, fear the competition, give up so much for a fleeting chance at riches and fame, and then have to give it all up when you die."

"No wonder so many people who grasp what God is offering by comparison want a large chunk of him, instead. They see the banquet God offers, free of charge, with nothing but believing it exists to start them on the road to tasting it, and they'd much rather have that than obsessing on things that have no lasting value. And when it dawns on them that God's world is here to stay, and it's coming in full later on as well, toppling this Satan-infested mess forever, they'd rather use their precious lives now to learn how this Kingdom of God operates, experience it as much as possible, and get a head start in this life for what's coming in future."

"The more they taste it now, of course, the more they understand what's coming, and it starts a lovely ball rolling of endless expectancy. What other hidden corners of God's Kingdom are yet to be revealed? What's going to happen when God himself comes to this planet and takes over? And it's these questions that begin to consume their thoughts, not all that other rubbish that evaporates at death."

"The happiest people on this Earth are those who realize everything doesn't evaporate at death, because they're already experiencing the life they'll be living after they die. They live in anticipation of what they're experiencing in this life expanding to enormous proportions. So when God comes they're ready for him. The moment he arrives they're charged up and ready to go. And think how God feels about that. He's got a ton of people who can't wait to sweep out the insanity of this world and replace it with his beautiful world of love, forgiveness and freedom."

"I can hardly wait for that day either, when all these trusting, eager people take their places at God's banquet table so he can wait on them. That's right, his first wish in the New World is to put on a waiter's uniform and serve tables. So

now you've got that to look forward to as well, when God himself stands beside you and with a smile as wide as a canyon says, 'And what can I get for you?'"

Chapter 9 – The one who can be trusted...

"I'm making a very simple point," Jesus continued. "If God's not in the picture you can literally waste your life chasing things that have no benefit to you or anyone else. But when you know God is invading this world with his world, and you can see the obvious proof of it, you don't get caught up in this world so easily."

"It's like the homeowner who knows there's a burglar on the prowl in his neighbourhood, so he's on guard watching and listening for him. No way is that burglar going to sneak by him and pinch his belongings. And no way is this world going to sneak in and steal a man's mind when he's locked on the Kingdom of God. He's not going to be caught by, or caught up in, the ridiculous obsessions of this world. He's on the lookout, guarding his mind against anything that doesn't fit God's spirit and attitude, because he knows God could arrive any time bringing his world with him, and he'd much rather be a part of that."

Peter at this point wondered if what Jesus had just said was meant for everyone, or just them.

Jesus replied with a question of his own. "Say you owned a company, Peter, and you had to go away for a while to dig up more business. Who would you leave in charge? You'd pick the person you know would be on the job every day you were away, right? You could suddenly cut your trip short and stride into your office out of the blue, and you'd find him beaver away just as hard as if you'd been there with him."

"Well, good for him, because if the time ever came when you needed someone to take charge of everything you owned, he'd be your first choice. But what if, instead, you'd chosen someone who liked the idea of you being away and took advantage of your absence to take days off, raid the petty cash, and hold parties for his friends on company expense? And what if he also likes being a bully expecting everyone to bow and scrape to him?"

"If you suddenly walked on him, then, what would you find? Here's this you trusted shouting insults at the staff, and when you walk into your office there he is with his feet on your desk and he's as drunk as a fish. I imagine you'd turn various shades of purple and dismiss the faithless wretch on the spot, and then sue him for breach of contract, leaving the man destitute and his reputation shattered."

“To answer your question, then, Peter, as to who I’m talking to, it’s to anyone who knows what God is up to in this world, but rather than spend his life living and spreading the beautiful spirit and attitude of God’s world, he prefers the spirit and attitude of this world. To knowingly do that when the opportunity was dropped in his lap to live and demonstrate the nature and spirit of God is like putting your feet on God’s desk and thinking you deserve to be in charge. Well, God’s also coming back one day, and he doesn’t take hypocrites lightly. People who pretend to be what they’re not will have hell to pay.”

“If mistakes are made in ignorance, God’s not upset at that. But he gets extremely upset at people who break his trust, just as you would if a friend or employee broke your trust. But I’m talking more than just employees in a company; I’m talking about people who were given a shot at living the Kingdom of God in this life and they wasted it. If you’d given an employee an opportunity to run the company and he blew it, how would you feel? It all comes down to trust, because what value does a man have if he can’t be trusted? When God trusted you with knowledge of himself and his Kingdom, will you value it to the day you die? Because who do you think he’s going to trust to run his Kingdom later?”

Chapter 10 – The gloves are off...

Turning his attention to all the disciples, Jesus took what he’d said to Peter a step further. “I came to light a fire under people that burns right down to their roots, and how I wish it could spread like wildfire to burn up all the junk that people are wasting their precious lives on. I wish it could happen right now too, to put an end once and for all to the misery and insanity of this world. Unfortunately, it’s not to be - yet.”

“To light the fire that destroys this mess I must die first. The suspense of having to wait until that happens is tough, because I know what my death will accomplish.”

“It will bring hell out into the open. It will let loose the battle of all battles, the war of all wars, because this world won’t go down without a fight. Just my coming here has already stirred up the powers of hell into a desperate attempt to preserve their devilish control over people. So don’t think the Kingdom of God is going to take over with peace and happiness just like that. It won’t. Instead, it will bring every demon there is out of the woodwork to fight it. The gloves are off; it’s a fight to the death.”

“It’s going to split up families too. Those who love this world will defend it with all they’ve got against those who dare to expose its evils. It won’t be a pretty sight as neighbours, friends and family turn on each other.”

“But it’s all necessary. It has to happen to help people realize that life isn’t just pattering along and all is well. It isn’t well at all. There’s a raging battle going on every moment of every day between good and evil, light and darkness, freedom and slavery - a battle that you can see happening by how people are reacting to me. They’re either for me or against me, and people really get fired up.”

“I started this firestorm for good reason. It shows people why they’re obsessed with life-wasting nonsense, why they’re empty, anxious and confused, and why there’s so much rage and hatred. It’s because there’s a war going on between two worlds and you’re either on one side or the other.”

“And there’s no middle ground either, or half measures, or riding the fence. You’re either for me or against me, and you’re against me if there’s anything in this world you love more than me. There are things in this world you can rightly love, of course, like your parents and children, but if your love for them means you side with them against me, then you’ve become my enemy not my friend. You can call yourself my friend when you’re one hundred per cent with me. It will mean a cross to bear, yes, but give your all to me and you know what’s waiting for you.”

“Right now you’re in a battle to make it clear in your own head what the choices are and which of the two is most important to you, and why. Is everything you do compelled by God’s love or Satan’s selfishness? It’s as simple as that, but you need to understand why God’s way is best. That’s why the Devil must still have influence, so you can see the contrast clearly between his attitude and God’s.”

Jesus now turned his attention to the crowd, with a question: “You’re all good weather forecasters, right? You know when clouds are forming in the west that rain is on the way, or that when a south wind blows it’s going to be scorching of a day. You can read those signs quite easily, but you’re terrible at reading the signs of the times, because right now there are clear signs of another world in existence that makes a clear line between good and evil.”

“And surely you can see that; and if you can see it hadn’t you better respond to it? Why would you just carry on with life as though there are no consequences? What would you do, for instance, if someone charged you for a wrongdoing and your case was coming up before the judge and it didn’t look good for you? You’d do all you could to make it up to the person charging you, right? You wouldn’t just idly sit by and hope for the best, because you might be found guilty and sent off to prison. And you’d deserve it too, because you had the chance to do something about it, but you didn’t.”

Chapter 11 – The tree with no figs...

Just then some people ran up and told Jesus about a massacre that had just happened. Several Jews from Galilee had been pounced on during a religious ceremony and killed by Roman soldiers under the command of Pontius Pilate.

What they expected Jesus to do about it they didn't say, so Jesus asked them a question that tied in with what he'd just been saying.

"Do you think those Galileans got what they deserved, because they were worse people than their neighbours?" he asked them.

Before any of them could answer, Jesus answered for them. "Horrible things like this can happen to anybody, just like the eighteen people who were killed when a tower fell on them at Siloam. These things don't happen to people because they're bad, they just happen, and they could just as easily happen to you. So why bring on more disastrous consequences for yourself than just the normal ones that can happen any time to anybody, by refusing to respond to me? This is your eternal, spiritual life I'm talking about here, and why risk damaging that life too by ignoring it? You've got the chance to live it now, so live it."

"Or are you like the fig tree a man owned, that for three years didn't produce a fig? So the owner of the tree called in his gardener and told him to hack the tree out and put another tree in its place that would produce fruit."

"But the gardener replied in earnest, 'Can we give it a chance for one more year? I'll work on it. I'll feed it, prune it, and do what I can to help it produce - and then if it doesn't produce, I'll chop it down.' In other words, God's all for giving you a chance, but if you gave somebody a wonderful gift and he left it in the box and ignored it, how would you feel?"

Chapter 12 – Eighteen years with a bent spine...

Again it was on a Sabbath Day that Jesus did a marvelous healing, just like the healing of the blind beggar on a previous Sabbath.

On this occasion Jesus was teaching in a synagogue, and in the audience was a woman with a horribly bent spine. It had begun to curl forwards at her waist eighteen years ago, and now her back was seized at right angles to her legs. It was now so bad she couldn't stand or sit up by herself.

When Jesus saw her, he stopped speaking, walked up to her, gently laid his hands on her and said very simply, "You're now free of it." And she was, instantly. Her head and back straightened up just like that, and she looked Jesus in the face

rather than being stuck looking at the ground all the time. She thanked him, thanked God; she was overjoyed.

But the Elder in charge wasn't. He was furious. How dare Jesus walk into his synagogue and blatantly breach the Sabbath Law in his presence? He was just as angry at his congregation too: "You people have six other days in the week to come and be healed, so come on those days, not the Sabbath."

Well, that made Jesus angry too.

"You lousy hypocrite," he yelled at the Elder. "You let your people feed and water their animals on the Sabbath, but you won't let a crippled woman be healed? And isn't she a whole lot more valuable than a cow or a mule, for heaven's sake? She's a descendant of Abraham, just like you. And have you been bent over double by Satan for eighteen years? So what on earth would be wrong with wanting to see her healed, no matter what day it is?"

The congregation cheered and the Elder shuffled off, his face red with anger and shame.

Chapter 13 – Look at the evidence...

Jesus went back to Jerusalem, this time for Hannukah, the festival celebrating the rededication of the temple in 165 BC by Judas Maccabeus. It was a wonderful festival of lights - candles lit in the Temple and in homes all around - brightening up the winter's day.

While Jesus was strolling along Solomon's Portico he was recognized by several of the Jewish religious leaders. They quickly circled him with one question on their minds: "How long are you going to keep us in suspense? Are you, or are you not, the Christ, the Messiah. Yes, or no?"

"But I already told you," Jesus protested. "The problem is you didn't believe me, even when the evidence was obvious. There I was doing the most incredible miracles in the name of my Father, proving beyond any shadow of doubt to anyone with two eyes and a working brain that the prophecies about the Messiah were being fulfilled."

"And do you remember me telling you why you turn your noses up at me? It's because you don't like my miracles. Miracles give enormous weight to what I'm teaching, about God being my Father, about God sending me with a message for you, about the Father unlocking the doors to his Kingdom through me and me alone, and about the Father giving eternal life to those who trust me. And you didn't like hearing any of that, did you, because you think you've already got it made, right?"

“So you closed your minds against me. It didn’t matter what I said, or what miracles I did to back up what I said. You simply weren’t listening or interested. But others did listen and they were interested, and they are the ones who truly have it made, because they are my sheep and the eternal life I give them no one can take away, including you. I have the full backing of the Father too, because he and I share the same goal, so they’re his sheep as well, and since he’s Lord of Everything, no one is snatching his sheep from his hand either.”

On hearing that, the Jews peeled off in a rush searching for rocks to throw at him, a repeat of what happened on his first visit to the Temple. With rocks in hand and hate in their faces they rushed back, but before even one rock flew Jesus shouted out at them, “Tell me - which of all those wonderful miracles I did in my Father’s power are you about to whack me for?”

They all skidded to a halt at that point and then one man shouted back, “What’s a miracle when you’re a blatant blasphemer? We’re not chucking rocks at you for the good things you’ve done but for claiming you’re God. You’re not God, you’re a man.”

“So what about the Scripture that says you are gods, what do you make of that?” Jesus shouted back. “You know, the bit where the Psalmist says you’re ‘sons of the most High God.’ To be a son of God you must be a god too, and it’s right there in the word of God, so why would you charge me with blasphemy for the Father calling me the Son of God when the Father calls you sons of God too?”

“Based on Scripture, then, I’m not a blatant blasphemer. Based on the evidence of my actions I’m not a blasphemer either. When I say the Father sent me, it’s easy to prove: Am I doing what he sent me for, or not? If I’m not, then you have every right to throw rocks at me. But if I am, how can you possibly ignore it? I realize you don’t have any faith in me personally, but why don’t you take notice of what I’m doing? No mere man can do what I do. Only the Father’s power in him could do such miracles. So what does that tell you about who I am? Based on the evidence, am I the Christ or just a mere man? Am I acting on my own or in total unity with the Father? Face the obvious facts, and make your conclusions from them.”

But obvious facts didn’t mean a thing to the Jewish leaders. To them Jesus was an irritating embarrassment, so they closed in to arrest him, but in the mix of struggling bodies all trying to get a hold of him he slipped through their fingers, disappeared into the crowd and left Jerusalem. He hiked his way across the River Jordan and stayed near the spot where John the Baptist did his first baptisms. He stayed there for several days, and a crowd soon gathered every morning on his doorstep to hear him teach and have their sicknesses cured.

Many of those people remembered what John had said about Jesus, and here was the proof of it. And, unlike the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, they accepted

the evidence of Jesus' miracles. So Jesus travelled all over that region, gradually working his way back to Jerusalem again.

Chapter 14 – The narrow gate...

Someone asked him how things were going as far as people responding to his teaching. "It looks like only a few people are being saved," the man remarked to Jesus. "Is that true?"

"It depends on your definition of salvation," Jesus replied, "because only a few actually grasp what it means. It's not just listening to me, and being healed. Lots of people follow me around for those things. But how many of them, including yourselves perhaps, have caught on that salvation is entering the Kingdom of God based entirely on trusting in me? There's no other way into God's Kingdom, and it's a tight squeeze that only a few are ready to tackle. A lot of people take a stab at it, decide it's too narrow and give up. Rather than trust me they stand outside whining for God to open the main gate so they can walk right in, as if they qualify on their own merits to enter. And that's when they get a rude awakening because God yells down at them, 'Be off with you, the gate's shut and it's staying shut because I'm not opening it to the likes of you. Who are you anyway? You're nobody I know.'"

"They shout back, however, that they deserve to be let in because, they say, 'Of course you know us. Surely you remember us sitting down with you to eat together? Weren't we in the front row when you came teaching in our towns? Weren't we the most loyal of your followers, so how come you don't recognize us?'"

"'Oh, I recognize loyal followers when I see them,' God yells down at them again, 'and you aren't them. If you were you wouldn't be trying to get through the main gate, you'd be over at the other gate, the narrow one, that has 'TRUST ME' written on it. Those who trusted my Son are lined up there, and they're the ones who enter my kingdom. You lot, meanwhile, get out of my sight.'"

"Does that sound shocking?" Jesus asked. "So it should be, because it's better to be shocked now than shocked later. Can you imagine how utterly devastated you'll be, thinking you've got it made and you can sail into the Kingdom with all those other famous names from the past, like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and all the prophets, only to find the door slammed in your face, and you don't know why? And then you hear this noise behind you, of a cheering crowd approaching who walk right up to the gates of God's Kingdom, where for a moment it looks like they're not going to be let in either, but they're only waiting for the late-comers who haven't arrived yet, and God's waiting so they can all enter his Kingdom

together. And then the gates are flung open and in they all pile together. All that is, except you. You can only watch and wish.”

Turning to the man who asked the question, Jesus said to him, “The question, therefore, isn’t how few or how many will enter God’s Kingdom. It’s have you understood how you yourself enter God’s Kingdom? Because that’s what I’m here to tell you.”

Chapter 15 – Oh, Jerusalem, Jerusalem...

A Pharisee then asked Jesus when the Kingdom of God would come.

“Not as you might expect,” Jesus answered. “It’s not like all those world empires that come crashing onto the scene with clear and visible evidence of their presence. With God’s Kingdom there’s no exact time it arrives or obvious place it arrives in, nor is it ushered in and ruled by those in positions of power and authority. Instead, it’s almost invisible. But look carefully and there it is - glowing in a person here, another there, and in all those who respond to my teaching and trust me. It’s this great, mostly unseen crowd of people who one day arrive at the gates of God’s Kingdom to all enter together.”

The Pharisee wasn’t amused at Jesus’ obvious hint that the Pharisees and their brand of religion weren’t the Kingdom of God. The other Pharisees with him weren’t too pleased either, and one of them shouted out, “Hey, Jesus, you’d better get out of here quickly, Herod’s coming to kill you.”

“Is he now?” Jesus replied. “Good, because when he gets here give that crafty devil a message from me. Tell him I shall continue to drive out demons and heal people until my job is done, and he can’t stop me. And I shall continue my journey to Jerusalem today, tomorrow and the next day, whether he likes it or not, because I am that prophet he’s so scared of and nothing will stop me entering Jerusalem. Like so many other prophets that Jerusalem killed before me, Jerusalem is where I must die too.”

That last thought really stirred Jesus.

“Oh, Jerusalem, Jerusalem,” he cried, “the times I’ve wanted to gather you up in my arms like a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you wouldn’t let me. You killed everyone I sent to help you, and one day you’ll kill me too. So then you’ll be left on your own, won’t you, with nothing but your Temple and your empty religion to sustain you? Because for a long time you won’t be seeing me again, and certainly not until you’re ready, at last, to welcome those coming to you in God’s name, rather than hauling off and killing them.”

Chapter 16 – Wanting the best seats...

Another Pharisee, one of the top members of the Jewish Council this time, invited Jesus to a meal at his home, and on the Sabbath Day, which was a bit risky, remembering the fights the Pharisees had already had with Jesus over the Sabbath.

And they were all watching Jesus like a hawk on this occasion too, because the Pharisee had also invited a man with bad swellings in his face, legs and arms due to a weak heart causing water retention in his tissues. It was a set-up, and Jesus knew it; he could read their little game like a book. So, in the most casual tone, he asked his host if the Law allowed a sick man to be healed on the Sabbath - or did it not?

The Pharisee didn't say a word. Nor did any of the others present. They just stood there in stony silence waiting to see what Jesus would do next. Well, if they weren't going to answer his question, Jesus might as well heal the man, which is exactly what he did. He took the man by the hand and the swelling in his body disappeared, just like that. The man was obviously there as a plant, so Jesus sent him home, because that man's battle was over, whereas Jesus' battle was about to begin.

With all eyes glaring at him, Jesus fired the first shot, by asking a second question: "I imagine you're going to blame me for working on the Sabbath Day, but wouldn't you pull one of your valuable working animals out of a ditch if it was stuck there on the Sabbath? Which one of you would just leave it there to struggle in pain, or die?"

Silence. By now, though, the Pharisees were seasoned veterans of battles they'd lost with Jesus, and they'd learnt that anything they said to him got them shot down in flames, so they ignored him and went to eat. But what an embarrassing sight they made of themselves as they all raced to grab the best spots at the high table, closest to the most important guests. All those dignified lawyers tripping over each other to get their faces noticed. It was pathetic.

Jesus waited until they'd all finally settled down. He stood at one end of the table and said, "I couldn't help noticing that you rushed to the table to get the best seats. How embarrassing, because what if you'd been invited to a wedding feast, fought your way to the top table where you could be noticed the most, only to have the host come up and ask you to give up your spot to someone far more distinguished than you? And there in front of everyone you have to shuffle your way to the foot of the table where the least important people sit?"

"Wouldn't it be better if you'd sat at the foot of the table first and then had the host come up to you and say, 'My dear friend, come up and sit with us,' and all eyes would then watch you escorted by the host himself to a spot close to

him. But that's life, isn't it? Those who do anything to promote themselves risk serious humiliation, whereas those who don't push for personal gain have nothing to lose. Others may even do the promoting for them, and it's so much sweeter when that happens because it's much more likely to be permanent."

Chapter 17 – Invited, but didn't come...

Jesus was treading on sensitive ground again because reputation and ambition were so important to these people, but here they'd just made absolute fools of themselves trying to nab the best seats. No wonder they were having such trouble understanding the spirit and heart of the Kingdom of God. It was light years away from their own attitude of selfish gain; the absolute opposite, in fact. So Jesus grabbed the occasion to help them see themselves, with another example that would likely touch a nerve or two as well.

"All these dinner meetings you hold are really just a merry-go-round, aren't they? You invite all your rich and important friends and family because they will invite you to their homes in return. And that's all you're doing, just exchanging nice meals with each other for personal gain. But what if you changed that and put on a banquet for people who had nothing to give you in return? What if you invited the poor, the weak and the blind? You wouldn't like doing that, though, would you, because what do you benefit by it?"

"But you do benefit," Jesus continued, "because there's another world in existence as well as yours. And that world honours the humble. It sees you serve the poor. It notices you consider others and their needs too. It recognizes how fair-minded you are in your judgment of people, that you respect everyone equally. And one day that world takes over, and it rewards all those who cared for others, not just themselves. You believe in a resurrection, so who do you think God wants to raise to life again and invite to his banquet - those who share his nature or people like you?"

One man listening knew the answer to that. "It's a happy man," he said, "who gets to eat at God's table in his Kingdom."

"I heartily agree," Jesus smiled, "and God would love the whole world to join him, much like the man who just loved the idea of putting on a huge banquet and inviting all his friends. He sent out invitations, telling everybody it was a big bash in their honour. But as the grand day drew near, a couple of people said they couldn't make it, then several more cancelled out, and then it was like a flood of cancellations.

'Sorry, can't make it,' one person said, 'I just bought a farm and a million things need doing.'

'I can't make it either,' another man said, 'I have a new team of oxen and with the heavy ploughing season coming up I need to get them ready.'

'I just got married,' a third man said. 'Got to get the house in shape. Sorry.'

"And the excuses kept pouring in. it was a disaster. No one wanted to come. So now what was the host supposed to do? All his friends had ditched him and now he had this massive pile of food all ready to go and no guests."

'Quick,' he yelled to his helpers, 'go to the poor sections of town and tell anybody you see there's a feast of food and drink waiting for them at my house. I don't care what they smell like or look like, or what diseases they've got, just get them here.'

"But even after inviting all those people, there was still room for more, so they went to other towns and villages and invited their poor too. Eventually the house was full of people, and so full there was no room for any of his friends who'd cancelled to change their minds and come."

Jesus looked round the table at the stony faces avoiding his gaze.

"You know exactly what I'm getting at, don't you? God, through me, is inviting the Jewish people into his Kingdom. He has a feast for those who come, but it's like he has the plague, or people think the food is poisoned, because the people who should be leading the way and telling everybody to follow them - meaning you, the leaders - aren't the least bit interested. You come up with every ridiculous excuse you can think of to get out of it. Continue along those lines, though, and God will fill up his Kingdom with other people, leaving no room for you. And can you blame him?"

Chapter 18 – I'll get you there...

It had been another meal at a Pharisee's house and another ugly confrontation. So Jesus left and once outside it wasn't long before the crowds found him. Stirred by the resistance and stubbornness of the Jewish leaders, Jesus really put his foot down.

"If you wish to enter God's Kingdom there's only way in: You follow me. You can't get in without me. You either trust me with your life or excuse your way out of it - which is it to be? It's either one or the other; it can't be a mixture of both. Your family, for instance, is no excuse for not following me, because they can't get you into God's Kingdom. Nor can your husband or wife. There's nothing in this world, or in your own head, or in any religion that can squeeze, slide or slip you into God's Kingdom. It's me, or nothing. And to me your life is precious. It was built for eternity, so will you spend your life on something that lasts 'til you die, or something that lasts forever?"

“Think of your life now in terms of building your dream house. You don’t just dive in without thinking through what it’s going to cost, right? If you leap in without planning you might find you’ve only got enough money to put the foundation in, but no walls. And there it sits as a monument to your stupidity, a great source of amusement to your neighbours too, who watched you launch in with no plans and come to a screeching halt before you even got one wall up.”

“It’s like the Army General who roars into battle without knowing the strength of his enemy. Imagine his horror when he discovers he’s heavily outnumbered. So whether it’s building your dream home or going into battle there’s no point in getting started if you can’t win or you can’t finish. And it’s the same with being my disciple. There’s no launching in if half way through you decide the cost of giving up everything in your life to me is too much for you. Or you find the world is lined up against you on so many fronts, including perhaps your own family, that you look for excuses to ease off or pull out all together.”

“There’s only one route to go for a disciple of mine: I lead, you follow. I’ll get you to where you’re going if you never stop trusting me, so in your mind say ‘I trust you’ and never stop saying it to your dying breath. That’s all it costs, but if you can’t afford to trust me with your life, then you’re not quite ready yet to be my disciple.”

Chapter 19 – When the lost is found...

In among the crowd following Jesus were some pretty unsavoury characters - cheating tax collectors, fraudsters, adulterers, and a host of others who didn’t even attempt to hide what they were, and as such were well-known by many others in the crowd, including the scribes and Pharisees.

To watch this motley crew following Jesus around gave the scribes and Pharisees another excuse to criticize and resist Jesus. “He lets rabble follow him around, and he welcomes them. He even eats meal with them. How can Jesus be a good man if he keeps such rotten company?”

Again, Jesus responded with a story.

“If you were a shepherd and you had a flock of a hundred sheep and one of them wandered off, what would you do? Would you ignore it and let it go, or would you go searching for it until you found it? A good shepherd would make sure his other sheep were safe and then go looking, right? And how would you feel when you found that lost sheep? You’d be delighted. You’d look it over for any injuries, sling it over your shoulders and carry it home, and maybe even hold a party with neighbours and friends to celebrate the return of your lost sheep, because it meant that much to you.”

“That one sheep, for that short time it was missing, meant more to you than all the other ninety-nine put together, simply because it was lost and you found it. Well, that’s exactly how your Father feels about his lost sheep too. He doesn’t want to lose even the scruffiest, sickest, worst sheep he’s got. He can’t stand the thought of losing anybody, even the worst of the worst. Imagine the reaction in Heaven, then, when a lost sheep is brought home. It’s time to party. Heaven loves it when the lost is found. It means far more than all the others who don’t think they’re lost at all.”

“And you ladies,” Jesus continued, “you know how you feel when you lose a treasured piece of jewelry. You’re frantic, right? You hunt high and low for it, scouring the house clean. And then, suddenly, there it is. You found it. And what do you do then? You’re so happy you’re bursting to tell anybody who’ll listen what happened. Well, that’s how the angels feel when, suddenly, the person who seemed lost forever wakes up and comes to his senses, and now he’s following me around wherever I go. You Pharisees, then, may not like these creeps I keep company with, but Heaven does. For the angels it’s party time.”

“I know my Father,” Jesus continued, “so let me tell you how he feels when you finally take the plunge to trust me. He’s like the man who had two sons, the younger of whom wanted his inheritance right away, rather than having to wait until his father died.”

“So Dad divided up his estate, gave half of it to his younger son, who immediately set off for the bright lights of the city. He spent the money on anything and everything that struck his fancy. In time, of course, his money ran out. Unfortunately for him it also coincided with a major drought, and he had no money to buy even what little food was available. So he got a job feeding pigs, but even their food he wasn’t allowed to eat either. He was now in desperate straits. He was starving, penniless and completely lost.”

“It was only then that he had thoughts of home, for the first time since he’d left. He thought of his Dad’s servants having enough to eat, even the lowest paid ones, whereas he was literally starving to death. So one day he said to himself, ‘I’ve had enough, I can’t take this any longer, I’m going home. I’ll let my Dad know - if he’ll even listen to me - that I’m utterly ashamed of myself. I’ve hurt God and I’ve hurt him. I no longer deserve to be his son. I’ll be happy if he lets me become one of his servants - if he’ll take me in at all.’”

“So he left the pig farm and set off for home, wondering along the way what he was in for when he arrived. Little did he know that his Dad had been hoping for a glimpse of him every day. So when his Dad saw his son coming, he ran to him, threw his arms round him and kissed him.”

“The boy pulled away to begin his apology. ‘Dad, please, I don’t deserve this,’ he cried. ‘I’ve been a lousy son to God and to you. You mustn’t think of me as your son anymore. I’m sorry, but...’”

“But that’s as far as he got, because his father was shouting at his servants, ‘Quick, go find the best clothes we’ve got for my son, and let’s have a party. My son is back, the son I thought I’d lost forever.’ His son was immediately whisked off, cleaned up and dressed in a fresh set of clothes, and fed as much food as he could eat.”

“His older brother, meanwhile, had no idea all this was happening. He returned home from work on the farm to find a party in full swing in the house. He asked a servant what everyone was celebrating about. ‘You haven’t heard?’ the servant asked excitedly, ‘it’s your brother. He’s back, and your Dad was so happy he ordered us to put on a feast for him. Come in and join us, and see for yourself.’”

“‘No, I won’t,’ he replied, ‘I’m not coming in and you can tell that father of mine that I am extremely annoyed.’”

“When his father got the message, he rushed outside to his son to find out why his son was so angry. ‘Oh, come on, Dad,’ his son replied, ‘can’t you see? For years I’ve worked faithfully for you, and never once did you put on a party for me, did you? But my idiot brother turns up after wasting all your money and doing nothing to help you on the farm and you immediately put on a banquet for him and invite everybody in.’”

“‘But my son, my dear, dear son,’ the father cried, ‘every day you’ve been in my thoughts, and everything I own I’ve shared with you all the time we’ve been together. I’ve never held back anything from you because I love you. I wanted to do that for your brother too, but I never could because he’d run away. But now I can, because both my lovely sons are with me again, and how can I not celebrate that as their Dad? Especially when I thought one of you was gone forever and I’d never see him again.’”

“And that’s how your heavenly Father feels about you,” Jesus concluded. “He wants to share everything he has with you, but how can he if you’re not interested? He’s been longing for you to trust me so I can bring you home to him and the party can begin. And what a party breaks out in Heaven when, at last, you come to your senses and see your Father’s love.”

Chapter 20 – Being a good manager...

For his disciples later, Jesus had another story:

“A wealthy landowner employed a state manager to run his estate for him, and as far as he knew the manager was doing a good job. The landowner found out through the grapevine, however, that the manager was letting the property go to pieces, and things weren’t being looked after properly at all.”

“So the owner arranged a meeting with the manager and asked him, ‘What’s this I’m hearing about you creaming off the profits for yourself and not feeding them back into the property? I’d like to see the accounts, and if I find you’ve been embezzling funds, you’re fired.’”

“The manager knew the game was up because that’s exactly what he’d been doing. ‘What on earth am I going to do?’ he asked himself. ‘If I’m fired I’m too old for a low-paying job and hard labour, and I can’t face begging in the streets. Maybe I can alter the accounts a bit so they don’t look so bad - and nor will I.’”

“So he started contacting all the people who hadn’t paid their bills, asked each of them how much they actually owed, and told them he’d write new invoices for them with a lesser amount owed. He cut back each bill by at least 20%, so the accounts owing didn’t look nearly as bad as they were, and therefore nor would he.”

“The landowner was no dummy, however, and he soon caught on to what his manager was up to, but he couldn’t help admiring the man for at least trying to look after himself - and finding a clever way of doing it, too.”

“People can be pretty astute,” Jesus continued, “when their livelihood is threatened. But when it comes to looking after themselves spiritually, it’s often a different story. People think they’ve got it made when they haven’t, and even if they know they haven’t they don’t do much about it.”

“It’s a pity they don’t learn from how they feel when they’re short of cash or they’re laid off work, because that’s when their brains go to work thinking up all kinds of ways of making money - a little job here, another job there, and it all mounts up. They make friends along the way too, by doing dirty jobs for low wages, and it’s these friends they make that get them through tough times. People see how hard they work for meager earnings and they’re impressed. So impressed, in fact, it makes them think he can be trusted with bigger things. Some of those friends may even think about helping him spiritually too, because if he can be trusted with material things it could well spill over into spiritual things too. The opposite is also true, of course; that a man who cuts corners physically is likely to cut corners spiritually.”

“So if you were God, would you make managers in your Kingdom from people who in this life frittered away their money, or ran companies with huge debts due to sloppy accounting? Obviously not, because if you can’t manage what you have now, God’s hardly likely to trust you with much later on, is he?”

Chapter 21 – Lazarus and the rich man...

The Pharisees got to hear this story later on, and it didn't go down well, because they'd been siphoning off money too. They loved money, and they'd found a way of making a lot of it. They not only charged people the required tithes, they also added other taxes, like the Temple tax, and so-called 'holy gifts'. With all that money pouring in, and all in the name of religion too, they had a good thing going. They were getting rich on religion, and no upstart like Jesus was going to spoil their lucrative little game. So they openly ridiculed his story - not because it was wrong, but because a real can of worms would open up if people discovered what they'd really been up to themselves. What if people found out the Pharisees had actually been using religion to make themselves rich? What if people then began to question the Pharisees' spiritual lives as well, and their right to be religious leaders?

Jesus, of course, already knew what the Pharisees were like spiritually, and he told them to their faces: "It's amazing," he told them, "how you've managed to convince yourselves that making money off people in the name of religion isn't wrong. But God knows your motives. You don't care for people at all. You're in the religion business to make money for yourselves, and how do you think God feels about that, eh? I'll tell you: He hates it."

"And I'll tell how much he hates it too, with another story you might not like very much either. It's about a wealthy man who didn't care much for people, just like you don't care much for people either. He only loved what money could buy. He lived like a prince, wore expensive clothes and lived in a lavishly furnished house with a long driveway and a high, impressive gate at the entrance. And that's where Lazarus curled up every day, begging at the rich man's gate. The poor man was in terrible shape, with weeping sores all over his body, that the local dogs licked. A few scraps from one of the rich man's banquets would have improved the beggar's life immensely, but the rich man never gave him a crumb."

"The rich man then died, and soon after that so did Lazarus. An almost state-like funeral was held in the rich man's honour, with endless speeches praising his fame and fortune. Lazarus, meanwhile, had no funeral at all, but angels gathered him up, carried him off to Paradise and gently laid him in Abraham's arms."

"The rich man, however, found himself in Hell, and hell of the worst kind, because he could see Lazarus cradled in Abraham's arms while he, the rich man, was alone with nothing but his own twisted mind and stricken conscience for company."

"He yelled out to Abraham, 'Have pity on me. Send Lazarus over with a drop of water to cool my tongue. This wretched place is suffocating the life out of me.'"

“‘But, my friend,’ Abraham replied, ‘do you not remember the time when you had everything and Lazarus had nothing, and you didn’t even give him a scrap of the leftovers from your banquets? And now that the tables are turned, you expect him to pity you? Well, even if he does pity you he can’t get to you because the chasm between the two of you is too wide. Nobody can get from your side to his, either. You’re stuck where you are, just as Lazarus was stuck where he was without anyone to help him.’”

“‘That being the case,’ the rich man cried, ‘I beg you to send Lazarus to my five brothers to give them warning of this terrible place.’”

“‘Why should I?’ Abraham replied, ‘Your brothers have Moses and the prophets, so let them listen to them.’”

“‘But I know my brothers,’ the rich man begged, ‘and they’ll need more than Moses and the prophets to wake them up. They’ll need something far more dramatic, like a messenger from the dead.’”

“‘Really?’ Abraham replied. ‘But if they won’t take Moses and the prophets seriously, why would they take anyone else seriously, even if he’d come back from the dead?’”

“And there you have it,” Jesus concluded. “Such is the power of money. It creates people like you Pharisees, who justify making money at the expense of the poor. And you think you’re rich spiritually? You’re empty shells, just like that rich man, drained of all feeling for others. But that’s what money does to people. It consumes them, eats them up, until there’s nothing left inside them but their selfish, twisted minds. And at that point what can anybody do to wake them up? If a person came back from the dead to shake them up, would even that be enough?”

Chapter 22 – Another Lazarus...

It was news of another Lazarus that arrived a few days later. A message from Martha and Mary said that Lazarus, their brother, was very ill. All three were very attached to Jesus, and he was to them.

Jesus responded to the news with a surprising comment: “Don’t even think about Lazarus dying, because you’re about to see something wonderful come of his illness that will really open people’s eyes to the Father and to me being his Son.”

For two days, however, Jesus made no move to visit Lazarus and his sisters, which suited his disciples just fine because Bethany was only two miles from Jerusalem and to them the risk was far too great being that close. “Remember

the last time you were in Jerusalem,” one of them reminded him, “and how the Jews wanted to throw rocks at you, and nearly did?”

“Ah, but you don’t see what I see,” Jesus replied. “Lazarus’ illness fits in perfectly with God’s plan, and now’s the time for it to happen. God sent me to a world stumbling around in the dark, where people have no clue who God is, who I am, and what God has planned for them. But through me God is shedding light on all those things, as you’re about to see when I wake Lazarus up from his sleep.”

The disciples didn’t think there was anything special about Jesus waking up a sleeping Lazarus until Jesus told them, “Lazarus is dead. And I deliberately waited until he died, because what’s going to happen next will lift your trust in me to new heights.”

“If we live to see it, that is,” Thomas muttered. “It’ll be us who’ll be dead if we go that close to Jerusalem. So let’s all go die together, shall we?”

By the time they set off and arrived on the outskirts of Bethany, four days had passed since Lazarus had died. Word of their arrival got back to Martha, and she ran out to meet Jesus.

“At last you’re here,” she cried, “but why didn’t you come sooner before Lazarus died? He might not have died at all if you’d been here. But I’m sure you had a reason for delaying, so I trust God will give you what you asked for.”

“Martha, my dearest friend,” Jesus replied, “your brother will be alive again.”

“Oh, I know that,” she said, “he’ll come back to life in the resurrection.”

“That’s true,” Jesus replied, “but the resurrection is not just a time in the future. It happens right now too, because anyone who trusts his life to me has already been resurrected to eternal life. He may still die physically, yes, but he’s already alive eternally because of me. And you believe that too, right?”

“Yes, I do,” Martha replied. “I believe with all my heart that you are God’s Son, sent by God with eternal life for all of us, just as Scripture predicted.”

She left Jesus where he was, ran back to the house and whispered excitedly to Mary, “He’s here at last, and he wants to see you.” She whispered because the house was full of people who’d come from Jerusalem and elsewhere to offer their help and comfort to them, and she didn’t want to disturb them. When Mary suddenly left, however, they assumed she was off to Lazarus’ tomb, so they all followed along behind her.

Jesus hadn’t budged from the spot where Martha had met him. Mary’s reaction on seeing him was the same as Martha’s: “If only you’d come sooner...,” and then she fell at his feet crying her heart out. Many of the others began to cry too. Their grief was heartbreaking, and Jesus was deeply moved.

He knelt down beside Mary and asked softly, “Where is Lazarus now?”

“Come and see,” she replied, but so sadly that Jesus could not contain his tears either.

“How Jesus must have loved Lazarus,” someone said.

But another replied, “Really? So if he loved Lazarus that much, how come he let him die? Jesus healed blind people so why didn’t he heal Lazarus too?”

Jesus made no effort to explain because he was still in tears. He followed Mary in silence to the cave where they’d laid Lazarus’ body. The opening to the cave had been sealed off with a huge stone.

Jesus composed himself and then said, “Move the stone away.”

“But you can’t do that,” Martha protested. “Think what he’ll look like. He’s been dead for four days already.”

“But remember what I told you earlier, Martha - and what you told me you believed too - that in me God has given the power to raise people to eternal life. So trust me and watch. You’re about to see the glory of God in action.”

So Martha let the stone be slowly rolled away, leaving the entrance to the cave wide open.

Jesus tilted his head toward the sky and said, “Thank you, Father, for always hearing me. Thank you too for the chance today to help these people believe you sent me.” And then in a loud voice he cried, “Lazarus, come out.”

And out of the cave stepped Lazarus, very slowly, because he was still wrapped in bandages with a cloth over his head.

“Quickly,” Jesus shouted to a couple of people beside him. “Get those bandages off him so he can move freely.”

As Lazarus shook himself free of his burial clothes, there was no more wondering if God had truly sent Jesus and given him the power to raise people from the dead. In front of their astonished eyes it was there for all to see, in the once totally dead Lazarus standing there in front of them alive and well.

Chapter 23 – When faith is a bit shaky...

Despite this amazing miracle there were still mixed reactions among those who saw it happen.

There was a clear divide between those who believed Jesus truly had been sent by God - how else could a mere man restore life to a four day old corpse? - and those who only accepted what their religious superiors decreed as true. It was those in this second group who ran off to the Pharisees to tell them what Jesus had done.

This time the Pharisees were not only angry, they were scared. They went straight to the chief priests demanding an emergency meeting of the entire Jewish Council.

The mood of the meeting quickly turned desperate: “What are we going to do? This man will soon have the whole nation following him if he keeps on doing these little tricks of his. We’ve got to do something before the Romans step in. If they smell rebellion in the air they’ll crush it, place us all under military rule, and we lose our jobs.”

Caiaphas, the ruling High Priest that year, wasn’t perturbed in the least, however. “You’re all talking a load of rubbish,” he snorted, and then he made a most surprising statement: “Think about it,” he said, “wouldn’t it be better for us if one man died for everyone, rather than the whole nation being destroyed?” In other words, let Jesus become the lightning rod, so that if he was killed the Romans would be satisfied and back off.

Caiaphas had no idea when he made that comment that he was, in fact, being inspired to predict that Jesus’ death would not only save the Jewish nation, but the whole world too. Here he thought he’d come up with a brilliant way of saving their own skins and their jobs, but instead he was making the most staggering prophecy that Jesus’ death would be the start of God bringing his lost sheep home.

Not surprisingly, therefore, the Council agreed very quickly that Jesus must die. So they issued an order requiring anyone who knew where Jesus was to report to them immediately. And since Bethany would be the obvious first choice for the search, Jesus and his disciples left in a hurry and hid themselves in a little desert town in the district of Ephraim.

But why, after that amazing miracle, were they now on the run, the disciples wondered? Surely people would know for certain now that Jesus was who he said he was, but instead they wanted him dead. How could God, if he really was the power behind Jesus, have allowed this to happen? Their faith, which Jesus said would be lifted to new heights by Lazarus coming back to life again, was instead rather shaky, so they went to Jesus to explain how they felt and ask how their faith could be strengthened.

“You say your faith is a bit shaky,” Jesus began. “Well, it’s amazing what just a little faith can do. Faith as small as a mustard seed could uproot a tree and chuck it in the ocean if you told it to, because that’s the power it contains. Faith takes complete control of a problem, rather than the problem controlling you. It’s like having a servant who expects you to serve a meal for him when he comes in from work. But he’s not in charge, you are. You’re the one giving the orders, and so is faith. Faced with a difficulty, faith takes charge and carries you through. You’re really, then, servants of your faith. God simply says, ‘Trust me’, and all you do is

obey, and you'll discover there isn't a problem that trust can't handle. Everything bows to trust. Nothing can resist it."

Chapter 24 – Keep trusting...

"So keep trusting and never give up," Jesus continued, "just like the widow who had an ongoing problem with a neighbour and never gave up trying to get it resolved.

"She went to the man on City Council who was supposed to handle disputes between neighbours, but unfortunately for her he couldn't care less. The idea of administering proper Godly justice in such issues had never crossed his mind, so when this rather ordinary, unassuming local widow presented her complaint to him it didn't register as important to him at all, and he passed her off to various useless juniors on Council. She got absolutely nowhere with any of them, so she went back to the original magistrate to ask for his personal help again."

"He was annoyed, and told her that he couldn't help her and she was wasting his valuable time. He thought that was the last of it, having said it in a rude enough voice to put her off, but in a few days she was back, asking for help again, and for several weeks she kept coming back, begging for help."

"It got to the point that she was becoming very annoying, even to his insensitive mind, so the magistrate decided one day that enough was enough. 'What God thinks about this and what people think, I don't care a hoot,' he said to himself, 'but what I do care several hoots about is how irritating this wretched woman is becoming. To shut her up once and for all I'll just have to give her what she wants.'"

"So," Jesus concluded, "if an uncaring oaf like that magistrate eventually answers your need, how much more do you think your merciful, loving God answers your need? You say your faith is shaky, but think like that widow and never give up on God. Even if it seems like you're getting no help after crying out to God day and night, God never ignores you. He understands your plight and your worries and he's onto them without delay. But how many people actually believe that? And how many people will I find believing it when I come again in the future too?"

Chapter 25 – God honours the humble...

"That story, by the way," Jesus continued, "wasn't about pestering God until he has to answer, or that God eventually answers if you keep at him, or you

deserve an answer because of how persistent you are. It's amazing how people expect God to answer based on how good they think they are. Let me explain with another story."

"In this story there are two men, a Pharisee and a tax collector, who went to the temple to pray. Think of their prayers being like the widow going to the magistrate with her request."

"When the Pharisee got to praying he stood up straight in the front row with his chin out and head held high. And his prayer, very eloquent and proper of course, went something like this: 'O great God, I'm so thankful to you that I am so different to other people. I'm not a cheat like all those awful tax collectors, nor do I swindle people like they do, overcharging people so they can cream off the extra for themselves. Nor do I have any impure thought, or do I do anything immoral. I'm a model citizen in my community, I fast twice a week without fail, and I faithfully give a tenth of everything I own to the furtherance of your work.' And there was more he said about how wonderful he was, a lot more in fact, but you get the idea."

"Meanwhile, back in an obscure, dark corner of the temple, we find the tax collector - the 'awful' tax collector according to the Pharisee - standing in the shadows with his head bowed and his eyes tightly shut, almost as if he was in pain."

"But when he began to pray he kept waving his arms around and banging his chest, and there was nothing eloquent or proper about his prayer at all. It was bursting with emotion: 'O God,' he cried, 'please, please, be kind to me because I know I'm such a fool, and I'm always making a mess of things.' And he went on and on about how weak he was and how much he depended on God's mercy every day."

"We're talking about two very different approaches to God. And which of the two do you think God appreciates the most - the arrogant, superior-minded Pharisee, or the downcast, humble-minded tax collector? There's no contest, right? And you'd be right in thinking so, because God not only has great respect for those who don't think much of themselves, he also deeply feels for them. But those with a high opinion of themselves he humbles."

"So, going back to the story of the lady, it's not about her persistence or any other good quality she had that got the magistrate to answer. It was simply a story contrasting the magistrate to God to show how aware God is of your needs, and his total willingness to help you when you cry out to him. But like the tax-collector it also shows how willing God is to answer those who humbly recognize their need and turn to him for help."

Chapter 26 – When a marriage dies...

Some time later, a group of Pharisees - of the arrogant type like the Pharisee in Jesus' last story - tried to embarrass him with a tricky question. They wanted to know if he would allow a husband to divorce his wife if he, the husband, thought it was justified.

"What did Moses say on the subject?" Jesus asked them.

"Moses said it was fine," one of the Pharisees replied. "If a man thought he had good reason for divorcing his wife, all he had to do was put it in writing and hand it to her, and that was it, the marriage was ended."

"But you know as well as I do why Moses allowed that, don't you?" Jesus asked them. "Would divorce have been an issue at all if the husband and wife had taken to heart what God intended for a married couple? They would never have turned against each other in the first place. But Moses was dealing with married couples that weren't interested in what God designed marriage for. They viewed marriage from a totally selfish point of view. If the wife didn't meet her husband's expectations, therefore, or he didn't meet hers, the marriage was over as far as they were concerned."

"So what was Moses to do?" Jesus continued. "A marriage truly was dead when people had hearts as cold as theirs. So Moses had the husband write down the reason for the divorce, and sign it to make it official. It was never meant to happen that way, because God created marriage as the best thing on Earth to bring two people together as one. But selfishness can break even that bond, and there was nothing Moses could do about it."

The Pharisees didn't pursue the subject any further, but later, indoors, the disciples did. "You said married couples shouldn't separate," one of them persisted, "so how come Moses allowed them to separate?"

"Because husband and wife have already separated when their hearts have turned cold toward each other," Jesus replied. "That's never what God intended when he designed marriage, though. He built men and women to want to set up their own homes together, and stick together through good times and bad, because it works. Even the idea of breaking that bond should never have entered the picture, and nor should it today either. To divorce and remarry is just as bad as adultery."

"Well, if that's the case," one of the disciples sniffed, "who'd want to get married in the first place if it meant getting stuck in an awful marriage with no way out?"

"And that's my point exactly," Jesus replied. "Now you understand why Moses did what he did. People back then didn't like being stuck in an awful marriage either. What if the wife was sleeping around, for instance, and had no intention

of stopping? Should a husband put up with that, when it's obvious his wife couldn't care less about him? Or what if the husband believes he's pleasing God by abstaining from sex? Should a wife stay in a loveless marriage, and become an emotional wreck? What would you suggest in those cases? Can a marriage survive such things?"

"Moses could clearly see that no, the marriage couldn't survive, because it was already dead. But if people had taken marriage as seriously as God intended, would these difficult situations have arisen in the first place? That's the real question here."

Chapter 27 – Children have no trouble trusting...

It was just as this discussion on marriage was wrapping up that a group of parents arrived at the door asking if Jesus could do a special prayer for their children and ask God to bless them.

The disciples told them to go away and stop bothering Jesus with such trifling requests. They were about to slam the door in the parents' faces when there was a roar from behind them.

It came from Jesus, and he was furious.

"What do you think you're doing?" he yelled at his disciples, and loud enough to make them jump. "Move aside and let those children come to me, and don't you dare try to stop them." And he pushed past the disciples, took a child in each hand, and led them indoors.

The disciples had never seen Jesus so angry, and he wasn't finished being angry either. "Can't you see, you silly people?" he fumed at the offending disciples. "These children are what God's Kingdom is made of. Look at their beautiful childlike trust, how they just held my hand and followed me in. There couldn't be a better illustration than these children as to how to enter God's Kingdom."

"Only a few days ago," Jesus continued, pointing to his disciples, "you came to me saying your faith was shaky, but these children had no trouble trusting me at all. And you wanted to shoo them away? Well, shame on you. So, please," he said, beckoning to the parents, "bring your children to me," and he took each child in turn in his arms, and thanked God over and over again for them. The disciples had never seen Jesus express so much affection before. Jesus obviously loved children, but now they could see why: Children are what the Kingdom of God is made of.

Chapter 28 – It’s tough for a rich man...

They were back on the road heading for Jerusalem when an important official from a local town saw them coming and puffed his way up to them at a wobbly trot. In a most surprising move for someone so important he fell on his knees in front of Jesus. He looked up at Jesus and said, “You’re a good man, so please tell me, what good works do I need to do to qualify for eternal life? Just tell me what to do and I’ll do it.”

The sight of the man kneeling and the imploring look on his face seemed like a step in the right direction, but Jesus wasn’t impressed and he was blunt in his response. “Why are you asking me about good works? I don’t remember telling anybody in my travels what good works have to do with eternal life. And why are you calling me good, when you know full well that only God is good?”

This seemed like a rather sharp response, but Jesus knew where the man was coming from. The man thought eternal life depended on what he himself did, just like those who think the gates of the Kingdom of God will be thrown open to them for being such good-living people, and especially because they kept God’s commandments. And this man was clearly one of them, which soon became obvious by Jesus’ next statement:

“All right, I’ll go along with you,” Jesus said to him. “You believe eternal life depends on your obedience to the commandments, right? So off you go and keep the commandments, then.”

“Which ones?” the man asked.

“Oh, come on,” Jesus snorted, “you know full well which ones - the big ten: don’t murder, don’t steal, don’t lie or cheat, respect your parents, don’t chase other women if you’re married - those commandments - the ones about doing for others what you’d like done for yourself.”

“But I’ve done all those,” the man insisted. “I’ve kept them since I was a boy. So is there something I’ve missed somehow, or something else I need to do?”

Oh dear, there it was again; everything was based on what he needed to do, and Jesus really felt for him. Poor man; all his life he’d been struggling as hard as he could to be perfect on his own strength, and now Jesus was about to shatter that to pieces and shake the man to his roots.

“All right, there is something you can do,” Jesus told him. “If you’re to be that perfect man you want to be, sell everything you own, give the money to charity and come and join me, because then you’ll know what real riches are.”

And just as Jesus thought, it hit the man like a ton of bricks. He looked up at Jesus with startled eyes and then slowly got to his feet and shuffled off in silence with his head hung low, because he thought he had everything sown up nicely. In his mind all he had to in life was simply obey the commandments and everything

he could ever want would come to him. It had certainly worked so far. Obedience had paid off handsomely; he was a wealthy man with an important job. And in going to Jesus he was hoping his obedience would be the promise of even greater riches for eternity too, but here was Jesus saying there were greater riches in following him. Jesus was a bitter disappointment to him.

Jesus watched him go.

Then he turned to his disciples and said, "It's tough for rich people to enter the Kingdom of God."

The disciples looked at each other in shock, because surely wealth was a sign of God's favour, not some sort of handicap, and they let Jesus know.

"You're right," Jesus replied, "wealth being a blessing from God was true in the past, but the reason I came is to open up the riches of heaven, not physical wealth. And I can understand that being difficult to accept, especially for people like that official who think you get rich if you get religious, or for people who think money is everything. I understand why the official shuffled off in silence and why people turn their noses up at the Kingdom of God; it's because there are no obvious, visible, physical rewards in following me like there are for keeping the commandments."

"But if that's the case," a disciple argued, "why would anyone want to follow you or want the Kingdom of God, if there's no obvious reward involved?"

"Good question," Jesus replied. "And the answer is, because it's simply not in people naturally to commit themselves to something if there's no visible, physical, personal gain in it. So how on earth are they going to respond to the rather vague offer of heavenly riches if they follow me instead? But that's where God comes in. You've seen what happens to people when I talk of the Kingdom of God and the key to entering it being trust in me. And they believe it, even when it's totally against what they've been taught in the past, and totally against their built-in 'What's in it for me?' You've seen what God can do. He can break through the thick crust of any human brain and help a person grasp what he's offering through me. It's just a lot tougher for rich people to see it, that's all."

It was Peter who spoke up next. "But what about us? We've given up our jobs and left our homes to follow you, and we're not following you for any physical reward either. But does that mean there's no reward at all? Or if there is a reward coming to us, what kind of reward do we get?"

"Oh, that's been taken care of already," Jesus replied with a smile. "When the Kingdom of God comes in splendour and I'm in charge, the twelve of you who faithfully follow me will each be given charge over a tribe of Israel. You are kings in the making. And if you were hoping for some sort of reward now for giving up a good life in this world, then trust me, the rewards for following me are a

hundred times better than anything this world has to offer. What price can you put on tasting the Kingdom of God now and entering it in full, for eternity, later?"

"At times it won't seem fair, though, and I understand that, especially when you see people who don't follow me having all the fun and all you get is criticism. But no one loses out who sacrifices for the Kingdom of God. You may be losing out now but not later. You'll be the first in line for rewards, while those who lived for this life only will be last. The Kingdom of Heaven rewards its workers, you can be sure of that."

Chapter 29 – God is equally generous to all...

All this talk of rewards brought another story to Jesus' mind that would expand his disciples' understanding of God, because in reality that's what Jesus had come for, to fill their vision with the beauty of the Father that only he knew so well. When talking to them of the Kingdom of God at this point in their lives, then, it was really about God himself.

"See if this will help," Jesus said, as he watched his disciples struggling with this latest bombshell about God. "Picture God as a farmer who needs labourers to bring in the harvest. Bright and early he's down at the Job Centre hiring a crew. He needs them from 8:00 am to 6:00 pm, a full day's work, and they agree on a wage."

"A couple of hours later the farmer's down at the Job Centre again to hire another crew. He offers them the same wage as the first crew, even though they're working two hours less. He hires two more crews as well, one at noon and one mid-afternoon, and again they get the same full day's wage."

"When he realizes he needs yet another crew, he's back at the Job Centre again at 5:00 pm, and fortunately, there are still some men sitting around twiddling their thumbs because no one's hired them yet, so with only one hour to go he hires them as well."

"Six o'clock comes, work ends for the day, and it's time to pay the crews. The farmer calls all five crews together and he pays the 5:00 pm crew first. They've only worked an hour but he pays them a full day's wage anyway. He pays the next three crews the same. When he gets to the crew that started at 8:00 am, the only crew to have actually worked a full day, he pays them the same amount as well."

"Well, you can imagine the outcry from that first crew. 'How come we work all day in the scorching heat and get blisters for the same wages as those who only worked an hour?' they grumble. And tempers begin to flare at the unfairness of it all."

“But the farmer says, ‘What have I done wrong? You agreed to the wage I offered, so take your money and go. And if I want to pay the others the same amount for less work done, what’s that to you? I can do what I jolly well like with my money, and I jolly well like being generous. You may think the others don’t deserve the same as you, but in my book they do.’”

“And in God’s book it’s the same,” Jesus concluded. “God simply loves being generous, because that’s the kind of Father he is, and those who grasp that about God grab the chance to take advantage of his generosity right away. They’re not thinking about who deserves what, or the unfairness of others being rewarded for less work done, or even about losing out in this life because they’re following me. All those thoughts disappear when they realize they can experience their eternal life right now. And the more they experience it the better it gets, which means they’re already reaping the benefits - or their reward - long before the resurrection.”

“Others who resist me don’t get that, so they don’t get to reap the benefits now. They’ll have to wait, and if they’re really stubborn they’ll have to wait longer - like that official we just met who’s stuck in his ways. Some really stubborn types may have to go through a stint in hell first, like the Rich Man in the story of Lazarus. But God, being the generous God he is, loves everybody equally so everybody gets a chance. He’d love to see everyone take advantage of his generosity as soon as they hear about it, but some people hold out for a while, like the wealthy. Everybody gets an equal share in the end, but some have to go a tougher route to get there, that’s all.”

“In God’s book the race doesn’t go to the swiftest or the best. It goes to everybody. Everybody is a winner. The little people who don’t get much in this life but believe what God is offering get to experience being winners earlier. The big people who get what this life has to offer but resist God, lose out on being winners for now. In other words, the last shall be first, and the first shall be last. The little people get to experience God’s generosity first and the big people last. All get a chance at tapping into God’s generosity, but some get into it quickly while others dig their heels in.”

Chapter 30 – Jesus’ mood changes...

At every stage of their journey together, situations arose that filled the disciples’ heads with new concepts of God. There was one thing they simply couldn’t grasp, however. It was like a dark, foreboding cloud that seemed to contradict everything they’d heard about God so far, and it came up again as they were walking on the road to Jerusalem.

It was sparked by the many travelers on the road with them, all heading to Jerusalem to attend to their ceremonial purification rituals before celebrating the Passover. Many of them had already arrived in the city and headed straight for the Temple in the hope of finding Jesus there.

“He won’t dare show his face,” one person said when they couldn’t find him. “Remember what happened when Jesus last turned up at the Temple? He nearly got himself killed.”

“I bet he won’t even come to the festival at all, then,” another declared, remembering how quickly Jesus had disappeared last time when things turned nasty.

They were both wrong, however, because Jesus was on his way at that very moment, but they were right about the trip being extremely harrowing for him. Even at that point on the journey, Jesus’ mood had changed so dramatically it really frightened the disciples.

So he sat them down to explain the dark cloud that had so suddenly enveloped him. “This is my last trip to Jerusalem with you,” he began, “because awful things are about to happen, all of them predicted in Scripture by the prophets long ago. They tell of the Messiah being handed over to the Jewish religious authorities, who will sentence him to death, hand him over to the Gentile rulers, who in turn will humiliate him, spit on him and treat him in the most shameful ways. They’ll rip his body to shreds and kill him by crucifixion. Three days later, however, he’ll come back to life again.”

The disciples had heard him speak like this before, and they didn’t like it. They had no clue which prophecies he was referring to either, and this crazy notion of the Messiah being tortured to death by Gentiles was way too much for them to absorb. It didn’t connect to anything he’d said before. Only a day or so ago Jesus had been telling them the Kingdom of God was coming and about them being kings in it. It didn’t make any sense.

Chapter 31 – Defining greatness...

The disconnect in their minds became all too clear when two of Jesus’ disciples, James and John, brought their mother to Jesus, asking him for a favour - and to please not turn them down, either.

“Tell me what the favour is first,” Jesus told them.

It was the mother who answered: “I want you to let a son of mine sit on each side of you in the Kingdom, and please fix it for them right now.”

“That’s right,” her two sons chimed in, “that’s what we want too.”

“But you have no idea what you’re asking for,” Jesus replied.

Turning to the mother, he asked her, “Do you really want your sons to share in the hell I’m about to go through?” and to the disciples he asked, “Do you really think you’re ready to go through hell with me?”

“Yes, we are,” they both said confidently.

“Well, one thing’s for certain,” Jesus replied, “you will go thru hell, but as far as fixing spots next to me in the Kingdom, that’s not within my power to arrange. That’s my Father’s business, not mine. He reserves those seats, not me.”

The other ten disciples, meanwhile, were totally unaware that James and John, stirred by their mother, had put in a secret bid for top positions in the Kingdom. But word of it leaked back to them and they were livid. Jesus quickly called them all together before a major punch-up broke out.

“All this arguing over who gets top spot is not what the Kingdom is about,” he told them. “It’s easy to understand why too, because look what that attitude has done in the Gentile kingdoms of this world. They are full of dictators and tyrants consumed by the desire for power, and they grind their people into the ground. They don’t care about their people at all, and is that how you want to be? Is being great all that matters to you too? Is that the reward you’re hoping for, that one day you’ll be rich and powerful and everybody bows to you?”

“I know I said you would be kings one day in God’s Kingdom, but what I mean by the word ‘king’ is not the way the world thinks of kings. Kings in the world expect everybody to serve them, but kings in the Kingdom of God do the serving. They love serving. That’s why they love being kings because it gives them greater opportunity to be of service to others.”

“Can you see, then, how different God’s world is? Greatness in God’s world is defined by service, so if you’re after a top spot in God’s Kingdom, that’s wonderful, because you obviously love serving. It means you’ve cottoned to what really makes the world go round. It’s the joy of serving others - and being in a position where you can really serve others - and that’s what God will give you. If you’re hooked on serving he’ll give you every opportunity - and the power you need - to serve effectively. And that I know from personal experience, because that’s what God has provided for me. I wanted to serve and God has given me the position and the power to serve the best interests of every person on Earth. I couldn’t ask for more.”

Chapter 32 – Zacchaeus, the rogue that was...

Their long trek to Jerusalem had brought them to the ancient fortress city of Jericho next, where another rich and important man, the head of customs, wanted to get a good look at Jesus as he passed through.

Unfortunately for him, Zacchaeus was a rather short man, so when a huge crowd gathered for Jesus' arrival, he couldn't see a thing for the sea of shoulders and heads in front of him. But nearby was a good-sized mulberry tree with sturdy branches, so he hauled himself up the tree and perched himself on an overhanging branch. So there he was, a little fat man dressed in rich clothes draped over a tree branch clinging on for all his worth, but catching a glimpse of Jesus was all that mattered to him.

He got the surprise of his life when Jesus stopped right beside the mulberry tree, looked up at him and called out, "Zacchaeus, get down from that tree at once because I'm coming over to your house right now to rest."

Zacchaeus nearly fell out of the tree, first with surprise and then with excitement. He wobbled his way backwards down the branch, slid down the trunk and pushed his way through the crowd to welcome Jesus to his home. He was beside himself with delight, running from side to side and looking back every two seconds to see if Jesus was still following.

He was thrilled at this turn of events, but there were many in the crowd who weren't thrilled at all, because they knew Zacchaeus all too well as a cheat and a fraud. He wasn't rich because he'd earned it; he was rich because he'd been overcharging people on their customs fees and creaming off the difference for himself, and nobody could do a thing about it. He was the kind of man Jesus was talking about earlier, who used his position for his own gain, not for serving others. To the people who knew him he was an unforgiveable leech.

The general reaction, then, to seeing his little fat legs leading Jesus to his home was: "Why on earth would Jesus even consider going to stay with him?" Some people even started yelling, "Shame," and other uncomplimentary comments, and the murmuring grew so loud that Zacchaeus actually stopped in his tracks and turned round to face the crowd.

Everybody screeched to a halt and immediately went quiet.

Zacchaeus looked at the crowd and then he went up to Jesus and said: "From now on I'm going to hand over half of what I own to the poor, and if I've overcharged anyone on their customs fees I will repay what I owe him four times over."

The crowd was stunned into silence by his startling pronouncement. Jesus put his hand on Zacchaeus' shoulder and smiled, "Now that's what I call a true descendant of Abraham, because now you see what the promise given to Abraham was all about. It's about lives being changed. It's about the lost and hopeless being rescued from their self-centred existence, and being transformed like this man here. Now you can see with your your own eyes how that prophecy plays out in real life, where you see dramatic things happening to people you know. This man was a rogue, but now look at him. He's totally changed."

Chapter 33 – What the Kingdom of God does best...

After a short stay with Zacchaeus, Jesus and his little band of disciples left Jericho. Behind them stretched a long procession of people.

At one point along the route they encountered a blind beggar named Bartimaeus squatting at the side of the road. He couldn't see what was happening but he could hear the shuffling of hundreds of approaching feet and he wondered what was happening. Someone told him that Jesus was coming.

He leapt up, stood in the middle of the road and started yelling, "Jesus, Jesus, Son of David, please have pity on me," and he kept yelling it again and again, so persistently that those at the front of the crowd tried to pull him off the road and shut him up. But that only made him more frantic and even louder in his cries of, "Son of David, have pity on me; oh please, please have pity on me."

Jesus stopped. He looked at the beggar frantically struggling to free himself, and then he called to those trying to hold him down, "Bring him to me."

The beggar had no idea that Jesus was talking about him, because he couldn't see who Jesus was looking at, but someone nearby whispered, "He's calling for you, my friend. You'll be all right now."

Once he realized Jesus was calling to him, he broke free of those holding him, threw off his outer cloak to get to Jesus faster, and ran in his eagerness to where he'd heard Jesus' voice.

Jesus took him by the arm and asked him, "You called for me, so what would you like me to do for you?"

"Oh, please," the beggar cried, "I would love to have my sight back."

The man's sad condition and his open trust touched Jesus deeply. He gently placed his fingers on the man's eyelids, and with tenderness in his voice said, "Because you trusted me you can have your sight back. So now you're free to go wherever you want."

The man's sight was immediately restored. He was able now to look at Jesus, and with tears of joy he jumped up and down and ran around Jesus, thanking him and thanking God, and he kept at it as the crowd moved forward. Many in the crowd joined in his thanks to God for another amazing miracle.

It was simply Jesus doing what the Kingdom of God does best, serving and caring for the needy, and bringing joy to the hopeless and lost. And those like the blind beggar who could admit their need to Jesus and trust him with it, did not regret it.

Chapter 34 – Trust now, rewards later...

Jesus had made it clear by his own example that God cared. When he talked of the Kingdom of God, therefore, it instilled in people's minds the obvious contrast between God's world and the world they were living in, and it created a revolutionary zeal in many who followed him. Hope grew that this was the time predicted, at last, when the Messiah would end all suffering and send their enemies packing. And judging by the crowds that turned out to see him and follow in his wake, that hope was clearly building the nearer to Jerusalem he got.

But the Kingdom of God was not about to take the world by storm - not yet at least - and the disappointment could be devastating if people's pent-up expectations were shattered, so Jesus told another story to get their minds focused on what was really important, no matter when the Kingdom came.

"The owner of a company took a position overseas," Jesus began. "He explained to his managers that the trip was a temporary assignment and he'd be back again some time later, but there was no telling when." That was the first gentle hint for those looking for clues in Jesus' story as to what he was getting at - the owner, of course, being Jesus himself, who would also be leaving for a while after his ascension back to Heaven.

"Before the owner left the country," Jesus continued, "he brought all his managers together and gave each of them a packet of money, and challenged them to see what gains they could make with it while he was away."

"When the owner's stint overseas came to an end, he returned home. He could hardly wait to hear what his managers had accomplished with the money he'd given them. He got them all together as soon as he could to ask them how they'd done."

"The first to reply said, 'I made ten times more out of what you gave me.'"

"That's tremendous," cried the owner, "because now I can explain why I put this challenge to you in the first place. As you know, the money I gave you wasn't that much, but it would tell me something vital about you by what you did with it. It was a test of sorts, yes, but a positive one, to see if you trust me. Would you take up my challenge simply because you believe in me and how I operate? Do you truly believe that everything I do, or ask of you, is always for your good in some way? And this little test would tell me if you do, by how you reacted to it. Would you really go for it, even with such a small amount to play with? If you did, simply because you trusted me, I'd know then that you'd make the most of whatever I gave you in the future, and that's hugely important to me because I've got all kinds of things in mind in the future for those who trust me. So, my good man," he said to the first man who replied, "I'm giving you ten times more in the

company than what you had before I left, and I can't wait to see what you do with that lot next."

"Well, that sent a ripple of excitement around the room, and another voice shouted out, 'I made five times more from what you gave me.'"

"Well done,' the owner chuckled, 'another hefty gain on my investment, and another hefty gain for you too, because I'm giving you five times more in the company than what you had before.'"

"After several minutes of hands shooting up and further reports on gains made, there was only one man left who hadn't said anything. 'Well, how did you do?' the owner asked him."

"I put your money in a locked drawer,' the last man replied, rather coldly, 'because if I lost it or made a bad investment you'd get angry at me and fire me. And I didn't think much of the idea in the first place, to be honest. To me you were just playing with us, not being serious. You were going away and this was just a clever ruse to get us to work in your absence without you needing to check on us. You knew we'd be working our fingers to the bone in fear of losing our jobs if we failed you. So I didn't take up your challenge for those two reasons.'"

"But even if you did feel that way,' the owner replied, 'you could at least have banked the money and given it back to me with interest, but you didn't even do that. I know why you did what you did, though. It's because you won't accept me for who I am. You accuse me of being clever, as though it was a negative thing. Yes, it was a test, but only to find out if you really trust me, not to see if you were going to mess up and fail me. That's all I've ever wanted from you. It was your trust, your unwavering belief that everything I say or ask you to do is totally for your good and benefit. I would know then that you know me, as to how deeply I value and reward trust. That's all this was about, nothing more.'"

"It really makes me angry, then,' the owner continued, 'when people like you give the impression that I can't be trusted, so I'm giving the money I gave to you to the one who did trust me.'"

"The man who made the most, right?' one of the other managers called out.

"Absolutely,' the owner replied."

Jesus paused, because now came the point of the story. "Look, I'm telling you all this because whatever happens next, one thing remains the same: Trust me with what I give you. Use my gifts well. Do something worthwhile with them. Develop them so you can help, serve and produce things that really benefit people, because that's the Kingdom of God at any time. It's always in operation to help people, so even if it's delayed in coming and I have to go away for a while, I'll give you the wherewithal to keep the Kingdom of God going and growing, and now's your chance to prove it. So, please, take up my challenge and see what you can make of it, because when God sees what you do with just the small gifts I

give you now, can you imagine what he'll give you when his Kingdom comes in full?"

"Oh, and there's one more part to this story, too," Jesus continued. "While the owner of the company was overseas he received a petition demanding that he stay overseas and not come back. It contained a long list of signatures of people in his company, who made it clear in a statement on the petition they were fed up with the way he was running the company, and they didn't want him running it anymore."

"Well, that just made certain the owner came back home, and when he did he fired the lot of them."

"So to those who hope and wish I'd go away and not come back because they don't like how I do things either, I say 'too bad', because the Kingdom of God is not going away and anyone who persists in opposing it will be up against the might of God one day, and I don't fancy their chances of surviving that unscathed."

"Realize, then, what God is doing," Jesus concluded. "He's giving you opportunity to play a part in his Kingdom now, because as he sees you using those little gifts he's given you to build his Kingdom and all that it represents, he'll reward you handsomely with much greater gifts later. Those who prefer instead to believe God is just being harsh and demanding - well, they're the ones who lose out, and more shame to them."

With those thoughts established in their heads, Jesus took to the road again with his disciples, advancing ever closer to Jerusalem and what awaited him there....

End of Part 3