

The 4 GOSPELS in one story

Part 4

Introduction

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

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

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

Chapter 1

Mary, the first to truly understand...

A week before the Passover Jesus was back in Bethany staying with Mary and Martha again, this time with Lazarus their brother very much alive and well after four days dead and raised back to life again by Jesus.

On Saturday evening Jesus was invited to a dinner in his honour by Simon the Leper, a title that had stuck with Simon despite being healed of his leprosy by Jesus some time earlier. Keeping the title provided living proof of how the Kingdom of God can change a person's life.

The meal was very different to those Jesus had recently attended in the homes of various Pharisees, because half way through supper Mary totally broke with Jewish rules of etiquette by pouring a very expensive and exquisitely smelling jar of perfume over Jesus' head and feet, and then wiping his feet with her hair. No Jewish lady would dare loosen her hair in company, nor was it Jewish custom to anoint feet. Anoint the head, yes, but not feet, and then to actually wipe Jesus' feet with her hair - well, it was an outrageous slap against the proper way for a Jewish lady to behave. But Mary was beyond worrying about that. Compared to what she'd seen and come to love in Jesus, Jewish ritual and convention meant nothing.

The contrast between her attitude to Jesus and the Pharisees' attitude to him - and both expressed at meals too - was vivid. She was all love and trust, the Pharisees all tradition and rules. But even the disciples were shocked at Mary's flagrant breaking of convention.

Shock quickly turned to anger too, the most vocal of the angry being Judas: "What a waste," he growled, "we could have sold that perfume in the market and given the money to the poor. There's a year's worth of wages in that jar of hers, and it's all gone up the spout, and for what, eh?"

It was all froth and posturing on Judas' part, however, because he didn't care a hoot about the poor. Quite the opposite, in fact: he was greedy and dishonest. For months he'd been sneaking money out of their funds for himself. Being treasurer for the group had made it easy; a bit here, a bit there, no one noticed. So right within Jesus' own chosen disciples there was a typical Pharisee, who looked and sounded good, but meanwhile was using his position for personal gain.

Jesus, of course, was well aware of all the grumbling going on, and of Judas leading the protest and trying to stir things up, so he launched in with an angry response of his own: "How dare you pick on Mary like that," Jesus shouted. "You leave her alone. What she did was just fine, thank you very much. And what's all this waffling on about giving the money to the poor? Give some of your own

money to the poor if that's so important to you, because there'll always be plenty of poor people around. But you won't always have me around, and Mary understood that. That's why she chose that perfume. It's the same perfume used for burial because she knows what's in store for me, and she wanted me to know she knew by actually anointing me in preparation for my burial. Right before your very eyes, therefore, you had someone who understood the Gospel, and what an example Mary will be for generations of people to come who wonder what the Gospel is really all about. It's about why I died. And Mary was the first to get it, which history will record forever."

Meanwhile, outside Simon's home a crowd had been gathering as word began to spread that Jesus was in Bethany. Hundreds of people were pouring into town from all directions to see for themselves that the miracle was indeed true, that Jesus had literally raised Lazarus from the dead.

It was a cause of great dismay back in Jerusalem, however, as the chief priests watched people leaving the city in droves for Bethany. If this huge exodus continued they could lose all kinds of people to Jesus, and all because of Lazarus being raised from the dead. Forget the fact that an incredible miracle had been done that clearly proved everything Jesus had said about himself was true. Far more important to the priests was plugging this huge leak of people to Jesus. And the only way to do that, they realized, was to get rid of Jesus - and kill Lazarus as well.

Chapter 2 – Jesus approaches Jerusalem...

On Sunday, Jesus left for Jerusalem.

When they reached the village of Bethphage on the east side of the Mount of Olives Jesus sent two of his disciples to another village nearby "where," he told them, "you'll find a donkey and its foal just inside the entrance to the village. Untie the foal and bring it back to me, and if anyone asks you what you're up to, don't worry, just tell them it was I who sent you and I've already made arrangements with the owner to return the foal back to him, so they'll let you take it, no trouble at all. The foal has never been ridden before, so walk it back rather than ride it."

The disciples found the foal tied up at the entrance to a person's yard, and just as they were untying it a couple of the owner's assistants ran out to stop them. It took some explaining and a quick check with the owner, but the owner immediately gave his permission to take the foal and the disciples were soon on their way with the foal in tow. The donkey didn't come with a saddle, since it had

never been ridden, so the disciples fashioned a saddle out of their cloaks and Jesus used that instead to ride his way into Jerusalem.

The trip began quietly but ahead of them a huge crowd of people was pouring out of Jerusalem to meet him. News of Lazarus had spread like wildfire, set alight by those who'd actually seen Lazarus walk out of his tomb in his burial bandages. Jerusalem, meanwhile, was swollen with people gathered for the Passover, so the crowd flowing out of the city was immense, and intensely excited too, because a man who could raise people from the dead had to be the promised Messiah, the Son of David who would usher in the new age of glory for Israel.

Jesus and his little group set out on the sloping road down the Mount of Olives towards Jerusalem, and they could see the waves of people coming up the slope to meet them. The first to arrive lined the road on both sides and threw their cloaks onto the road for Jesus to ride over. Others raced to nearby fields to find leafy branches and whatever other greenery they could find to carpet the road as well, and those who arrived later waved palm branches from the back rows. The entire crowd was shouting and singing, "Salvation, salvation, salvation has come. Long live our King, the Son of David. Praise God, peace at last, his glorious Kingdom has arrived. God save our great father, David. Salvation, salvation, salvation has come."

But how many people in that cheering, ecstatic crowd knew they were actually taking part in a prophecy that had been written five hundred years earlier by the prophet Zechariah? "Shout in triumph and joy, Jerusalem," Zechariah had written, "because here comes your King in victory but also in humility, riding on the foal of a donkey."

The Pharisees, who should have known their Scriptures, didn't see any significance in Jesus riding into Jerusalem in exactly the humble way Zechariah said he would. Instead, they were far more concerned about the commotion Jesus' arrival was causing. Some of them even barged their way through the crowd and confronted Jesus in person, demanding that he control his followers and stop this nonsense.

Jesus' answer to them was blunt: "Even if these people could be silenced the very stones you're standing on would start shouting instead." No way could Jesus stop the crowd; they were fulfilling prophecy, and nothing could stop that.

It wasn't just the Pharisees, however, who were concerned by all these goings-on. Jesus' own disciples were thoroughly puzzled too. It was only after Jesus' death that they realized just how many prophecies in the Scriptures had been fulfilled by Jesus without them even noticing, including this one of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey's foal, and right under their noses too.

Chapter 3 – The fig tree with no figs...

Even Jesus riding on a little donkey didn't dampen the crowd's expectations. He didn't quite fit their hopes of a Messiah striding into town on a great, white warhorse flaring at the nostrils, with Jesus astride waving a sword flashing shafts of sunlight, but it made no difference to the people's anticipation of more great miracles to come. Jesus had known this, of course, and warned his disciples earlier not to get caught up in it.

Even when Jesus stopped as Jerusalem opened up in full view before him, and he began to cry, it didn't register with the crowd that maybe this wasn't a great victory march after all. It certainly wasn't to Jesus as he sat slumped in his saddle crying out, "Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem, if only you could see what you've missed. Here I came with the peace you so longed for and you didn't recognize me as the source of it. And even now, while I'm still with you, it's still within your grasp, but you still can't see it, even when it's right in front of you. Oh my dear Jerusalem, you great City of Peace, how little you reflect your name, because it's not the peace you dream of that's coming to you, it's going to be crushing, brutal war. Your enemies will surround you, pile up earth against your walls, pour over the ramparts raining death and destruction on all who oppose them. Your children will perish and your buildings will be flattened, and all because you didn't grasp the opportunity God had given you. He so wanted to save you, but you didn't accept his Saviour."

And right at that very moment the people in Jerusalem were proving his point, because for all the cheering going on outside the city there were still hundreds of people inside the city who had no idea what all the fuss was about. They didn't even know who Jesus was. People were racing around asking, "Who is that man?" as Jesus entered the city, and they had to be told it was "Jesus, the great prophet from Nazareth in Galilee." So even at this late stage most of Jerusalem's inhabitants were stumbling around without a clue that the source of the eternal peace they had longed for had just arrived on their doorstep.

Jesus, meanwhile, was weaving his way through the streets of Jerusalem heading for the Temple, where he spent the rest of the day. In the evening, he and his disciples went back to stay in Bethany, and then early Monday morning they headed back to Jerusalem again. It was on the way there that Jesus felt hungry, so he veered off the track to a nearby fig tree. There wasn't a fig to be found, however, just leaves. It was too early anyway for ripe figs, but the edible buds hadn't formed either, so there was no fruit of any kind on the tree. Almost under his breath Jesus said, "No one will ever eat fruit off this tree again," but the disciples heard him say it, and they'd remember he said it too.

Chapter 4 – How dare you make my Father’s house a market?...

The significance of Jesus’ curse on the fig tree became obvious as soon as they arrived at the Temple. As far as spiritual fruit there was none. Instead, the Temple Court of the Gentiles was full of traders selling sheep, cattle and pigeons at way over market prices with much of the extra cash making its way into the priests own pockets. It was a blatant money grab by the priesthood, and a clever one too, because people needed animals for Passover sacrifices, so the traders simply upped their prices and the priests skimmed off their share of the profits. And that wasn’t all the public was being gouged by either. People also needed Temple currency for Temple taxes and offerings, so moneychangers had set up their tables too, but what they offered in Temple currency was way below the normal exchange rate, so again the public was being soaked and the profits went to the priests, and all in the shadow of God’s house too.

When Jesus saw what was happening, he was livid. In a symbolic act of judgment he made a whip out of reeds that delivered quite a sting when flicked across the back of an animal. With whip in hand and a lot of angry yelling Jesus raced over to the sheep and cattle and drove them out of the Temple courtyard and into the city streets. And then he turned on the moneychangers next. He knocked over their tables, scattering coins in all directions.

Last on Jesus’ list were the pigeon salesmen. “Get out of here and take your pigeons with you,” Jesus yelled. “How dare you turn my Father’s house into a market. This is the Temple, for heaven’s sake, the place where everybody can come and pray, free of charge. Have you no respect for the Scripture in Isaiah that says, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations’? So, go on, get out of here, and you people just walking through here as a shortcut, you get out of here too.”

For people who should’ve known the Scriptures, the significance of Jesus’ anger was obvious, because it was Malachi the prophet who’d said the Messiah would come in judgment on his people - and on the Temple - because of their careless attitude to God. And here before their very eyes it was happening, but none of them got it.

One of Jesus’ disciples got it, though. As he watched Jesus yelling and flailing away with his whip and furiously scattering coins and animals, the Scripture popped into his mind that says, “Zeal for your house has consumed me.” He was quoting yet another prophecy that was being fulfilled by Jesus, this time from Psalms.

Chapter 5 – We want a sign (again)...

The Temple, unfortunately, was typical of the state of the whole nation. It was a tree without figs, a tree with no spiritual fruit. It was all leaves, a show of religion but no real connection with God. It was a place to make money, or just a place to walk through to somewhere else, not the place where anyone, Jew or Gentile, could come to God and pour out all his troubles and know that God was listening.

During the last days of his life, therefore, Jesus spent most of his time in the Temple teaching about his Father and his world of love and compassion, and demonstrating it in his usual way too, by healing every blind or crippled person who believed what he said about God and trusted him. Children were also running around inside the Temple shouting at the top of their lungs, “Salvation, salvation, salvation has come. Long live the Son of David,” which again should have roused some sort of understanding in the minds of the people watching Jesus that here was their prophesied Saviour. But in the minds of the chief priests and religious scholars it only aroused anger.

One of them, a Pharisee, even interrupted Jesus in the middle of his teaching, shouting in his face, “Do you hear what those wretched little brats are screaming?”

“Yes, I do,” Jesus replied, “and have you never read the Psalm that says, ‘Out of the mouths of babes and infants comes perfect praise’?”

The Pharisee turned away in disgust muttering, “He’s done it again. Nothing we say ever makes any difference. He always has an answer. And the whole world is going mad about him.”

The Pharisee’s companions came up with an idea, therefore, to publicly embarrass Jesus. “Ask him what right he has to act as he does,” one of them said. “Ask him for a clear sign to prove he has the authority to speak as he does.” So the Pharisee did just that.

Jesus had an immediate answer: “You want a sign? All right, I’ll give you a sign: Destroy this Temple and in three days I’ll raise it up again. There you are, there’s your sign.”

“You’re crazy,” the Pharisee snorted, “the Temple took forty six years to build and you’re saying you can re-build it in only three days?”

But Jesus didn’t mean the physical Temple they were standing in, he meant his physical body, because in a few days time these people would destroy his body but three days later he’d raise it back to life again. It was pointless trying to explain that to these people, though, because the last thing they wanted was him

coming back to life again, and even an astounding miracle wouldn't change their minds about him anyway.

But it changed the minds of the disciples, because when Jesus did come back to life again after three days - exactly as he said - it totally sealed their trust in him and in every word he'd spoken, and in all the prophecies about him in the Scriptures too. The sign Jesus gave was clearly meant for them, therefore, because it gave them the proof they needed that Jesus really was who he said he was. Now they could tell the world with confidence that Jesus truly was the prophesied Messiah and Son of God.

Chapter 6 – Why the fig tree died...

Meanwhile, the plot to kill Jesus was growing in intensity. The chief priests and religious leaders had combined forces with other influential people in Israel to find some way of killing Jesus without stirring up revolt and anger in those who followed him.

But no clear plan came to mind as yet. On the one hand they were fearful of Jesus' influence growing even more, but they were also fearful of the people's reaction if they tried to stop him, because a lot of people loved what he had to say. Every morning people were up bright and early and lining up outside the Temple to hear Jesus teach.

For now, then, the chief priests' hands were tied, which meant Jesus could still travel freely, so that evening he spent the night again in Bethany. But early Tuesday morning he was back on the road again to teach in the Temple, and that's when the disciples noticed that the fig tree Jesus had cursed the day before was completely dead.

"How quickly the fig tree died," one of the disciples said in shock when he saw it. "It was fully alive only yesterday, but now look at it."

Peter touched Jesus' arm and pointed to the tree. "See the fig tree you cursed yesterday? It's totally dead."

"Yes, and so is this nation," Jesus replied. "Remember how Hosea compared Israel to a fig tree? Well, that's why this fig tree is dead, because it pictures the state of the nation today. The problem is the nation's faith; it's as dead as this tree. And that's the fault of the religious leaders, because they made a god out of rituals, tradition and strict obedience, not a God you can trust your life to. And that's the tragedy, because if people really trusted God they could kill a fig tree just like that, just like I did."

"You know what we Jews say, that 'Faith can move mountains'? Well, it's true. There isn't an obstacle in existence that can resist someone who goes to God in

faith. So, any time you're faced with a mountainous problem, put your doubts aside and trust God to deal with it, and he will. If only people realized that God's power is unlimited to those who do not doubt. That's the kind of power you have when you trust him. Anything you need is already yours, and that's true even more now, because that's the relationship God has opened up to you through me."

"And there's only one thing I would add to that: Just make sure, before you ask God for something, that you've forgiven anyone who may have hurt you, because it was God forgiving you that made this marvelous relationship of trusting him possible."

Chapter 7 – A question of authority...

So that's why the fig tree had died so quickly. The disciples took a last look at its pathetic withered state and then they were off to the Temple again for Jesus to do more teaching on God, his Kingdom and the contrast between God's Kingdom and the nation.

And again he was challenged by a group of chief priests, religious scholars and other influential Jews. One of them pointed his finger at Jesus' chest and in a sneering tone asked him, "And who, may I ask, gives you the authority to carry on as you do?"

It was another clever trap to get Jesus in trouble, because if Jesus claimed his authority came from God that would give the Jews the right to kill him for blasphemy. And if he claimed he was the Son of David and rightful heir to the throne of Israel, it would put him in direct conflict with the Romans. Either way, it would get Jesus killed and that's what the Jewish leaders were after. If, on the other hand, Jesus did not claim his authority came from God they had him there too, because they could publicly announce he was an impostor, a pretender, and a false prophet. It looked like they'd sprung a trap he couldn't escape from. Had they finally got him?

Jesus answered without hesitation, however: "All right," he said, "I'll tell you where my authority comes from - if you answer a question of mine first. You're asking me if I believe I have God's divine authority for everything I do. The question I ask you in return is: Do you believe John the Baptist had God's divine authority for everything he did?"

Well, that was a tough question to answer, because if they said, "Of course we believe John's authority came from God," then all Jesus had to say back to them was, "So why didn't you believe him, then?" and that would be disastrous because John had clearly pointed at Jesus as the promised Saviour and Messiah.

If, on the other hand, they said, “No, we don’t believe John’s authority came from God,” that would be just as disastrous because hundreds, if not thousands, of people were utterly convinced John was a prophet sent by God. To deny that John was sent by God would also be considered blasphemy and that would put their own lives at risk, because the people would have a right to kill them. Had Jesus turned the tables and sprung a trap they couldn’t escape from?

After some serious consulting with each other, realizing yet again that Jesus had beaten them at their own game, they had to answer with a pathetic “We don’t know.”

“Really?” Jesus replied. “Well, since you’re not going to answer my question I’m not going to answer yours. If you won’t tell me what authority John had for what he did, I’m not telling you what authority I have for what I do.”

So, in their attempt to embarrass Jesus the Jewish authorities had only further embarrassed themselves. But Jesus wasn’t finished with them yet, either.

Chapter 8 – The Stone the builders rejected...

“Since you couldn’t answer my first question,” Jesus continued, “let me ask you a second question and see what you make of that.”

“It concerns a father with two sons, both of whom helped him in his vineyard. One day a special job needed doing so he asked one of his sons to do it, but the son answered, ‘No, I won’t.’ A few minutes later, though, the son felt bad about saying No, and off he went and did the job.”

“The father then asked his other son if he could help out with the same job, and that son was all enthusiasm. ‘Of course I can help,’ he replied. But he carried on with what he was doing instead, and forgot all about it.”

“So,” Jesus concluded, “which of the two sons carried out his father’s wishes best?”

“That’s easy,” one of the priests answered, “the first son, of course.”

“All right,” Jesus continued, “so now let’s put God the Father in the father’s place and ask who carries out God’s wishes best. Is it those like the first son who say ‘No’ to God and live as they please, ripping people off and sleeping around, who then turn their lives around after hearing John the Baptist teach? Or is it people like the second son who think they’re already spiritual enough that John has nothing of any importance to say to them, and they carry on doing what they’ve always done?”

“Before you answer, take into account it was the Father’s wish that people listen to John as the first step toward entering his Kingdom. And hundreds of people did listen, believing John really was a prophet sent by God, many of whom

realized the error of their ways and made some serious changes in their lives. There were many others, however, who wanted nothing to do with John or his teaching. So, with that in mind, who do you think fulfilled the Father's wishes best - those who accepted the one he sent, or those who rejected him? Was it those who admitted their need to change, or those who considered themselves great authorities on God but didn't accept his authority over their own lives?"

Jesus didn't wait for an answer. Instead, he launched straight into a story about the owner of a vineyard, who did a beautiful job of preparing the land, planting the vines, fencing off the property and providing all the equipment for producing fine wine. But then he was called away on other business overseas, so he leased the land and all the equipment to several tenants who began making good money right away.

"It was all working rather well," Jesus continued, "until it came time for the tenants to pay their rent. They refused to pay it. And when the owner sent a rental agent to collect the rent the tenants gave him a bad time and drove him off. When he sent a second agent the tenants beat him up. He sent more agents, but the tenants beat them up too, and some they even killed."

"The owner then thought, 'I'll send my son, the son they know I love, because they're bound to respect him.' The tenants, however, viewed the son as a great opportunity for themselves, because if they killed him - and the owner had no other heir to pass his property on to - they could inherit the property by law, since they were the ones working it. So they surrounded the owner's much loved son, beat him to a pulp and threw his dead body into the weeds outside the vineyard."

"Well, how do you think the owner felt when he arrived home some time later to hear what they'd done to his son? Could you blame him for wanting to destroy those utterly evil men and leasing his vineyard out to others who appreciated what they'd got and willingly paid the rent?"

The chief priests and their cohorts were all deeply moved by Jesus' story. "God forbid that such an awful thing should happen," one of them said, in deep sympathy for the owner.

Jesus looked at them, each in turn, waiting to see if the point of his story suddenly dawned on them. But no eyes popped open. There was no, "Oh, I get it." They were sympathetic, yes, but they didn't catch the connection between the son and Jesus, or between the tenants and themselves.

So Jesus took them back to the Psalm the crowds had been shouting ecstatically on his entry into Jerusalem on the donkey a few days earlier. "Do you see now where that Scripture comes in that says, 'The very stone the builders threw out as a reject turned out to be the headstone, the most important stone of all, because that's God's greatest miracle of all'?"

Jesus waited again to see if the Scriptures they knew so well would spark a connection, but still nothing.

“Come on, think, you silly people, because Scripture clearly talks of the great Stone, the very Rock of God’s own making, that people were predicted to reject, and here you are rejecting it. Can you not see that God sent that Stone to you, his chosen people, just like the vineyard owner sent his son to those tenants? And just like those tenants you now want to kill the son as well. In which case, you are in serious danger, because you may be able to kill him but in turn you will be crushed too, just like the owner of the vineyard destroyed those who killed his son. All those wonderful privileges you’ve been given as God’s chosen people will be taken away from you and given to the Gentiles, none of whom deserve it, but unlike you they will appreciate it.”

“For centuries God sent prophets to this nation to bless it, but it’s always been the same response. The prophets were ignored, driven out, and some were even killed. And now you want to kill me. Don’t be surprised, then, if God reacts to you like the vineyard owner reacted to his tenants. In his anger, he destroyed them.”

Chapter 9 – Many are called but few are chosen...

It was then that the chief priests and Pharisees twigged that Jesus was talking about them. They were furious, and they would have arrested Jesus right there and then, but they daren’t yet because the people saw Jesus as a prophet sent by God, just like John the Baptist.

So they held off carting Jesus away, which gave Jesus opportunity to tell another story.

“Can you not see how God sent me to bless you?” Jesus began. “God is like the king who wanted to put on a fantastic feast for his son’s wedding. He sent out hundreds of invitations to all his son’s friends and relatives - all delivered in person by his servants too. And then just days before the wedding he sent his servants out again with reminders of the feast coming up so that no one would forget it or miss out. But none of those invited replied to say they were coming.”

“So the king sent out his servants again to everyone invited, with some urgency to their message this time. ‘Tell them,’ the king told his servants, ‘that the feast of a lifetime is ready, with the best food and wine money can buy, and I’d love to have them join us, but would they please let us know if they’re coming.’”

“The response, however, was dreadful. Some slammed the door in the servants’ faces, some deliberately chose the date of the wedding to work on their

estate or go on a business trip, some abused the servants physically, and some, believe it or not, actually murdered the king's servants."

"The king, as you can imagine, was so angry he sent soldiers to execute the murderers and destroy the towns they lived in."

"But that left a wedding banquet all ready to go with no guests. The king, therefore, gathered his servants together again and told them, 'Since the people I invited to my son's wedding don't want what I'm offering them, I want you to go back into the streets and tell everyone you meet - no matter how good or bad they are - that the king is putting on a feast for his son's wedding and they are welcome to come.' So off the servants went, and lots of people happily accepted the king's offer and the banquet hall was filled with guests. Every seat was occupied."

"The king himself then came in to greet his guests, but that's when he noticed someone who wasn't dressed in wedding clothes. The king went up to him and asked him why he was dressed the way he was when wedding clothes had been provided for him."

"The man didn't say a word. He didn't say, 'I'm sorry, I'll get dressed in wedding clothes right away,' he just stood there as if to say, 'So what if I'm not dressed properly?' The king, quite understandably, turned several shades of purple and had the man thrown out, concluding his fury with the statement, 'Many are called but few are chosen.'"

"There was a warning in that statement, because the only ones allowed into the wedding hall were those who'd accepted his invitation - the 'many are called' bit - and those who were dressed in the right clothes - 'the few are chosen' bit. In other words, they couldn't just stroll in as they were, expecting to be good enough, any more than people can just stroll into God's Kingdom on their own merits. They need to accept God's invitation and wear the right clothes. And I just told you what those right clothes are: They are accepting the Stone the builders rejected, the Son the Father sent, the one to whom he clearly gave his authority by incredible miracles and by dozens of prophecies fulfilled."

"There's only one way to get into the wedding feast, or into God's Kingdom. It's by use of the only key that the Father supplied, and that is his Son. He and he alone is the key that opens the door to salvation. Trusting in him, therefore, is the only proper set of wedding clothes. That, and that alone, is what gets a person 'chosen' for the kingdom, or allowed to attend the great wedding banquet of God's Son."

"All of you, take note, have been invited to the banquet of salvation in God's Son. And all the clothing you need for that salvation has been provided by God in his Son too, just like wedding clothes had been provided for all the guests. But if you think you can get into the Kingdom on your own merits you've got another

think coming, just like the man who wasn't dressed properly for the wedding, because to that man the king said, 'Many like you are invited to the banquet of salvation, but oh so few get to attend.' It's a clear warning to those like you who should know better, that the One God sent is the way to salvation and there is no other."

Chapter 10 – Pay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar...

But the Pharisees still refused to accept that Jesus was God's personal servant through whom he was inviting the Jews into all that he was offering in his world and Kingdom. They chose instead to ignore Jesus, seek to embarrass him, and find some way of killing him.

If they arrested him on the spot, however, they'd be torn apart by the people, so they resorted to devious means to try and convince the people that Jesus wasn't sent by God. To do that they had to trap him into saying something that put him in direct contravention of God's law, or Roman law, or both.

So they sent some of their own followers, in cahoots with some of Herod's men, as witnesses to catch any hint from Jesus that he was flouting Roman law. The Jews would pose as sincere and interested inquirers and ask the questions, and if Jesus made one wrong answer the Herodians would pounce on him and arrest him.

It was important that they appeared to be genuine, so the spokesman for the Jews asked Jesus very politely, oozing with oily charm, "Great Teacher, it's very obvious to all of us here, and we're all agreed, that you are a very honest man who teaches the truth about God without worrying what people think, and nor do you favour one person over another. Could you tell us honestly what you think, then, as to whether it's right for us Jews to give taxes to Caesar, or should we refuse?"

It was a clever question because the Jews hated paying taxes to the Romans. Riots broke out when the taxes were imposed, so any hint of support on Jesus' part for the Roman government would turn the Jews against him. But he also risked arrest by Herod's men if he even hinted at the Jews not paying taxes. The Pharisees were trying to get Jesus to take sides, because whichever side he took spelt trouble for him.

To Jesus, however, it was just another dumb question, and he treated it as such. "You sneaky bunch of hypocrites," he snorted, "who do you think you're fooling by your stupid questions? You're not the least bit interested in my opinion on anything. You just want to get me into trouble. So let me ask you a question in return: When you pay taxes, what money do you use?"

Well, obviously they paid in Roman coins, because that's all the Romans

accepted. So Jesus asked one of the Jews to give him a coin from his pocket. He took the coin, pointed to the head on the coin and the inscription round it and asked, "Whose head is this on the coin and whose name is on it?"

"Caesar's," several of them replied together.

"Exactly," Jesus replied, "so pay Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God."

And what Jew or Roman could object to that? The Jews couldn't blame him for siding with the Roman government when they themselves had demonstrated from their own pockets that they were using Caesar's money. They hadn't rebelled against paying taxes, either, so they had accepted they owed the Romans for services rendered. So if Jesus lost credibility for supporting the Roman government, so did they.

But Jesus had also turned the question right round and pinned the Jews to the mat with the second part of his answer, because they also owed a debt to God. And since they'd accepted the need to pay Caesar, wasn't it just as important that they accept what they owed to God? And what did they owe to God? Trust in the one he'd sent. So Jesus took their question and used it to get the same point across that he'd been hammering away at for the last three years.

The Jews stared at him wide-eyed. How did he do it? They'd set another clever little trap for him and instead it had sprung back on them again. They couldn't use his reply against him either, so as usual they simply said nothing.

Chapter 11 – Whose wife will she be?...

Later that same day the Sadducees took a swipe at Jesus, using the same technique too, with one of them posing as an interested follower, but trying to trap Jesus into an answer they could turn against him.

The Sadducees were different to the Pharisees, because they, unlike the Pharisees, did not believe in a life after death. They lived for the here and now. And they did well from it too, because many of them were wealthy aristocrats. They'd benefitted greatly from fraternizing with the Romans, and they lived by a simple code of rules from the Law of Moses that required no real sacrifice on their part as well.

Their question, therefore, not surprisingly, came from the Law of Moses, their purpose being to make the resurrection from the dead sound silly. The question started off rather innocently, quoting the Law of Moses accurately: "Moses said that if a man's brother died, leaving a wife but no children, the man should marry his sister-in-law and raise up a family for his brother, and the children they had would then inherit all the dead man's property."

So far so good, but now things took a twist toward the ridiculous because, the Sadducee continued, “There’s a man we know who has seven brothers. The first brother got married, but he died before he had any children. So the second brother married the first brother’s wife, but he also died childless. The same thing happened with the next five brothers too. They all married the first brother’s wife but none of them had any children by her. And then the woman herself died. My question is, therefore: Whose wife will she be in the resurrection, since all seven brothers were married to her?”

To a Sadducee this was a legitimate question, because he lived entirely by the Law of Moses. So what law applied to this situation, assuming, of course, that a resurrection from the dead was real?

“Well if you truly knew your scriptures and God’s power you wouldn’t be asking that question in the first place,” Jesus answered. “I agree that the Law of Moses had rules governing a childless marriage where the husband dies, but only for this life now. In the next life, however, rules governing a childless marriage where the husband dies won’t be necessary because no one in the next life dies. As God’s own children, husbands and wives will live forever, just like the angels.”

“Now I know you Sadducees don’t believe in angels or a life after death,” Jesus continued, “but, as I said, if you truly knew your scriptures you’d know that the Law of Moses does, in fact, fully support a life after death too. Do you remember, for instance, what God said to Moses from the burning bush? He referred to himself as ‘I, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.’ To God these men weren’t dead and gone and forgotten. In his mind they were alive as they ever were, and he was still being their God long after they’d died. Their death hadn’t ended God’s relationship with them, then, had it? But what would be the purpose of God continuing a relationship with them if they weren’t going to be resurrected later?”

“The God you believe in is a God only of dead people. But the God that Moses believed in was a God of the living, because to God no one is dead forever. People die, yes, but God continues being their God, just as he continues being God to Abraham right now. To assume therefore, as you do, that there’s no resurrection is to deny the God that Moses believed in. Moses had no trouble believing in the power of God to continue being God to people after they’ve died, so you’re making a big mistake if you don’t believe that too.”

Well, for the first time, there was actual applause from some of Jesus’ critics: “That was a great answer,” several of them told him, but only because the Sadducees were their rivals and it was good to see them put down a peg or two. The crowd, of course, thought Jesus’ answer was splendid, because here again he’d made the scriptures come alive.

Chapter 12 – If Jesus truly was the Son of David...

With the Sadducees well and truly put in their place, the Pharisees jumped in next with their own question about the Law.

One of them, a highly respected expert in the Law, asked Jesus: “Of all God’s laws which one is the most important?”

“There are two laws that form the bedrock of Scripture,” Jesus answered. “The first and greatest law is: ‘Hear O Israel, our God is the one and only God, love him with all your heart, soul and mind.’ The second is: ‘Love all your fellows humans as much as you love yourself.’”

“I couldn’t agree more,” the lawyer replied. “There’s just one God and no other. And I heartily agree that loving him with our whole being and loving others as much as ourselves beats out anything in this life, including all our offerings and sacrifices.”

“Well said,” Jesus smiled. “I can see you’re catching on splendidly. You’re well on the way to the Kingdom of God. I now have a question of my own for the rest of you: ‘When it comes to the Messiah, the Christ, whose son is he?’”

Several of the Pharisees replied at once, “The Messiah is the Son of David. He’s David’s son.”

“And your religious scholars would agree with you,” Jesus said. “The Messiah is clearly referred to in Scripture as the ‘Son of David’. That being the case, though, what do you make of the Holy Spirit inspiring David to call the Messiah ‘Lord’? Remember in Psalms where David says, ‘The Lord said to my Lord, sit here at my right hand until I make all your enemies your footstool’? But if David calls the Messiah ‘my Lord’, how can the Messiah be his son?”

The implications of what Jesus just said were devastating to the Pharisees because they’d heard hundreds of people calling Jesus the Son of David. When Jesus entered Jerusalem the crowd was crying out, ‘Long live our King, the Son of David.’ Dozens of people seeking healing from Jesus called out to him as the ‘Son of David.’ But Jesus had just pointed out in Scripture that the Son of David was no ordinary mortal. He was called ‘Lord’. He was as much Lord as the other Lord who said to him, ‘Sit at my right hand.’ He held the same title. Whoever held the title ‘Son of David’, therefore, was as much God as God is God. And it was right there in the scriptures that the Pharisees were supposed to know so well.

But they’d missed the significance of that verse in Psalms, and there was no denying Jesus was right. The Messiah, the Son of David, was called ‘Lord’. If Jesus truly was the Messiah, which all the evidence clearly pointed to, then Jesus was also God. And that wasn’t all that verse brought out either, because it talked of two Lords, one talking to the other. And that was something else Jesus had mentioned often, that God was his Father, meaning God was a relationship of

Father and Son, or two Lords, just as the Psalm had said. So not only did Jesus know that, he was also fulfilling the role of the Messiah too, and that clearly stamped Jesus as God, and God as Father and Son. The truth of Jesus' identity, therefore, and his relationship with the Father, was right there in Scripture all along. So what were the Pharisees going to say to that?

They said nothing. Rather than say, 'You're right,' they kept quiet. They also decided from that point on not to ask Jesus any more questions because every time they asked a question it only exposed their ignorance of Scripture and their ridiculous resistance to obvious truth. The rest of the crowd listening in, however, found Jesus' answers delightful. It was a bonus seeing all those snobby Pharisees being put in their place too.

Chapter 13 – The seed must die first...

First the Sadducees, then the Pharisees, and now a group of Greeks, converts to Judaism, wanted to speak to Jesus. They mentioned it to Philip, whom they knew from their connection with his hometown, Bethsaida. Philip talked to Andrew about it, and they both thought Jesus ought to know.

When Jesus met up with them, it was clear that his mind was very much on what he was in Jerusalem for, and not on what the Greeks had in mind, because his first words to them were: "It's time, time for me to return to my glory in heaven, but first I must die. Wonderful things will come of my death though, just like a seed planted in the ground dies but the plant that grows from it produces hundreds more seeds. If it isn't planted and doesn't die it produces nothing; it stays as a seed and nothing more."

"And the same goes for you, because if you're living for this life only and trusting in yourself for everything you need and want, in the end you produce nothing, just like an unplanted seed. You're born, you live and you die, and that's it. But if you're willing to give up your life in trust to me, like a seed dying when it's planted, I will turn your life into eternal life, a million times better than anything this life has to offer and many times greater than anything you might miss out on now. And if you give your life in service to me, my Father will honour you, just as he honours me, and that's a glory greater than the greatest gains you can make in this world."

Chapter 14 – The bronze serpent on a pole...

"For me, though, my worst time has come," Jesus continued, "and I can feel

the claws of death tearing at my very soul. Only my Father can get me through what's to become of me. But this is what my Father sent me to you for, to face this trial and see it through, so I say, 'Father, no matter what cost to me, fulfill your purpose in me to the glory of your name.'"

And in response a voice from the sky said, "I have already glorified my name through you" - harking back to the amazing miracle of Lazarus - "and I'm about to glorify my name through you again."

The people who heard the voice thought it was thunder or the voice of an angel, to which Jesus replied, "The voice you heard wasn't meant for me, it was meant for you, because what God is about to do through me will be the start of a whole new age for humanity. The old era ruled by the Prince of this world, the Devil, will be judged, sentenced and condemned, and deposed as a relic from the past."

"From the moment I die," Jesus continued, "when I'm lifted up on the cross and then lifted up again to my Father in heaven, the new age will start to make its influence felt. Greeks and Jews alike will start to experience eternal life, the life of the Kingdom of God, because when I die and rise again I will take all humanity with me so that all of you, no matter who you are, can experience the same life I have. I will then have the power to give eternal life in the Kingdom of God to anybody who trusts in me. No longer will my mission be restricted to the confines of Israel; it will then include everyone. And you've already seen the start of this happening as demons are cast out and do exactly as I say."

"It won't all happen at once because Satan's influence will still linger. He'll be a spent force, yes, but he will still hold a tight grip on people. But you will be with me where I am - and I will be with you at all times too to help you."

"Do you recall the time back in the days of Moses when the Israelites were moaning about manna and God sent snakes to bite them? 'Fiery serpents' they were called because their bite caused a painful swelling. Did you notice in the story, though, that God didn't take the snakes away, but he did provide the Israelites with help? Moses had a huge snake made out of bronze curled round a long pole, which was then lifted up, and it was high enough that any Israelite could see it. Anyone then bitten by a snake only had to look at that bronze snake on the pole and he, or she, would be instantly healed of the fiery inflammation."

"And the same goes for you now. If Satan's influence is making a mess of your life - the same as being bitten by a fiery serpent - then look to me, because I too was lifted up on a pole, the cross, for your sakes. And that cross is available to anyone, with its simple, clear message to all humanity: Trust in me and you will be healed. You can come to me any time, because this is what I go to the cross for, so you can see the love of God and trust in it and be healed of the Devil's snakebites."

“God won’t remove the Devil’s influence, just like he didn’t take away the snakes, but if you look to me I will heal whatever Satan has done to you and get you back to experiencing life in the Kingdom of God again. Trust in me and I’ll have you living the kind of life I’m living, you just watch.”

Chapter 15 – Light in the darkness...

One of the Greeks listening to Jesus was a bit flummoxed though, because, as he said, “In Scripture it says the Christ lives forever, but you’re saying he has to die, meaning he doesn’t live forever. So is the Christ you’re talking about different to the one in Scripture?”

“Not at all,” Jesus replied, “because the Christ is also the Son of God. He’s always been the Son of God and he always will be. But the Father also sent his Son to die as a human being. And why did he do that? Because God loves humanity. He’d hate to see anybody miss out on eternal life in his Kingdom. But there’s a problem: no human being has eternal life in himself. Everybody dies, and none of you can extend your life one second after you die, either. So what was God to do? He loves human beings, but once they’re dead they’re dead, and that’s it.”

“But what if the One who created human beings in the first place died their death for them? What if he became a human himself and by dying on a cross took away the sting of death, just like the bronze serpent on the pole took the sting of the snakebites away?”

“Well, that’s precisely what God sent his one and only Son to do. He lifts his Son up on a pole, just as the bronze serpent was lifted up on a pole, so that anyone who looks to the Son does not have to die forever.”

“But, you may ask, since human beings were dead forever does that mean his Son must die forever too? No, because the Son, like the Father, is eternal. He’s able to die a human death but remain the eternal Son of God. He can lift himself up from death - and, take note - he can also lift up humanity with him into the same eternal life he has. So not only does his death replace human death, his life replaces human life as well - and his life is eternal. Anyone who looks to God’s Son, therefore, is spared from eternal death and, what’s more, he gets to share in the Son’s eternal life too.”

“And that’s been God’s plan all along. He isn’t sending his Son to doom humanity to death forever. He sent his Son to rescue humanity from eternal death. Nor did God send his Son as a judge to condemn humanity for its stupidity; he sent his Son to rescue humanity from its stupidity. God wants all humans free of the clutches of death, free of the Devil, and free of the consequences of their

own stupidity, so they can experience life in his world instead.”

“And who’s the fool who won’t believe that? Who’s the fool who won’t trust in the Son of God, the one name he can look to as the solution to all his worst enemies? That’s like an Israelite who refuses to look at the serpent on the pole for relief from the snakebite. How stupid is that? He’s an idiot. God doesn’t even have to condemn a person like that, because the silly fool has already condemned himself. He’s been offered freedom and he’s rejected it. Imagine someone being released from court with no jail term and instead he takes himself off to prison and throws away the key.”

“But why on earth would people do that to themselves? I’ll tell you why. It’s because they don’t want anybody interfering in their lives. They want to be free to do as they please. They much prefer scurrying around in the darkness where they think no one can see them. The last thing they want, therefore, is a person like me bursting into their darkness with a blast of light, exposing what they’re up to and catching them in the act.”

“But that’s what God sent me into the world for, to act like a Light to reveal the clear and obvious contrast between the human world of death and misery and God’s world of healing and life. People hate the contrast, though, and find all kinds of excuses for ignoring it, because it shows how ridiculous their own choices have been. I mean, who likes to admit they’ve been conned into a lifestyle that offered no solution to death, no lasting relief from the misery they see all around them, and no escape from the hurt they constantly do to themselves because of their own stupid choices?”

“Can you see now why God sent John the Baptist? John clearly pointed out what was wrong with people’s lifestyles and choices. He offered much better alternatives. And as people listened to him they could see how stupid their own choices had been by comparison, and many of them decided it was time for a change. In other words, they allowed a little shaft of light to pierce through their ignorance and resistance. Oh it hurt all right, just like your eyes hurt when a bright light shines in a dark room, but their lives began to change for the better. And what an eye-opener that was, because now they knew what God was up to. They could see by what was happening in their own lives that God wants people out of the mess they’re in and into a better life. The changes in their own lives proved it. Then God sends me with power to relieve people’s misery, and power over the demonic forces that cause so much of that misery too. Suddenly, a whole new world opens up, a dramatic alternative, and a source of life and healing never seen before, from God himself.”

“So I came as a Light in your darkness, but I’m not here for much longer. Cling on to what you’ve learnt from me, therefore. Don’t let the darkness return, because people in the dark stumble around, banging their heads against brick

walls, and then blame God for it. But you've seen the Light. So trust me and never stop trusting me, because I'll be your source of life and healing, always."

Chapter 16 – If you're going to be that stubborn...

"And you realize, of course, that by trusting me you end up trusting the Father too, because in me you're seeing exactly what he is like. By looking at me, then, you never have to be in the dark about God again. But that's what I came for, to shed light on God, so you see in me what he's like and you come to really trust him."

"Everything I've said so far has revealed something about God, so you'd be foolish to ignore what I say. I won't judge you for being foolish because it was never my purpose to condemn, but I did come to correct. I came to correct people's wrong notions of God. If you want to ignore that, so be it, but don't think God doesn't notice. He does, and he's the one who does the judging, and he gets tough with those who won't accept what I reveal him to be. Everything I've said will come back to haunt them one day when they realize what an opportunity they missed. They could have understood God and come to trust him because of me, but their own stupid stubbornness stopped them."

"I've always presented God as God is, by only saying what he wanted said. And the reason I only said what he wanted said is that I knew people would begin to experience eternal life when they took what I said seriously. When people believe that God is speaking through me, and because of it they come to really trust him, that's when things really begin to change for them."

There was little point in Jesus continuing, however, because most of the people listening didn't believe God was speaking through him at all, despite all the amazing miracles he'd done in their presence. So he slipped away to a place where the crowd couldn't find him. Why be a light to them if they simply weren't interested?

But seven hundred years earlier the prophet Isaiah had predicted this would happen. God had given him a vivid picture of how people would react to Jesus one day, in how people were being just as stubborn in response to Isaiah, making him cry out, "Who among these people ever takes what we say seriously? And who believes even when God does amazing miracles?"

It didn't matter what God said or did through Isaiah, people dug their heels in and resisted him. No wonder they never came to the point of trusting God. And no wonder that "God then blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts so they couldn't trust him and be healed." If people were going to be that stubborn, they could stay in their darkness stumbling around and see what that did to them

instead. And in fulfillment of that prophecy Jesus left the people to stumble around in their blindness and hardness of heart too. There was nothing more he could say or do that would change their minds toward him anyway. Even raising people from the dead hadn't dented their resistance.

It certainly showed the need for Jesus' sacrifice in just a few days time, and Isaiah knew that too. He wrote of Jesus' sacrifice and the power it held to heal every human weakness, but most people in Jesus' day didn't see any connection between Isaiah's prophecies and Jesus. And those among the Jewish leaders who did see the connection kept it to themselves for fear of being thrown out of office by the Pharisees. Worrying about one's image and position was a terrible inhibitor to open trust.

Chapter 17 –

Watch out for those who make you feel spiritually inferior...

Jesus had a few things to say about the Jewish leaders too when he returned to the Temple later that day. And again a crowd quickly gathered to hear him speak.

Jesus immediately launched into a warning about religious leaders and how they made people feel.

“Keep your eyes wide open when it comes to the professors of the Law and the Pharisees,” Jesus warned them. “I accept that they are the rightful successors to Moses as the preservers and teachers of the Law, so obey them as you would Moses, but what these people teach and how they live are two very different things.”

“That's not immediately obvious though, because on the surface it looks like they're doing everything they teach you to do. They sit every Sabbath in 'Moses' seat' in the synagogues as the great authorities on the Law, and they set the standards very high. You suppose, of course, that they must be living up to those standards too. And then, as if they were Moses himself, they add all kinds of other laws of their own making on top of the Law of Moses, and you probably think they're keeping all those laws too, right?”

“It's all very impressive, and it makes them look very holy and spiritual in your eyes, but you know what? They're not keeping all those laws themselves. No one can keep all those laws perfectly, but they expect you to keep them. They dump that ridiculously impossible load of laws on your shoulders, and then don't even offer to help you carry it. But because they're the experts and authorities on the Law, you try to do everything they say. And because they're the standard to live by, you try to live by it too. And when you can't keep up with their standards you

get to thinking they're so much holier and more spiritual than you."

"The trouble with that is, they then get to thinking they're holier and more spiritual too. They set these impossibly high standards and think they're so spiritually superior for setting them. And then they start acting all superior as well, which only makes you feel more inferior and lacking. So now you look up to them even more, and they get to thinking they deserve it."

"It makes them believe they're on a higher spiritual plane, and then they like to show it. That's why they wear all those long flowing religious-looking robes and tie those little leather cases to their arms and foreheads with scriptures written inside them. Walking around in public dressed like that makes them feel very spiritual and holy - and very noticeable too, of course."

"And that's what they've come to like. They like being recognized in the street. They like it when people look up to them and depend on them. They like having the best seats reserved for them in the synagogues and at people's dinner tables. They like having titles attached to their names that give them an air of authority and respect. They've created a nice little empire for themselves, and they're clever enough to stay within the basic letter of the law so they look good on the surface. But behind the scenes they're making life miserable for the little people who simply can't keep up."

"In public these religious leaders look and sound good, with all their flowery prayers that go on and on. Oh, they know how to put on a good show, all right. But that's all it is. It's a sham, and God isn't fooled one bit by it, and one day he will deal with these people, and severely too."

"So don't let them influence you into thinking you need a title too to make yourself feel holy and spiritual. Titles are nonsense anyway, because no person is superior to another. You're all brothers and sisters on the same level. God's the only one who's truly superior and deserves titles."

"But notice how the Pharisees like to call their leaders 'father'? What a cheek, when there's only one person who can truly be called Father and he's in heaven. So don't think you have to call them 'father' as if they're God, because they aren't. Only God and Christ have the right to titles of spiritual authority; no human being does. And if you do happen to have a title or position of some sort in this world, use it to serve people, not to elevate yourself, because God has ways of humbling those who think they're somebodies, and he has ways of honouring those who are happy just serving."

"So please, be on your guard. Don't let these religious leaders weasel their way into your heads, making you feel spiritually inferior or dependent on them."

"I see them as they really are, and they fall far short of their standards."

Chapter 18 – Where religion goes wrong...

Not even one Pharisee got the chance to object because Jesus carried right on, this time directing his comments at them.

“What a sorry state you Pharisees and Law experts are in,” he told them. “You put on a great circus for people to show off how clever and spiritual you are, but you know what you’ve really done, don’t you? By insisting on the Law as the only way into God’s Kingdom, and then making the Law impossible to keep, you’ve slammed the door shut to the Kingdom of God. And not only slammed it shut in other people’s faces but in your own faces too, because you can’t live up to what you preach either.”

“You’ve actually become a danger to people, because you spend an enormous amount of time and energy poking your noses into every nook and cranny to find just one person you can influence into following you, but once you get your hooks into him you turn him into twice the monster you are. He picks up from you that religion is a demanding list of rules and rituals, and in his zeal to be like you he becomes even more demanding and strict than you are, and an even worse pain to be around.”

“You confuse people terribly with your teaching too. You tell people, for instance, that swearing by the Temple doesn’t bind them to keeping a promise, but swearing by the gold of the Temple does. You mean the Temple, where God himself dwells, is less important than the gold that’s only part of it? How crazy is that? And you don’t stop there, either. You tell people they can break a promise if they’ve sworn by the altar in the Temple, but not if they’ve sworn by the gift on the altar. But it’s the altar that gives the gift its value, just like the Temple gives value to its gold. You, however, have this awful habit of turning the unimportant into important, and the important into nothing. Shouldn’t you be telling people to swear by the throne of God, or by God himself, things that really mean something, rather than focusing people’s attention on twiddly bits of law and ritual that mean nothing?”

“Witness the way you squint at your herb garden to make absolutely sure you collect every tenth mint leaf or dill frond to give to God - but hardly give a glance at the real meat of the Law, like justice, mercy and trust. I’m not against you tithing every tiny seed or herb leaf, but how stupid you look spending all that time counting leaves. You strain out a flea but swallow a horse. You concentrate on tiny points of the Law but miss huge chunks of it, and it makes you look ridiculous, because who in their right mind would filter out tiny specks of dirt in their drinking water but then swallow a huge chunk of mud? But that’s how nuts you’ve become. And this is the picture of yourselves you want to portray as teachers of the Law and guides to the blind?”

“I mean, look at the way you treat cups. You wash and polish the outside of the cups 'til they gleam, and they really do appear to be clean, even when the inside of the cup is stained and still dirty. But that's you exactly, because on the outside you look all polished and sparkly too, but inside your heads and hearts - where the real dirt is - you're a mess. You're greedy and selfish, and that's how you got to where you are now. You saw a way of getting rich and respected through religion and that's what drives you. So on the outside you may appear squeaky clean to people, but on the inside your motives stink.”

“To me you're like those gleaming white tombs you find in graveyards, all beautifully carved and decorated on the outside but all bones and rot on the inside. That's you in a nutshell, all saintly-looking on the outside, but crack the nut open and inside it's a dried up husk. You're all show and no heart, because you've lied to yourselves long enough that your heart has withered away.”

“Think of the lie you've been telling yourselves every time you build a splendid tomb for a prophet or lay flowers on the graves of good men whom God sent in the past. You solemnly declare at their gravesite that if you'd lived in the days when your ancestors murdered these men you would never have taken part in their murder yourselves. But of course you would and you know it, because all your ancestors had murder flowing through their veins, so why should you be any different? Admit it, you're not any different at all, because here you are now, chomping at the bit to finish off what they started; same poison, same attitude, same murderous streak. You're like snakes poised for the kill. Well, it's “to hell” with vipers like you, because you appear all innocent and holy but your heart is full of venom and hatred.”

“God even predicted what you'd be like. ‘I'll send prophets, wise teachers and inspired writers to my people,’ he said, ‘but they'll be hunted down, flogged in the synagogues, and some will be murdered and crucified.’ And here you are now, at the end of that long line of murdering swine, so it's you, therefore, who will carry the blame for all that innocent blood shed. You can answer for all of it, from the blood of the innocent Abel to the blood of the prophet Zechariah, Barachiah's son, whom your ancestors killed in the Temple itself. Someone has to pay for all those horrendous crimes, and since you're the only ones still alive you can bear the brunt of them.”

Chapter 19 – The widow who gave her all....

His audience must have been stunned into silence, because Jesus and his disciples were then able to sit quietly under the colonnade surrounding the Court of Women in the Temple treasury area and watch people drop their offerings

into the wooden boxes supplied. Each box had a narrow bronze funnel at the top through which coins would slide, the noise of which would indicate the amount offered, so when rich people dropped in their coins it made a lot of noise.

Several rich people did drop by too, and judging by the clattering of the coins as they trickled down the funnel it was obvious they'd given a lot. But it was the widow approaching one of the boxes that caught Jesus' eye, and he pointed her out to his disciples. She really did look very poor too, but here she came with an offering anyway.

The sound of just two coins could be heard as they scraped down the funnel, but Jesus cried out, "Look at that. She gave way more than all those rich people put together, because they only gave what they won't miss, but she must've given everything she had to live on."

The disciples weren't quite sure what to make of that, but it was clear that Jesus was very impressed.

Chapter 20 – When all hell breaks loose....

As they left the Temple, which at the time was still under construction but already looking extremely impressive with its dazzling white marble and gold, one of the disciples burst out with, "Isn't this building just marvelous? I mean, look at how huge the building blocks are, and how intricate and beautiful the decorations are too."

Compared to the two widow's coins, however, Jesus wasn't impressed. "It may look great now," he said, "but it won't be long before the whole lot will come tumbling down into a big pile of unrecognizable rubble. Not one of those huge building blocks you're so enthused about will be left standing on another."

And again, the disciples weren't quite sure what to make of it, so four of them - Peter, James, John and Andrew - asked if they could speak to Jesus privately. By now they'd climbed up the Mount of Olives to a spot where they could look back to the Temple on the opposite side of the Kidron valley, and that's when one of the four opened up about what was bothering them.

"We heard what you said back there at the Temple, about the whole thing crashing down, and soon too, so we'd really like to know when it will happen, and will there be any warning first? And for that matter, will there also be any warning before you take over in power and the end of this age comes?"

Two loaded questions.

"All right," Jesus replied, "I'll tell you. The first clear sign, or warning, that things are about to take a nasty turn for the worse is what happens to the Son of Man, as written down already in the book of Daniel. There's your first clue."

“Daniel made several clear predictions, one of them being that the Son of Man would have to suffer terribly and be rejected by his countrymen, which I’ve told you about too, several times. Daniel also talked about what he called ‘the Abomination of Desolation standing in the Holy Place’, a clear historical reference to an invading army that will one day surround Jerusalem. That’s the sign that the end is near, that very soon Jerusalem’s walls will be breached, the city sacked, and the Temple with all its finery and rituals will be destroyed.”

“At that point there is no time to waste. Jerusalem will no longer be a safe place to be. Anyone living in the city, therefore, should get out immediately and take refuge with his fellow Judeans in the mountains. If someone sees the army approaching from his lookout on the roof, he should run downstairs and run so fast he has no time to take anything from the house with him. If a farmer out ploughing his field spies the approaching army, he should run too, and not even go back to pick up his coat. Remember the old story of Lot’s wife? Don’t look back, just run. Don’t risk losing your life by trying to save a few possessions. Be willing to let them go and save your life, because this is the time of destruction predicted by Daniel when those who deserve to be killed for not listening to me will be.”

“It will be especially tough for pregnant mothers and mothers with nursing babies, so hope and pray that the time to run isn’t in winter or on a Sabbath day. Run, run, run, because any second all hell will break loose, worse than anything since the creation of the world up to now, and worse than anything into the future too. That’s how terrible and distressing it will be for this land and its people. If God didn’t put a stop to it, not one person in the entire country would be left alive. It’s only because Israel is his chosen nation that he prevents its total annihilation. The slaughter won’t be total, therefore, but it will be terrible, and many of those left alive will be carried off as slaves into other countries. And from that time on Jerusalem will always be under the thumb of foreign powers in some form or other, until, at last, God’s allotted period of foreign rule comes to an end.”

“You can be certain that everything I’ve just warned you about will happen, and it’s going to happen in the lifetime of this generation of people right now too.”

Chapter 21 – Things will get brutal, but....

“Be warned too, that in times of distress like the one coming up, charismatic charlatans always come crawling out of the shadows to claim they’re me, or that they’re coming in my name, and therefore they have ‘inside information’ and

'revelation from God' as to the exact timing of the end. But they're only exploiting people's fears to get a following for themselves, and, amazingly, it always works. They always manage to dupe people and drag them off in bizarre directions. So be warned. If someone whispers, 'Come and see, I've found a man like Christ himself', pay no attention whatsoever; it's a dead giveaway that he's an impostor and a liar. But he won't give up easily. He'll try anything to deceive, even God's elect. And he's got a whole bag of tricks he uses too, involving strange sights and sounds to prove he has God's power and approval, so be on your guard, because these people are really clever."

"Distressful times always bring reports of so-called 'Christs' appearing in various places, but ignore them all because the real Christ, the real Son of Man, will arrive like a massive bolt of lightning that lights up the sky from east to west. That's the real sign of his coming, and as the old Jewish expression goes, 'it's as sure as a carcass attracts vultures.'"

"Rumours, of course, will run rampant. Another war or vicious conflict will break out between nations, which will look like the world is doomed, but don't be alarmed. All sorts of horrible things will pop up around the world, like powerful earthquakes and killer disease epidemics, but these are only the initial signs of trouble, like the early pains of childbirth. And like childbirth the pains must get worse."

"Evil will spread to the point that the only thing people can think about is themselves. They won't care what harm they do to each other, or how stupid their ideas are. They will use every tactic they can think of to humiliate, intimidate, break friendships, destroy people's reputations, and wreck innocent lives. They'll lie, betray confidences, carry grudges, seek revenge, and in every way display their utter contempt and hate for each other."

"But the main target of their hatred will be those who obey and trust me, so expect a rough ride. They'll turn their guns on you to break you. They'll spread lies to as many people as they can to grind you into the ground. They'll find ways of having you arrested, thrown in jail and dragged into one-sided court cases to beat you down mentally, physically and emotionally."

"Even your family, including your own parents and children, and your friends, will turn you in as a traitor, a criminal, or whatever other lying nonsense they can accuse you of. And if you're threatened with torture and death they won't lift a finger to help you."

"So why on earth would God allow all this to happen? Well, think about the amazing witness you can be to him, to Jew and Gentile alike. Rest assured, therefore, that I will be with you to make your witness effective. And if you're dragged into court and you're up against some really sharp interrogators, don't even think about what you're going to say, because the Spirit of my Father will

give you the words and the wisdom to slice through their arguments and accusations. They won't be able to beat you down, or hurt even one hair on your head. Hang tight and trust me, therefore, and you will make it through, and others will notice your unbending loyalty and be deeply impressed by it. So things will get brutal, yes, but what an impact you will have."

Chapter 22 – When the Son of Man comes....

So that was Jesus' answer to the first question that Peter, James, John and Andrew asked him, as to what kind of warning signs there would be before the world came crashing down on their nation. Now to the second question they asked, about the warning signs leading up to the end of the age and Jesus taking over in power.

"Well, the same warning signs apply to both," Jesus told them, "because the destruction of Jerusalem marks the end of an age and the Son of Man taking over, just as there is a later end of the age and the Son of Man coming in power then too. And on both occasions there will be warning signs followed immediately by cataclysmic events that in our Jewish terms would be like the sun and moon being dimmed and the stars being thrown into disarray. Imagine the universe spinning out of control causing the oceans to foam, the seas to roar, and the waves to rise like mountains. People will faint from fear as their world is turned upside down and there is nowhere safe to run to."

"But they were given the message about the Kingdom of God, so there comes a point when no more needs to be said. It's been said. This nation now has heard the message. So will the world later on too. Everyone is given the chance to believe it. But once that's done then it's time for the new age of the Son of Man to begin."

"Imagine the shock wave when the Son of Man then arrives on this planet in power, with angels blasting on trumpets to announce his return, and he gathers together all those who believed him from all around the world. For you it will be wonderful as you look up and see the One you obeyed and trusted collecting you all to join him."

"So just like buds and leaves popping out on trees telling you summer is near, you've got all sorts of clues and signs telling you when the Kingdom is near. And it's not just near, it's certain. The exact time of its arrival, however, is a secret that for now the Father keeps to himself. I don't know when that time is, nor do the angels, and nor, therefore, do you, so don't ease up or get bored with waiting. Stay close. Stay sharp, because your King may arrive at any second. And always keep in mind that everything I say comes with a guarantee of certainty

that even the disappearance of Heaven and Earth cannot change.”

Chapter 23 – And it’s all such a surprise....

“So how come so many people are caught by surprise when the Son of Man arrives? Because that’s the way it was in Noah’s day too. The message and warning went out just as loudly in his day as well, but people just carried on their lives as usual. They ate, drank and got married without a care in the world.”

“But the day then came when Noah’s job was done. He stopped warning people and boarded the boat he’d taken so long to build. Then the flood hit and with such suddenness and ferocity that people were simply swept away and drowned. And the worst part of it was, they had no idea it was coming.”

“It was the same in Lot’s day too. On the very day that sulfurous fire rained down on the city of Sodom the people were going about their business, buying and selling, planting and building, as if that day was no different to any other. And tragically it will be just like that when the Son of Man arrives. It will catch so many people by surprise that when two men are working away in their field together, or two women are grinding wheat together, and one of them is suddenly taken away, the other person will have no idea why.”

“So take note that you don’t get caught by surprise too, because the Son of Man could arrive at a time you may never have guessed. Think like the person who’s been left in charge of the company while his boss is away on business. The boss has explained exactly what he wants you to do. But he doesn’t tell you when he’s coming back. It could be in a week or a month, or some time in the evening or morning soon. So what do you do? You make sure everything’s functioning perfectly - no matter when he arrives, right?”

“But what if weeks pass and he still hasn’t come back? Do you let things slide and take time off to do what you want instead, or spend your time on your own worries? You know you’re taking a risk, because he could arrive any minute and catch you napping, but after a while that doesn’t matter to you either. It happens. And one day it’s going to happen to everyone. You make sure, then, that you stay sharp and you stay close to God, so you can stand unashamed before the Son of Man when he arrives, and you aren’t caught napping when the horrors hit.”

Chapter 24 – The arrival of the bridegroom....

Jesus continued on this same subject with another analogy, to keep on

focusing their minds on what was now most important, since he too would be going away. He chose the lovely scene of a Jewish wedding, and the arrival of the bridegroom.

In Jewish custom the bridegroom-to-be, having lived at his father's house and away from his bride for several months, would then set out to meet his bride for their wedding ceremony with a whole company of people with him - family, friends and servants. It was a wonderful day, full of fanfare, trumpets blaring, music and dancing. His bride, meanwhile, had no idea which day he was coming, and nor actually did the bridegroom himself, because it was his father who had set the day, and only his father knew.

But suddenly the day the father decided arrives. In Jesus' story, however, it turns out to be at night instead, to add to the element of surprise. I mean, who expected the bridegroom to come that late at night? So, when news arrives at the bride's house that her bridegroom would be coming for her, she and her party of bridesmaids go out to meet him. But being nighttime they need lamps.

"And this is where things got a little sticky," Jesus continues, "because five of the ten bridesmaids who set out to meet the bridegroom hadn't put aside any extra oil in case there was a delay. They got all excited and just rushed out with what oil they already had in their lamps, and that was it. The other five women, however, took into account a possible delay, since they too had no idea when exactly the bridegroom would arrive, so they took full cans of oil in reserve as well."

"They were glad they did, because it just so happened there was a delay. So there they all were, out in the dark and no bridegroom yet, and of course they all got drowsy and fell asleep. No problem there, but then suddenly there was a shout at midnight, 'He's coming, he's coming!' so they all grabbed for their lamps to rush out to meet him."

"Well, you can guess what happened next, because the lamps of the women with no oil in reserve were already sputtering out, so naturally they asked the ones with extra oil if they could share it."

"And just as naturally the answer was 'No', because, as the other ladies rightly said, 'Our lamps could run out of oil too if we do that, so go buy some more oil for yourselves, just as we did.'"

"So off they rushed to buy more oil. It was while they were away, of course, that the bridegroom turned up. The five vigilant women who had lots of oil to keep their lamps well lit were able to meet him and then join him for the wedding ceremony and the banquet to follow."

"When the other women finally got back, they found the door to the place of the banquet was locked and they were shut out. They frantically banged on the door yelling, 'Open up, open up,' and loud enough for someone to unlock the

door and peer through the gap at them. To their shock and surprise, though, the person then said: 'Who are you? I don't know you, go away.'" And whoever it was went back inside and locked the door again.

Chapter 25 – Make the most of what we've been given....

The message, of course, was obvious, but Jesus wasn't finished yet. He had another rather compelling story to tell.

"The owner of a company was taking a business trip overseas, so he got his employees together before he left, and to their surprise he handed out envelopes full of money to them. The amounts differed, but the purpose of the money was the same: use the money to make a gain for the company while he was away. How they did it was up to them, but he trusted them to use it well."

"The man with the most money immediately challenged himself to double its value to the company, which he did, and so did several of the others with their lesser amounts. The one with the least money given to him, however, decided to dig a hole and bury it."

"The day the comes when the owner returns from his trip, eager to know what his employees have managed to do with the money he'd given them. To his delight the one he'd given the most to had doubled its value. 'Oh, well done,' he cried. 'And since you took my little challenge so seriously, I'm going to give you a much more important job in my company that will pay you a whole lot more too. My hearty congratulations to you.'

"it was the same response to all the others who'd doubled their money. But now it came to the man who buried his money instead. It was his turn now to explain to his boss what he'd done."

"'Well,' he said, 'I never liked your idea in the first place. I mean, you didn't have to do any work yourself, did you? You just came up with this clever little idea to make us do the work you didn't want to do. So rather than feel bullied into going along with your little scheme, I put your money in a box and hid it. But here it is. You can have it back.'"

"The owner was furious: 'How dare you accuse me of such blathering nonsense,' he spluttered, 'It's you who didn't do any work, not me. You're the conniving one. You've actually managed to excuse away doing any work at all. You're just a lazy, useless man. Even if you knew it was a little scheme of mine to make gains for the company, you could at least have banked the money and made interest on it, but you didn't even care enough to do that, did you?'"

"You make me sick. Give me your money right now, because I'm giving your money to the one who made the most, and you are fired. You can join all those

other useless fools out there who are suffering horribly for their stupid, lazy, good-for-nothing attitudes. And you deserve every bit of it.”

It was a strong message for his disciples, but it got the point across that he'd given them wonderful gifts for a purpose, and while he was away it was to make the most of them. Those who did would be given more. Those who didn't would have their gifts taken away.

Chapter 26 – The key to the Kingdom....

“And now to the time when the Son of Man becomes monarch of the realm at last, and King of all he surveys,” Jesus continued. “And what a glorious time that will be, when all the angels will be there to witness his coronation, and all the nations of the world will be gathered before him.”

“It will also be the time when, like a shepherd, he'll separate the sheep from the goats; sheep to his right hand, goats to the left. To the sheep he will then say, ‘Come all of you whom my Father has so carefully groomed and prepared for this occasion, and enjoy the Kingdom he's had in mind for you since the very beginning of creation.’”

“And how was it that he groomed you so successfully? It was in sending me. I was the key, because it was in your treatment of me that you were being trained and prepared for life in his Kingdom and a vital part in making it happen. It was in feeding me when I was hungry, giving me a drink when I was thirsty, giving me a place to stay and warm clothes to wear when I was cold, nursing me when I was sick, and visiting me in prison.”

“But I can't think of any time we did any of those things for you,” someone replied.

“Ah, but you did,” the King will reply. “Any time you did any of those things for a person in need, you did it for me.”

“But you goats here,” the King said, turning to his left to face them, “you never did any of these things for anyone, so there's no Kingdom for you. Your place is with the Devil and his angels and the hellish punishment reserved for them. And don't try to make excuses that you never saw me hungry, thirsty, or in need of a home and clothes, or in need of help when sick, and company when I was in prison, because every time you refused those things to others, or turned your back on the little people who so desperately needed them, it was like a direct slap in the face to me.”

“My sheep, therefore, have a life of endless happiness to look forward to, but you goats, never. Be gone into the punishment you so absolutely deserve.”

Chapter 27 – The plot is hatched....

All Jesus' stories and admonishments had been motivated by his deep and boundless love for those who had so faithfully followed him. He loved them dearly, but now it was time for him to leave this world and go to the Father.

There was one more vital thing that needed doing for his disciples first, though. So he got them together and went straight to the point: "It's just two days to the Passover, and that's when the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified."

Jesus was right too, because at that very moment a meeting was in progress, hosted by Caiaphas the high priest at his palace, in which he and all the chief priests and elders were discussing how they could have Jesus charged and executed, and how to get it done before the Passover too, because if they waited until the festival began there would be huge crowds and killing Jesus could well cause a riot.

This was the moment too when the Devil started working on Judas Iscariot, to get an inside man in Jesus' own group of twelve disciples who would turn against Jesus when the right time came. Judas was ripe for the picking too, because it was obvious by his constant siphoning of money from Jesus' mission fund that his heart wasn't in what Jesus was doing at all. It was almost a foregone conclusion, therefore, that Judas would eventually contact the chief priests and Temple guards to find a way of having Jesus arrested. He was also thinking how much money they might pay him too, knowing how desperately they wanted Jesus dead.

The chief priests could hardly believe their luck when Judas arrived with his proposal, and they immediately offered him a month's wages in silver. All Judas had to do to receive the money was let them know when Jesus was away from the crowds so they could dive in and arrest him without causing a riot.

Chapter 28 – Called to serve....

Jesus, meanwhile, had asked Peter and John to arrange a supper for them all, including Judas, on the evening before the Passover, which coincided exactly with the time when the Passover lambs were killed and eaten as well.

When they asked Jesus where he wanted this supper to be held, he said, "Go into the city where you'll see a man carrying a large jar of water, which should stand out quite easily, since it's usually women who carry water. When the man then enters a house follow him in and tell the owner you know me and that I

need this supper with you all before the Passover at his house, because my appointed time has come. Ask for his guest room. It's the large room upstairs that has all you need for putting the meal together."

Everything worked out exactly as Jesus said, so the two men prepared supper in readiness for Jesus and the other disciples arriving later.

It was just before the meal that Jesus had this sudden awareness that the Father was handing the reins of power over to him, confirming in Jesus' mind fully and completely that he'd come from God and was about to go back to him. But Jesus' first reaction to knowing he'd been given all this power by God was to get up from the table, take off his outer robe and tie a towel round his waist. He then poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, wiping each man's feet dry with the towel.

When it was Peter's turn, however, Peter would not let Jesus wash his feet.

"No, I won't let you do it," he said.

"It's all right," Jesus replied. "I realize you don't understand right now what I'm doing, but you will."

But Peter still resisted. "You're not washing my feet, and you never will."

"Well, if that's what you want, Peter, then you'll have nothing to do with me, or any part in what I'm doing, from now on."

Peter's face turned ashen grey, and he blurted out desperately, "Then don't just wash my feet, wash me all over, my head and hands, everything."

"No, I don't need to do that," Jesus replied. "It's only your feet that need washing, because you've already had a bath and washed yourself all over. You're all nice and clean. Although, not all of you are."

Jesus added that last comment because he already knew the Devil had got at Judas. He quickly returned to explaining why he was washing their feet.

"Have you any idea why I just did that?" he asked them as he put his outer robe back on and joined them at the table. "I'll tell you why. You rightly call me your 'Lord and Master', so if I've washed your feet, shouldn't you do the same for each other? That's why I did it, as an example. I as Lord served you so you get the picture and serve each other."

"I want you to think quite differently to how things are done in the world. In the world, for instance, the big question is, 'Who is the greatest?' You've argued that amongst yourselves too, haven't you? But that's so typical of this world. The master of a house is at the top of the ladder and his servants are at the bottom, just like an employer is much higher on the pay scale and importance than his employees. And the world is full of dictators who treat their people like minions, and yet they think of themselves as great 'Benefactors' and expect to be looked up to as such."

"But that's not you. The higher up the ladder you go, in worldly terms, the

more of a servant you become. Imagine the chief of a tribe washing the feet of his young upstarts. What a shock that would be, because that's not the way things are done, right? But that's the way I am, and therefore so are you. You'd much rather be the waiter than the man sitting at the head table. Me too."

"And there is great happiness now and in the future for those who understand this," Jesus continued. "There are blessings now and places reserved in my Father's Kingdom too. And for staying by my side through thick and thin, you will sit with me at the great banquet celebrating my coronation as king of God's Kingdom and your coronation as kings of the twelve tribes of Israel too. The Father loves exalting servants, and he will exalt you just as he exalts me."

Chapter 29 – To whom I give this bread....

Jesus' mood began to change at this point. He looked at each of his disciples in turn and said, "I'm not speaking of you all, however, because I knew from the time I chose you that the prophecy, 'He who eats bread with me has lifted up his heel against me', would have to be fulfilled. What is about to happen to me, therefore, is no surprise to me, but I'm telling you so you too will know when it happens that I really am the prophesied Messiah. I'll send people in the future to explain these things too, and those who believe who I am will also join me in my Kingdom, with the Father's total blessing too, because they acknowledge that he was the one who sent me."

Jesus' mood then really changed. The distress in his voice was obvious when he announced while they were eating, "I must tell you that the prophecy I just mentioned, about the one lifting his heel against me, refers to one of you at this table eating with me right now and sharing the same food. And do I ever pity that man. A horrible future awaits him. Better for him that he'd never been born."

This was shattering news to the disciples, and not surprisingly they immediately looked at each other wondering who it could be.

John was next to Jesus, his head on Jesus' lap, so Peter caught John's attention and whispered to him, "Go on; ask Jesus who it is."

John, knowing Jesus loved him deeply, looked up at Jesus and asked gently, "Lord, who is it?"

Jesus paused and then with a sigh said, "It's the person I give this piece of bread to after I've dipped it in this dish." And he gave the bread to Judas, Simon Iscariot's son.

Judas was shocked. "It can't be me, surely not," he cried.

"Oh yes," Jesus replied. "It's you." At which point, Judas took the bread, and that's when Satan took control of him.

Jesus could see the immediate change in Judas, so he quietly told him, “Do what you must, Judas, but do it quickly.”

The other disciples had no idea what was going on, and why Jesus was talking this way. Was he telling Judas as their treasurer to go buy more supplies for the festival coming up, or was it to give a little something to the poor?

Judas then ate the bread Jesus had given him, and off he went into the night.

Chapter 30 – The bread and wine....

After Judas left, Jesus turned to the remaining disciples and told them, “It’s time for the Son of Man to be seen for who he really is, which, in turn, will reveal who the Father is too, because it was in the Father’s plan all along that through the Son of Man people would come to see and know him as well.”

“But I want you to grasp this now,” Jesus continued, “so that you won’t be surprised when what’s about to happen to me happens - and to make sure you know why it’s happening too. I’m glad, therefore, that we had this Passover meal together before I suffered, so that when I suffer this will be the picture that fills your minds. And when my suffering is over and done with I won’t eat another Passover meal like this again until everything that the Passover has ever pictured is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is here in full.”

Finally, the meal began, and it was while they were eating that Jesus reached across the table, picked up the loaf of bread, thanked God for having disciples he could explain all these things to, and tore a piece off for each of them.

He then told them, “That little piece of bread I ripped off the loaf for you is a picture of my body about to be torn apart for you. So eat it to seal that in your memory, so when it happens you’ll remember I told you it would happen, and why.”

After they finished eating Jesus then reached across to a cup of wine on the table, and after thanking God again for what it too would mean to his disciples, he told them, “I’d like each of you to take a sip from this cup, because it pictures my blood being shed for you as well. It will also seal in your memory why my blood is being shed, that it marks the beginning of a new covenant in which your sins and the sins of many others will be forgiven.”

Each disciple took a sip, after which Jesus said, “I won’t drink wine from this point on, not until the Father’s Kingdom is firmly established on this Earth. There’ll be a new batch of wine made for that occasion, and we’ll drink it together in what will then be my Father’s Kingdom.”

Chapter 31 – Be to others what I am to you....

With the memory of the bread and wine sealed in their minds to prepare his disciples for what was about to happen to him, and to mark the beginning of the New Covenant, Jesus could now move on to what this New Covenant entailed in the short time he had left with them.

“The central theme and purpose of this new covenant,” he began, “is a new commandment I’m giving you, that you love one another as I’ve loved you, because that will show people more than anything that you are my disciples.”

“I have loved you as deeply and completely as my Father has loved me. If you want to keep feeling that love I have for you, then keep doing what I taught you, because it’s when I did what my Father taught me that’s when I felt his love for me. This is the key that unlocks the storehouse of joy and happiness in a human life, which is why I’m telling you these things. I want you to be full of joy.”

“To repeat the point again, therefore: the key from now on is my new command, that you love one another as I have loved you. And the ultimate proof of my love is giving up my life for you, as I’m about to do. There is no greater love than that, than giving up one’s life for one’s friends. Well, you are the friends I’m giving up my life for. That’s why I’m doing it, because you are my friends. And because you do what I taught you, you will always be my friends. Not servants, note. Friends. And friends aren’t like servants who are kept in the dark about their boss’s business, and aren’t allowed to know what’s really going on. Friends get to be in on everything, no details missed. Well, everything the Father told me I’ve told you, no details missed at all. And I do that so that you know you are my friends.”

“That’s why I chose you - and it was me who chose you, not you me - because I could make your life flourish. As your friend I wanted to help you grow to the point you could run to the Father for anything you need and know he will answer. And all you need do is ask in my name, acknowledging that I am the source and reason for the life you now live, and the Father will answer your request. He just loves it when you honour me.”

“So now it’s your turn to love as I love. Make other people’s lives flourish like I make your lives flourish. See others as friends in the same way I see you as friends. Be to others what I am to you. And when the Father sees you wanting to be like me and honouring me, then of course he’ll answer your requests.”

Chapter 32 – A fruitful vine....

Having just drunk wine, Jesus jumped into an analogy about a grapevine to

show them how they could be like him, and love each other as he'd loved them.

"Picture me as a vine," he told them. "Not any old vine like you see on the hillsides, but the best vine there's ever been, because this vine is being nourished and sustained by the Father himself. Imagine, then, how the Father reacts after lavishing all his care and attention on the vine, when he discovers a branch that simply won't produce any grapes. It's just a shriveled stick. No fruit means it's completely useless, so he lops the dead branch off and burns it."

"On the other hand, there are branches on the same vine that do bear fruit, but they also get the chop, but in a way that helps them produce even better fruit, like the pruning of a tree. And that's exactly what my teaching has done for you. It's knocked some rough edges off you and got you to the point now that you can really produce some wonderful fruit."

"So after I'm gone keep it that way. And the simple way to do that is to stay attached to me, as I will to you, and we've got ourselves a vine producing great fruit. The opposite is also true, of course. If the branches aren't attached to the vine they can't produce a thing, and neither can you if you aren't attached to me. You're just like that shriveled stick."

"Think of me, then, as your vine and you are my branches. Stay attached to me by continuing to do all the things I taught you, and that's how you'll be able to love each other as I've loved you. And any time you need help to keep on producing a fine crop of love, just ask and it's yours."

"And two great things will result from it. First of all, you will become easily recognizable as my disciples. And secondly, you will make the Father look really good as well."

Chapter 33 – Hate without cause....

Being attached to Jesus would also have its problems, however, so that's what Jesus got into next. He wasn't holding anything back from them, just as he said.

"If people hate you, well, they hated me too, as you know. They wouldn't hate you if you just swam along with them, of course, but I pulled you out of the mainstream to swim in my direction instead, and that's what they don't like. You don't conform. And neither did I. And because I didn't conform I was seriously picked on, so expect the same to happen to you. On the other hand, it's not all bad, because some people really liked what I had to say, and that will happen to you as well."

"But why do people get so upset at us? It's because they don't clue in to the power that's driving us. People just saw me as a radical nuisance, and I wouldn't blame them for thinking that if, that is, I'd done nothing of any note. But I did

things no one had ever seen or done before. So why didn't they ask themselves where my power to do those things came from? I even told them it was the Father who sent me who was doing these marvelous things, and the evidence was obvious, so they had no excuse for being pig-headed and obnoxious. But Scripture did say they would hate me "without cause," and they fulfilled it to perfection. People just hate for no reason. And in hating me they hated the Father too, so if they hated the two of us that much, don't be surprised when they hate you too. It happens."

"And hate won't stop at just shutting you down either, it can turn to killing too, including the lunacy that killing you is doing God a service. Amazing. One minute they hate God, but the next they want to serve him? It's crazy. But what more proof do you need that these people have no idea what the Father and myself are all about?"

"Anyway, I'm telling you all this so when it happens you'll remember I said it would. I didn't mention it earlier, not while I was with you still, but it's time now for me to go back to the Father who sent me. And I know it really upsets you hearing that, which probably explains why you've never asked me about it, but it's all for the best that I leave. And here's why...."

Chapter 34 – The Comforter...

Jesus now stepped into new territory for his disciples, "For if I do not leave," he told them, "'the Comforter' will not come to you."

The Comforter? What was all that about?

"It's the Spirit of truth," Jesus explained, "and I'll send that same Spirit to you after I'm gone. What the Spirit will then do is make known what my life and death are for. Up to this point the world has no idea what the cause of all its problems are, so it's time people knew the truth, and in no uncertain terms too. That's why the Spirit is called 'the Spirit of truth'. The truth of why I died, for instance, needs to be told, because it makes clear, at last, what's at the heart and core of every human problem."

"But what about solutions, too? Well, the Spirit will get the truth out about them as well, and what happens to people when they either accept or reject those solutions. Time will then clearly show that what I taught is right, and how wrong people are for not believing that everything I said and did came from God. The Spirit will prove me right, you watch."

"The Spirit will make one more great truth clear too, that evil - and the Devil at the heart of it - have been defeated by my death. So three great truths will become known, thanks to the Spirit - the truth of the problem, the truth of the

solution, and the truth of evil defeated - and all made possible by what I'm about to go through."

"There's a lot more I could say, but enough for now, and I'll let the Spirit fill you in later. For now, though, please realize that you'll be walking where no humans have walked before. But with the Spirit as your guide the reality of God's world will open up before you in ever-increasing detail, including an ever-widening picture of what God has in store for the future too."

"But how will you know it's the Spirit and not some other fake power? That's easy to tell. The Spirit will always refer and defer to me, and make me the centre of everything. Your constant proof that the Spirit is the one guiding you, therefore, will be your ever-expanding understanding of me, because the Spirit only ever repeats what I want said, just like I only ever repeated what the Father wanted said."

"The Spirit is fully aware that I am the one now that the Father wants everyone to look to, because the Father has passed on everything he has to me. Top of the Spirit's list, then, is making me come alive in people's minds, just like I made the Father come alive in your minds. That's why the Spirit receives everything from me now, so that everything about me can become known. And that puts you in a wonderful position too, because as the Spirit expands your understanding of me, you can make me come alive in people's minds too, and especially since you already know me, having been with me for the last three years."

Chapter 35 – Honour me, the Father honours you....

Jesus then made a rather puzzling comment that had his disciples scratching their heads again, when he said, "Soon you'll lose sight of me, but you'll see me again shortly after."

"What on earth is he talking about?" one of them mumbled.

Well, that made it clear that they still didn't understand what was about to happen to Jesus, and why. So Jesus went over it again.

"What I meant was this," he began, "I'm about to be taken out of circulation and removed from sight, which will cause much rejoicing for most people, but great sorrow for you. But think of it like the lead-up to a child being born. The Mother experiences considerable distress and pain and even panic, because the pains just get worse and there's no relief. But as soon as that baby of hers is safely born, the pain is forgotten and her joy is full, because out of it all has come this brand new human being."

"So for a while it's going to be really tough for you, and the pain of not having

me around - and especially to answer all these questions of yours - will be unbearable. But I will be back very shortly, alive and well, and that will lift your joy and confidence in me to new heights, enough to last you a lifetime.”

“And after that you won’t need me around to answer your questions anyway, because you can go directly to the Father with all your requests, just as I did. This will be something new for you, because up to this point I’ve been praying to the Father on your behalf, but not for much longer. Very soon he will fling open the doors so you can walk right in and talk to him directly, because he loves you. And the reason he loves you is because you love me and totally believe I came from him. In other words, when you honour me, and you tell the Father that when you make your requests to him, I promise you he will answer, because he knows that whatever you ask for is to further the honour of my name. He can clearly see that’s what you live for, and it pleases him immensely, and he shows it through his answers. And that’s how your joy and confidence will be filled to the brim.”

“I’m talking in plain language here, no more analogies, parables or metaphors. Simply put: Love and honour me, and the Father loves and honours you. And that’s what I want ringing in your ears when I leave this world and go back to my Father.”

There was a brief silence as Jesus’ words sunk into their heads, and then one of them shouted out, “We get it. No more questions from us, then, because every question we’ve asked you’ve answered perfectly, so it’s obvious you came from God.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Jesus replied, “but do you really believe it? I ask that, because very soon, when trouble hits, you’ll run off home and leave me alone. The Father, however, won’t abandon me, because he wants to show you through what happens to me, that it’s possible to be cruelly treated by the world but make it through. And from that I hope your courage gets a boost and your fears will be eased, as you watch what the world does to me, but never do I succumb. Instead, I overcome.”

Chapter 36 – Showing what the Father is like....

“And on that last point,” Jesus continued, “you don’t have to let the world overwhelm you either, because you’re aware of another world - the world in which God exists. And you’ve trusted God to help you cope, which is good, but have you grasped yet what I came for? I came to open your mind to what this God you’re praying to is really like. Again and again I called him ‘my Father’, because that’s what he is. He’s a Father. And I know that because he’s always been a Father to me. That’s why I kept telling you I came from him, and hoped

you would believe it, because then you'd believe that what I said about him and what he's like are wonderfully true."

"I came to give you a picture of the Father's heart, so you come to know him, and love him, and trust him like I do. And because of that lovely picture you've got of him you would then want to be with him as much as I do."

"Well, that's exactly where I'm going, to be with him. And the reason I'm going to be with him is so you can be with me. You can trust in me as well, then, that I'm going to my Father to prepare a place for you beside me in his Kingdom. And a short while later I'll be back for you so you can be with me where I am. But you knew that, right? You knew where I was going and how you could be there too."

"No," Thomas jumped in. "We have no idea where you're going, or how to get there."

"But I'm how you get there," Jesus replied. "I'm your passport to the Father's Kingdom. I'm like the man at customs. No one can enter the country without going through him. And no one can enter the Father's Kingdom without going through me. So the way through to the Father is by me. On the other hand, who would want to be with the Father in the first place, if they have no idea what he's like? But that's where I come in, because I came to help you know the Father, and know him so well that it would seem like you've already seen him. The key, therefore, to how you get to where I'm going is knowing the Father first, which you can by knowing me. I am the way to knowing him, because I am the one who knows the truth about him, and the kind of life he lives."

But that still wasn't enough for Philip, because he jumped in next with, "Yes, but; if you could just show us the Father in person, then we'd really know him, wouldn't we?"

"Oh come on, Philip," Jesus replied. "You mean to say that all this time I've spent with you and you still don't grasp what I'm here for? So let me try again. When you look at me, Philip, what do you see? You see the Father. I am your picture in bright colours as to what the Father is like, because I came from him, I know him, and I was sent by him specifically to tell you what he's like. So why are you asking me to show the Father to you when I've already done it? Can't you see that my Father and I operate together like a hand in glove, so that everything I say and do represents him perfectly? And this isn't just me saying this, because the Father himself also made it abundantly clear by the amazing things I've done that what I say about him has his total stamp of approval."

"I came to show you what the Father is like so that you in turn can show others what he's like. You can do it just as well as I did, and even better in fact, because I'm going to the Father to personally answer your requests for help to do it. Remember what I said, that you're with me where I am? We're up to our eyeballs in this together, you and I, with exactly the same goal of wanting people

to have a clear picture of the Father. So in the future talk to me and trust me, as if I was right there beside you, and I will answer you every time, just like I have while I've been with you."

Chapter 37 – If you love me....

It was on this personal level that Jesus then looked at each of his remaining disciples and said, "If you love me - I mean, really and truly love me - you will stick like glue to what I taught you, because I can then go to the Father in total confidence that he will assign the Comforter to you on a permanent basis. I don't want you feeling like lost orphans after I'm gone."

"You will soon have your very own Spirit helper, actually living in you all the time. And you'll know it too, because the Spirit has the amazing ability to make me come alive in your minds, as if I was still walking beside you and teaching you personally."

"The world, meanwhile, will think I've disappeared from sight forever, unaware that any such thing as a Spirit exists. But to you it will be constant proof that what I said is true, that I really am with my Father, you are with me, and I am with you."

"In which case, keep this process wonderfully rolling along at your end by locking on to what I taught you, because that's your proof you love me, which then means the Father loves you, which then means the Spirit can make me and my love for you become more and more real to you."

Judas (not Iscariot) then asked, "But why are you only making yourself real to us and not to everyone else?"

"Because," Jesus replied, "you're the ones who love me, and you prove it by doing what I taught. That's what opens the door to me becoming real to you. That's why my Father loves you, and why we both come to live in you. You become our home, because you are the ones we feel most at home with. To other people this means nothing, because they don't believe the Father sent me. That's the problem. Without that they're not even at the starting gate. So if they don't believe the Father sent me it naturally follows they don't believe what I taught came from the Father either. So then they don't do what I taught, and in not doing what I taught they make it clear that they don't love me, and because they don't love me I don't become real to them."

"All I can do for now, Judas, while I'm still with you, is explain it. And if it doesn't make sense yet, don't worry, because after I'm gone the Father will send the Spirit to you to make things clear, by not only reminding you of everything I said, but also making it real in your own experience."

“I want to put your minds at rest. I don’t want you feeling lost and confused like all those other poor people out there. They’re so anxious and afraid. But you don’t need to be worried one bit, because you’ll have Spirit in you keeping me and my words fresh and alive for you every day.”

“And one last thing. Do you remember me telling you I’m going away for a while to be with my Father, and how upset that made you feel? Well, if you loved me you’d be glad for me, because the Father is so much greater than I and that means I can be of much greater help to you when both he and I will be coming to live with you. So cheer up, because think how fired up you’ll be later on when everything I’ve just told you actually begins to happen.”

“For now, though, I can’t say too much more, because the evil ruling power of this world is about to launch his attack against me. And the world will learn a big lesson from it, that evil has no power over me, and the reason for that is my love for the Father, which I express in doing only and always what he wants done. With that in mind, it’s time we got going for what he wants me to do next.”

Chapter 38 – What Jesus wished for most of all...

Just before Jesus left the room where he’d eaten with his disciples and said these last words to them, he looked up and directed his next words to his Father.

“At last the time has come, Father, for you to lift your son up and prove to people who I truly am, which in turn will prove to them who you truly are. This is the job you gave me to do, that with your power behind me I could make you real to those you gave to me, taking into account that this is what eternal life is all about too. It’s about seeing and knowing you, the only true God, and about knowing me too, since I was the one you sent. And by helping people see and know you I’ve done what you sent me to do. I look forward, then, to being with you again, just like I was before the creation of this world.”

“Those you gave me to train are well on their way too. They know you by name as the Father, they know you are the power behind me, and they know that every teaching of mine originated with you. They know exactly what you want them to do, therefore, and they have truly responded, because they realize I came from you, and they are convinced that you are the one who sent me.”

“So these are the ones I pray for - and just them for now - because they are the ones you gave to me. You chose them, but you also gave them to me, just like you give everything else that’s yours to me. What my disciples do from now on, therefore, will reflect on me as well. So, just as I lifted you up in my lifetime, they will now lift me up by what they do in their lifetimes too.”

“I won’t be with them in person anymore, though, because I’m leaving this

world and coming back to you. So, dear Father, look after them for me. Be a Father to them as you have been to me. Help them experience what we've got as Father and son. And bond them together with each other too, with the same love that you and I have for each other. It's you they need from now on to protect them, just like it was you who protected them while I was with them. Because of you I didn't lose any of them, except, of course, the one that Scripture predicted would destroy himself."

"Before I come back to you, I wanted to make sure, first of all, that those you gave me know you're there for them, just as you've been there for me, so they experience the same joy I've had from knowing that. And they need to know that real joy is possible, because it's going to be tough going for them. They'll be hated and resisted for going along with my teachings, and scoffed at and despised, just as I was, for not going along with what the world believes is important. So they're in for a rough ride, but I'm not asking you to get them out of the world. What I'm asking is that you protect them from the world's evil, because that's not their world anymore, just as I wasn't part of that world either."

"Keep them glued to the truth of your teachings, because it's now their turn to do as I did. You sent me; I now send them. I followed the truth of your teachings to pave the way for them, and now it's their job to live those teachings for the sake of everyone else in the world. And some people will respond, so I pray for them too, that they grasp what I came for."

"I came to reveal you and the relationship that you and I have, because that's the relationship they can have with us too. And when thousands of people actually experience what that's like, it's just the proof the world so desperately needs that the great Father you are really does exist, and it was you who sent me to make all this known to them. This is what you gave me to give to people, so they can be part of our family too; family with us and family with each other. And all it needed was me being with them and you being with me for this wonderful family to take root and grow. And that will then show the world for certain that you were the one who sparked all this by sending me, because it's through me they could see you. They could see in your love for me that this is who you are, and therefore you love them in exactly the same way. And that's why they believe in me, because they can see that's what you sent me for. And that's why I'm now sending those you gave to me, and those that follow, to get this same message to the world loud and clear."

"If only, then, they could be with me where I will soon be, because then they'd see me in all my glory, basking in the love you've always had for me, long before this world even began."

"Most people, unfortunately, have no clue what you're like, even after I told

them. But I know you, and so do those with me, because they caught on that this is why you sent me; it's because I'm the one who knows you. So because of me now, they too have come to know you as Father. And that means they're in the same boat as me, because they can now experience your Fatherly love just like I do. Your love for them now fills their entire being, just like it does mine."

And with that said, Jesus turned to the disciples he so deeply loved, and with a sigh he said, "Come on then, it's time we got going," so they sang a hymn and left.

End of Part 4