

*F*ASHIONED

*B*Y

*C*ULTURE

A study of the impact of culture upon Scripture

By

*C. W*ILLIAM *C*OOPER

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O. William Cooper

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Over the years, students have asked pointed questions about the meaning of words, phrases and situations they encountered in the Biblical text. Some of these I was able to answer because of what I had learned in my studies and travels in Israel. Other questions sent me back to the text to study, dig and compare. In each instance, their questions drove me to clarify what I had learned so as to present it in such a way that the student could comprehend what the text was trying to convey. I am deeply indebted to these students for their inquisitive minds and questions.

There is a Sunday School class in the church I attend that I sometimes teach. They are eager to understand what the Scriptures really say. They challenge me to deeper study and more careful thought about the meaning of Scripture. I look forward to these challenges as we study together.

My wife has been a source of real encouragement to write this volume. It has helped greatly as I struggle to find time to commit ideas to writing.

The very deliberate work of proof reading has again been done by Rev. Mary Neil. This is a task that the better it is done, the more invisible it becomes. I am grateful.

My catastrophes on the computer are hidden by the talented work of Dr. Peter Stone. His computer skills make my work look much better.

There is a wealth of computer artistry that becomes visible in the work of Dwaine Stoll as he designs a book cover. I am deeply appreciative of his good work.

These and other people have enabled me to bring this work to completion. I have no words to express the depth of gratitude I feel for the work of each one. May God richly bless each one for their faithful efforts.

O. William Cooper

DEDICATION

There is a man whose life has been a great inspiration to me in the years that I have been privileged to know him. He is a Haitian by birth; an obvious citizen of God's kingdom by adoption. He is a man gifted in business; possessing great wisdom and an example of God's grace in action. He has spent much of his life serving God among his people at a Christian radio station. He was also the director of a seminary at the same mission station.

On one occasion Jesus said, "If you have seen me you have seen the Father." It is clear to me that as I watch my friend and brother, I also have learned something more about Jesus.

It is with great joy and thanksgiving that I humbly dedicate this book to my brother in Christ, Eutrope Samson.

Gratefully,

O. William Cooper

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THE INTRODUCTION

Culture is baffling to some of the best of scholars. It is the material out of which every conversation is spoken; the instrument through which we express our deepest thoughts and feelings to one another; the measuring-stick by which we evaluate every action of our lives. Culture is the mold in which our ideas take shape. This is one of the major concerns of those who write translations of the Greek and Hebrew Scriptures into the native language of another land. We understand that those who translated the New Testament into one of the Eskimo languages could not deal with the picture of hell as a place of burning. They had to turn it around before it had meaning for these people of the frozen north.

Every group of people has their own cultural understandings. It is difficult to explain the 10 commandments in some cultures. How does one explain, “Thou shalt not steal” when their culture taught them it is acceptable to steal, but not to get caught? How does one explain, “Thou shalt not bear false witness” when the culture is literally built upon the acceptability of dishonesty. The part one must avoid is getting caught.

We are thoroughly convinced that the Scriptures are “inspired” as II Timothy 3:16 so carefully indicates. We are equally convinced that we need to carefully examine what it means to be “inspired.” In most discussions, “inspired” is taken to refer to the choice of specific words as “God breathed messages from God.” We would not dispute that for a moment. We would like to suggest that when God breathed His word into human experience, it involved more than specific choices of words. God made use of the individual personality and disposition of each author. Can you imagine Paul writing the beautiful psalms like those David sang and prayed? Can you imagine fiery Peter writing with the delicate sophistication that makes Luke’s writings the most beautiful Greek in the entire New Testament. I don’t think so!

Included in this beautiful “inspiration,” is the divine choice of language. Imagine trying to express the glowing beauty of Isaiah chapter six in the scientifically precise words of the Greek language. On the other hand, can you imagine trying to express the intricate precision of the New Testament theological statements in the most beautiful, but imprecise manner of the Hebrew language? Hebrew, like Spanish and Latin, is beautiful and graphic, but not that precise. Greek, like German, is more a precise, scientific language and expresses our finest details of doctrine with great precision.

We also would suggest that God used the intricacies of culture to convey an understanding of His nature and will to people in a form they can readily understand. Jesus used dozens of cultural references to share His message with people of His own culture.

In order for us to fully understand His message as His hearers understood it, we must permeate that culture to discover what they really understood. The Greek and Hebrew meaning of a word will not always open these thoughts to our deeper understanding. We have to be able to hear what they heard and see what they saw. That is the underlying principle being scrutinized in this volume. By seeking to understand, at greater depth, the cultural references Jesus used we hope to be able to shed light on some of the actions and teachings which at present are not as clear to us as they were to the people on the scene. Cultural understanding will not solve all the problems we have concerning the meaning of some Scriptural passages. It will enable us to come much closer to what people of His culture understood when He taught.

This is the second volume in this series. Like volume one, “Did You Know This?!”, this volume looks carefully at passages that contain rich elements of the Hebrew culture. These would be very obvious to the Jewish people who listened to Jesus, but because they are not a part of our culture, they can easily be overlooked. It is to this that we have focused our attention in these volumes.

THE BIRTH OF JESUS THE BIRTH OF JESUS

There are a number of issues surrounding the birth of Jesus that need careful attention. We will deal with these in one large chapter with several subheadings. These will be identified in bold print.

THE SHEPHERDS

And in the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields, and keeping watch over their flock by night. Luke 2:8

When we hear the story of the birth of Jesus, we tend to read in a matter-of-fact manner that the coming of the Jewish Messiah was first made known to shepherds on the hillsides outside Bethlehem. There is no shock or surprise in that discovery for us.

For the first century Jew, however, that would be a different story altogether. In fact, if someone told a devout first-century Jew that the announcement of his Messiah was made to shepherds, he would immediately cry out, “Heresy!” Actually, if you said that his Messiah had already come he might cry “Heresy.” The Jewish understanding almost guarantees that they would never be able to say that their Messiah has come. They would be frightened to say so. To say that such and such a person is the Messiah when they are not is considered blasphemy. The punishment for blasphemy is being stoned to death.

The reason they would cry “heresy” when you tell them the announcement was first made to a group of shepherds is because of the reputation of most shepherds. No group of people in all Israel was held in such moral contempt as shepherds, unless it is the tax collectors. No mother would ever hope and pray that her daughter would be married to a shepherd. We know that shepherds were forbidden to stay in a caravan stop, which would be much like our truck stops even though such a place was known to be a brothel. The shepherds were known to have sexual relations with their animals. To think that the announcement of the coming of the Messiah would be made to a group of shepherds would be just too much for a devout Jew to contemplate.

If you said the announcement was made to a Scribe or Pharisee, that would be difficult, but far more acceptable than through a shepherd. If you told a devout Jew that the angels gave this announcement to the High Priest, again, it would be difficult, but much more acceptable than to a lowly shepherd. The misdeeds and plans of the Jewish priests was a poorly kept secret.

Isn't that just like God!! He doesn't look for people of position, honor or power to carry His message, but seeks out the lowly. How much more lowly can you get than shepherd? Again, we have categories of sin which God does not recognize. Most first-century Jews knew that the High Priest was a sinner. He had to make a sacrifice for himself before he could intercede for his people. They were convinced that his sins were not nearly as bad as those of the shepherd. If God were going to make such an announcement, the High Priest would be the best candidate. But a Shepherd?!

By the way, in Luke 2:8, the writer spoke of “the same region.” This is a reference to the area around Bethlehem. This is very helpful information. Jesus, at the triumphal entry into Jerusalem went to the temple and drove the people out who sold sacrificial lambs. It was a scam and everybody knew it. We know that the lambs that these people sold to worshippers who had come from some far-distant land, came from this particular area. It is interesting to note that the announcement of the coming of the Lamb of God came to shepherds who cared for the sheep who were to be offered in the temple sacrifices.

SHEPHERDS IN THE FIELD

And in the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields, and keeping watch over their flock by night. Luke 2:8

For centuries, there has been a law in Israel – shepherds can graze their flocks in any field so long as it is not planted in a crop. This law is still observed. Sheep will eat a field right down to the soil. Because of this, the shepherds were not allowed to take their flocks into a planted field until the harvest had been reaped.

THE BIRTH OF JESUS

When Luke tells us that the shepherds and their flocks were “in the fields,” he has told us when this took place. Harvest comes at different times in different places. For instance, in Kansas wheat is harvested earlier than it is in North Dakota.

Many different crops were planted in Israel, but two grain crops were most often considered when harvest was discussed. Wheat was planted, in the south, in November. Barley, on the other hand, was usually planted in the early fall. Bread was ultimately important when one considers the eating habits of the Jewish people.

There are two distinct harvest times which were so identified in Israel. Many things were planted and harvested in Israel. The Jewish people, however, planted two kinds of grain. Bread was a very important part of their diet.

- a. **BARLEY HARVEST** - the cheapest grain in all Israel and the staple food for the poor. This grain was harvested in the South from mid-April onward.
- b. **WHEAT HARVEST** – This was an important crop and was sometimes difficult to find. This wheat would be more apt to be harvested beginning in mid May.

We must keep in mind, however, that the planting and harvest time would be a bit different in Galilee and the Jerusalem area. The time mentioned in our text deals with conditions in the Jerusalem area.

We can be certain that the birth of Jesus took place after the harvest in May-June and before planting in late fall. We cannot be more specific than that. It certainly did not occur on December 25.

NO ROOM IN THE INN

Two different Greek words are translated “inn” in the New Testament. These two words represent two very different locations used for quite different purposes.

1. **“KATALUMA** – This is the word used in Luke 2:7. The Greek word “kataluma” (κατάλυμα) is a compound word. It is composed as follows. “Kata” means “down.” “Luo” means “to loose.” It was a place where a traveler could untie his cargo and loosen his belt and sandals for a good night’s rest.

In the Near East, rain is a rarity. Because of this, rainwater is collected and stored in cisterns underneath each house. In ancient Israel, the roof of each house was flat. This being a very hot climate, in dry season, the family usually slept on the roof of their home in what we call summer. Guests were highly honored and it was a special treat to be able to serve them in royal fashion. This certainly included allowing the guest to sleep on the roof where it was much cooler than it was in the house where there was very little breeze.

In Mark 14:15 and Luke 22:12 this word is translated “ a large upper room.” In both instances, it is the place where Jesus and His disciples shared the Passover feast. This is exactly the same word used in Luke 2:7, where Luke’s gospel records the words, “there was no room for them in the inn.”

2. **PANDOCHEION** – The other word translated ‘inn” is “pandocheion” (πανδοχείον). This is also a compound word. The word “pas” means “all.” The word “dechomai” (δέχομαι) means, “to receive.” It was another word used to describe a “caravanserai,” both of which are places to receive strangers. It was, if you please, a first-century truck stop where the caravans would stop for the night. In many cases this was a brothel. This is the word that Jesus used in Luke 10:34 where he told the story of the Good Samaritan.

What difference does this make? First, I am glad that Joseph was looking for a lodging in a private home rather than a first-century truck stop. The difference between the “kataluma” and the “pandocheion” has to do with their purpose. If there was no room in the first century truck stop, it indicates that there were many more people in Bethlehem than there were places to sleep. On the other hand, if there was no room on the roof of a private home the implications are very different. Remember everyone had to go to the place of their birth to be registered. Joseph’s family lived here. Remember, also, that though he and Mary were engaged, they were not yet married officially and she was quite pregnant. Had his family invited them into their home, it would be seen as approval of what they assumed had happened and they would be shunned in their community and expelled from the temple. This, in fact, is what Luke is suggesting rather than that there were just too many people in town for the registration.

THE BIRTH OF JESUS

WRAPPED IN SWADDLING CLOTHES?

And she gave birth to her first-born son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. Luke 2:7

The word translated “clothes,” is “sparganon” (σπάργανον) and means “to wrap with strips.” In the King James Version, it refers to “swaddling cloths.” A newborn baby was wrapped in long strips of cloth. “Observant Jews” secured these long strips of cloth from the abandoned common clothing of a priest. It appears that Mary and Joseph both came from this religious persuasion.

Priests usually had one purple thread in their regular garments. Mothers would try to have this one purple thread, emblematic of the priesthood, in the swaddling clothes used to wrap their newborn baby boy.

Purple dye, because it was so costly to make, was limited to royalty and high officials. The color purple was the most precious, costly of all dyes in ancient times. This is because of the way it was prepared. There was a type of mollusk in the Mediterranean off the coast of Tyre as well as off the coast of Corinth. These mollusks were to be located in a bay where the water was about 100 feet deep. Divers had to dive to the bottom of these bays and collect the shells of these mollusks. Historians tell us that it took about 8,000 of these shells to be crushed in order to make just one gram of purple dye. It is not difficult to understand why the purified dye was so terribly expensive.

The text does not specifically indicate this, but it would be most unusual if the infant Jesus were not wrapped in the garments of a priest with its single purple thread. His priesthood was signaled from the moment of His birth.

THE WISE MEN

It seems most everyone knows about the “wise men,” but Matthew’s Gospel is the only one of the four who records their story.

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, Matthew 2:1

The word translated “wise men” is “magos” (μάγος). The word really means “sorcerer,” “practitioner of magic.” We can assume that these would be men of great means. This is made clear by the kinds of gifts they brought to Jesus. Also, this would be obvious by the great distances they apparently traveled to get to Bethlehem.

Also, these would be men who were intellectual giants of their day. They certainly would be well trained in what was known as astronomy at that time. We must keep in mind, however, that astronomy and astrology were not separated by a clear-cut division in that day.

In astronomy, scholars in our time have made great strides, but the basic information, the foundation of the science was known to them and probably established by them.

The text only indicates that these men came from the east. The land east of Bethlehem is desert. Modern means of transportation have made it possible for people to go directly east of Bethlehem and cross the desert successfully. In that day, however, that was impossible. The first major country you encounter directly east of Bethlehem is Babylon. Because of the vastness of the desert, the only way to get from eastern countries to Israel was to go, like Abraham, north around the Fertile Crescent and then south into Israel. With this in mind, these scholars and practitioners of magic may have come from places we would identify as Babylon, Persia, Assyria, or Media. The fact is, we do not know their place of origin.

It is interesting that God made this breath-taking event known to practitioners of magic. Throughout the Old Testament, sorcery, in any form, was summarily denounced as evil and condemned by the Scriptures and prophets through whom God spoke to the people.

In every Christmas play, there are always three wise men portrayed. The biblical text does not tell us how many of these sorcerers came to Bethlehem. Then, where do we get the idea of three men? We do not know for sure, but it is highly possible that this idea comes from the gifts they brought – gold, frankincense and myrrh.

THE BIRTH OF JESUS

Of the three gifts, we are only familiar with the first, gold. Frankincense is a form of gum which has a rich odor. It is obtained by cutting an incision in the bark of several different trees. This gum is collected from the Boswellia tree. These trees were found from India to Africa. It was used as perfume, in sacrificial offerings as well as for incense.

Myrrh, also, was extracted from a tree, allowed to harden and then used as perfume and in the embalming process. In this instance, it was used to cover up the odor of decaying flesh.

Historically, bible scholars attached a spiritual significance to these three substances. They claimed that gold was the symbol of royalty. Frankincense, on the other hand, was a reference to deity and myrrh foretold the kind of death this little baby would endure as the savior of mankind. These are interesting suggestions, but there is no real basis for saying that this is accurate.

We can say this about these gifts – they were extremely valuable. Some have contended that it was the proceeds from these gifts that made it possible for Joseph to take his bride and the baby to Egypt. This, also, cannot be confirmed.

HOLY TO THE LORD

As it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every first-born male that opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord", Luke 2:23

Every Jewish male child was to be circumcised on the eighth day after birth. This is called “the bris.” At this time, the father presented the child for circumcision and the child was officially named. In this instance, the name was “Jesus.”

You would not know it from the text, but 33 days pass between verses 21 and 22. In verse 22, Luke speaks of “their purification.” This, of course, cannot refer to Jesus. The word “their” is rather a reference to Mary and Joseph.

In verse 23, Luke quotes from Exodus 13 where God said,

That you shall devote to the LORD the first offspring of every womb, and the first offspring of every beast that you own; the males belong to the LORD. Exodus 13:12

It stresses the fact that every first born male that opens the womb shall be called “holy to the LORD.” The word translated Holy” is “hagion” (αγιον). This word also is translated “sanctify.” Implicit in the use of this word are two separate, but related ideas. It speaks of moral purity. It also speaks of being set apart for God. The Old Testament priests were “holy” (sanctified). They were set apart exclusively for the service of God. The sacrificial lamb was “sanctified.” It was set apart, removed from the flock and given special care and attention. It only could be used for the sacrifice to Jehovah.

All of this dates back to the time of the Exodus. You will remember that God told Moses to have the people sacrifice a lamb and smear the blood on the doorposts and lintels and thus protect the first-born male of man and beast in every household. Though the first-born males of Israel were spared, all the first-born of Egypt died. God then said that the first-born of Israel from that time forward were His. They were “holy to the LORD.” This gives us insight into what Hannah did when she brought Samuel back to the place of worship as she had promised to do.

BOUGHT BACK

In the story of the Exodus, the final plague God brought against the Egyptians was the slaying of the first born of man and beast among the Egyptians. As the story is told, the author said:

"But every first offspring of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb, but if you do not redeem it, then you shall break its neck; and every first-born of man among your sons you shall redeem. ¹⁴ "And it shall be when your son asks you in time to come, saying, 'What is this?' then you shall say to him, 'With a powerful hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery. ¹⁵ 'And it came about, when Pharaoh was stubborn about letting us go, that the LORD killed every first-born in the land of Egypt, both

THE BIRTH OF JESUS

the first-born of man and the first-born of beast. Therefore, I sacrifice to the LORD the males, the first offspring of every womb, but every first-born of my sons I redeem.' Exodus 13:13-15

The fact that the families of Israel must buy back their first-born son served to remind them of the great mercy of God in sparing the first-born sons in Israel and delivering His people from their terrible slavery in Egypt.

It is interesting that Israel had a choice – they could buy back the first-born animals or they must break its neck. Though this option is not addressed concerning the first-born son, still they must buy him back. The author of Numbers gives us this information:

"Every first issue of the womb of all flesh, whether man or animal, which they offer to the LORD, shall be yours; nevertheless the first-born of man you shall surely redeem, and the first-born of unclean animals you shall redeem. Numbers 18:15

The price to be paid for the first-born-son was five shekels of the sanctuary shekels or 20 gerahs. To be totally accurate, we cannot be certain what this price might be in our money system now. There were three different shekels mentioned in the scriptures – the heavy shekel, the light shekel, and the sanctuary shekel. Again, the value of these pieces of money changed from time to time. Our closest estimate is that this was a considerable amount of money and it was to be paid to the priests.

Did you ever wonder why God slew the first-born-son of the Egyptians or the second or even the third? For one thing, a majority of the families would have at least one son. A much larger percentage would not have two sons and far fewer still would have three sons. The infrequency of sons would help to account for this choice. There is another, more telling reason. The first-born son, in most countries in that part of the world and time, were destined to become head of the family when the father died. He would be the one who would hold the family together and enable everyone to survive after such a traumatic event. From the Egyptian perspective, God was touching the Egyptian culture at the point where it was the most vulnerable. Pharaoh had laughed in the face of God too many times. It was time for judgment to be meted out. God is a God of mercy, but He is also just. From the Israelite perspective, next to the father of the family, in most instances, the first-born-son was the most important person in the family.

THE TRIUMPHAL ENTRY INTO JERUSALEM

THE TRIUMPHAL ENTRY INTO JERUSALEM

There are several details of this great event that require our attention. We will look into each one in an effort to understand more fully what the disciples understood as they viewed this experience following Jesus into Jerusalem.

THE ROAD TO JERUSALEM

Jesus knew that His hour was nearly come. From that moment on, He moved with deliberate intention toward the cross.

And when Jesus came to the place, He looked up and said to him, "Zaccheus, hurry and come down, for today I must stay at your house." Luke 19:5

In Jericho, Jesus had a surprise encounter with a man named Zacchaeus. Jesus called this man by name. It is appropriate to ask the obvious question, "How did Jesus know this man's name?" There are a couple of possibilities.

1. Jesus is God. He is omniscient. This definitely is one reason that Jesus would have known the man's name.
2. There also is a collateral possibility. We know that the Rabbi in Nazareth, at the time of Jesus' childhood, was a man named Zacchaeus. We know that the Romans preferred to involve Jewish Rabbi's in the collection of taxes because they could be trusted and because it would create tensions within the Jewish community. It is very possible that along with His omniscience, Jesus remembered Zacchaeus from His childhood.

We cannot confirm, fully, how Jesus knew this man. These possibilities do, however, give us a meaningful insight into the situation with which Jesus dealt on that Jericho road.

THE IMPORTANCE OF LAZARUS

There is no doubt that Jesus intentionally delayed His arrival at the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus so as to demonstrate His limitless power. The accomplishment of this is recorded in John's Gospel.

And when He had said these things, He cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth." John 11:43

It is not accidental that John recorded this report a few verses later.

Therefore they were seeking for Jesus, and were saying to one another, as they stood in the temple, "What do you think; that He will not come to the feast at all?" John 11:56

It was a very serious matter to say that a person was the Messiah. If you were correct, everyone would praise you. If, on the other hand, you were in error, Jewish law required that you be stoned to death. This would effectively keep any Jewish person from claiming that any individual was their Messiah.

Additionally, tensions were rising between the Jews and their Roman overlords. We know that Roman troops killed several purported Messiahs and their followers.

The Jews had a list of things the person must do if he were the Messiah. One of the things on this list was that he must be able to raise the dead.

The people gathered in Jerusalem for the Passover knew what the Messiah must be able to do. The news of the raising of Lazarus was well known. Thus, the people wanted to see and acknowledge Jesus.

WHY AT BETHANY AND BETHPHAGE?

And it came about that when He approached Bethphage and Bethany, near the mount that is called Olivet, He sent two of the disciples, Luke 19:29

THE TRIUMPHAL ENTRY INTO JERUSALEM

As you look at this verse, a question comes to mind, "Why did Jesus wait until He reached these villages to send disciples to get the colt?" Why not from Jericho or some other village along the way?

The writings of the ancient rabbis record a debate they had concerning the distance one could "carry the bread of presence on the Sabbath." They agreed that one could carry the bread of presence as far as the gate. The response was, naturally, "Which gate?" There were many gates to the city of Jerusalem. After much debate, it was decided that a person could carry the bread as far as Bethphage, which was considered the city limits of Jerusalem.

WHY THE COLT?

Saying, "Go into the village opposite you, in which as you enter you will find a colt tied, on which no one yet has ever sat; untie it, and bring it here. Luke 19:30

There are at least two reasons Jesus wanted to ride a colt of a donkey as He entered the city of Jerusalem on this historic occasion.

1. There was a royal tradition dealing with the travel of kings. Remember, they had no means of instantaneous communications. Thus, if people saw the king coming on a horse, it meant that he had intentions that were not peaceful.

If on the other hand, he came riding on a special donkey, they knew that his mission was a peaceful one.

We must keep in mind, that they did not see traveling on a donkey, as we do. This was a very respected form of travel, to say the least.

In choosing to travel on the donkey, Jesus staunchly affirmed His royal lineage in the tribe of Judah.

2. The people were familiar with the prophecy of Zechariah.

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout in triumph, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; He is just and endowed with salvation, Humble, and mounted on a donkey, Even on a colt, the foal of a donkey. Zechariah 9:9

Both Jesus and the people were well acquainted with this passage. Insisting on riding into Jerusalem on a donkey was Jesus' way of affirming that He was of royal stature and, indeed, was the king over Israel.

RIDING ON THE GARMENTS

And they brought it to Jesus, and they threw their garments on the colt, and put Jesus on it. Luke 19:35

At first glance, it sounds like a casual statement. It is more than that. In that day, kings were very sensitive to the feelings of their favorite generals. The king would honor the general by allowing him to place his shawl or coat on the horse or donkey on which the king was to ride. Everyone would know that this was an honor bestowed by the king. In this instance, the people who saw this would immediately understand that this was another symbolic act to indicate again that Jesus is, in fact, the king of the Jews.

COATS AND BRANCHES

The very next verse gives us another symbolic gesture that announces that Jesus is the king of the Jews.

And as He was going, they were spreading their garments in the road. Luke 19:36

People wanted a way to honor their king. When the king moved about the city, people would place their coats on the ground for the king to ride upon. This is a little bit like the story of Sir Walter Raleigh placing his coat upon a muddy place so that a queen might not soil her shoes.

In the same vein, people cut palm branches and placed them on the ground where the king would pass. This is especially significant in view of the fact that the palm branch is the official symbol of the nation of Israel then as now. Indeed, in the first century, coins were minted by the Romans for use in Israel, presenting a palm branch on the face of it.

THE TRIUMPHAL ENTRY INTO JERUSALEM

When the people cut the palm branches and placed them on the road in front of the colt on which Jesus rode, they were clearly announcing that Jesus was the Messiah, the king of the Jews.

HOSANNA

This is a very interesting word. Look at the way it is used.

And those who went before, and those who followed after, were crying out, "Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord; Mark 11:9

If you look at the way we use this word today in sermon or song, you realize that it is a term of joy and excitement.

In the first century, that was not the case. The Greek word, "hosanna" (Ὡσαννά) is a simple transliteration of two Hebrew words

- a. "Yasha" (יָשָׁא) which means, "to be open" or released.
- b. "Na" (נָא) which means "I pray."

This compound word literally means, "save we pray." Rather than an explosion of joy and praise, it is a frightening plea for help. Observe how Mark tells the story. People who went before Him and those who followed Him cried out, "Save we pray, blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD,"

NO STONES PILED UP

This involves a very well known prophecy.

And will level you to the ground and your children within you, and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation. " Luke 19:44

This prophetic statement was made by Jesus. We know that the Romans placed Jerusalem under siege in 68 A. D. The death of the ruling Caesar prompted the recall of all armies back to Rome for fear that the German army would attack the city in the confusion surrounding the death of one Caesar and the time involved in the coronation of another. Finally, the Roman legions returned to Jerusalem and finally conquered it in 70 A. D. At that time, the temple was completely desecrated by a Roman general entering the temple, placing a statue of the emperor in the holy of holies and sacrificing a pig upon the altar there. The temple was completely destroyed and there was, literally, not one large stone, or "ashler" as they were called, left upon another.

That temple was never rebuilt. There are several consequences of the demise of the temple. It means that there would be no more sacrifices offered in Jerusalem. It means that the priesthood, as they knew it, would never again function as it had up to that point.

Nearly 40 years passed between the time Jesus made this prophetic statement and its fulfillment, nevertheless it did come to pass.

DID HE OR DIDN'T HE?

Look closely at the following two verses.

And He entered the temple and began to cast out those who were selling, Luke 19:45

And He entered Jerusalem and came into the temple; and after looking all around, He departed for Bethany with the twelve, since it was already late. Mark 11:11

Both of these verses describe the same event. Of the three synoptic gospels, (Matthew, Mark and Luke) only Mark says that Jesus entered the temple, looked around and left.

It generally is agreed that the Gospel of Mark precedes both Matthew and Luke. It is also generally agreed that Mark's Gospel served, at least, as the source consulted by both Matthew and Luke.

Again, Mark tells us that it was late. This means that there would not be any sellers there and no one to buy the animals that they had for sale. The scenario described by all three Gospel records indicates activity that would take place during the very active, busy time of the day. It would not take place in the evening.

Not for sale or resale

THE TRIUMPHAL ENTRY INTO JERUSALEM

The question surfaces, "Why would Jesus come from Bethphage to Jerusalem; look around in the temple; then walk back up the Mount of Olives?"

It was a common occurrence for a king returning from battle, in victory, to go first to the throne room, reaffirm his regency and then retire to the palace itself. This is precisely what Jesus did. His throne, however, was not in the palace, but next door in the temple.

As previously indicated, the story of the triumphal entry is speckled with repeated symbols that announced that Jesus was the king of the Jews, the Messiah. This experience is just one more of these symbols.

UNWANTED HERE

And they came to Jerusalem. And He entered the temple and began to cast out those who were buying and selling in the temple, and overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those who were selling doves; Mark 11:15

There is no doubt that the actions of Jesus were warranted, but the religious leaders would certainly disagree. The vices sanctioned and used by the religious leaders were vile and unscrupulous. Look at some of the scenarios:

A. **MONEY CHANGING** - The Jews were not supposed to bring a coin bearing the image of a person into the temple. To this day, very strict Jews will not take money into their synagogue because almost all forms of currency have a person's image on it. All the coins used in areas under Roman control bore the image of Caesar on the face of it. The religious leaders made temple coins which bore no human image whatsoever. The religious leaders required that sacrificial animals and the temple tax be paid for with this "temple money." In order to exchange their Roman coins for "temple money" the people had to pay an exorbitant rate of exchange.

B. **THE SALE OF ANIMALS**

There were two basic reasons the religious leaders sold animals for sacrifice.

1. Many worshippers came from far distant places to take part in the religious feasts. We know that Mary and Joseph, along with many others walked about 75 miles to take part in the feasts. We know that Simon the Cyrene was present for the Passover and carried Jesus' cross. Cyrene is literally hundreds of miles from Jerusalem. In Acts 2:9, 10, Luke tells us that people had come from as far away as Rome, Persia, Asia and Egypt. All of these are hundreds of miles from Jerusalem.

It would be nearly impossible to bring a lamb in perfect condition, from such a great distance. This made it necessary for the people to purchase their sacrificial animal when they arrived in Jerusalem. That is a legitimate service performed for people with a very special set of circumstances.

2. A worshipper could purchase their sacrificial animal wherever they wished. They also could bring their own sacrifice. The Old Testament gave specific instructions and high standards that governed which animals could be used for sacrifice. People soon learned that no matter how perfect their sacrificial animal was, the leaders would find some flaw in it and they would still have to purchase an animal from the salesmen in the temple.

The religious leaders had a monopoly and they knew it. This gave them liberty to ask unreasonable prices for the sacrificial animals they sold. It was not uncommon for these animals to be sold for many times their worth on the open market.

It is not surprising that Jesus referred to their activities as making the temple a "den of thieves." The Gospel records tell us that these religious leaders liked to be seen in the marketplace wearing long robes. These long robes were the symbols of the best fine clothing available in that culture.

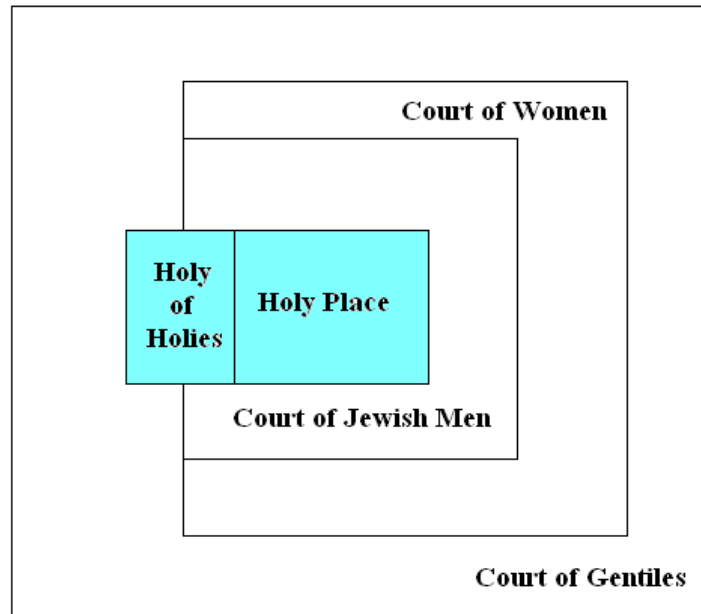
This created a problem for the religious leaders. God had prepared for their care and necessary provisions. The design is clearly described in the Old Testament. They were to be cared for from the sacrifices and offerings brought to the temple by the people. These leaders were accepting what God had provided, but they had this lucrative business on the side. One of the issues this created was that many of the people who paid these outlandish prices were not for sale or resale

THE TRIUMPHAL ENTRY INTO JERUSALEM

prices for the sacrifices could hardly afford to pay anything at all. The leaders were taking advantage of the exceedingly poor and becoming very rich in the process. God always takes a dim view of such actions.

Observe that the text says Jesus, "cast out those who were buying and selling in the temple and overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those who were selling doves.

The temple did not look like the modern church sanctuary. The temple area looked a bit like this:



The money changing and sale of sacrificial animals took place in the "outer court", Court of the Gentiles. You cannot have animals in this part of the temple all day without having the area polluted with animal droppings. This would defile the area.

Also, observe the care with which Mark wrote. He said, "He (Jesus) overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who were selling doves." No physical harm would come to the money changers if their tables were overturned. They might lose a bit of money. Their ego would be damaged somewhat, but that is all.

The people selling doves were a different issue altogether. Had Jesus overturned these tables, great physical harm and probably death would have come to these helpless little creatures. By overturning the seats of those who sold the doves, the business would certainly be interrupted, but no physical harm would come to the helpless.

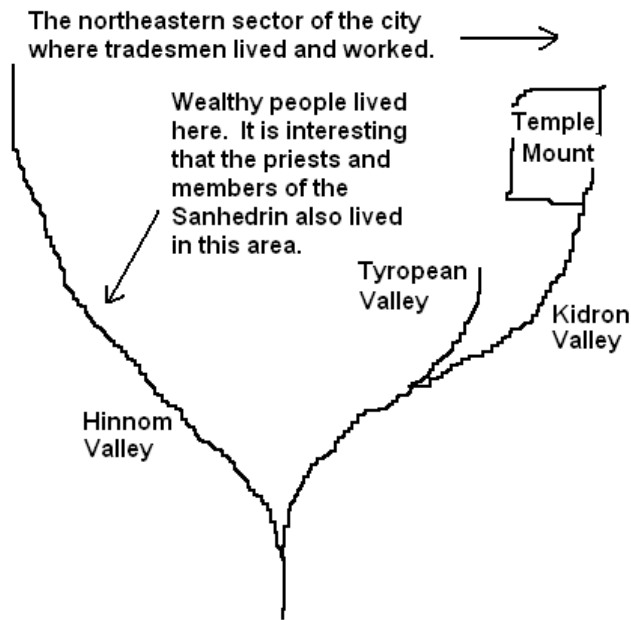
Even in His intense anger over the use of the House of Prayer as an Agora, a market, Jesus was unusually sensitive to the safety of the helpless and harmless. That is just like Jesus.

DETOUR

And He would not permit anyone to carry goods through the temple. Mark 11:16

In order to understand the import of this verse, one needs to have a mental picture of how the city of Jerusalem was laid out. This is a rough sketch of the city. It is bounded on the right by the Kidron Valley. It is bounded on the left by the Hinnom Valley.

THE TRIUMPHAL ENTRY INTO JERUSALEM



You will observe there are six areas on the sketch:

1. The northeastern sector of the city where tradesmen lived and worked
2. The temple mount
3. The area where the wealthy people of the city lived; *It is interesting that the priests and members of the Sanhedrin also lived in this area.*
4. The Tyropean Valley.
5. The Hinnom Valley
6. The Kidron Valley

Goods produced and marketed in the northeastern sector of the city had to be carried by hand to the southwestern sector where people of wealth lived. As you can see it would be much easier to go through the temple mount and across the Tyropean Valley to their customers rather than to go around the temple mount and cross a more difficult terrain to reach these wealthy customers.

The issue here is the importance of the temple itself. The religious life of the city had degraded to a very low condition. The temple was viewed as nothing more than a shortcut for the couriers. Jesus was bent upon restoring the House of God to its position of magnificence. He wanted it to be the place where God met with His people as it had been in the wilderness. A part of this mission was to forbid the people from using the temple properly as a shortcut for their deliveries. The religious leaders were more interested in protecting their positions of power than in the high motive of restoring the respect for God and the House of Prayer that had been provided for His people.

THE CHALLENGE

And they spoke, saying to Him, "Tell us by what authority You are doing these things, or who is the one who gave You this authority?" Luke 20:2

This would seem like a very logical question in the minds of the chief priests, scribes and elders. They were the people who were charged with the care and control of the temple. Indeed, they were the ones who negotiated with the money changers and animal salespeople to set up their business within the confines of the temple compound. They were the ones who profited liberally from this illicit business. These men made the rules concerning the use of the temple property.

None of these men gave Jesus permission to interfere with their lucrative arrangements. He was not authorized to terminate their agreement to let these people change money and sell sacrificial animals on temple grounds.

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None of these men gave Jesus permission to put a stop to using the temple as a shortcut for merchandise couriers. It is only natural, then, that they would challenge His authority for His actions. In their minds, this challenge would accomplish these purposes:

1. It would make it clear to Jesus that they were the people of power and that He had none.
2. It would place Jesus in the embarrassing position of being publicly reprimanded.
3. It would place Jesus in the awkward position of weakness before a crowd who increasingly believed in His limitless power.

These ideas are further supported by the fact that after Jesus had told a parable, which was apparently directed at them, they placed spies around Him to see if they could find some punishable offense in the things He did and said.

WILL HE COME TO THE FEAST?

It is hard for us to imagine just how crowded Jerusalem was at the time of the Passover. Josephus tells us that there were enough sacrificial animals killed on this occasion to provide for more than two million people. This is "wall to wall" people. In the midst of this, one could hear these words over and over again,

Therefore they were seeking for Jesus, and were saying to one another, as they stood in the temple, "What do you think; that He will not come to the feast at all?" John 11:56

Often, people think of this situation as the attraction of popularity. Jesus was popular. People all over Jerusalem were talking about His teachings and miracles. There was heated debate about who Jesus really was. This, however, was not new. You may remember that on their way to the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus asked His disciples who the people thought He was.

And Jesus went out, along with His disciples, to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way He questioned His disciples, saying to them, "Who do people say that I am?"² And they told Him, saying, "John the Baptist; and others say Elijah; but others, one of the prophets." Mark 8:27, 28

On this occasion, however, their interest in Jesus was more than popularity and fascination over the wonderful things He had done.

The news of the raising of Lazarus had pulsed through the city like the torrent of a flood. Exciting? Yes, but more than that. These Jews knew that one of the evidences of the Messiah was that He could heal the sick and raise the dead. There were many who claimed to be the Jewish Messiah. One historian said that there was a Messiah on every corner of Jerusalem. Certainly, this was an exaggeration, but the point is well taken. Many wanted people to believe that they had healed the sick and raised the dead, but Jesus had done it and witnesses to these miraculous events abounded throughout the city. The people were anxious for Jesus to come to the feast. They were quite certain that He was the Messiah and they wanted to meet Him and see His miraculous deeds. It is not beyond reason that they might have wanted to be in on the celebration of the acknowledgement that Messiah had come or that they might personally benefit from His coming.

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People who have been Christians for any length of time know the story of the trial of Jesus by heart. Because these people trust the Scriptures implicitly, they just accept that the record is exactly what happened. They are right. The Pharisees, the enemies of Jesus, were well skilled and trained both in the laws of the land and the laws of the scriptures. No one knew these laws as intricately as the Scribes and Pharisees. These well-trained experts in the law, however, violated the very laws they knew so well in a host of ways during the last days of Jesus prior to the crucifixion. They were so blinded by their hatred, so preoccupied with their determination to put Jesus to death that they became oblivious to the very law they were sworn to defend.

THE HIGH PRIEST'S HOUSE

And having arrested Him, they led Him away, and brought Him to the house of the high priest; but Peter was following at a distance. Luke 22:54

And they led Jesus away to the high priest; and all the chief priests and the elders and the scribes gathered together. Mark 14:53

In the first century, Near Eastern culture, a day was measured beginning at sundown. Indeed, the Jewish people today begin their Sabbath observance at sundown Friday and it ends at sundown on Saturday. The rules of the Sanhedrin were that they met during daylight hours in the Council Chambers. There was an exception to this rule – in the case of a threat to the life of the nation, they would be permitted to meet at any time as necessary.

In this passage, the Council had arranged in advance for Judas to betray Jesus to the leaders of the Council under the protection of the temple guard. The arrangement called for this to be done after their observance of the Passover. The guard and the leading members of the Council would arrest Jesus and take Him into custody. Jesus was to be taken to “the house of the High Priest,” not the Council chambers.

The Council was in an awkward position. They had counted on their false witnesses to make the case against Jesus. To their great disappointment, the false witnesses could not agree with each other as would be required if the testimony were to be admitted. The High Priest was upset and he asked Jesus if He was the Christ. Jesus finally answered and said,

And Jesus said, "I am; and you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven." Mark 14:62

The High Priest responded in two ways: First, he tore his clothing to express an extreme show of sorrow and devastation. His second response betrayed his motive and purpose. He claimed the crime of blasphemy had been committed. Now, if a person claimed to be the Christ, it could be blasphemy, but not necessarily. If the claim was false, then it is obviously blasphemy. On the other hand, if the claim was true, then the person could only be charged with telling the truth. The High Priest assumed, without proof, that Jesus made a false claim to be Messiah and this made Him guilty of blasphemy. This, of course, would not stand up in court.

Some difficulties arise because of this arrangement. Because the meeting of the Council took place at night, it was not possible for them to meet in the Council Chambers. This, too, was a violation of the Council law these men were sworn to uphold. This meeting was held after the hurried observance of the Passover in the household of each Council member. At this point, no work was to be done on this, one of the most sacred days of the Jewish calendar.

It seems clear that the arrest and trial of Jesus was the only issue that was important to these men. If laws they were sworn to uphold had to be violated, then this was considered a small price to pay in order to accomplish their priority of getting rid of Jesus.

UNUSUAL PUNISHMENT

And the men who were holding Jesus in custody were mocking Him, and beating Him, Luke 22:63

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In the context of this verse, the event took place in the home of the high priest. Matthew 26:57 indicates that Caiaphas, was the high priest. You may remember that at this time there were two High Priests, one elected by the priests, the other appointed by Roman officials. Caiaphas was the one appointed by the Roman officials. This would be extremely important. The Council was holding an illegal meeting at night and away from the Council chambers. The verse we are considering indicates that the guards, probably Samaritans paid to serve as Roman soldiers, were exposing Jesus to physical and emotional abuse.

This, too, presents several chargeable violations of the law. This could hardly be called a trial. A Kangaroo court, perhaps; a trial, never. Whatever one chooses to call this gathering, it was illegal as previously pointed out. Granted, there was wide latitude provided for a Roman soldier's treatment of a civilian, but there were rules governing the treatment of a prisoner. It was permissible for them to beat a prisoner, to "soften him up before a trial," but it was otherwise illegal to mistreat a prisoner who had not been convicted of any crime. In the eyes of their law, Jesus had not yet been put on trial because of law violations we have already considered.

Observe what they did to Jesus. They "mocked" him. The word Luke used was "enpaizon" (ἐνπαίζον). It means "to treat a person with scorn." It is "to deride." In Matthew 26:67, Matthew described this scene and it appears that the Council members joined with the soldiers in the abuse. Matthew tells us that they "beat Him with their fists." The word translated "beat" is "kolaphidzo" (κολαφίζω). It means "to punch with such force as to tear the skin." It also says that they "spit in his face."

Our translation states that they also "beat Him." This would be a very mild translation. The word Luke used was "dero" (δέρω). It is the word they used to describe the skinning of an animal. It is the way they described beating a prisoner in such a way that it took all the skin off his back. This was accomplished by the use of a scourge. Many thin strips of leather were fastened to a wooden handle. At the end of each leather strip a piece of sharp metal or broken glass was fastened. When the prisoner was ferociously hit with this weapon, it literally tore the skin from his back. To say it mildly, this is fiendish, illegal treatment of a man who had violated no law.

In Mark's account of this part of the trial, he indicates that part of this mistreatment was the administration of several strokes with "the rod." This is a description of their use of a wooden rod or the metal shaft of a spear to beat a prisoner. When this was used, in almost every instance there were broken bones from each stroke with the rod. It is difficult to imagine the enormity of this inflicted pain.

In verse 64, the author used these words.

And they blindfolded Him and were asking Him, saying, "Prophecy, who is the one who hit You?" Luke 22:64

This is a game the soldiers liked to play with prisoners, especially religious prisoners. It was a way of making fun of their religious claims. The soldiers would blindfold the prisoner and then someone would slap him in the face – an act of extreme derision. The blindfold was then removed and the prisoner required to identify his attacker. This, of course, was intended to poke fun at the claims of unusual divine powers. If the prisoner did not identify the proper attacker, the blindfold was replaced and the game would be repeated. There were times when this was done so often and with such abusive force that the prisoner lapsed into unconsciousness. Some even died.

These religious leaders were not being zealous for the law. They admitted that they were trying to protect their own positions with the people and with the Roman authorities.

"If we let Him go on like this, all men will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation." John 11:48

ANOTHER COUNCIL MEETING!?

And when it was day, the Council of elders of the people assembled, both chief priests and scribes, and they led Him away to their council chamber, saying, Luke 22:66

The council had met illegally in the night. At the meeting, in the house of Caiaphas, they charged Jesus with blasphemy. This, however, was not a treasonable offense according to Roman law. Luke tells us that the Coun-

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cil met again, this time in Chambers, “as soon as it was day.” This is sunup. The meeting was required because the previous meeting was illegal and they knew it. They feared that Jesus might claim that He was examined at an illegal meeting in the night. Indeed, if that happened, the charges would be dropped and Jesus would be released.

At this official meeting of the Council, Jesus was commanded to answer the question, “if you are the Christ, tell us.” Jesus refused to answer their question. He was within His rights. According to the law, no prisoner could be forced to implicate himself. It was the prosecutor’s responsibility to prove that the prisoner was guilty.

Jesus spoke about the “Son of Man.” He did not, however, claim to be the “Son of Man.” The accusers knew that Jesus had not implicated Himself. They therefore demanded, “Are you the Son of God?” Luke 22:70. According to this text, Jesus did not agree that he was “the Son of God,” He said, “You say that I am.” This would not be convicting evidence. They acted as though Jesus claimed to be the Son of God when, according to this text, He only said that they said this. In verse 71, they claimed that He had blasphemed. This obviously is what they wanted, but was not really a valid claim. In Mark’s account, when asked if he was the Messiah, Jesus answered, “I am.” So, did Jesus make that claim or not? We do not know. The question, however, is moot for two reasons. First, if He made the claim, it would not be blasphemy because the claim would be true. Second, the religious leaders looked for a legal way to put Jesus to death. Blasphemy was not an offense, according to Roman law, that was punishable by the death penalty. The Jews, if they could prove that His statement was blasphemous, could not put Jesus to death. Only Roman law convictions could result in death.

FALSE WITNESSES?!

Now the chief priests and the whole Council kept trying to obtain testimony against Jesus to put Him to death; and they were not finding any. ⁵⁶ For many were giving false testimony against Him, and yet their testimony was not consistent. Mark 14:55-56

A false witness in court is as old as human government and as new as today’s newspaper. It is wrong because it violates one of the Ten Commandments. It is wrong because it is dishonest. It is wrong because it also violates civil law. It is wrong because it tries intentionally either to do violence to the innocent or to protect the guilty from the punishment God says they should receive.

In the statement of the Law, in Exodus 20:16, and the restatement of the Law, in Deuteronomy 5:20, the commandment reads, “thou shalt not bear false witness.” Though widely practiced, it bears the divine prohibition. Obviously, the Council leaders knew this by heart. A few chapters later, in Exodus 23:1, God clearly decreed that it is wrong to work or cooperate with a false witness. This, however, is exactly what the Council leaders and members were doing. They intentionally sought people who would be willing to tell lies about Jesus in order to get a verdict sentencing Jesus to death. Not only did these religious leaders seek out such false fellows, but they worked with them helping to prepare and practice the lies they were to tell.

Again, these religious leaders knew the law better than most anyone else in Israel. Indeed, they would be able to quote the law by heart. As in each step of this vicious process, the ultimate killing of Jesus was a higher priority in their hearts than keeping the law they were honor bound to obey and defend. They did neither one.

The religious leaders would have memorized the statement in Proverbs 6:16 that indicates that God hates a false witness as He views liars, and “those who shed innocent blood.” These rulers coveted the reputation that they were holy, but Proverbs 12:17 indicates that such people are deceitful. The religious leaders would have to try to ignore the fact that false witnesses would perish (Proverbs 21:28) and they would be punished (Proverbs 19:5).

The religious leaders may have been able to justify to themselves their participation in this scandal of false testimony, but the prophet Malachi was very clear that God hated this vile practice so much that He will bring judgment upon it very quickly.

In spite of all this evidence, still the members of the Council allowed themselves to be complicit with this horrendous evil action. No Council member could claim ignorance of what was happening. They were present when the false witnesses were brought in to testify against Jesus, but could not get their lies to agree. (Mark

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14:56) These are the religious leaders of Israel; the ones chosen to be an example for God's people. We need to give them the benefit of the doubt. The best one is able to do, however, is that they were so intent on putting Jesus to death; so intent on protecting their power and popularity with the people and Roman authorities that they shut everything else out of their minds.

STILL MORE CHARGES

And they began to accuse Him, saying, "We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar, and saying that He Himself is Christ, a King. And Pilate asked Him, saying, "Are You the King of the Jews?" And He answered him and said, "It is as you say." Luke 23:2, 3

All four Gospel records report that the Jews' official charge against Jesus was that He claimed to be the king of the Jews. As you can see in the above quotation, Luke added two other charges that they made. The added charges are as follows:

1. This man perverts our nation.
2. This man forbids us to give tribute to Caesar.

We must ask what it means to "pervert a nation." The word translated "pervert" is *diastrepho* (διαστρέφω). It means "to distort," "to corrupt." The most appropriate definition, here, is "to defect," or "turn away." They were accusing Jesus of leading a movement to get people to overthrow the rule of Rome over Israel. If this could be proven, it would be properly before this court and would bring the sentence of death. This certainly was what this group had in mind when they tried to trap Jesus by asking if they should pay tribute to Caesar. The truth is that when the Jews asked Jesus this question, He said that they should give to Caesar the things that are his. There was absolutely no evidence to support this charge. If you read through the gospel records, there is not one statement of Jesus that suggests that the people break away from the control of Rome.

The second charge is not only an unfounded lie; it is an obvious trap which did not succeed. Had Jesus been minded to do so, He could have reminded the Governor that these very people raised this question with Him about whether or not tribute should be paid to Caesar. This question, in itself, can be demonstrated to be treasonous. The generosity of Jesus and His love for His enemies is the only thing that would have kept these religious leaders from facing the same charges that they brought against Jesus.

Pilate was well informed about both Jesus and the religious leaders who brought charges against Him. He knew that these men held a deep opposition and hatred for Rome. He knew they despised all who represented the empire because of their attempt to control the temple and the worship that took place there.

Of the three charges, Pilate questioned Jesus about only whether he was the king of the Jews. This was Pilate's silent, but ever so effective way of slapping the religious leaders for bringing trumped up charges into his court. When Jesus responded to Pilate's question with the words, "thou sayest," Pilate immediately said, "I find no fault in this man."

We mention these charges because they represent a definite change. On the night of Passover, when Jesus was taken into custody, the religious leaders examined Jesus and officially charged him with blasphemy. In the official meeting the next morning, they went through the motions, but made no change in the charges to be brought against Jesus.

Later that same day, however, when they appeared before Pilate, the charges were completely different both in nature and intent. The original charges were aimed at Jesus' relationship to the Jewish faith. Roman courts would not hear charges of this nature. The charges made before Pilate were three rather than one as previously announced. These charges were political in nature rather than religious. The charges dealt with Jesus' relationship to Rome rather than with Israel.

TRACING THE CHARGES

And they said, "What further need do we have of testimony? For we have heard it ourselves from His own mouth." Luke 22:71

THE TRIAL OF JESUS

On four occasions in 12 to 15 hours, charges were defined. On Thursday night, most of the council gathered at the residence of Annas and then Caiaphas, the High Priest chosen by the Roman officials. They tried desperately to find a crime with which they could charge Jesus. Here is a summary of the process of charging Jesus.

THURSDAY NIGHT	
LOCATION	CHARGE
Matthew 26:64	Destroy temple, rebuild in three days Are you the Christ, the Son of God?
Mark 14:61	Are you the Christ?
Luke 22:63	Blasphemy
John 18:13 - before Annas	Questioned about disciples and teachings

FRIDAY MORNING	
LOCATION	CHARGE
Matthew 27:1	Sought charges against Jesus
Mark 15:2	Sought charges against Jesus
Luke 22:66, 70	Blasphemy
John 18:24 Before Caiaphas - apparently morning	Not identified

BEFORE PILATE	
LOCATION	CHARGE
Matthew 27:11	Accused of being king of Jews
Mark 15:2	King of the Jews – Not punishable by death
Luke 23:2, 3	King of the Jews Misleading the nation Forbidding people to pay Roman tax
Luke 23:14	Incites people to rebellion
John 18:33	King of the Jews

As you observe the above tables, you can see that though the Sanhedrin met twice, once illegally and once legally; though they used false witnesses; still they did not come up with a treasonable offense to present to Pilate. In each of the gospel records of the evening and morning Sanhedrin meetings, the only charge that they could use was, from their point of view, He was guilty of blasphemy. Caiaphas' presentation of the charge suggests to Pilate that the Sanhedrin had found Him guilty of the charges presented. This was not true. They had not found these to be true. The charges were false and in some cases the opposite of the truth.

It is important to observe this because it is more than that they presented false charges. These religious leaders were guilty of violating the law they wanted to be known for protecting. Their Scriptures condemned false witnesses or working with false witnesses. They were guilty of both. They gave false witness themselves.

JESUS AND HIS FAMILY

JESUS AND HIS FAMILY

The birth and life of Jesus created an awkward, uncomfortable situation for Mary, Joseph and their family as long as Jesus lived. Though the gospel record does not deal with this situation in detail, it had to be most difficult. We know that Mary's cousin, Elizabeth, understood the situation and rejoiced in it. How would Mary's parents feel? We can only guess. Think about it! Mary's father and Joseph's father had entered into a covenant that their two children would be married. The Lukan account sounds as though it was exclusively Joseph's decision to put Mary away. That would not be the case. His father would have the final say. Again, think of Mary trying to tell her mother that she was pregnant, but that it was the child of God. Sure it was!

THE BUSYBODIES

And when they saw Him, they were astonished; and His mother said to Him, "Son, why have You treated us this way? Behold, Your father and I have been anxiously looking for You." Luke 2:48

When speaking with Jesus, Mary called Joseph "your father." We know that the people of Nazareth called Jesus "Joseph's son." They believed that it was true. Imagine the busybodies gathered at the well in Nazareth. They would certainly believe that Jesus was Joseph's son born out of wedlock. Many of the people in Nazareth had grown up in Bethlehem as Joseph did. They would know every detail about this family.

How did the boy Jesus feel about this situation? Mary spoke of Joseph as Jesus' father, but Jesus knew the truth even as a boy of 12 years.

And He said to them, "Why is it that you were looking for Me? Did you not know that I had to be in My Father's house?" Luke 2:49

Jesus was not dealing with Joseph's house when he spoke these words. He knew that Joseph was not really his father. He was very clear that God was His father. This had to be awkward for a boy of twelve years.

Many scholars believe that Joseph was substantially older than his wife, Mary. Be that as it may, it appears that Joseph died not too long after Jesus reached the age of manhood, 13 years. Jesus was the oldest son in the family. Thus, when Joseph died, He would be in control of Mary and everyone else in the family. He would be the head of the family as long as He lived. We gather this information of the possibility of Joseph's death from two interesting verses in the gospel record.

"Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not His mother called Mary, and His brothers, James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? Matthew 13:55

Jesus is here referred to as "the carpenter's son." This meant that His earthly father was the carpenter and Jesus was his assistant, learning the trade. The second verse is this:

"Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, and brother of James, and Joses, and Judas, and Simon? Are not His sisters here with us?" And they took offense at Him. Mark 6:3

Observe that this passage does not speak of Jesus as the "carpenter's son," but as "the carpenter." Observe, also, that though it mentions the brothers, it does not mention Joseph himself. These are not casual designations. It meant that Joseph was now dead and Jesus had taken his place as carpenter for the village and the head of Joseph's household.

We don't usually think of it in these terms, but when Jesus began His ministry He walked away from a responsibility that Joseph's family and the whole community expected Him to carry out. This caused a very severe strain on family relations, to say the least. It meant that James, whom Jesus probably trained in the carpenter's trade, was now going to be the head of the household. Now everyone in the household, including Mary, would follow the directions of James. It would be difficult to overestimate the division and alienation this created between Jesus and James.

JESUS AND HIS FAMILY

AND NO ONE CAME

And He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up; and as was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and stood up to read. Luke 4:16

This was Jesus' hometown. If family relations were at all good, you would expect them all to be present to hear Jesus preach. You would also expect the gospel writers to take note of it. Not a word was said. It is quite doubtful if any of them were present. Mary knew that Jesus was the Son of God. One would at least have expected her to understand and be present to see her son. She probably remembered very well. When Joseph died, Jesus became the leader of that family. However, when Jesus left to begin His ministry, that responsibility reluctantly fell upon James. If James did not grant permission, Mary would not be able to go. It appears that this is the first visible sign of the deep rift within the family.

TAKING JESUS HOME

And it was reported to Him, "Your mother and Your brothers are standing outside, wishing to see You." But He answered and said to them, "My mother and My brothers are these who hear the word of God and do it." Luke 8:20-21

You probably know this story very well. Jesus' popularity was growing very fast. Along with this popularity, there was also the dividing question about whether or not Jesus was the Messiah. There is a shocking discovery in these two verses. When someone disgraced the family, a public funeral was held as if the person had died. From the time of the funeral, the name of that person could never again be mentioned in that household. Do not think that James and Mary and the other members of the family came just to visit their popular relative. Rather, view this as the embarrassed family coming to take their erring relative home before He could disgrace them any further. Jesus spoke in exactly the same way that any disowned person would speak.

While conducting a spiritual retreat in a prison, I met a Jewish boy. Over the next year or so, he and I spent a lot of time talking. On one occasion, I slipped and asked him a question I know I should not ask. I said, "tell me about your family." He turned ashen gray and muttered, "I have no family." Like Jesus, he too had no family any more.

WOULD BROTHERS DO THIS?

His brothers therefore said to Him, "Depart from here, and go into Judea, that Your disciples also may behold Your works which You are doing. John 7:3

It was well known that the Pharisees had been trying to trap Jesus during most of His ministry. Now, everyone, including Jesus' family, knew that the Pharisees were plotting to kill Jesus when he came to the feast. With that in mind, this is what His brothers urged Him to do. I ask you, in such a situation as this, would anyone ever think of making such a recommendation to a family member they dearly loved? I think not!

NOT PRESENT

If you read the individual accounts of the crucifixion, you will discover that Peter stood at a great distance, John was present, and so was Mary, Jesus' mother. There is no record, however, of James or any other member of Jesus' immediate family being present at the crucifixion. Granted, a crucifixion was a horrible event that would be easy to avoid. Knowing that Mary was there, wouldn't you think at least James would be there on his mother's behalf if for no other reason?

One must ask, if James was in charge of the family and strongly opposed to any association with Jesus, how would Mary gain permission to attend? The text is silent. The honest answer is, we do not know. There is a hint. Mary attended the crucifixion in the company of her nephew, John. It may well have been that this is the time when Mary finally refused to be absent in her son's hour of pain and thus disregarded the directives of James. If that is the scenario, then it is likely that when Mary left the home to attend the crucifixion, she was also leaving her home for the last time. That, of course, is exactly what happened.

JESUS AND HIS FAMILY

SON?! MOTHER?!

When Jesus therefore saw His mother, and the disciple whom He loved standing nearby, He said to His mother, "Woman, behold, your son!"²⁷ Then He said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!" And from that hour the disciple took her into his own household. JOHN 19:26, 27

People, down through the centuries, have been moved to tears by these touching words from the cross. Why would Jesus speak so eloquently? He knew that John was His cousin, but not Mary's son. Jesus was, again, carrying out the responsibility as the head of Joseph's family, as it was the father's responsibility to choose his heir. That heir would one day approach death as well. He must choose the man who would take responsibility for the family when he had breathed his last. Jesus bypassed all his brothers and went to the person who would be next in line after the brothers, His cousin John. When Jesus passed that responsibility on to another relative, it should have been first to James. Could it be that James and Mary had a falling out over her going to the crucifixion? It could be. We have no record of her ever going back to Nazareth or to her son's home again.

MAY I PLEASE?

And after these things Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple of Jesus, but a secret one, for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus; and Pilate granted permission. He came therefore, and took away His body. John 19:38

There was a Roman law which dictated that if a person was crucified, a member of the immediate family could claim the body for burial. Otherwise, the body would be disposed of in the dump or the pauper's graveyard. We have no reason to think of Joseph of Arimathea was related to the family in any way. Joseph is mentioned elsewhere in the Gospel record, but there is no hint of a family tie. If Joseph had not claimed the body and buried it in his own tomb, the record of the resurrection would read very differently. This is perhaps the most convincing evidence that there was a serious division in the family over Jesus and His ministry. Did no one care? Was everyone too involved in the family differences to make the request? We will probably never know the answer to this painful question. One thing is certain; all was not well within the family.

ONE LAST VISIT

Now they were Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James; also the other women with them were telling these things to the apostles. Luke 24:10

There are those who believe the mother of Jesus was one of "the other women" who went to the tomb on the first day of the week. Now, it appears that Mary was no longer under the control of her son, James. He would not have to be present at the tomb on Mary's account, but he might have been thoughtful enough to visit his half-brother's grave on his own account. That was not to be. Whenever we consider this time in the story of Jesus, we must always keep in mind that though Mary apparently did not talk about it a lot, she knew that her Son was indeed the Messiah, the Anointed One.

WE JUST MOVED

Then He said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!" And from that hour the disciple took her into his own household. John 19:27

We know that Mary passed from the care of James to that of her nephew, John. One can't help but wonder, granted John now carried the responsibility of Mary's care for the rest of her life, did she ever get to go back to Nazareth to visit her lifelong home? Did she see her other children again? We do not know. It appears that she did not get to go back.

We know that John was a leader in the Jerusalem church. We know that later he moved to give leadership to the church in Ephesus and the surrounding area.

JESUS AND HIS FAMILY

Interesting sidelight: There is a tomb in the city of Ephesus that bears the name: Marie.” There is a tomb in Jerusalem at the base of the Mount of Olives that bears the name “Marie.” That situation defies explanation. However, there is no tomb in Nazareth that bears the name “Marie.” Wherever Mary went, from that final moment at the cross she was in the loving care of her nephew, John.

There must be a postscript if we would be fair with James.

These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer, along with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers. Acts 1:14

It is interesting that when the list of the people who were in the upper room, James was among them. What is responsible for this change? The text is silent on this issue. Perhaps that is best. It is sufficient to know that following the resurrection there is a complete reversal in the actions and priorities of James. It was dangerous to be in the Upper Room with the disciples, and James was well aware of that. Nevertheless, he was present and deeply involved in prayer, just as his half-brother had commanded.

WHO IS THE LEADER?

And after they had stopped speaking, James answered, saying, "Brethren, listen to me. Acts 15:13)

The scene is the Jerusalem Council. The debate had been heated and very long. Finally, in the midst of this impasse, James rose and made an announcement. He decided for the whole church that the Gentiles could, indeed, be Christians without becoming Jews. He, also, provided the basis and boundaries around which this decision was to be implemented.

And now the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. Acts 21:18

The church was faced with a very delicate issue. How do you deal with a man who was responsible for the death of hundreds of our brothers and sisters and now not only says he is one of us, but also that he is called to be an apostle in the church. To make matters worse, there were different opinions about the dependability of this man, Saul of Tarsus. It was not Peter who was with the elders when they met with Paul. It was James.

There is also a very beautiful document recorded in the New Testament that bears the name of its author, James. It is astounding how carefully and beautifully this great leader of the church molded into his epistle the marvelous life and teachings of his half-brother. His life, after the ascension is a testimony to the transforming power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

THE STORY OF JOSEPH

THE STORY OF JOSEPH

There are a number of incidents in the story of Joseph that we do not fully understand and in some instances do not understand at all. More often than not, this has to do with the differences in cultural practices. We will look at several of these in an attempt to help make Genesis 37 – 50 more understandable for those of us who may be unfamiliar with their cultural mores.

FELLOW WORKERS

These are the records of the generations of Jacob. Joseph, when seventeen years of age, was pasturing the flock with his brothers while he was still a youth, along with the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives. And Joseph brought back a bad report about them to their father. Genesis 37:2

The author indicated that Joseph was tending the flock along with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah. This gives us an insight into the position of Joseph in the family. First, he was the youngest of the eleven sons. Being the youngest son was a position that received no respect whatsoever. In this culture, they had no social security system to care for people in their old age. This care was accomplished by having a large family, particularly boys. The sons cared for their parents in their old age. If a woman was unable to have children, it was necessary for the man to take a second wife for the purpose of providing children. In some cases, such as Genesis 37-50, both wives were unable to have children. In such a situation, the wife would give her maidservant to her husband to have children on behalf of the wife. Bilhah and Zilpah were the maidservants of Rachel and Leah. Though these servant girls bore children for the family, their children did not have as high a position in the family as the first or second wife.

The fact that Joseph was working with these boys indicates that he had a job that was the lowest among the boys in the family. Now, we know that Joseph's father had more respect and love for Joseph than the other 10 brothers. That being the case, Joseph's lowly position was not on account of his father's disregard, but was probably done in order to train Joseph in all the different tasks over which he would one day be in control.

THE COAT OF MANY COLORS

Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his sons, because he was the son of his old age; and he made him a varicolored tunic. Genesis 37:3

This is an interesting statement. Unfortunately, however, this is not what the Hebrew text says. The Hebrew text speaks of a "coat with long sleeves." A "coat with long sleeves" does not mean that the sleeves were longer than his arms. We would understand it better if it were described as a coat with "wide sleeves." One would naturally ask, how a man could work as a shepherd with two-foot wide sleeves on his garment. That is the point. The wide sleeves identified the heir of the family. He could not work in this coat because he was not supposed to do so. It informed the family and everyone else that when the father died, the one wearing this coat would take control of the family. The mother and all the family members would be under his control. You can imagine how his ten older brothers would receive this news. The oldest brother probably had children of his own as old as Joseph.

Did this coat with wide sleeves have a many-colored design? We cannot be certain, but it probably did. The addition of extra colors woven into the garment would increase the cost manifold. We suspect that Israel, his father, would want to have the coat identifying his heir appropriately lavish and beautiful.

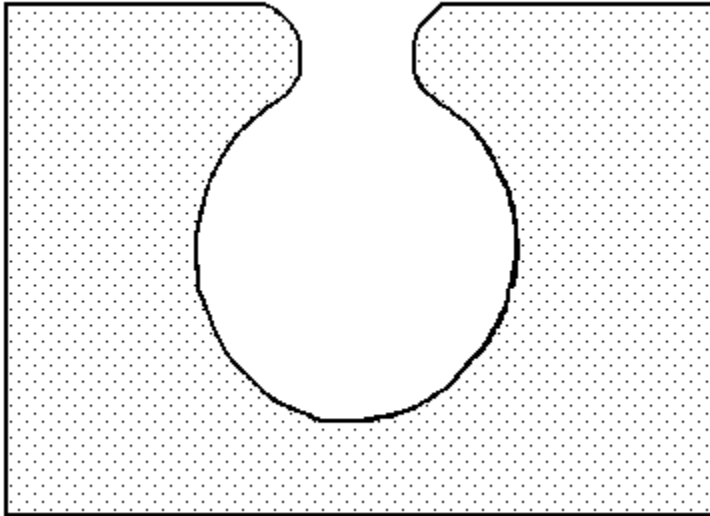
CAST INTO A PIT

And they took him and threw him into the pit. Now the pit was empty, without any water in it. Genesis 37:24

We must keep in mind that this was a part of the world that received very little rain. Also, there were very few rivers and lakes in the country. Water was a very rare commodity. On the very few occasions when it did rain, Not for sale or resale

THE STORY OF JOSEPH

they needed to collect the water for future use. This was done by digging what is here called a “pit.” We would understand it better if it were translated “cistern.” In much of Israel, there is a thin layer of soil covering the bed-rock. This rock is porous and soft. They dug down into this rock and made a hole that would look something like this



This hole would be at least ten feet deep and in most cases about 12 feet in diameter. With the invention of plaster, they could coat the walls of the cistern and the water would not seep out through the porous rock.

As you can see from the diagram, it would be impossible for a person to get out of the cistern without a rope or ladder. When the brothers put Joseph into the cistern, they knew that he could not get out without help. They also knew that if they wanted to get him out they could certainly do so.

SOLD TO THE ISHMAELITES

Then they sat down to eat a meal. And as they raised their eyes and looked, behold, a caravan of Ishmaelites was coming from Gilead, with their camels bearing aromatic gum and balm and myrrh, on their way to bring them down to Egypt. Genesis 37:25

Then some Midianite traders passed by, so they pulled him up and lifted Joseph out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver. Thus they brought Joseph into Egypt. Genesis 37:28

Most often when people read these verses, they are not aware of the emotion involved, particularly when read by a Jewish person. Observe that in verse 25, it speaks of “Ishmaelites.” In verse 28, however, it speaks of “Midianites.” The truth of the matter is that both verses speak of the same group of people. We know that the Ishmaelites were descendents of Ishmael. He was the son of Abraham, born to Hagar, not to Sarah. The trauma this creates for the Jews is that Joseph was about to be sold to their cousins several times removed. How did the Midianites figure into this picture? You also will remember that though the Jews were not to leave the land of Canaan, Esau was angry with his father over the gift of the birthright to Jacob. Thus, Esau left the land though he knew better. Though forbidden to marry any of the idolatrous desert people, he hurt his family further by marrying more than one of these women. Genesis 36, the record of Esau’s lineage, informs us that he intermarried with several tribal groups in that area and the Midianites were the product of these marriages and Esau’s political maneuvering. It is a terrible thing to be sold into slavery. It is a far more horrible thing for family, even distant relatives to buy a relative and sell him into slavery. This was usually the death warrant. Most of the time, the longevity of a slave was two to three years at most.

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TWENTY PIECES OF SILVER

Then some Midianite traders passed by, so they pulled him up and lifted Joseph out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver. Thus they brought Joseph into Egypt. Genesis 37:28

Again, in verse 28, the author tells us that the brothers sold Joseph to the Midianite caravan for twenty pieces of silver. At first, it sounds as though this is just the report of the price the brothers received for the sale of Joseph. By the way, this means that each brother would only receive two pieces of silver from the sale.

If a person of that era read this report, they would be severely shocked. This means that Joseph was not only sold as a slave, but that he also was sold for less than the wholesale price.

This gives us another insight into the relationship that existed between the brothers. One would have to have great disdain for a relative to sell them into slavery for only 20 pieces of silver when for centuries the going price for a slave was at least 30 pieces of silver. This gives one a shocking idea of just how much disdain they had for such a relative.

This caravan was headed south. It was perfectly clear to the ten brothers that the Midianites were going to take Joseph to Egypt. The Egyptians despised the Jews. It was a fore drawn conclusion that Joseph was headed into a situation where he would probably be severely mistreated, if not killed. The fact that they would sell him to these people under these conditions indicates that they had no concern where Joseph went or how he fared as long as he was out of their lives.

POTIPHAR WAS ANGRY

Now it came about when his master heard the words of his wife, which she spoke to him, saying, "This is what your slave did to me," that his anger burned. Genesis 39:19

The text indicates that when Potiphar's wife told him what she said Joseph had done, Potiphar was very angry. The assumption is that Potiphar was angry with Joseph. That could hardly be the case. We must keep in mind what Potiphar's position was. He was "captain of the guard." This may have been the title, but as "captain of the guard", this really means that he was the chief henchman for the king. His job was to hang or otherwise dispose of Pharaoh's enemies. If Potiphar was really angry with Joseph he would have killed him on the spot. Because Joseph was a slave, no one would have raised an eyebrow. There can be no doubt that Potiphar was angry, but not at Joseph. We must deal with the question, if Potiphar was not that angry with Joseph, then why did he put Joseph in prison?

Then, as now, royal courts were known as places of loose morals and unchaste behavior. It was common for husbands and wives to both have liaisons with persons of the opposite sex. For purposes of face-saving, Potiphar had to punish Joseph, but he had to know that his wife was not telling the truth. The fact that Joseph was put into prison instead of being put to death is clear evidence that Potiphar was wise to what his wife had done. The fact that the man in charge of the prison was allowed to put Joseph in charge of the other prisoners is even more reason to be absolutely certain that Potiphar did not believe that Joseph was guilty.

THE MEANING OF CLOTHES

Then Pharaoh took off his signet ring from his hand, and put it on Joseph's hand, and clothed him in garments of fine linen, and put the gold necklace around his neck. He had him ride in his second chariot; and they proclaimed before him, "Bow the knee!" And he set him over all the land of Egypt. Genesis 41:42-43

In these verses, the author gives us information about four things that each identifies the position of honor to which Pharaoh was appointing Joseph.

PHARAOH GAVE JOSEPH HIS SIGNET

A signet was made in one of two forms. Some were made as a ring that a person would wear at all times. It was usually made of gold or other precious metals. The other form was a cylinder of stone which was fastened to

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a chain and worn around the neck. In both forms, the signet was engraved with a design that identified the owner. The text does not say which form was used, but it might well be a ring. We will explain this in greater detail shortly. The signet was a very important symbol of power. There were many uses for this powerful tool, but two were most common. The one who had the signet could purchase anything and by the use of the signet arrange for the payment for that purchase. Again, the one who had the signet of the king could write orders and sign them with the king's signet. That order would of necessity be obeyed as if the king had said it.

VESTURES

It is difficult to find an appropriate honor for those in the highest government positions. We know that there were times when a high official was honored by being given a garment similar to one that the king himself would wear. We know that an even greater honor was to receive a garment that the king himself had worn.

The designs of these garments were some that were reserved exclusively for royalty to wear. When people saw Joseph, his clothing would tell them that he was a high government official. In many instances, and I think this is one, such a garment was one that Pharaoh himself had worn on some special occasion.

GOLD CHAIN

This gift from Pharaoh was important for two reasons: First, it was made of pure gold and this in itself made it clear that the wearer was a very important person. Earlier we mentioned that we don't know if the signet was a ring or worn on a chain. One might think the appearance of the chain would answer this question. Not necessarily. Heads of state and their highest subordinates usually wore a medallion which was a symbol of their position of authority. The truth is we cannot be certain which this was. My guess is that Joseph wore a medallion on the chain and the signet as a ring.

THE SECOND CHARIOT

Out of respect, no one would ride ahead of the Pharaoh except his protective guards. By the same token, only the king would ride ahead of Joseph's chariot. The privilege of riding in the second chariot was an honor reserved exclusively for the person who in the throne room sat at the right hand of Pharaoh. Another facet of this is that the law required all the people to bow down in submission before the king and his most trusted advisor as they passed. To be granted the privilege of riding in the second chariot was a gift of honor that provided prestige second only to the king himself.

BRING THEM INTO THE HOUSE

When Joseph saw Benjamin with them, he said to his house steward, "Bring the men into the house, and slay an animal and make ready; for the men are to dine with me at noon." Genesis 43:16

This was more than a friendly invitation to eat together. It was, as we indicated earlier, a sign of forgiveness and friendship. No one would be allowed to enter a house if that person was not at peace with the owner. The brothers were frightened and panicked when brought into the house. They were thus unable to realize the gift they were receiving. Anyone who was allowed into the house was guaranteed friendship and protection as long as they were in that house.

LET'S EAT!

We must keep in mind that the brothers knew they were in the home of the power behind the throne of Egypt and that there had been some unfriendly exchanges between this man and their family. They did not know that this man was Joseph, their brother. As indicated earlier, another sign of forgiveness and peace was to eat with the person. The Pharisees attacked Jesus when he ate with Zacchaeus publican and sinner friends. The basis of this attack was that you only eat with people with whom you are at peace and forgiveness. Again, however, the brothers experienced too much panic to realize that this man, really their brother, was giving them a wonderful gift. They had to eat, but they were in great fear for their lives.

THE STORY OF JOSEPH

SEPARATE, BUT TOGETHER

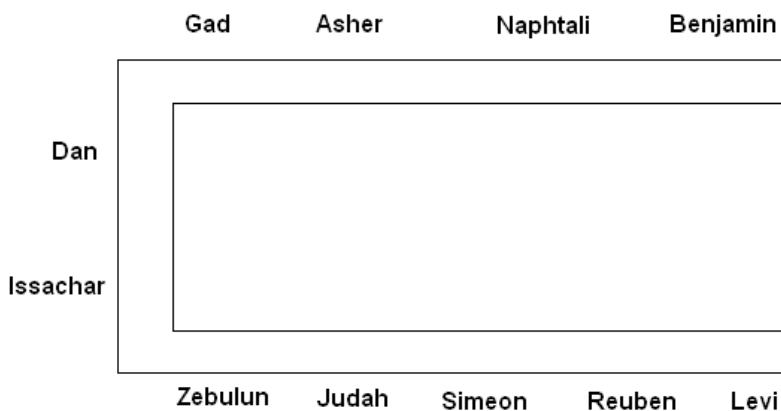
So they served him by himself, and them by themselves, and the Egyptians, who ate with him, by themselves; because the Egyptians could not eat bread with the Hebrews, for that is loathsome to the Egyptians. Genesis 43:32

There had been a love-hate relationship between the Egyptians and Jews for many centuries. In this verse, it clearly states that these two groups, on no occasion, would eat with each other. Joseph was not just going to eat with his brothers. He made this a special occasion of state. Several Egyptian officials were brought in for the occasion of this planned feast. The Egyptians would rather go without food than to recline at the same table with a Jew. There were a couple of reasons for this. The Egyptians had some serious religious difficulties with the Jews. Joseph's family were shepherders and the Egyptians were offended by the odor of these animals. The Egyptians were idolaters and the sacrifices they offered were pigs, not sheep. This just seemed very crude to the Egyptians. Also, the two groups held each other in serious disdain. As a result, the Egyptians ran the risk of offending the second most powerful man in all Egypt, but they were not about to eat at the same table with these offensive Jews. Joseph knew this and made the proper table arrangements: The Egyptians ate by themselves; Joseph reclined at a table by himself; the 10 brothers reclined at a table by themselves.

THE SEATING ARRANGEMENT

Now they were seated before him, the first-born according to his birthright and the youngest according to his youth, and the men looked at one another in astonishment. And he took portions to them from his own table; but Benjamin's portion was five times as much as any of theirs. So they feasted and drank freely with him. Genesis 43:33-34

One might wonder why it was so significant that the sons were seated according to their ages. Having seated the boys according to their ages, it would tell the brothers that this Egyptian ruler knew the birth order of the family. This prepared the way for them to begin to wonder how he knew this. Seating the 10 brothers in their birth order accomplished two things: It was intended to surprise the ten brothers that Joseph knew the order of their birth. The second factor was that at any table there was an accepted order in which the guests were to be seated. The oldest son should have the most respect of any member of the family. It was only appropriate that Reuben should sit in the seat of honor at the table. Again, at any table, people were arranged according to the declining positions of honor. At this table, the seating arrangement would look like this.



THE STORY OF JOSEPH

MEASURING THE DISHES

And he took portions to them from his own table; but Benjamin's portion was five times as much as any of theirs. So they feasted and drank freely with him. Genesis 43:34

The serving would be done by the head of the feast. Their culture dictated that the head of the feast would serve everyone and in so doing honor them by picking out some food especially for them. This being the case, the eldest son should receive the best of the meal. The problem was that everything on the menu was special and there was only special food. The only way to give special attention would be in the amount each received. Because Joseph was the son of Jacob's favorite wife, he was the favorite son. When Joseph was presumed dead, it might have been assumed that Benjamin would be the one to receive special attention. The ten brothers, however, would not share this perception. As Joseph prepared each dish, he sent a special message by giving Benjamin five times as much food as the others received. There would be no way that Benjamin could eat it all. That was not the point. He wanted to dramatically send a message to each of his brothers. He did!

JOSEPH'S DIVINING CUP?!

*"And put my cup, the silver cup, in the mouth of the sack of the youngest, and his money for the grain."
And he did as Joseph had told him. Genesis 44:2*

Two things about this verse call for our attention. Because Joseph was the second most powerful person in the land, one wonders why his divining cup was made of silver rather than gold. This becomes clear when we realize that sometimes silver was a more precious commodity than gold. This would account for the fact that his cup was made of silver.

The text speaks of this as a divining cup. It was not really a cup. It was more like a shallow bowl than a cup. Some of these divining cups are still in existence. Around the rim of the bowl, there are several astrological symbols. We do not know the process, but by studying these signs in relation to certain problems, they claimed to be able to foretell coming events and issues.

The second issue is, why was Joseph, the servant of Jehovah, using a divining cup in the first place? We must keep in mind that this event is the only occasion in the story of Joseph when the divining cup is even mentioned, much less described as being in use. It is possible that almost all people in his position would use a divining cup. With this in mind, they might have prepared a cup for him just on basic principles. We do not know all the details about the perception the Egyptians had of Joseph, but there are some things we do know. We know that his steward knew about Jehovah and spoke to the brothers about Jehovah when they were puzzled about how the extra money was found in their bag. We, also, know that Joseph indulged in a bit of trickery in order to prepare his brothers for the time when he would announce that he was, indeed, their brother. It is very possible that Joseph used the divining cup as a way to keep his brothers from discovering, too early, that he was their brother. Joseph spoke about the cup as though he used it often. That does not mean that he did. At last, the honest answer is that we do not know for certain why the divining cup was used at this point in the story.

KISSING BROTHERS

And he kissed all his brothers and wept on them, and afterward his brothers talked with him. Genesis 45:15

Earlier, we described the different symbols used among the Jews to symbolize forgiveness and oneness. The last of the four symbols of forgiveness and mutual acceptance is the kiss of forgiveness. If I want to show you that there is forgiveness and no separation between us, I would give you the kiss of forgiveness. During the time of the "cold war," newscasts often pictured leaders of the former Soviet Union greeting each other at the airport. Inevitably, the greeting was not a handshake. It was a hug and a kiss of friendship that was exactly what the kiss of forgiveness was used to convey during the time of Joseph. When you read the story of Joseph and his brothers, you will notice that this is the last symbol that Joseph gave his brothers that they were in no danger whatsoever. Notice also that the text says that after Joseph kissed each of his brothers, "and after this his brothers talked with

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him.” They had been speechless because of their fear. Having received the final symbol of forgiveness, they realized that they were really in no danger at all.

It is interesting that Judas chose the kiss of forgiveness as a way to identify Jesus for the temple guards. To use the kiss of forgiveness as a way to cover up his betrayal of Jesus for blood money is despicable to say the least.

ISRAEL BLESSED EPHRAIM

When Joseph saw that his father laid his right hand on Ephraim's head, it displeased him; and he grasped his father's hand to remove it from Ephraim's head to Manasseh's head. Genesis 48:17

In that day, when a man knew that he was about to die, he called his children together to give them his final blessing. It was understood that the father's blessing was prophetic. If you look at the messages Israel gave each one, you will discover that they did prove to be true.

It was a common understanding that the oldest son was more to be honored than any other son. Of all people, Joseph should have known that being the oldest son does not guarantee one a special blessing. In this culture, the right hand was used in situations of special honor. The left hand was considered to be of much lesser honor, if not disdain. Joseph brought his two sons to his father so that the older boy, Manasseh, would be in front of the grandfather's right hand. Israel realized, however, that the blessing he was about to give would not fit this arrangement. He prophesied that they would be known as “Ephraim and Manasseh” rather than “Manasseh and Ephraim.” It was a way of saying that Ephraim would be the leader, not Manasseh. In order to accomplish this properly, Israel crossed his arm so as to place his right hand on the head of Ephraim rather than on the head of Manasseh. This prophecy proved to be very true. When Joseph protested, Israel assured him that his action was no accident and that in fact this is the way life would be for the two boys.

REFLECTION

As you review the story of Joseph, you wonder how a Jew would reflect upon it. They believed and taught that God blesses the righteous and punishes the wicked. In the first half of the story, the Jewish summary of life seems to be turned upside down. In the first part of the story the righteous one, Joseph, was the one who seemed to be punished. At the same time, the unrighteous ones, his ten brothers, seemed to be the ones who were blessed. That, of course, seems to be an accurate assessment of the situation. The last part of the story is totally different. For 20 years Joseph did the good and right, but suffering for it. Suddenly, Joseph was doing the right, but was blessed and honored a hundred times more than his years of suffering.

As in the other portions of Genesis, the story of Joseph gives us a picture of a patient God who is sovereign over all the people and powers of His creation. Jehovah is a loving merciful God who having given repeated opportunities for the unrighteous to repent and change, ultimately defends the righteous and obliterates the rebellious and wicked. This is a picture of God that many people, particularly in our time, do not want to hear about. They want a God who is always merciful and never makes a person suffer for disobedience. These people mistake God's patience for His tolerance. The Old Testament picture is always the same – God blesses the righteous and punishes the wicked.

CAUGHT IN THE ACT

ACCUSATIONS PROPERLY MADE

Aside from the fact that these Scribes and Pharisees were trying to trap Jesus, their appeal to the Law was accurate. You find these words in Deuteronomy.

"If a man is found lying with a married woman, then both of them shall die, the man who lay with the woman, and the woman; thus you shall purge the evil from Israel. Deuteronomy 22:22

There had to be two or more eyewitnesses and there were. They reminded Jesus that the Law demanded that the persons caught in this act should be stoned to death outside the camp. This is the interpretation of the Law they presented to Jesus. They then asked Jesus to pass judgment.

WHERE IS THE MAN?

There was one part of this law from Deuteronomy that the Scribes and Pharisees overlooked. This had to be intentional because these men could recite this passage from memory. The Law in Deuteronomy unequivocally states that both the man and the woman were to be tried and punished. At this point, the Scribes and Pharisees violated the very Law they pretended to uphold.

The Scribes and Pharisees must have thought that Jesus was not too bright. The Scribes were the people who were called upon to make these judgments, not the Rabbis.

INTO THE TEMPLE

In John 8:1, the text clearly states that Jesus came into the temple. Jesus was teaching the people there when the Scribes and Pharisees brought the adulterous woman to Him. It was the law of the temple, however, that persons considered "unpardonable" – murderers, tax collectors and prostitutes were not to be allowed to enter the temple. In their eagerness to trap Jesus, they violated the Law of the temple they were sworn to uphold.

PROSECUTING THE CRIME

If you look at the text, you will see that Jesus never answered their question. He wrote something in the sand, but never said she was guilty. When the Scribes and Pharisees persisted in demanding a verdict, Jesus stood up. He then acted upon the assumption that the woman was guilty. To emphasize the seriousness of such a charge, Deuteronomy required that the eyewitnesses who gave witness against the accused must be the first persons to cast a stone at the guilty parties. Then all the people were required to stone the guilty parties until they were dead.

THE NEW REQUIREMENT

The Scribes and Pharisees and all the people who stood by observing had to be stunned into total silence when Jesus spoke. He said,

But when they persisted in asking Him, He straightened up, and said to them, "He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." John 8:7

Each of the Scribes and Pharisees who brought this woman was an eyewitness. They were, therefore, required to stone this adulteress before anyone else did. Jesus did not alter the Law, but simply added a qualification for those who were to carry out the justice. This created a serious problem. These Scribes and Pharisees coveted their claim to a holy life, but not one could claim to be without sin. Jesus could do so, but they could not. The Scribes and Pharisees were in a bind. They initiated this confrontation to trap Jesus and ended up being trapped themselves. If they threw a stone, the people would rise up in anger and remind them of their many sins. If they did not throw a stone, they were admitting that their claim to holy perfection was a farce.

Jesus did not wait to see how they would react, but knelt again and continued to write in the sand. People conjecture about what Jesus wrote. Could He have been writing the Ten Commandments? They had all broken at

CAUGHT IN THE ACT

least one of them if not all. Was He writing some of the over 600 other laws that were binding upon the Jewish people? We know that they had broken these as well. We honestly do not know what Jesus wrote.

BEGINNING WITH THE OLDER ONES

Being trapped and very much under the spotlight, the Scribes and Pharisees no longer acted as a body, but as guilty individuals. John wrote,

And when they heard it, they began to go out one by one, beginning with the older ones, and He was left alone, and the woman, where she was, in the midst. John 8:9

Each of these men contemplated the embarrassing situation he had created for himself. One by one, they dropped their stones and slipped quietly away.

John wrote a curious thing, "Beginning with the older ones." One would think that as embarrassing as this was for them, they would all drop their stones and leave hurriedly as a group. Modern westerners would do this, but first century Jews would not. They had great respect and deference for persons of age. No matter how embarrassed they might be, they would not consider doing anything until the oldest among them took the lead. Pity the youngest of this group who had to wait until all the older Scribes and Pharisees had left before he could leave.

JESUS SAID THAT?!

All the accusers had fled. Jesus stood alone with the guilty woman in the midst of the crowd of onlookers. Now, it was necessary for Jesus to reestablish the situation where they were. He said,

And straightening up, Jesus said to her, "Woman, where are they? Did no one condemn you?" John 8:10

As He did so often, Jesus taught by asking a question. Jesus was not seeking information, but was making a point. By asking, "where are they, did no one condemn you?" Jesus hereby established that there were no current grounds for stoning her because they now lacked the two or three eyewitnesses to give testimony against her and cast the first stones.

Jesus continued with the words that have puzzled so many. "Neither do I condemn you; go your way, from now on sin no more." The fact is that though it was clear that this woman was guilty, the scriptural rules for conviction and prosecution could not be met without two or three eyewitnesses to testify against her. Had Jesus done so anyway, He would have been guilty of violating the law himself.

In His closing statement to this frightened woman, Jesus made it clear He did not condone her past conduct. The scribes and Pharisees were keenly interested in conviction and prosecution of the guilty. Jesus was rather interested in forgiving and transforming the guilty.

JACOB AND ESAU JACOB AND ESAU

When you read of the early lives of Jacob and Esau, it is hard to keep track of which one is taking advantage of the other. More often than not it is Jacob, but neither one wears a halo very comfortably. As you read this part of Genesis, you must constantly keep in mind that this is a very dysfunctional family. Isaac highly favored Esau while Rebecca did the same with Jacob. There is also evidence that both Isaac and Rebecca used their two sons as pawns in their struggle for power within the family. In this family, there was no effort to fight fairly. “Winning wasn’t the important thing, it was the only thing.” Because of this, there were some very unfortunate things that took place within the family.

THE BIRTHRIGHT

And Esau said to Jacob, "Please let me have a swallow of that red stuff there, for I am famished." Therefore his name was called Edom. But Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright." Genesis 25:30-31

The word translated “birthright” in these verses is “bakorah” (בְּכֹרָה) which means “the right of the first born.” This seems a bit strange in our culture for a couple of reasons. The first reason has to do with the way the aged are cared for in the culture. In America, when a man is no longer able to work to support himself and his wife, we have what is called a pension or Social Security. In ancient times, there were no pensions and/or Social Security plans. One reason to have a large family was so that when father and mother were no longer able to work, they would have someone to care for them. When Jesus raised the widow’s son from the dead, He did two things: He gave her back her son. He also gave her back her livelihood. In a cultural system where it was a normal expectation for the children to totally care for their aged parents, it was necessary to designate one of the children to be in charge of the extended family when father had died or was no longer able to perform this necessity. It was called “birthright” or “the right of the first born.” In almost all instances, the oldest son was given this responsibility. There were some notable exceptions. Joseph was the eleventh son in his family, but his father gave him the “coat with long sleeves” (not many colors) which was the badge of this honored position. Joseph had two sons – Ephraim and Manasseh. Manasseh was the first born. We never say “Manasseh and Ephraim,” thus giving him the right of the first born. Jacob conferred his grandfatherly blessing upon Joseph’s sons and he placed his right hand upon the head of Ephraim and announced that he would have the right of the first born. There are other examples as well.

With the responsibility came certain privileges. The birthright provided a “double portion” in terms of possessions. If a father had two sons, his possessions would be divided into three equal portions. The “first born” would receive two of these portions and the remaining son would receive the other portion. Also, the “first born” would take the father’s place as head of the clan. This meant that as his father had controlled everything and everyone in the family, this place was now vested in “the first born.” Even the mother came under the direction and control of her son.

Jacob had an advantage over his brother. He had food and his brother was desperately hungry. Jacob pressed his advantage even though it was an improper way to bargain. In effect, Jacob said, “you are the first born both in terms of the time of birth as well as our father’s choice. I will provide you life saving food in exchange for that privilege and responsibility.” We know of no other situation where such an agreement was made. The fact that this did not seem to be appropriate did not matter to Jacob at all.

BOW SEVEN TIMES

But he himself passed on ahead of them and bowed down to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother. Genesis 33:3

In this context, Jacob was returning to his homeland a wealthy man. He sent word announcing the fact that he was returning only to discover that his brother was coming to meet him with 400 men. Jacob was located in what we call “Gilead,” the plateau on the northeast side of the Jordan River. It was an area that was well laid out for

JACOB AND ESAU

battle, but offered almost no place to hide. Jacob had fled from one person – Laban who would destroy him if given the opportunity. It appeared that he was heading into the presence of Esau who was the warrior Jacob could never be. This was also, however, the time when Jacob encountered God and his name was changed from “Jacob” “heel grabber” to “Israel” which means “God prevails.”

At this point, some might misunderstand Jacob’s actions. The text describes the change that took place In “Jacob” turned “Israel.” In the past, when threatened by Esau, Jacob fled. This time he did not flee. He rather went alone, ahead of his family to meet whatever might happen when he encountered his brother. Jacob did two things that could easily be misunderstood. First, the text describes the great gift that Jacob sent to his brother before they met. As you read the text, Jacob instructed his servants who attended the gift of animals to bow themselves to the ground as they approached Esau. This is sometimes viewed as an attempt to buy off Esau because Esau had vowed to kill Jacob. Remember, however, that God changed Jacob’s name to “Israel” because the man had changed.

Second, the text indicates that as Jacob approached Esau, the former heel grabber bowed himself to the ground seven times. One wonders, why seven times? Why not six times? Why not ten times? For the Jews, both names and numbers had specific significance. The number seven was called “a perfect number.” It also reminded the Jews that in six days, creation had taken place and on the seventh day, God ended His work or celebrated the conclusion of His work. For the Jew, anything that was done seven times was done perfectly or completely. It is this to which the mention of seven refers in this story.

The text states that Jacob bowed himself to the ground before Esau. This is the ultimate act of subservience. It is what every slave did in the presence of his owner. This sent a message to Esau that he would understand perfectly. It is not that clear for us. When Jacob forced Esau to give up the “birthright,” Jacob took two things away from Esau. Jacob took possession of one third of his father’s possessions that rightfully belonged to Esau. Secondly, he took away the position of authority that rightfully belonged to Esau by the edict of his father. In the act of sending the gifts and refusing to take them back at Esau’s insistence and by bowing himself to the ground before Esau, “Israel” was restoring to his brother that which he had wrongfully taken away from Esau. This is a beautiful picture of the astonishing change God had worked in “Jacob” turned “Israel.”

ISRAEL’S TEST

Then Esau said, "Let us take our journey and go, and I will go before you." But he said to him, "My lord knows that the children are frail and that the flocks and herds which are nursing are a care to me. And if they are driven hard one day, all the flocks will die. Please let my lord pass on before his servant; and I will proceed at my leisure, according to the pace of the cattle that are before me and according to the pace of the children, until I come to my lord at Seir." And Esau said, "Please let me leave with you some of the people who are with me." But he said, "What need is there? Let me find favor in the sight of my lord." So Esau returned that day on his way to Seir. Genesis 33:12-16

A casual reading of this portion of the text may appear that “Israel” was acting more like “Jacob” again. A more thoughtful reading hopefully will give us clearer insight into what both Esau and “Israel” were doing. In the previous segment, Israel returned the position of “first born” to its rightful owner. This means that now, Esau is the leader of the clan of Isaac’s inheritance. Immediately, Esau tested to see if “Israel” really meant what he had just said and done. For all intents and purposes, the “first born” had the power of life and death over everyone in the clan. Esau indicated a direction he wanted Israel to go. Though it was done graciously, Israel refused to do what Esau wanted. Esau then softened his request, but Israel again graciously demurred. Was “Israel” behaving like “Jacob” again? It would appear so, but it was not. The author gave us a clue. There is a hint in the things Esau said, “Let us take our journey and let us go and I will go before you.” On the surface, this was not an inappropriate request, but it was. From the time of Abraham, God had given them the promised land and they were not to leave it. Esau left the land and joined himself to the idolatrous people east of the Jordan and outside the land of promise. Though Israel was not his father’s favorite child, still he would not violate his father’s command. Israel was right.

JACOB AND ESAU

In 33:15, Esau tried a less intrusive way to get his brother to follow him in disobedience. Israel risked both his life and his new relationship with Esau to obey his father. It was now clear that “Israel” would have nothing to do with Esau’s disobedient way of life. Esau left with all his men.

In 33:18-20, the author presented a beautiful picture of Israel’s new spiritual outlook on life. First, Israel went into the land of promise and pitched his tent at Shechem. Israel purchased land from Hamor. This is a way to indicate that he intended to stay here. Israel then built an altar to God. In a land of pagan idolatry, Israel made a clear and obvious witness to his worship of the LORD. The name he gave the place was a strong expression of his faith. He called the place “El Elohe Israel.” This is a combination of two different names for God:

- a. “El” – This name emphasizes the mighty power of God.
- b. “Elohe” – this name emphasizes the omnipotence of God and tends to be used in instances where God’s mercy is being shown.

The name Israel is added to make it obvious that this indescribable power is being shown on behalf of His special people, Israel. This is a phenomenal change from what Jacob used to be. It also is an amazing contrast which the author intentionally posed between the obedience of “Israel” and the rebellion of Esau. The test was a simple one. Was “Israel” willing to return what he had taken from his brother? Having done that, is he willing to risk it all by standing firm in obedience when his brother was urging him to join him in rebellion? “Israel” passed the test.

CONCERNING WIVES

The contrast between Esau and Jacob goes on throughout their lives. It was clear to both Jacob and Esau that they were not to marry foreign, pagan wives. In Genesis, chapter 26 you will find these words:

And when Esau was forty years old he married Judith the daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and Basemath the daughter of Elon the Hittite; and they brought grief to Isaac and Rebekah. Genesis 26:34-35

In this passage, Esau married two wives, Judith and Basemath, both of them from Hittite families. The text clearly states that this was a grief to Isaac and Rebekah. The way this is written indicates that the grief was more than the fact that he had married pagan women. It also had to do with the way they conducted their lives in relationship with Esau’s parents.

Writing about a time before the death of Isaac and Jacob, the author of Genesis wrote,

Esau took his wives from the daughters of Canaan: Adah the daughter of Elon the Hittite, and Oholibamah the daughter of Anah and the granddaughter of Zibeon the Hivite; Genesis 36:2

Esau knew that his marriage to two pagan women grieved his parents. This verse creates the impression that he intentionally married two more pagan women to increase his parent’s grief.

Why would he do this? He knew that this was a source of great grief for his parents. He enjoyed a very favored position in his father’s eyes. Why would he jeopardize this position? It could have been for spite because his father had given his blessing to his brother and had none to give to him. Even when Isaac did pronounce a blessing upon Esau, it was not that substantial in terms of the blessing he had placed upon Jacob. It could have been an expression of his rebellion against the God his father worshipped. Throughout his lifetime, Esau was most reluctant to leave these idolatrous people and return to the land God promised to his people. We honestly do not know why, but whatever the reason, it caused him to sin and intentionally do it again in such a way that would sorely grieve his parents and reject the God of Israel.

Granted, Jacob also had more than one wife. The motivation, however, was different, not necessarily better. Jacob knew that in the Near Eastern culture, no other daughter could be married until the oldest daughter married. Only then could the next oldest daughter be married. In spite of this knowledge, he tried to arrange a violation of this code as though he was unaware of it. Laban was as aggressive and subtle as Jacob. He knew the marriage could be conducted in such a way that Jacob would be unaware of the subterfuge until after the marriage was consummated. There was definitely disobedience involved, but it was not spiteful as the actions of Esau had been.

JACOB AND ESAU

Both Jacob and Esau were less than pleasing in the eyes of their parents; Esau for his rebellion and Jacob for his subterfuge. The contrast between the two continued as long as life lasted. Even in their choices for marriage, there was the mark of selfishness on the one hand and a lack of concern for the feelings of their parents on the other.

JACOB AND LABAN JACOB AND LABAN

WHAT DOWRY? !

And Rachel and Leah answered and said to him, "Do we still have any portion or inheritance in our father's house? "Are we not reckoned by him as foreigners? For he has sold us, and has also entirely consumed our purchase price. Surely all the wealth which God has taken away from our father belongs to us and our children; now then, do whatever God has said to you." Genesis 31:14-16

Jacob had been with his mother's family for about twenty stormy years. As the saying goes, "Jacob and Laban deserved each other." When Jacob arrived, it appears that Laban had no sons and Jacob appeared to be destined to be Laban's heir. Since that time, however, sons were born to Laban. As the sons grew, the tensions between Laban and Jacob grew, also. It was almost to the point of violence and Jacob knew it. Earlier in this chapter, the LORD spoke to Jacob and instructed him to return to Canaan. At the time of this passage, Laban and his sons were away shearing sheep. Jacob has informed his wives of his decision to leave. This quotation is part of their response.

Observe, in verse 14, Leah and Rachel spoke of themselves as "foreigners." The word translated "foreigners" is "neker" (נֶכֶר) and means "someone who is unfortunate," "calamitous." An appropriate synonym would be "stranger." Remember, the word "stranger" is more than one you do not know. It literally identifies one who is or appears to be strange to you. This is the way that they considered their father thought of them. They had been with Jacob long enough to be as strange as he was. This is a way of saying that Laban no longer thought of them as one of his own.

The two wives of Jacob asked a self-answering question. They asked, "Do we still have any portion or inheritance in our father's house?" The answer their question suggests is simply, "No we don't." The word translated "portion" is "heleq" (חֵלֶק). The word literally means "share," "part" or "territory." The answer is "absolutely not!" This is not really a question, but an emphasis. The daughters in any family never did have any share in the family's possessions. The land, animals and possessions passed from father to the sons. The women did not, could not own property.

The two women also used the word "inheritance." The word so translated is "nahala" (נַחֲלָה) and means literally "the passing along of family possessions." Again, in that culture, a daughter could not share a portion of her father's possessions. She was to be married and share her husband's inheritance from his father. Again, neither of these are real questions. Everyone knew the cultural provisions and the daughters could not be included. Their questions were intended to emphasize the fact that for all intents and purposes they were no longer a part of their father's family. They were as much strangers to Laban as Jacob was.

In many parts of the world the "dowry" is still a vital part of their culture. Interestingly, in some places the dowry is paid by the groom's family to the father of the bride. In other cultures, the dowry is paid by the family of the bride to the father of the groom. In the Near East, the groom's family paid the father of the bride. A portion of the dowry must be given to the bride and these ten coins are sewn on her head covering around her face. This serves much the same function as a wedding ring does in our culture. Observe, in verse 15, the two women said, "He has sold us and has also entirely consumed our purchase price." These are very bitter words. They did not use the word "dowry," but rather spoke of being "sold." It is a way of saying he has not married us to a husband as he is required to do, but sold us as a man in dire straits would sell his daughter as a slave. What was the real difference in the minds of these two women? As you remember, Jacob did not pay the dowry in cash. This was not uncommon. When this happens, it was the father's responsibility to give the bride the appropriate coins to sew on her head covering. If he did not do this, the community would think of his daughter as the husband's slave rather than his wife. This is what Laban failed to do and thus humiliated his two daughters.

THE ATTITUDE OF LEAH AND RACHEL

The bitterness of the two women continues to reveal itself in their harsh words. Observe, in Genesis 31:16, the two women ascribe Laban's declining empire to the actions of Jehovah. This is interesting. Up until they met

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Jacob, they were deeply involved in the worship of the idols that Laban worshipped. Here they spoke of the matchless power of Jehovah. This, however is not the last word on the subject. Later in the story of Jacob, the LORD commanded Jacob to make his family get rid of their idols and amulets. We do not know how to evaluate this situation. Only God can do this. We can only say that in this instance they would say that God is the one who has taken Laban's fortune in animals away from him. This is quite interesting. Jacob's wives knew quite well that for years Jacob had been working underhandedly to find ways to take the flocks away from Laban in a way that Laban could not dispute. It appears that they are saying that God has used Jacob as a way to take these belongings away from Laban because he had not been dealing properly both with Jacob and with his own daughters.

ADVICE FROM JACOB'S WIVES

The closing statement in Genesis 31:16, represents their encouraging advice to their husband. They said, "Do whatever God has said to you." Seven simple words, but they represent earth-shattering implications. If Jacob leaves as God has instructed, they are running the very real risk of being murdered by Laban, his sons and his servants. Nevertheless, they felt strongly enough to encourage Jacob to do it anyway.

Observe that they referred to Jacob's deity as "God." This is very significant. This name for God highlights His omnipotence. It is the word the Genesis author used to describe the creator of all things. He said, "In the beginning, God created..." This omnipotent, creating God is merciful. These are the things Leah and Rachel had in mind as they urged Jacob to do whatever God said to him.

STOLEN AWAY: SENT AWAY

Then Laban said to Jacob, "What have you done by deceiving me and carrying away my daughters like captives of the sword? "Why did you flee secretly and deceive me, and did not tell me, so that I might have sent you away with joy and with songs, with timbrel and with lyre; Genesis 31:26-27

On the surface, it appears that this is just Laban's angry outburst when Jacob left without telling him. It is much more. If one has been the guest in another person's household, the whole community has a vested interest in the way that person leaves. If the guest is "sent away," it is considered a way that the host honors the guest and the guest honors the host. For the host, it determines the way the entire community will think of him the rest of his life. If a guest is being "sent away" the whole community participates. They escort the guest to the gate of the city or the edge of their encampment with singing and dancing. If the person leaves without being "sent away," it can be life threatening because it establishes a bad reputation for both the host and the guest. Jacob did not think he would live long enough to be sent on his way in peace. If he were ever going to be able to return to the land of promise, he would have to leave without anyone knowing that he was going. The fact that it could be dangerous did not matter too much because it appeared that his life was in jeopardy either way. In the verses quoted here, one can see some of the reasons for his anger along with the community embarrassment. Laban said, "Why did you flee secretly?" Obviously, Laban was more than just angry. He demanded that Jacob explain why he made the decision for himself. Laban was the head of the clan and only he could make a decision about what the people in his clan would do. Part of his anger grew out of the fact that Jacob acted on his own initiative without consulting Laban.

Laban also said, "Why did you flee secretly and deceive me?" For decades, Jacob and Laban had worked hard to deceive and take advantage of each other. Be assured that they kept score. The anger here was over the fact that Jacob deceived and took advantage of his father-in-law one final time and there was no opportunity for Laban to reciprocate. Jacob won!

Laban said, "That I might have sent you away with joy and with song, with timbrel and with lyre." Then as now, no one believed that Laban would ever send Jacob away either with joy or with anger. He just would never allow him to leave. The ultimate statement was that Jacob had publicly embarrassed Laban and the father-in-law was not about to accept this humiliation. This gives us a glimpse into some of the real reasons for Laban's intense anger over the flight of Jacob and his family.

STOLEN IDOLS

"And now you have indeed gone away because you longed greatly for your father's house; but why did you steal my gods?" Genesis 31:30

The religious understandings of Jacob and Laban were complete opposites. Laban worshipped idols while Jacob worshipped Jehovah, the unseen, omnipotent God. The fact that these two men were family to each other made these religious differences much more than philosophical differences. It had to be a source of intense friction between the two. Frankly, it was common for people who worshipped idols and those who worshipped Jehovah to ridicule and deride each other over their seemingly incredible beliefs. There was certainly lots of room for this between Jacob and Laban.

Note, in the opening statement of this verse, Laban is a bit more generous in his description of what Jacob has done than he was when he first caught up with him. This is just a gentle thrust to catch him off guard when his attack follows immediately. In this verse, Laban explains Jacob's leaving as because he was homesick for his father's house. Leaving the way he did would be considered a crime in that culture. Being lonesome for one's father's house is understandable. It is like Laban is saying, "I am going to let you off the hook for running away, but not for the theft of my idols." Theft in most places is considered a crime, but in that part of the world, even today, the punishment for theft is having your thumbs chopped off. That is a serious crime!

Laban is not mentioning the real crime he had chased Jacob down to correct. Laban spoke of "my gods." It was more than a graven image. Remember the problem Rachel and Leah had with their father – no inheritance for them? Among the people in Laban's culture, one particular idol served two purposes. First and foremost it was a deity they worshipped. This was not what Rachel was concerned about. Like the long sleeved coat among the Jews, this idol was the symbol of the leader of the clan. The person who possessed this idol controlled all the people and possessions in the clan or tribe. That was Rachel's concern! Laban felt he had to retrieve this symbol in order to be assured that when he died his possessions and people would come under the control of his son and not under the control of Jacob or his children. Keep in mind, no one knew about this theft except Rachel, the person who took the idol in the first place. When you see the issues that drove Laban as he sought to retrieve both his reputation in the community and the control of his possessions, you understand at a much deeper level just how strongly he felt when he finally caught up with Jacob.

WHOSE DAUGHTERS ARE THESE? !

Then Laban answered and said to Jacob, "The daughters are my daughters, and the children are my children, and the flocks are my flocks, and all that you see is mine. But what can I do this day to these my daughters or to their children whom they have borne? Genesis 31:43

As we read this story, we must keep in mind, at all times, that both Jacob and Laban mixed in half-truths, vague understandings, anything that would suit their purposes. This is a case in point.

A casual reading of this verse would give one the impression that Jacob had stolen, outright, people and possessions that belonged to Laban. That was not true. We need to look more closely to see just how Laban dealt with the truth in his anger and bluster. Laban said, "The daughters are my daughters." It is true that Laban was the father of both Leah and Rachel. In that culture, it was not true for him to say, "The daughters are my daughters." He could honestly say, "The daughters WERE my daughters." That would be true. When he agreed to allow them to be Jacob's wives, they were no longer his daughters. They were no longer members of his family. If they were his daughters and destitute, he would have been forced to provide for them. When he made the agreement with Jacob, these women were no longer members of his family, his responsibility or his control. They now were members of Jacob's family, his responsibility, his control. Jacob could, with impunity, defend them against Laban, who had, in fact, fathered them. This is borne out by the fact that if a woman's husband died, she could not return to her father's house and care. She was without family and had to provide for herself. In most instances that meant that she became a prostitute or died.

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Laban said, “The children are my children.” Again, this is not even close to being true. The way Jacob later dealt with Joseph’s sons- Ephraim and Manasseh – indicates that the grandfather has the right to call his son’s children his children, but the father of the children’s mother has no claim upon these little ones; he cannot control or discipline them or ultimately give them his grandfatherly blessing as Jacob did placing Ephraim ahead of Manasseh. Isaac could call Jacob’s children, “my children,” but Laban could not do this, and everyone knew it.

Laban said, “The flocks are my flocks.” That was a false claim and the magistrates of every community would issue the same verdict. It appears that Laban made this claim on the basis of the fact that the young had been born while Jacob was a part of his household and Laban controlled the entire household. This was not the case. In the tents of Laban, there were two separate, distinct households. Laban possessed one and Jacob possessed the other. A careful study of the text will indicate that Jacob and Laban did not even graze their flocks together at this point. When Jacob left Paddan-aram, he had his flocks with him. Laban was, with his sons and servants, sheering his flock some three days journey away.

There is another insight here. It would have been honest for Laban to say, “the flocks WERE my flocks.” Granted, by Jacob’s conniving and God’s help, the flock that at one time had belonged to Laban gradually became Jacob’s as his wages for serving Laban and the father-in-law had agreed to these terms. It was not necessarily the propensity to lie that caused Laban to say, “The flocks are my flocks.” Rather, it was a way of saying, “You got these flocks by your dishonest maneuvering, but in reality they are still my flocks.”

Laban said, “All that you see is mine.” As we have already pointed out, none of what they could see belonged to Laban. This was an outright lie and his bluster could not change that.

Laban said, “What can I do this day unto these my daughters and unto their children whom they have borne?” His point is that because he was the father of Leah and Rachel he would not dare to do anything about the terrible, illegal theft which Jacob had perpetrated. That is a complete fabrication for two reasons:

1. When Leah was married to Jacob, she was no longer Laban’s daughter and he would never think twice about treating her as a complete foreigner under other conditions.
2. The more important reason he could do nothing was that while he chased after Jacob, Jehovah appeared to him in the night.

Laban said,

It is in my power to do you harm, but the God of your father spoke to me last night, saying, 'Be careful not to speak either good or bad to Jacob.' Genesis 31:29

Laban, in fact, chased after Jacob for three specific reasons:

1. By chasing after Jacob, for leaving without being properly sent away by the entire community, Laban could preserve his respect and reputation in Paddan-aram.
2. He wanted to retrieve his idol so as to insure his son would be the one who controlled his household when he died.
3. He wanted to protect his household. We will discuss this issue in the next segment.

THE COVENANT MEAL

"So now come, let us make a covenant, you and I, and let it be a witness between you and me." Genesis 31:44

A covenant in the Biblical sense is a three-sided agreement between two people and God. The word translated “covenant” is “berit” (בְּרִית). It is “a treaty,” “an agreement,” “a divine ordinance” with specific signs to guarantee cooperation, an agreement with obligations.

If you study this passage, Genesis 31:43-53. you will see some interesting information.

1. Laban began the negotiations with some presuppositions – (The daughters, children, flocks are his).
2. The place was given a name. Each used the same name, but in their own language.
3. Each witness brought a stone to mark the place. This designated the place and the number of witnesses involved.

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4. Laban stated the conditions:
 - a. He called upon Jehovah to oversee the agreement, when he personally did not believe in Jehovah. v. 49
 - b. Jacob is not to afflict Laban's daughters. v. 50
 - c. Jacob is not to take any wives besides the two daughters of Laban. (Laban has nothing to say about this and it should not be part of the covenant. v. 50)
 - d. Laban will not cross the heap of rocks to attack Jacob. v. 52
 - e. Jacob will not cross the heap of rocks to attack Laban v.52
 - f. They called upon Jehovah to watch between them, but Laban did not believe in the existence of Jehovah.
5. They ate bread together with wine as they did with every covenant.
6. Jacob made a sacrifice to Jehovah, expressing his worship of Jehovah and his commitment to Him.

You may remember at the final Passover Jesus celebrated with His disciples, he initiated a new covenant in His own blood. It took place in conjunction with a meal and the eating of bread and drinking of wine.

You may have noticed that Jacob allowed Laban to set all the conditions for the covenant agreement. The text does not indicate why this negotiation was not mutual. One suspects that there were at least two reasons:

1. Laban claiming the daughters, children and herds changed nothing at all. They still belonged to Jacob.
2. Jacob had no interest in marrying other wives or in abusing his current wives.

You may have noticed that there are some very familiar words in verse 49. In a host of youth fellowship groups, they close their meetings each week with a misinterpretation of a very warm benediction. We all said, "May the LORD watch between you and me while we are absent from one another. Amen." It seemed so nice. The problem is that in the Genesis text, this is clearly a threat.

The real purpose of the chase and the covenant is revealed in this threat in verse 49. Laban feared that Jacob would go back to his father and gather the clan and come back to destroy him and his household. He protected himself by making the covenant.

Observe in verse 55 that Laban made one last move to establish his position over Jacob's household. Though he was weeks of travel away from his Paddan-aram home, he did everything he would have done to send them off in a self-protecting manner. He kissed his "sons and daughters," who were not really his sons and daughters. Though he had no authority to pronounce a blessing upon these children, he usurped that authority anyway. This was an "in your face" move for him against Jacob. They parted never to meet again. He never knew whether Jacob obeyed the covenant conditions he had laid down. He did gain one thing. He felt he had forced Jacob not to come back to do him harm which he felt sure Jacob had in mind to do. He was wrong!

THROUGH DAVID'S EYES THROUGH DAVID'S EYES

Throughout the world, there must be millions of Christian homes that have a copy of Psalm 23 printed as a plaque on their wall or framed like a picture on their desk. Believers in dozens of different languages have memorized these beautiful words. Interestingly, as new translations appear on the market, the beauty of the King James Version resists retranslation of this beautiful Psalm or at least keeps the changes at an innocuous minimum. There seems to be an aura about this Psalm; about this version of the Psalm. We may know it by heart, but may not always be too sure of its intended meaning.

This is known as “the Shepherd Psalm.” David knew sheep and shepherding like few others. His thoughts as he penned these beautiful words and our thoughts as we read them are east and west. Frankly, east saw more in the writing than west would ever grasp. Because of this, I spent some time with shepherds in a congregation I served as pastor. I also spent time with a shepherd in Israel. What an eye-opener for me!

It is impossible to reconstruct David's thoughts, but it is possible to review some of the things he certainly knew about the sheep and about shepherding. I invite you to join me as we look at this Psalm from a slightly different perspective.

“THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD”

The Hebrew text, of course, does not use the word “LORD.” When the English text uses the word “LORD”, it is almost always a translation of the unspeakable name “Jehovah (יהוה)”. I say “unspeakable name” for two reasons. First, this name has four consonants, but no vowels. The name can be sounded, but not really spoken. Second, this “unspeakable name” had very limited spoken usage. It could be spoken only on one day of the year – the Day of Atonement. It could only be spoken in the Holy of Holies and only by the High Priest. Our Jewish friends, when reading in Torah will often encounter this name. Whenever they encounter this name, in their reading, they will either say, “hashem” which means “the name” or they will use another name for God – Adonai.

The name identifies God as eternal. When Moses was trying to talk God out of a trip to Egypt, he asked, “When I come to the children of Israel and shall say unto them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me unto you,’ and they shall say to me, ‘what is His name?’ What shall I say unto them?” God said to Moses, “I am that I am.” Exodus 3:13b-14a. The Hebrew text has just two words for God's reply, “יהוה, יהוה”. The literal translation of these words would be, “LORD, LORD.” Interestingly, this name is almost always used in situations where judgment is involved.

Some people are shocked that David would say, “The LORD is my shepherd.” This vocation was associated with a very bad reputation. Joseph told his family to tell Pharaoh that they were “keepers of cattle” because every shepherd is an abomination unto Egyptians.” Genesis 46:34. Shepherds did have a bad reputation.

On the other hand, shepherds had and have a very good reputation. They also are known as being fiercely loyal and protective of their flock. I have seen a shepherd weep uncontrollably over his lamb that had a broken leg. He stopped a tour bus and got them to turn around and take him to Jerusalem – ten miles away to get help for his ailing lamb. The shepherd will risk his very life on behalf of his flock. He will face wild predators bravely to keep his little flock from harm. He will endure the blistering heat of summer and the biting, icy cold of the rainy season, but he will not abandon his flock.

“I SHALL NOT WANT”

This is a very confident statement. Everyone in that day would know that a shepherd would do whatever necessary in order to provide for his flock. There was never any thought that a shepherd would fail to provide for his animals. It is not surprising that David would make such an absolutely confident statement about God. He is our provider, our protector; never-failing one.

“HE MAKETH ME TO LIE DOWN IN GREEN PASTURES”

That part of the world does not have four seasons as we have. They have just two seasons – “rainy season” from November through March and “dry season” – the rest of the year. During the dry season, there is seldom
Not for sale or resale

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any rain at all. During this season, the grass is brown and brittle. During the rainy season, the grass is deep green and lush everywhere as it is in our springtime. This is what David is talking about.

Sheep are not the brightest creatures God created. Indeed, they have very limited mental capacity. Sheep like to eat green grass. However, limited mental capacity will allow sheep to keep on eating with no thought about whether or not they have had enough. As the sheep continue to eat, this grass begins to ferment inside them and they begin to bloat. If the feeding continues, they will fall over and lying on their back, they cannot breathe. They will suffocate. David knew of this danger and described how shepherds deal with it. When the flock has had enough to eat, for the time being, the shepherd will force them to lie down and stop eating. There is no doubt that the sheep would like to continue eating this wonderful foliage. Still, the shepherd will protect them, even from their own thoughtless desires. That is the way God deals with us.

“HE LEADETH ME BESIDE STILL WATERS”

Sheep cannot drink moving, noisy water. I am writing this in Almati, Kazakhstan. The Kazakh people have been herdsmen for centuries. It has rained a lot recently and the streams are running fast and muddy. This evening I took a short walk as the cattlemen and shepherds were bringing their animals home. There were rushing streams all around, but not one sheep even went close to that noisy water. Sheep only will drink when the water is clear, calm and quiet. The shepherd knows that and finds the place that is most helpful to meet the needs of his precious flock. David knew about sheep, but he also knew about God. God knows our needs and is determined to not only meet those needs, but to do so in a way that is most beneficial to us.

“HE RESTORETH MY SOUL”

This is a very delicate statement and must be approached with appropriate care. Some would see these four words as meaning that God revives or reinvigorates our lives. It may include this, but it is much more. David was obviously a great poet, but he was also a consummate Jewish theologian as well.

These four words, though part of a larger sentence, also have a profound message of their own to tell. The word “He” refers to God. It is the subject of this entire sentence.

The word translated “restoreth” is “shuwb” (שׁוּב). It means “to repent,” “to reverse directions.” It describes “returning to the starting point again.” It is to become again what we once were.

The object of this sentence is “soul” “nephesh” (נֶפֶשׁ). We have little agreement on a definition for the “soul.” We even describe it with great difficulty. The word “nephesh” literally means, “to breathe.” Whatever else it involves, this whole discussion focuses upon what we once were; what God intended us to be. In the four words we are observing, David talks about God restoring us to that blissful condition where we first appeared with no previous beginning or history.

We have all failed. We have intentionally and unintentionally alienated ourselves from our Creator. Though we deserve severe punishment, He chooses to “restore our souls,” “to return us to our starting point,” “to return us home again.”

“HE LEADETH ME IN THE PATHS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS”

There is interesting discussion about whether or not sheep can be driven. One person who grew up on a farm claims to have driven sheep. This same person claims to have seen sheep driven in Israel. I am no farmer and never attempted to drive sheep. In my ten trips to Israel, I have never seen sheep being driven. I have many times seen sheep following the shepherd.

My experience indicates that the sheep will follow their shepherd anywhere. One late afternoon, I decided to take a walk through the old city of Jerusalem. In this part of Jerusalem, the streets are six or seven feet wide. These streets were filled with tourists. As I approached the area, I saw a shepherd also approaching with about twenty sheep. He was heading toward the crowd. I watched. I saw the sheep stop at the edge of the crowded street, but the shepherd wedged his way into the crowd. I heard him call one name and all the sheep lunged into the crowd. It got noisy with shocked tourists yelling with surprise and fear, but the shepherd led the way and the

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sheep followed. They got through the area long before I did. Shepherds take sheep where they need to go and the sheep will follow them.

“FOR HIS NAME’S SAKE”

David spoke of God. As a shepherd leads his flock where they need to go, so God leads His people where they need to be. He leads us in paths of righteousness because this is where our life is safest and most meaningful. David said God did this for “His name’s sake”

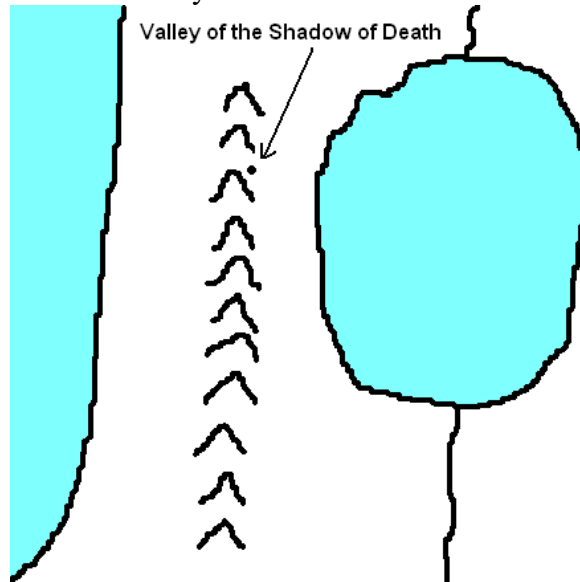
This phrase has been a bit confusing for some people. It is quite obvious that when God restores our soul and leads us in the paths of righteousness, we are the beneficiaries of His actions. The problem is that David presents this as something done, “for His (God’s) name’s sake.” So, is it for our benefit or is it “for His name’s sake”? The answer is “yes.” When God “restores my soul” and “leads me in the paths of righteousness,” it is both for my benefit and “for His name’s sake.”

Obviously, it is important to clarify what it means when David used the phrase, “for His name’s sake.” When God acts, it is always in keeping with His nature, character and purpose. It is always for the benefit of people – both believers and non-believers as well. No matter how one interprets this phrase, the previous statement must be the foundation of one’s thinking and action.

There is a minority of people who would look at this phrase and conclude that it is one more piece of evidence that God is self-centered. Obviously, I take a very different view. First, I firmly believe that “when God acts, it is always in keeping with His nature, character and purposes. At the same time, His every act is for the benefit of people both believers and unbelievers. God acts for His name’s sake, not in seeking His selfish benefit, but rather so that all people can discover His greatness. This is in order to benefit them with the blessings He longs to bestow upon them. If the people are not aware of His generous greatness, then they have no way to know what He longs to do on their behalf.

“YEA THOUGH I WALK THROUGH THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH”

There is a place in Israel called “the Valley of the Shadow of Death.” On the map it looks like this.



There is a mountain range running north to south. It is located about midway between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. There is an opening in the rock, a valley way carved out of the mountain by the ravages of wind and weather. The floor of this gorge-like valley is littered with the bones of sheep that died in the passageway or tumbled to their death following the sheep ahead of them doing the same thing- tumbling over the precipice. David may have tended his sheep here, but it is some distance from Bethlehem. On the west side of the mountain range, there is a lot of excellent grazing land. The winds carry the water off the Mediterranean Sea, but drop the water against the mountain making a wonderful place to graze sheep and grow crops.

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“I WILL FEAR NO EVIL”

Sheep under certain conditions will be afraid of no harm at all. It does not mean that there is no danger to their lives. It simply means that they are not aware of danger that could be all around them. When teaching in Kazakhstan, I met a herd of sheep on the road, they do not know me, but showed no real fear. Suddenly, one sheep was spooked and then the whole flock bolted. It is not that there is nothing to fear. Sheep are not always intelligent enough to realize that they are in danger. Again, it is not that David is unaware of the dangers. It is that knowing exactly what dangers he faces; he is equally aware of one whose power dispels David's fears. David contended that the presence of danger, under certain conditions does not constitute danger for him at all. He then explained his absence of fear.

“FOR THOU ART WITH ME”

Like people, some sheep have a higher propensity for fear than others. Again, some sheep are skittish about most everything while others seem to take most everything in stride. One thing that happens with all the sheep is that when danger is near, they look for the shepherd. It is the presence of their shepherd that dispels fear and initiates calm. The shepherd may not say a word. It is his presence that calms. David knew a lot about this. He had often calmed his father's flock by just being there or by touching them with his staff. He was their source of safety and security. For David, it was the presence of the eternal God that calmed his heart in the face of a vicious predator; an overwhelming army.

“THY ROD AND THY STAFF THEY COMFORT ME”

Despite the vast array of modern technology, in most of the world, shepherd's still carry a staff. When David spoke of the “rod and staff, it was much more than poetic repetition. The Hebrew text used two different words to describe two different implements.

The word translated “rod” is “shebet” (שֵׁבֶט). It literally means “branch.” It is a wooden pole about 1-1/2 to 2 inches in diameter and about six feet long. It is a weapon the shepherd used to defend himself against predatory animals and attacking people.

The word translated “staff” is “misheneh” (מִשְׁעָנָה). This is a walking stick, often a crook. This tool served two purposes:

1. It supported the shepherd attempting to negotiate uneven, dangerous terrain.
2. It was used to retrieve sheep from a precarious position on the rock.

The shepherd carried these two implements at all times. The touch of one of these or the sound of these instruments tapping on the ground or rock was a source of calm and comfort for the herd. David was saying that in precisely the same manner, that which God uses to defend and rescue us is a source of great comfort for every believer.

“THOU DOST PREPARE A TABLE”

Thou dost prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; Thou hast anointed my head with oil; My cup overflows. Psalm 23:5

People have sometimes visualized this verse as a huge banquet, in the middle of a battlefield. That is not quite what David had in mind. David, in this verse, described his relationship with God rather than a picture of a feast. As we pointed out previously, there were four signs of forgiveness that were accepted among the Jews.

- a. Take the person you forgive into your house. You never take anyone into your house with whom you are not at peace.
- b. Eat with the person you forgive.
- c. Share salt with this person during the meal.
- d. Kiss the person you forgive.

You see this in practice in the Old Testament story of Joseph eating a meal with his brothers as well as the New Testament story of the prodigal son.

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When David said, “Thou dost prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies,” he spoke of something very specific. More than most any other king of Israel, David had an overabundance of enemies. These enemies were all around him in the court. In this statement, David said that though he was surrounded by people who would hail his downfall, still he had a restored relationship with God. He was forgiven and shared fellowship with God even though the people around him in the palace would rejoice at his demise.

“THOU HAST ANOINTED MY HEAD WITH OIL”

In Biblical times, they used this kind of oil to accomplish three things:

- a. For refreshing after a very hot trip.
- b. To brighten a person's appearance.
- c. A beautiful fragrance – it was like fragrant perfume.

You may remember that the Pharisee who invited Jesus to dinner did not offer him oil to place upon His head. This was a grave social error on the Pharisee's part.

Basically this kind of oil served two basic purposes:

- a. It was offered to a guest as a kindness in consideration of the person's comfort. This is what we just described.
- b. It was the visual sign used in setting people apart for the service of God. When David was ready to allow Solomon to succeed him on the throne, he had the prophet anoint him with oil.

Remember that David had just talked about the fact that he was forgiven of God despite the fact that he had a host of enemies. He continued by asserting that God had not only forgiven him, but had chosen him to be king despite the disclaimers of his enemies.

“MY CUP OVERFLOWS”

In ancient times, Jews had some very definite ideas about their tears. They thought of their tears as having character. (We now know that tears of joy and tears of sorrow have very different chemical makeup.) They collected their tears of joy in one receptacle and tears of sorrow in a different one. In the Rockefeller Museum in Jerusalem, they have a display case full of these tiny glass bottles in which Jewish people collected their tears. Jesus referred to this understanding when He prayed and asked the Father, “let this CUP pass from me.”

When David said, “my cup overflows.” He was speaking of the experiences of joy that had filled his life. It was a way of saying that his life had been truly blessed by God. His tear cup of joy was running over because there had been so many wonderful things that God brought into his life.

Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life, And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever. Psalm 23:6

“SURELY GOODNESS AND LOVINGKINDNESS SHALL FOLLOW ME”

As you read through this Psalm, you sense a rising emotional tone in David's thoughts and words. It also becomes increasingly personal.

The word translated “goodness” is “tov” (טוֹב). It is almost always simply translated “good.” In reality, this word describes “that which is beautiful.” It identifies “that which is pleasant and gracious.” It is what God saw at the end of each day of creation and exclaimed, “It is good!”

In our text, the word is “lovingkindness.” In other versions, it is “mercy.” It is a translation of the word (רַחֲמִים). It describes “favorable action that would be surprising because it is not deserved.” It identifies that beautiful, kindly action motivated by unselfish concern.

As you look at the two meanings, you note that they are similar, but they are not synonymous. The word “goodness” identifies the kind of action or experience, while “mercy” identifies the motive behind that action.

As David contemplates the beautiful, gracious way God works in his life, he is reminded that it is the beautiful kindness of God motivated by divine concern for his undeserving life. It is not at all surprising that his words take on a noticeable emotional tone.

THROUGH DAVID'S EYES

“I WILL DWELL IN THE HOUSE OF THE LORD FOREVER.”

The way David writes his closing words of this psalm creates some questions for us to ponder.

- a. David already lived in the most beautiful palace in that part of the world.
- b. Observe that he refers to this as “the HOUSE of the LORD.” He did not say temple because no temple existed until many years after David died. The word translated “house” is “bayith” (בַּיִת) and means “building or dwelling.” We must ask the question, does David speak of the tabernacle erected just outside his palace or is this a heavenly reference? The fact that David spoke of dwelling there forever suggests this is a heavenly reference. If that is so, and I believe it is, people of that day would understand this, but they would also grasp something else in his statement.

In that culture, a traveler could approach a home or tent and be welcomed for three days. Family members, on the other hand, were expected to be an active, vital part of the family until the day they died.

David was saying his relationship with God, his Shepherd, was so strong and personal that as a member of God's family, he was not just **allowed** to spend eternity in the presence of the Father, he was **Expected** to do so. In the same way as a son was born into his father's household and lived there as long as he lived, so David was a part of God's family and would forever live with Him.

INVITED TO DINNER
THE GOURMET SECTION

INVITED TO DINNER

THE PHARISEE'S INVITATION

Now one of the Pharisees was requesting Him to dine with him. And He entered the Pharisee's house, and reclined at the table. Luke 7:36

As you read this verse, it seems innocent enough. In this first verse, however, there is evidence of a problem. In that culture, a person only would invite a person into their home with whom they were completely at peace. For Pharisees, that usually meant that they associated only with other Pharisees. This was certainly not the case in this instance. Jesus had been cast out of the city of Nazareth, His hometown. In John 5:21, the Pharisees and scribes were at odds with Jesus because he had forgiven a man's sins. In John 5:30, the Pharisees were upset because he ate with tax collectors and sinners. In John 6:1, the Pharisees were angry because Jesus' disciples plucked heads of grain on the Sabbath. This, according to Jewish law, was perfectly legal. In 6:11, the Pharisees were enraged because He healed on the Sabbath. In 7:30, the Pharisees were at odds with Jesus because they rejected the things He taught. All of this is clear evidence that the Pharisees were not at peace with Jesus. Still, this leading Pharisee invited Jesus into his home. Had he not been seeking a way to gather unfortunate information about Jesus, Simon the Pharisee, would never have allowed Jesus to enter his home.

At the same time, a second symbol of peace and forgiveness with a person was that you invited them to eat at your table. In spite of the severe hatred the Pharisees harbored toward Jesus, he still invited Him to eat at his table. The severity of this violation of cultural mores demands that the Pharisee had an ulterior motive for his break with custom.

UNINVITED VISITORS

And behold, there was a woman in the city who was a sinner; and when she learned that He was reclining at the table in the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster vial of perfume, Luke 7:37

In our culture, we would be stunned and shocked if someone uninvited came into our home and stood in the dining room while we ate dinner with invited guests. These intruders would be ushered out immediately. Normally it would be the same response in first century Israel, but there was an exception. People liked to invite important teachers and rabbi's to dine with them. In such instances, people from the community would feel free to enter the home and stand around the wall in order to listen to the special guest. Indeed, it was an honor for the host to have people want to come to his house because of his very special guest.

A host would be proud to have neighbors come to listen to the invited rabbi talk with the invited guests. A Pharisee host would be totally humiliated to have a prostitute come into his home for any reason. One of the shocking differences between Jesus and the Pharisees had to do with the way one responds to others. The Pharisees only allowed those with whom they were peace, other Pharisees, to enter their home. Under no circumstance would a Pharisee agree to eat a meal with a person who did not share their strict adherence to the rules of the Pharisees. This would be particularly true when it came to allowing a prostitute to come into his home. On the other hand, Jesus easily associated with the publicans and sinners. This would include the tax collectors, murderers, thieves, prostitutes and those fleeing from the law. This happened on more than one occasion and each time caused great consternation on the part of the religious leaders.

WHAT KIND OF WOMAN?

And behold, there was a woman in the city who was a sinner; and when she learned that He was reclining at the table in the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster vial of perfume, Luke 7:37

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This story is full of surprises. Our text refers to this woman as a "sinner." The word so translated is "hamartia" (ἁμαρτία). The word literally means "to miss the mark." When used of a woman it very often identified a person who was a prostitute. The Pharisees were very strict. They knew that a prostitute could not come into the temple because she was unclean and considered unredeemable. Under any other circumstances, the host would have refused this woman entrance into his home. The host would never speak to her; much less allow her to enter his home. Her presence would make the home and all the occupants unclean. Under these circumstances, everyone present would be unclean and could not go to the temple to worship. There are no conditions under which this Pharisee would permit this to happen. Then why did he allow it? Again, it appears that this too was a trap set for Jesus.

As was His custom, Jesus focused His attention on what a person could become, not on what others thought of the person or tried to attribute to their character.

THE PERFUME

And behold, there was a woman in the city who was a sinner; and when she learned that He was reclining at the table in the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster vial of perfume, Luke 7:37

We think of perfume as a liquid with a beautiful aroma. In Matthew 24 and Mark 14, the apostles tell a similar story. Is it the same experience? We do not know for certain. In the Matthew and Luke account, the perfume was nard. The value of this perfume was equal to a man's wages for more than a year.

In all three accounts, the perfume was packaged in an alabaster bottle. Alabaster was a very special stone and the bottle would be very costly as well. They would break the thin neck of the alabaster bottle in order to use the costly perfume. After use, a small ball of wax was pushed into the neck of the broken bottle to preserve the precious contents. Our text says this woman of the street anointed Jesus feet with the perfume. Actually, this is something the extremely rich often did, but it was unheard of among common people.

THE WOMAN STOOD BEHIND JESUS

And standing behind Him at His feet, weeping, she began to wet His feet with her tears, and kept wiping them with the hair of her head, and kissing His feet, and anointing them with the perfume. Luke 7:38

If you look carefully at the way John recorded this, it sounds impossible. The woman stood behind Jesus and wet his feet with her tears, wiped his feet with her hair and anointed his feet with the nard. Actually, had Jesus been sitting at the table, as we do, this would have been absolutely impossible. With apologies to Michelangelo, we must remember that they did not sit on a chair at the table. In every home, rich or poor, they would lie down on mats or pillows on the floor to eat. They rested on their left elbow and ate with their right hand. With Jesus lying on the floor, it would not be difficult for this woman of lowly reputation to perform the tasks John reported.

There is some question about how she washed Jesus' feet with her tears. It is possible that she knelt over His feet and tears fell on His feet as she wept. There is another possibility. Jewish people thought of tears, both tears of joy and tears of sorrow, as having a personality of their own. They used a tear cup to collect tears of joy and another to collect tears of sorrow. Modern research, conducted by Omni magazine, indicates that tears of joy and sorrow have a different chemical composition. Tears of sorrow are toxic, tears of joy are not. It is possible that she took her tears of sorrow and poured the contents over Jesus' feet. In either case, it would be a symbol of sorrow and grief that was beyond her ability to control.

EASY TO MISS REPRIMAND

Now when the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet He would know who and what sort of person this woman is who is touching Him, that she is a sinner." Luke 7:39

This verse is one more piece of evidence that the Pharisee had ulterior motives in inviting Jesus to his home for dinner. Because Jesus was in the Pharisee's home, it was the host's responsibility to protect his guest from dan-

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ger and uncomfortable situations. The Pharisee failed to carry out his responsibility as a host. Indeed, in his mind, the Pharisee looked down upon Jesus because he felt Jesus failed to realize what kind of woman this was and failed to stay away from her presence.

Observe that the Pharisee assumed that Jesus must have the same values as he held. The Pharisee would not come near a woman of the street, much less allow her to touch him. He assumed Jesus would feel the same way if He realized what kind of woman she was. The truth was that everyone would know. Prostitutes wore recognizable clothing so that perspective customers would know of her vocation. The Pharisee also assumed that Jesus did not know what kind of woman she was. On both counts, of course, the Pharisee's assumptions were false. As explained earlier, Jesus was not put off by what a person was, but focused His attention on what they could become in His grace.

JESUS' RESPONSE

Up to this point, the Pharisee had carried out a shrewd deception that probably fooled most everyone in the house, except Jesus. It was customary in that culture to eat only with people who were your friends or with whom you had no disagreement. Indeed, if a person wanted to show another individual that he was forgiven, he would invite that person into his house to eat with him. Because of this understanding, Pharisees seldom ate with anyone except other Pharisees. By inviting Jesus to dine in his house, the Pharisee indicated to the community that there was no disagreement between himself and Jesus. This, of course, was totally false.

During the meal, "An immoral woman" came up and washed Jesus' feet with her tears, dried them with her hair and anointed His feet with costly perfume. The Pharisee mused to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who and what sort of person this woman is." The fact was that Pharisees isolated themselves from sinners, but Jesus sought them out to forgive them. At this point Jesus vigorously exposed the deception of the Pharisee. Jesus identified each of the Pharisee's actions that was humiliating and insulting. The host pretended to be friendly toward Jesus, but was really insulting Him, seeking to trap Him.

NO WATER FOR MY FEET

*And turning toward the woman, He said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave Me no water for My feet, but she has wet My feet with her tears, and wiped them with her hair."
Luke 7:44*

The roads in that part of the world were made of neither cement nor asphalt. They were dirt roads packed down by rain, sun and repeated use.

When there was no rain, the roads were dusty at best. Tropical climates always seem to be very dusty. On those rare occasions when it did rain, these dusty roads were turned to mud.

Because of these severe conditions, it was necessary to remove the sandals and wash the feet whenever one came into a house. In the home of a rich man, a lowly servant would remove the sandals from the feet of every guest. He would then wash the feet of this guest. You may remember that John the Baptist told the crowd that he was unworthy to even remove the sandals from the feet of Jesus. It was to this that he referred.

On the other hand, in the home of a poor family, there was no servant to wash the feet. There was a place where each person could remove their sandals. In the home of such a poor family, there would be a bucket of water where the guest could wash away the grime and mud they accumulated as they walked.

Simon was a rich Pharisee. He would have had several servants. None of these, however, was on hand to assist Jesus when He arrived at the rich man's home.

Jesus did not ask for the privilege of attending this festive event. He was invited. Simon had the responsibility to care for His needs while He was a guest in Simon's home.

YOU GAVE ME NO KISS

"You gave me no kiss; but she, since the time I came in, has not ceased to kiss My feet." Luke 7:45

INVITED TO DINNER

As you can see, there are several hints in this story that this invitation was not all that it appeared to be. Part of Jesus' response to this Pharisee's attack is that he pointed out some of the things this host failed to do.

The host is responsible to greet his guest. In the home of a wealthy Pharisee, he would greet his guest after entering the home. The greeting would be in the form of a kiss. In that culture, there are four signs that indicate that a person is accepted or forgiven.

1. You show the person that he/she is forgiven or accepted when you take them into your home.
2. You show the person that he/she is accepted if you eat a meal with him/her.
3. You show a person that he/she is forgiven and accepted if you share salt with them during the meal. We must keep in mind that salt was one of their most valued possessions.
4. You show the guest that he/she is accepted when you greet them with a kiss when first they enter the house.

Jesus saw through the Pharisee's hypocrisy. He was saying that this host had attempted to fool him. The Pharisee invited Jesus to be his guest, but treated Him like an intruder. He did not offer him the customary kiss, a sign that there was no problem between the two people.

The Pharisee would have been furious with Jesus when He said these things. Jesus compared the Pharisee with the sinful woman. The comparison, however, leaned in favor of the woman and not the Pharisee. The Pharisee gave Jesus no kiss. Jesus had no reason to really believe that he was accepted in this home. The "sinful woman," however, continued to kiss his feet from the time she came into the room. It was clear that there was no division between Jesus and the sinful woman. It was also clear that there was no real acceptance between Jesus and Simon, the Pharisee.

YOU DID NOT ANOINT MY HEAD

"You did not anoint My head with oil, but she anointed My feet with perfume." Luke 7:46

This creates a question in our minds, but the people in Simon's house that night would understand fully. The fact that our roads are paved and relatively dirt free keeps us from understanding the ancient tradition of which Jesus spoke.

Their roads were simply packed dirt. Dirt roads, when used repeatedly, develop a thick layer of dust in the dry season. This dust becomes fine like flour. In the rainy season, however, it turned into thick mud. If a person walked from his home to some other place in the city, his clothes and even his hair would be covered with a cloud of dust. Should he sit down to eat, there would be dust in his food for certain.

To care for this unruly situation, they would pour a small amount of oil or ointment on the hair and rub it into the scalp. This was more a necessity than a cultural nicety. It sounds a bit gross and awkward to have oil poured on dirt-covered hair.

If a person intended to care for the necessities of his guests, he would never allow this custom to go unattended. Jesus came into Simon's house and received no water to wash the dust from his feet and no oil to keep the dust in his hair from falling into his food.

Jesus was doing more than pointing out a cultural failure. He was turning the tables on his host. Obviously, the host invited Jesus to dinner, not because they were at peace with each other, as custom demanded, and not because he wanted the pleasure of Jesus' company. He invited him in an attempt to trap Him. His subsequent treatment of Jesus overshadowed the fact that he invited the Master to dinner. The Pharisee was prepared to make assumptions about Jesus and about the woman who anointed His feet. Jesus was pointing out that at least she had not publicly humiliated Him in the way that His host, the Pharisee, had done.

DINNER WITH ZACCHAEUS

And when Jesus came to the place, He looked up and said to him, "Zaccheus, hurry and come down, for today I must stay at your house." Luke 19:5

The text indicates that Zacchaeus was a “chief publican.” This tells us a lot about the man. A “Publican” was one who collected tax revenue on behalf of the Roman government. A “Chief Publican” was one who negotiated directly with the Roman officials and paid for the privilege of collecting taxes. These “Chief Publicans” then hired “Publicans” to collect the taxes that the “Chief Publican” paid for the privilege of collecting. There was no such thing as a fair tax code. The tax was whatever the Publican felt he could extract from the person. The text also said that Zacchaeus was rich. This was probably the under-statement of the year. There probably was no one in Jericho as rich as Zacchaeus. Most of the Jews from Galilee came to Jerusalem at least three times a year. They came through Jericho so that they would not have to pass through what they thought of as Gentile Samaria. Jericho was a key stop on the trade route coming from the northeast and heading toward Egypt. He taxed them all.

The text says that Zacchaeus was “small in stature.” This means that he was very short because everyone in that part of the world was short. He was short enough that he could see nothing if others stood in front of him. This often meant that he had grown up in such poverty that nutrition was severely lacking in his home. He climbed up into a Sycamore tree. The word translated “Sycamore” is “sukomorean” (συκομορρέαν) which is actually a form of low hanging mulberry tree. Today there are several of these on the road going west toward Jerusalem out of Jericho.

Jesus saw him in the tree, called him by name and urged him to come down. How did Jesus know the name of this man? There are two major possibilities: First, Jesus, in His deity, was omniscient, He knew all things. Second, Josephus gives us two pieces of information that could be most helpful. He told us that the Romans liked to get Rabbi's to be tax collectors for at least two reasons: First they were well educated. Second, they could be trusted more than most of the Jews. The second thing Josephus tells us is that at the time Jesus was a little boy, there was a Rabbi in Nazareth by the name of Zacchaeus. Was it the same man? One would suspect so, but cannot say for sure.

When Jesus invited Zacchaeus down out of the tree, Jesus said, ” Today I must abide at your house.” Jesus actually invited himself into the house of Zacchaeus. That was not the way it would usually be done. People began to grumble when Jesus said this. In that culture you only talked with, ate with, stayed with people you affirmed and with whom you were at peace. The people said, bluntly, “He has gone to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.” One suspects there were a few Pharisees in the mix of that crowd. Their surprise is easy to understand. Zacchaeus was so ostracized he could not enter the temple in Jerusalem. Jesus set that custom aside. He was not short of a place to eat or stay. He was not want for company. He just wanted to talk with Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus was jubilant! Apparently, Luke 19:8-10 took place later while they dined in the home of Zacchaeus.

Sometime that evening, Zacchaeus made a confessional statement. Everyone knew that Zacchaeus was a thief. Nevertheless, he made two statements. First, he said, “Half of my possessions I will give to the poor.” Second, he said, “If I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much.” These statements tell us what Zacchaeus was thinking. “This,” Jesus announced, ”is real repentance.” Zacchaeus was a Jew and perhaps a former Rabbi as well. He knew the penalty for theft. It was clearly stated more than once in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Then it shall be, when he sins and becomes guilty, that he shall restore what he took by robbery, or what he got by extortion, or the deposit which was entrusted to him, or the lost thing which he found, or anything about which he swore falsely; he shall make restitution for it in full, and add to it one-fifth more. He shall give it to the one to whom it belongs on the day he presents his guilt offering. Leviticus 6:4-5 (see also Exodus 20:16; 22:1-4; Leviticus 5:16)

The thief was required to repay the loss plus 20% of the value of the stolen items. Zacchaeus, once the thief, is now giving back multiplied times what was required as the penalty for theft. Real repentance is not saying, “I am

DINNER WITH ZACCHAEUS

sorry.” It is turning around in your daily walk of life. It is amazing what can take place over supper. By the way, the text does not say what they ate that night. The fact that they ate a meal when Zacchaeus made this promise established a covenant he could never break as long as he lived.

THE UPPER ROOM PASSOVER UPPER ROOM PASSOVER

And on the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb was being sacrificed, His disciples said to Him, "Where do You want us to go and prepare for You to eat the Passover?" Mark 14:12

As a young child, Jesus became accustomed to celebrating the three major Jewish feasts, especially the Passover, in Jerusalem. In Luke's Gospel you will find these words:

And His parents used to go to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover. Luke 2:41

The people who lived in Galilee, particularly in Nazareth, were devout Jews and many of them attended the three major feasts in Jerusalem. Most of these people had originally come from the villages around Jerusalem. Everyone who lived within a radius of 15 miles of Jerusalem was required to celebrate these three feasts in Jerusalem. Having moved to Galilee out of protest against religious laxity, they continued to observe the 15-mile limit command.

In Mark 14:12, the disciples questioned Jesus concerning "making ready" for the Passover celebration. We would tend to think of this as preparing food for the feast. It included this, but there was much more. Someone had to stand in line with his sacrificial animal to have it sacrificed. There were thousands of lambs that had to be sacrificed. It took a long time. They also were required to go through the house with a lamp and remove every crumb of leaven. It was customary to give the leaven they found to some needy Gentile who lived nearby.

In verse 13, Jesus told the disciples to watch for a man carrying a water jug. This would be very obvious. They probably had never seen a man carrying a water jug before. This was done always and only by women.

In verse 14, Jesus instructed the disciples to ask for the upper room in the house where they were to celebrate the feast. By the way, the word translated "upper room" is "kataluma" (ΚΑΤΆΛΥΜΑ). This is exactly the same word Luke used in Luke 2:7 where our translation says, "There was no room for them in the INN." The text says that this upper room was "large" and "furnished." This indicates that it was the home of a very wealthy person. These homes were all located in the lower, southwestern part of the city, where, by the way, many priests, Scribes and Pharisees lived.

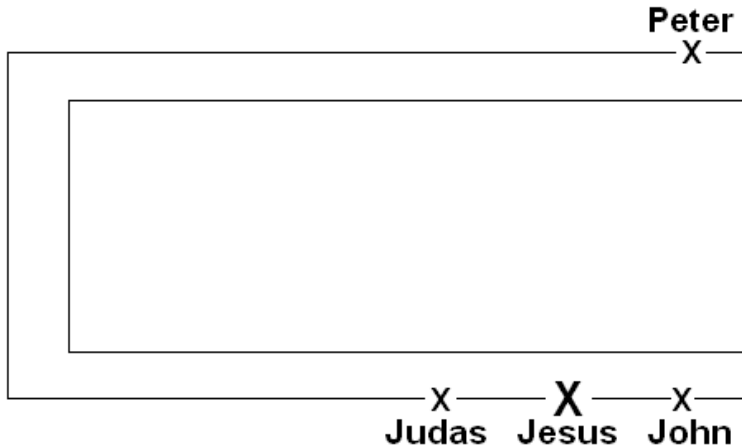
This celebration, to this day, is celebrated at night. To this extent, it was a reenactment of that first celebration in Egypt that took place at night.

In John's report of this celebration of the feast of Passover, He gives information about the seating arrangements around the table. He said,

There was reclining on Jesus' breast one of His disciples, whom Jesus loved. Simon Peter therefore gestured to him, and said to him, "Tell us who it is of whom He is speaking." He, leaning back thus on Jesus' breast, said to Him, "Lord, who is it?" John 13:23-25

From this paragraph, one can piece together the location of some of the people at the table. Our tables are usually round, square or rectangular. Theirs were made in the shape of the letter "U".

THE UPPER ROOM PASSOVER



These tables were about 18 inches high and with apologies to Michelangelo, they did not sit at the table, but reclined leaning on their left elbow and eating only with their right hand. On this diagram, you can see that the head of the table is marked with a large “X” and the name “Jesus” is placed there. Immediately to his left was the place of honor, where you see the name “Judas.” To Jesus’ right is the second place of honor where you see the name “John.” In John’s record, 13:24, it says,

Simon Peter therefore gestured to him, and said to him, "Tell us who it is of whom He is speaking." John 13:24

Remember, everyone at the table is leaning on his left elbow. That means that the only place where someone could get John’s attention was across the table at the servant’s place where you see the name “Peter.” Only at Passover would servants recline to eat. At all other times, they would stand to eat after their owners had finished. It was required that the youngest boy or man at the table must ask how this night differed from all other nights. The host was required to answer by telling the story of the Exodus. That did not happen on this night. Rather, Jesus said that someone at the table would betray him. Everyone, of course, wanted to know who would betray Jesus. Jesus answered John’s query by saying it was the one to whom he would give the “sop.” At every feast, the host was required to use a piece of bread, like a fork, and fish out a specially prepared piece of meat and place it in the mouth of the honored guest. In this instance, it was Judas. You may remember that in the story of Saul, I Samuel 9:24, Samuel made Saul the honored guest at a feast and presented him with the thigh of the sacrificial lamb they were eating.

In John 13:27, Jesus told Judas, “What you do, do quickly.” This statement escaped the minds of the disciples because they had a custom that on Passover, after the people had eaten, they would take gifts to the poor. Some of the disciples thought that this is what Jesus instructed Judas to do since he held the purse for the disciples.

All of the food on the Passover table was symbolic. It is interesting that Jesus chose the bread and wine for the new celebration he was establishing. The people around the table knew exactly what Jesus was doing. After supper, Jesus took bread and announced that this was a new covenant. They all knew that a covenant could not be entered into without eating bread. Everyone who ate that bread was indicating his participation in the covenant. After announcing the “new covenant in His blood,” Jesus gave each covenant participant the cup of wine to share. All covenants were sealed with a cup of shared wine. Actually, this cup was the third cup of wine shared at the Passover meal and was called the “cup of Salvation.”

The text says that Jesus took off his outer garment and wrapped a towel around Him as a slave did when preparing to wash the feet of a guest who had just arrived at the master’s house. You see, when the disciples arrived, the ones who made the preparations for the feast should have washed the feet of the other eleven who came. No one would stoop to do this. When everyone in the room had passed up the opportunity to serve in this man-

Not for sale or resale

THE UPPER ROOM PASSOVER

ner, Jesus humiliated them all by washing their feet. Jesus instructed the disciples, as often as they observed this new covenant they should do so “in remembrance of Him.” The word translated “remembrance” is “anamnesis” (ἀνάμνησιν). It means, “to recall affectionately.” We have a similar idea in English. We speak of remembering someone in our will. It is a way of displaying honor for that person.

The text says that afterwards they sang a hymn. This hymn was found in the book of Psalms. It is what they refer to as “the Hallel.” In our text, it is Psalms 113-118. If you read these beautiful Psalms, you quickly realize that they conclude this beautiful celebration with a song rich in thanksgiving and triumph. If you read very carefully, you will note there is also a Messianic reference.

DINNER ON THE ROOF

THE COUNCIL IN SESSION

Originally, most of the people who became Christians were Jews. Even the people who repented at Pentecost were Jews. When the apostle Paul went to a city to preach, he went first to the synagogue. The people who repented and accepted Christ in these services were Jews as well. As time passed, situations changed. The Jews persecuted Paul, so he preached to the Gentiles. Word of this change spread throughout the church. Serious division rose throughout the body. It was NOT over whether Gentiles could become Christians. Most everyone agreed that was possible. Indeed, Paul brought Titus as an example of a Gentile who had become a Christian. The division arose over whether or not a Gentile had to become a Jew in order to become a Christian. Peter attended the Jerusalem Council and spoke to this issue.

PETER'S EXPERIENCE IN JOPPA

As Peter traveled from place to place preaching, God spoke to him about the Gentiles. In Acts 11, Peter told of his experience while staying in the home of Simon the Tanner. This was a new experience for Peter. Peter's host, Simon, was a Jew. Simon, however, was also a tanner. A person in this trade was constantly in contact with the bodies of dead animals. This would make him unclean. By staying in Simon's home, Peter was as unclean as Simon was.

PETER'S TENSION

All his life, Peter had been a very strict, "observant" Jew. Now, God placed him in a situation where this was not possible. Peter was discovering, albeit painfully, that God treated Jews and Gentiles in precisely the same manner. To say the least, this was difficult for Peter to accept.

PETER'S VISION

Peter was a guest in Simon's house. It was apparently during the hottest time of the year, July, August. During this time, a houseguest would sleep on the flat roof of the house where it was cool. It appears that Peter was taking a mid-day nap when he had a vision.

"I was in the city of Joppa praying; and in a trance I saw a vision, a certain object coming down like a great sheet lowered by four corners from the sky; and it came right down to me, Acts 11:5

As Peter related this experience to the council, he told of seeing a huge vessel or implement like a sheet coming down from the sky. The word our Bible translators referred to as "sheet" is not the best word choice. The word "othone" is actually the Greek word used to identify the sail of a ship. Come to think of it, these people did not have sheets and had never slept in a bed. In museums depicting middle-eastern life, you will find tiny beds – four feet long – which date back to 2,000 B.C. Peter slept on a mat all his life.

Interestingly, there is a painting which portrays the way they "off-loaded" large animals from the hull of a ship. In this picture, the ship's sail was used to lift the steer out of the hull of the ship.

In this "sheet" or "sail," Peter reported that there were all kinds of animals and creatures both "clean" and "unclean," by his understanding. Not surprisingly, Peter objected strenuously.

'But I said, 'By no means, Lord, for nothing unholy or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' Acts 11:8

In all his life, Peter had never eaten any food which by the dietary laws was considered "unclean." He was not about to start now.

AN ANNOUNCEMENT

'But a voice from heaven answered a second time, 'What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy.' Acts 11:9

DINNER ON THE ROOF

This voice from heaven spoke words which even modern Jewish Christians would be shocked to hear. This was the beginning of a new era. It was a time when there was to be no difference between Jews and Gentiles in the body of Christ. It was a time when the dietary laws were no longer in vogue. As the heavenly voice said, "What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy (make common.)"

This was God's way to introduce Peter to the idea that there was a new order among those who loved and served Him. Though Peter had been totally immersed in the Jewish understanding of life, God was now opening new understandings for him to experience. From this point on, Peter would minister to the Gentile as intensely as he ministered to the Jewish people. To his credit, Peter served among the Gentiles as aggressively as he had served among his own people.

BREAKFAST BY THE SEASIDE

Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish which you have now caught." John 21:10

After His resurrection, Jesus left word that His disciples should go to Galilee and He would meet them there. The disciples went to Galilee, but did not see Jesus there. Apparently in frustration, Peter announced that he was going fishing and the others accompanied him. This was more than just finding something to do while they waited. Remember, Peter was a fisherman before he followed Jesus. Peter was saying, it was great to follow Jesus, while it lasted, but it is over. Peter was giving up on Jesus and the other disciples joined him.

They fished all night, but caught nothing. This can happen, but Peter was an experienced fisherman and had not seen many nights like this. The disappointment had to be very intense.

Finally, they saw Jesus standing on the beach. He inquired about their success. No one likes to admit that he fished all night and caught nothing. For a professional fisherman, the humiliation was far worse. Imagine Peter's thoughts when Jesus said, "cast your net on the other side of the boat." Peter is the professional. He is tired and frustrated. Now Jesus, who may never have gone fishing in His life, says, "you did it wrong. Throw your nets on the other side of the boat." That wouldn't necessarily have brightened Peter's day to say the least. Did Peter do it to humor the LORD; did he do it with an "I'll show you" attitude? We don't know. We only know he did it.

Jesus invited them to breakfast and they saw bread and fish cooking on the coals. Jesus instructed them to bring some fish with them. Why would He do this? Didn't He have enough cooked? Did He really need more fish? The text is silent. It could simply be that He wanted to remind them that He had called them to fish for men and not for fish. It would be a way to remind them that adverse circumstance, like the crucifixion, was no good reason to stop their calling.

In verse 13, John reported that Jesus gave them bread and fish for breakfast. This is Jesus' third appearance since His resurrection. John reported, in verse 15, that after breakfast, Jesus spoke personally with Peter. Jesus made it painfully clear that this was not a casual conversation. Jesus had spoken many times with Peter, but this was quite different. For one thing, it was a very formal conversation. Many questions are asked about this conversation. It appears that Jesus asked the same question three times and received the same answer each time. We need to look more carefully at what was said.

So when they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Tend My lambs." John 21:15

Jesus' question was simple and direct, "Do you love me more than these?" We need to ask what Jesus meant by the word "these". The text does not clarify this. One guess is that He was pointing to the fish. Jesus said, "Do you LOVE me." The word translated "love" is "agape" (ἀγάπη). This word identifies "unqualified love." It is the word almost always used to identify the love of God. It is love that is present with or without a response. It is love "without conditions."

Peter's answer was equally simple and straightforward, "Yes LORD, you know that I love you." It sounds quite simple, but there is a problem. The word Peter used for "love" is different from the word Jesus used. Peter used the word "phileo" (φιλέω). This is "brotherly love." It has definite conditions and limitations. It is a responsive kind of love which only exists as it receives an equal response. That is different from what Jesus asked.

A second time Jesus asked, in an equally formal way,

He said to him again a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Shepherd My sheep." John 21:16

Jesus' question is exactly the same as his first query, except He did not say, "more than these." He again used the word "agape" which is "love without qualification, limits or conditions." It is "to love just because you love."

BREAKFAST BY THE SEASIDE

Peter's answer was word for word the same as his first response, "Lord, you know that I love you" (phileo). Jesus responded differently the second time. He said, "tend my sheep." We will look at these responses momentarily.

A third time, Jesus addressed Peter in a formal manner:

He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?" Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, "Do you love Me?" And he said to Him, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You. "Jesus said to him, "Tend My sheep. John 21:17

Jesus said, "do you love me", but there is a surprising change. This time Jesus used the word "phileo", "do you like me?"

The text states that Peter was "grieved because he said to him the third time "do you love me." The word translated "grieved" is "lupeo" (λυπέω). It means "to be sorrowful, sad, deeply distressed." Peter was not angry that Jesus asked the same question three times. He was deeply saddened that the third time Jesus asked if Peter liked him conditionally rather than loving him unconditionally. Peter's response was a bit different the third time. There is pathos in his words as he said, "Lord you know all things, you know that I like you conditionally." Jesus responded again, "Feed my sheep." Can you imagine how Peter felt at this point?

We must look carefully at the charges Jesus made after each question. The responses were as follows:

1. "Feed my lambs" – The word translated "feed" is "boskoo" (βοσκώ). This is "the general care of the little lambs." This was Jesus' way of saying, "I want you to oversee the church; to spiritually feed the new believers, promote the spiritual welfare of these delicate new believers." Lambs represent new believers.
2. "Tend my sheep" – The word "sheep" here represents more seasoned believers. The word translated "tend" is "Poimaine" (ποιμαίνε). It means "to keep the flock," "to keep the sheep," "provide pasturage." Spiritually, Jesus was instructing Peter to nourish the more mature believers, to help them grow in the faith, to strengthen their understanding of the Scriptures so as to be more Christlike.
3. "Feed my sheep" – In the Greek text, the third response, the word translated "feed" is the same word as used in the first instruction, "feed my lambs," "boskoo" (βοσκώ). Instead of care for my lambs, the instruction is "care for MY sheep." The astonishing thing is that though Jesus exposed Peter's limited affection for Him, still Jesus was willing to entrust the souls of those for whom He died to his care. This grace is beyond description.

People usually stop here in their study. They miss an important piece of the story. Jesus was talking with Peter about the fact that his love for Christ was conditional. Still he entrusts His precious souls to Peter's care and then speaks in a very positive, hopeful way about how faithful Peter will be when he is confronted with the choice of martyrdom or rejecting his faith. Even in our greatest weakness, Jesus is willing to trust us to serve Him and His people; He is able to see how much more faithful we can become as we face even more taxing confrontations.

JESUS ATE WITH PUBLICANS AND SINNERS

WHO ARE THESE PEOPLE?

A. TAX GATHERERS

The Roman Empire was a far-flung military stronghold. Because their conquered territory was so vast and widespread, Rome had to hire mercenaries to control their subjects. Most of the mercenaries in Israel were from Samaria. By imposing heavy taxes, Rome was able to maintain such a huge military force.

In Israel, a "tax gatherer" was a Jewish man who paid Rome for the privilege of collecting the taxes. There was no such thing as a "uniform tax code." The tax was whatever the collector said it was. Taxes were collected for most everything. They were taxed for using the roads; for everything they carried with them. If they had a tree on their land, they paid a tax for it. (They soon cut down all the trees.) Tax gatherers, like Zacchaeus, hired other Jewish men to assist them in collecting these taxes. These men not only paid for the privilege of collecting taxes, but, also, paid a certain amount to support the government and the army.

Because tax gatherers supported the idolatrous Romans in keeping Israel under bondage, other Jews thought of them not only as traitors, but also as blasphemers. They were forbidden to attend the services at the temple. They were hated violently, because of their gouging of their own people, they were very rich.

B. SINNERS

Among the Jews, there were several groups, people they considered social rejects, who were lumped together as "sinners." Here are a few:

Thieves

As in any culture, there was the occasional person who stole someone else's belongings to make them their own. The law even gives a prescription to indicate how a thief repays what he took from another person or group.

There were some thieves, however, who stole from others as a way of life. These people were unconcerned about what the law had to say about their activities. They did not know and did not care.

When this became known, these professional thieves were barred from the temple and from social interaction. They were considered the social lepers of the culture. Decent people would have nothing to do with them. Pharisees would cross the street to avoid meeting them. Such people and their families were treated in much the same way as Gentiles were treated.

Murders

If you read the Pentateuch carefully, the punishment for murder was death. Indeed, the cities of refuge were established as a safety measure to protect the individual who took another person's life, but not by intent. For any other person guilty of murder, the penalty was death.

Still, the murderer was shunned by the rest of the community. He and his family would have interaction only with other murderers, thieves, prostitutes and tax collectors. They were, naturally, barred from entering the temple, which meant that there would be no sacrifice for their sins on the Day of Atonement. Their wives could not go to the well in the cool of the morning along with the other women of the community. Like the Samaritan woman, they would have to get water at noon when it was hot, very hot.

Prostitutes

These women, also, were part of the group called "sinners." This is a tragic scene. If a woman was divorced or her husband died, she had no place to turn. She was no longer a part of her husband's family. When she got married, she ceased to be tied to her parents' family. Her options were few and tragic. She could beg, starve or become a prostitute with few other possibilities.

Nevertheless, she was prohibited from entering the temple. Decent people would have nothing to do with her. Her only contact with people, other than her customers, was the others who were also called "sinners."

JESUS ATE WITH PUBLICANS AND SINNERS
THE RESPONSE TO PUBLICANS AND SINNERS

SCRIBES AND PHARISEES

Both the Scribes and Pharisees worked very hard to develop a reputation for purity and obedience to the Law, at least outwardly. This created a problem for them. In that culture, if you associated with a person, people had to assume that you accepted that person and their lifestyle. In order to maintain their reputation, Scribes and Pharisees were forced to avoid most everyone except each other. This is the reason they chided Jesus for associating with Zacchaeus and his “publican and sinner” friends.

Scribes and Pharisees assumed that all publicans and sinners were beyond redemption. Thus, they would have nothing to do with them.

JESUS

Jesus took a very different view of “publicans and sinners.” He acknowledged the depths of their sin, but staunchly affirmed that they could be changed. Jesus did not eat with the publicans and sinners because He wanted to be thought of as one of them. He ate with them because as He said, “it is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick.” Luke 5:31. In that culture you only associate or eat with those whose person and lifestyle you affirm. In word and action, Jesus challenged the cultural understanding and sought to minister to the person rather than bowing to the cultural understandings.

In Luke chapter 15, the Pharisees chided Jesus for associating with this kind of people. He answered by telling a three-part parable. In each instance, something/someone was lost, something/someone found and there was great rejoicing in heaven over the sinner that repented. Jesus was saying these people are redeemable and they are important to God. They were people that it was important for Jesus to care deeply for them.

The Pharisees gave every appearance of purity and obedience. They avoided the thieves, but profited handsomely from the unnecessary sale of sacrificial animals. They attacked Jesus’ integrity, made false accusations against Him, broke the law concerning the time the Sanhedrin could meet, hired false witnesses and refused to stone those who gave false witness. It makes one wonder, just who were the sinners?

THE BLOOD OF WAR

In I Kings, chapter two, David was on his deathbed giving Solomon his parting instructions. David had sworn that he would do no harm to Joab. That, however, did not prevent Solomon from taking care of the atrocity Joab had committed against David. If you look at 2:6, you will quickly sense David's heart. He said,

"So act according to your wisdom, and do not let his gray hair go down to Sheol in peace. 1 Kings 2:6

In effect, David said two things: He said, "Do not let Joab live to die an old man." Second, David told Solomon to make sure Joab did not die in peace.

In chapter two, verse five; David spells out the case against Joab. He said,

"Now you also know what Joab the son of Zeruiah did to me, what he did to the two commanders of the armies of Israel, to Abner the son of Ner, and to Amasa the son of Jether, whom he killed; he also shed the blood of war in peace. And he put the blood of war on his belt about his waist, and on his sandals on his feet. 1 Kings 2:5

David made four accusations concerning Joab. The charges are these:

1. He killed two captains of Israel's army. This is both murder and treason.
2. He shed the blood of war in peace.
3. He put the blood of war on his belt.
4. He put the blood of war on (in) his sandals.

Now, David was well acquainted with the blood of war. Because of this, one needs to ask why he was so upset with Joab at this point.

We need to identify what David meant by "the blood of war." This is a way to describe what happens during a battle. People died and their blood was spilled on everyone and everything in the area of battle. It is one thing to be guilty of killing an enemy soldier. It is quite a different thing to kill leaders of your own army. This was David's first complaint against Joab. He charged him with both murder and treason.

Observe that David spoke with Solomon about Joab shedding "the blood of war in peace." It is one thing to die in combat. Casualties happen. It is quite another thing to use a time of peace as a shield to give the murderer the element of surprise in order to murder the unsuspecting victim.

The third charge David made was that "Joab "put the blood of war upon his belt." Every Jew knew that blood would make a person unclean. Leviticus 12:7 indicates that when a woman has a flow of blood after giving birth, she must undergo purification. Any time a person touched blood or blood touched them, that person was considered unclean. The shock for David was that Joab rather than staying away from blood that makes one unclean, intentionally smeared the blood of the two military leaders on his leather belt. It was something exhilarating and pride producing rather than being seen as shameful and unclean.

David's final charge was that Joab placed some of the blood of these two military leaders in his shoe. Here again, this would absolutely make him unclean. Rather than making an attempt to keep from getting blood on his person, Joab intentionally placed some of this blood in his sandals. It would be viewed as one of those "look what I have done" kinds of things. It is bad enough to commit murder. It is far worse to view this as something that you are proud to have done.

THE HEM OF SAUL'S GARMENT

We are keenly aware of the intense drama created by Saul's search for David in the wilderness of En Gedi. It is with bated breath that one reads of Saul resting in the very cave where David and his loyal followers were hiding. The author wrote:

And he came to the sheepfolds on the way, where there was a cave; and Saul went in to relieve himself. Now David and his men were sitting in the inner recesses of the cave. ⁴ And the men of David said to him, "Behold, this is the day of which the LORD said to you, 'Behold; I am about to give your enemy into your hand, and you shall do to him as it seems good to you.'" Then David arose and cut off the edge of Saul's robe secretly. 1 Samuel 24:3-4

David and his men were at risk, moment by moment, at the hands of Saul and his army. It is not surprising that the men urged David to take vengeance into his own hands and kill Saul on the spot. There are at least two reasons why David could not allow this to happen:

1. If David killed Saul, he would be taking the life of the man God had chosen to be king of Israel. David could not, in good conscience, allow this to happen.
2. If David and his men killed Saul, sooner or later, Saul's men would come into the cave, find the dead king and realize that the murderers were in the cave. This would be a guaranteed way to get themselves killed along with Saul.

A question comes to mind, "Why would David further risk his life by creeping up to the compromised king and cut off the edge of Saul's robe?"

The word translated "edge," is "kanaph." It means "an edge," "an extremity." It is the border of a garment. Some versions translate this word as "hem." A better translation would be "fringe." You may remember that Mark tells the story of the woman with the issue of blood. She said,

After hearing about Jesus, came up in the crowd behind Him, and touched His cloak. Mark 5:27

At the extremity of a man's garment, there was a fringe. This fringe was a sign of his position and authority. The longer the fringe, the more powerful the person. This is what the woman touched and it is also what David cut from Saul's garment.

Jews are a very visual, symbolic people. To cut off the fringe of a man's garment did much more than shorten the king's garment. It was a strong, visual, symbolic statement that his power had, indeed, been cut off.

In I Samuel 24, when David emerged from the cave, he called out to King Saul on the other side of the valley.

"Now, my father, see! Indeed, see the edge of your robe in my hand! For in that I cut off the edge of your robe and did not kill you, know and perceive that there is no evil or rebellion in my hands, and I have not sinned against you, though you are lying in wait for my life to take it. 1 Samuel 24:11

Saul responded to the fact that David had cut off the fringe of his garment, but spared his life. He said to David,

"And now, behold, I know that you shall surely be king, and that the kingdom of Israel shall be established in your hand. 1 Samuel 24:20

By cutting off the fringe from Saul's garment, David said, in symbolic terms, "your rule as king shall be like the fringe I hold in my hand, cut off." Saul confirmed that he understood exactly what David had said by cutting off the fringe of Saul's robe.

THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

Again therefore Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world; he who follows Me shall not walk in the darkness, but shall have the light of life." John 8:12

This is a wonderful statement. It makes a beautiful wall plaque. I remember, as a child, seeing a small plaque with these words printed on it. Like so many beautiful sayings, people like them, but may not be clear about what they mean or where they come from. This is one of the five "I am" statements of Jesus quoted in John's Gospel.

If one reads the context carefully, John tells us that this took place "on the last day of the Great Feast" (John 7:37). This statement gives us another piece of information about why Jesus made the statement.

On the evening of the last day of the Great Feast, a very special event took place. The priests had a huge Menorah or seven-branched candle stick that was placed on the roof of the temple. This did not burn candles, however. It rather had seven huge cups for oil. These cups or pots were each very large, perhaps a foot in diameter. This Menorah was erected on the roof of the temple building, which was the highest place in the city until the palace was built adjoining the north side of the temple.

As darkness settled over the city, these huge pots of oil were ignited. The fire from these seven huge pots of oil was a marvelous sight to behold. Josephus tells us that this fiery spectacle was so bright that it was like mid-day in every alley in Jerusalem.

We know that people would stay when the feast was over in order to see this fiery spectacle. Everyone knew about it and they were eager to see it again, year after year.

On the very day this beautiful spectacle was anticipated, Jesus cried out in the temple and said, "I am the light of the world." Obviously, some would believe Him and still others might scoff. All would be aware, however, of Jesus intent. On the night they eagerly anticipated the fiery spectacle that would light up every alley in Jerusalem, Jesus cried out that He was, "the light of the whole world."

WHAT TIME IS IT?

Understanding the identification of time in the Bible is difficult for us. In part, this is because their measurements of time were general and a bit casual. For us, however, it is quite precise, right down to the second, which by the way is a measurement they did not recognize. It also is difficult for us because their concept of time measurement was vastly different from ours. We must keep in mind that they thought of a day having 24 hours, but their concept of an hour was not nearly as precise as ours.

The measure of a day is a case in point. They said that a day begins at sundown. However, sundown actually happens at a different moment every day. Because Sabbath, for our Jewish friends, begins at sundown, today they have a calendar that indicates the precise time they should consider “sundown” which indicates the beginning and end of Sabbath.

For us the day begins not at sundown, but at the stroke of midnight every day. With a couple of exceptions, our identification of the beginning and end of a day are very precise. The exceptions are obvious.

1. We know that there is a variance of a few seconds each day. We make a correction for this every four years on what we call “leap year.” This is the source of our February 29th.
2. We toy with the clock twice a year when we initiate and then remove “daylight saving time” in order to take advantage of hours of sunlight in summer.

Another difference between the two concepts is how one thinks of the 24 hours we call a “day.” People in the Near East thought of the day as comprised of two parts – twelve hours for work (daylight) and 12 hours of darkness for sleep. It was their idea of day and night. Jesus said,

“Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world.” John 11:9

Jesus knew that their system was built upon the idea of 24 hours in the day and 12 months in the year. Still, they spoke of a day’s work as 12 hours.

With electricity and the many conveniences we have, we recognize eight hours or less for work and an average of seven hours or less for sleep. We set aside the balance of our 24 hour day for personal enjoyment.

We divide the day roughly into two parts – Midnight to noon (A.M.) and noon to midnight (P.M.). Though their work day was made up of only one part, their night was completely different. For the bulk of the population, night was night. For the military, it was different. In the Old Testament, the military divided the night into three divisions of four hours called “a watch.” In Judges, you find these words,

So Gideon and the hundred men that were with him came to the outskirts of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch, when they had just posted the watch; and they blew the trumpets and smashed the pitchers that were in their hands. Judges 7:19

If you have a middle watch, then there must be at least three watches to make up the night. One might identify them in this manner.

- The first watch – sundown 6:00 P.M. to 10:00 P.M.
- The middle watch – 10:00 P.M. – 2:00 A.M.
- Morning watch – 2:00 A.M. – 6:00 A.M.

The Roman army came on the scene and they were open to a number of innovations designed to increase efficiency of their forces. One of these changes had to do with the watches. Matthew 14:25 speaks of “the fourth watch.” These would be four periods of three hours each. It would look like this

- First watch or evening watch – 6:00 P.M. to 9:00 P.M.
- Second watch or night watch – 9:00 P.M. to 12:00 midnight
- Third watch or crowing watch - 12 :00 midnight to 3:00 A.M.
- Fourth watch or morning watch – 3:00 A.M. to 6:00 A.M.

WHAT TIME IS IT?

In Scripture, the numbering of hours, as a way of designating time, is found only in the Gospels, plus Daniel and the book of Acts. Again, this is a bit difficult for us because we begin numbering the hours at midnight. In the time of Jesus, they numbered daytime hours beginning at sun-up.

In Matthew 20:1-9, Jesus told the story of the man who hired laborers for his field.

*"And when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. 3
"And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the market place; Matthew 20:2-3*

In verse two, Jesus mentioned laborers who were hired for the day. This means they began working as soon as it was light in the morning – roughly 6:00 A.M. In verse three, Jesus said the man went out at the third hour. This, of course, would be about 9:00 A.M. our time.

In the fifth verse, Jesus said the man went out at the sixth hour and ninth hour. In our time, the sixth hour would be noon and the ninth hour would be 3:00 P.M.

In verse six, Jesus spoke of the eleventh hour. This, by our calculations, would be 5:00 P.M.

In Matthew chapter 27, the apostle described the crucifixion. He said,

Now from the sixth hour darkness fell upon all the land until the ninth hour. Matthew 27:45

This means that it was dark from noon until 3:00 P.M. You will find parallel passages to this in Mark 15:33, 34 and Luke 23:44.

In John 4:6, he tells of Jesus' visit with the Samaritan woman.

*And Jacob's well was there. Jesus therefore, being wearied from His journey, was sitting thus by the well.
It was about the sixth hour. John 4:6*

Notice that at the sixth hour, which was noon, Jesus was weary with his journey and this was the hottest time of the day.

In John 4:52, the nobleman came to plead with Jesus to come and heal his son. Jesus simply told him to go home since his son would live. The nobleman believed Jesus and went home. The boy was well. The nobleman asked when the boy started to feel better and was told, "the seventh hour the fever left him." This would be surprising since the seventh hour would be about 1:00, one of the hottest times of the day.

In Acts 3:1, Luke tells the story of Peter and John going to the temple at "the hour of prayer." That is fine, but what time of the day is that? In Acts 10:30, Cornelius was explaining his vision to Peter. In this passage he gave us a clue concerning the hour of prayer. He said,

And Cornelius said, "Four days ago to this hour, I was praying in my house during the ninth hour; and behold, a man stood before me in shining garments, Acts 10:30

The hour of prayer was the ninth hour, or 3:00 P.M. In Acts 23, there is an unusual time designation.

And he called to him two of the centurions, and said, "Get two hundred soldiers ready by the third hour of the night to proceed to Caesarea, with seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen." Acts 23:23

Earlier, when we described the watches of the night, under Roman rule, the first watch began at what we would call 6:00 P.M. Thus, the third hour of the night would be 9:00 P.M.

One might wonder about their time designations. For instance, why would you have a watch at 6:00 P.M. and then again from 2:00 – 6:00 A.M.? Frankly, these were two of the most dangerous times of the day.

The use of electricity puts us at a distinct disadvantage in understanding total darkness. Today, many people seldom if ever experience total darkness. This, however, was normal for most common people. This factor alone would help us understand the way they measured time and why they identified it as they did.

WILL THE REAL HIGH PRIEST PLEASE...!

WILL THE REAL HIGH PRIEST PLEASE...!

In the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness. Luke 3:2

Some people are puzzled by the fact that there are some places in the New Testament where two high priests are mentioned as serving at the same time. We should keep in mind that when the Levitical system was designed, the text is quite clear that there was room for and need for only one high priest.

And the priest who is the highest among his brothers, on whose head the anointing oil has been poured, and who has been consecrated to wear the garments, shall not uncover his head, nor tear his clothes; Leviticus 21:10

In II Kings 22:4, the text mentions the fact that there was a High Priest and his name was Hilkiah. In the New Testament, four high priests are mentioned by name. They were:

Abiathar – Mark 2:26

Annas – Luke 3:2

Caiaphas – Matthew 26:3

Ananias – Acts 23:2

Only three of these high priests, however, were legitimate, according to the Biblical mandate – Abiathar, Annas and Ananias. We will discuss the high priesthood of Caiaphas shortly.

John 11:49 provides an interesting piece of information about the high priesthood.

But a certain one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all," John 11:49

The term of office for a high priest was one year. The high priests were elected by the members of the tribe of Levi, the priests. The rules did not declare that these priests had to elect a different high priest every year. It was just a one-year term. The high priest could be reelected for more than one term and many of them were. Indeed, it appears that Annas was elected to the high priesthood each year during the ministry of Jesus.

In the passage with which we began our study, it speaks of two high priesthoods running concurrently. This is confusing to many and was a source of bitter confrontation in the first century. Annas and Caiaphas were both recognized as high priest in Jerusalem at the same time. We know that Annas was elected high priest early. Caiaphas came along later. When Caiaphas became a high priest, Annas was still in the high priestly office and remained as such. We have substantial evidence that Annas was not only High Priest before Caiaphas became one, but Annas was also the father-in-law of Caiaphas.

It was no secret that the nation of Israel was a serious problem for the Roman conquerors. Rome had a larger contingent of soldiers maintaining calm in Israel than in any other country under their control. Roman soldiers and officials dreaded being assigned to serve in Israel. Rome was at a loss to determine how to maintain control of Israel. They knew that these were very religious people. They surmised that if they were to have any success in managing Israel, it would have to involve the religion of these people in one way or another. One ruler built the people of Israel a beautiful temple in Jerusalem in order to curry their favor. The people accepted the temple, but it did not make them more responsive to the rule of Rome. Later, Rome decided to control the priesthood. They required that all the priests surrender their priestly robes. These would be given out each day under the control of Roman officials. Thus, if the people did not behave in a way acceptable to Rome, the priestly robes would be impounded and no sacrifices would be allowed for that time. Rome managed to get control of the priestly robes, but again it did not change the attitude of the people in any way.

Roman officials realized that the high priest was the most powerful person in the Jewish society. They felt that if they could control the high priesthood, they could control the people. It was hopeless to think that they could talk the Jews into electing a high priest that Roman officials could get to do the things they wanted him to do. The Roman officials decided that they would change the rules. The high priest would no longer be elected by the priests as it had been done for centuries. From now on, the high priest would be appointed by the governor. It

WILL THE REAL HIGH PRIEST PLEASE...!

seemed certain that this would work for them. The Jews could not keep the Roman officials from appointing a High Priest to have power over the religious life of the people of Israel. Nevertheless, they were not about to be dictated to by these foreign pagans. When Caiaphas was appointed to be High Priest, Annas was already serving an elected term. The Jews decided that they had been electing their high priest for centuries; they were not about to change this now. For the first time in their history, there was a high priest appointed by the Roman Governor and another High Priest elected by the other priests in the system.

The appointment of Caiaphas was a carefully calculated decision. Because the high priest was the most powerful man in Israel, it was clear to Roman officials that they would have to discredit the existing high priest in some way if they ever hoped to have their chosen man accepted by the people. The officials used an old political tool that had worked for Roman officials for many decades – divide and conquer. They had to find a way to create division within the priestly ranks in order to make this plan work. This was attempted through the man that they chose to become the new high priest. They envisioned the new high priest taking over and the existing high priest retiring in disgrace. Their plan to do this was to choose a much younger man who would appeal to the younger people in the population as well as the priesthood. They realized that they might well be able to use this as a wedge to divide the present high priest from the new one. Who could accomplish this better than to appoint Caiaphas, the son-in-law of the current high priest to succeed his father-in-law? They felt that it would not be too hard to get a man to take a stand against his father-in-law.

We must keep in mind that the Jewish people had lived on the edge of oppression through most of their history. They have always been able to find a way to work around any plan that their oppressors developed in an attempt to control them. No one ever accused the Jewish people or their leaders of being shy and bashful. They knew how to take care of themselves. This was one more example of this ability. The Jews knew that they were powerless to reverse the decision of the Roman officials. They had to find a way to allow the appointed high priest to exist while circumventing him completely. They found a way. They referred to Caiaphas as the high priest. To the chagrin of Rome, they also continued to refer to Annas as the high priest. There had to be some level of frustration over the appointment of Caiaphas, but it was important to the Jews to refuse to allow this to divide them. They succeeded. They did this by dividing the tasks of the office into two parts. Annas would be in charge of the responsibilities that the high priest had always had. This meant that the appointment of Caiaphas was essentially a waste of time. They also protected themselves by allowing Caiaphas to continue to be dealt with as a high priest, but only dealt with him in matters that had to do with the Roman government. Notice the process they followed. Jesus was arrested and had to be interrogated by someone in order to pave the way for the accusations before the Roman officials. The problem the Jewish leaders had with Jesus had to do with His religious expression. It was not a civic problem, though the Jews would have liked to make it one.

Annas therefore sent Him bound to Caiaphas the high priest. John 18:24

They made their plans and accusations in the counsel of the high priest elected by the Jews, but he had no standing with the Roman government. Having finished their plans, they, then, went to the high priest recognized by the Roman government in order to prepare the defense that he would present to Roman officials. This accounts for the fact that two high priests were empowered at the same time, but the attempt of the Roman officials to use the appointed high priest to gain power over the religious life of the Jews and thus extend their control over the nation was a total failure.

DWELL IN THY HOUSE

One thing I have asked from the LORD, that I shall seek: That I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, To behold the beauty of the LORD, And to meditate in His temple. Psalms 27:4

David wrote a very warm, personal psalm. Unfortunately, when some people think of David, they call to mind only his catastrophic error with Bathsheba. This is understandable. It was a tragic event in his life. David, however, was more than this memory allows. God spoke of him as “a man after God’s own heart.” Though David had his weaknesses, he was able to admit his faults, confess them before God and accept his punishment feeling that it was well deserved. This is most unusual.

Though David was quite human and very frail, still he desperately wanted to serve and please God. When David became king, he ruled in Hebron for a period of seven years. When he finally conquered the Jebusite city we call Jerusalem, he wisely made it his capital city. This was wise because at this time the city was attached to no particular tribe though it was in the territory of Judah. It was a perfect choice for a capital city. It was a great deal like the American capital – Washington D.C. It was the capital but was not considered part of any tribal territory.

More than seven years after David became king, he built a beautiful palace for himself in the southeastern corner of what we call modern Jerusalem, on the hill called Ophel. We now refer to this area as “the city of David.” The king spared no expense in building a lavish palace for himself. The most skillful workmen used the finest materials to erect this marvelous palace. There was no place in Israel quite like it.

In the verse we are considering, David spoke of “the house of the Lord.” We must keep in mind what this means. When we speak of “the house of the Lord,” we think of it as the Jerusalem Temple. Actually, there was no temple in Jerusalem during the lifetime of David. The Temple did not come until the reign of Solomon. The place to which David referred was a tent at best. We should think of it as the tabernacle as used in Israel centuries before.

What does David mean when he speaks of “dwelling in the house of the Lord forever”? In good Hebrew fashion, we begin by identifying what he did not mean. It certainly did not mean that David, Israel’s king, was asking for a place to stay. The palace was far more beautiful and lavish than this tent of worship.

David certainly was not asking to stay in the tent of worship. Only the priestly members of the tribe of Levi could stay there. David was of the tribe of Judah.

David referred to something totally different; something every Jew of that day would completely understand, but it eludes us because we are unaware of many things from their culture. Jewish people of that day would be quite familiar with what some call, “the law of the desert.” In short, this cultural expectation stated that a traveler could come to your village and you would be expected to offer him food, shelter and protection for three days. He would not have to ask you. You would be expected to see him and invite him in.

Another understanding of their culture had to do with bringing a person into our home. The Jews had four ways to demonstrate forgiveness and express mutual acceptance. The four visual symbols were quite simple, but very obvious and equally meaningful. First, if you and I are at peace and forgiveness, I will invite you into my house. If we were not at peace, you would never be invited into my home. The Pharisee who invited Jesus to dinner was obviously a fraud because he certainly was not at peace with Jesus.

Second, if we are at peace, I will eat with you. Jesus told Zacchaeus that he had to go to his house and eat with him in order to show everyone that he accepted him and was at peace with him even though he was a tax collector. The Pharisees thought that tax collectors were unredeemable. This is the reason the Pharisees grumbled when Jesus went to eat with Zacchaeus and his friends.

Third, while we eat together, I would offer you one of my most valuable possessions – salt. Salt was extremely valuable because it was so costly to prepare. There were three sources of salt for the people in this area. There was a salt mine way to the south in Eilat. Salt could be brought from there, but at great cost. One could go to the Mediterranean, take a pan of seawater, and let it evaporate and scrape perhaps a teaspoon full of salt from the dish and then let another dish of water evaporate. This too was very costly. The third source was to dig up

DWELL IN THY HOUSE

dirt from the edge of the Dead Sea. When this dried they could pick out grains of salt from this dirt. If I share salt with you, it is clear that you are my friend.

Fourth, if we are at peace, during the meal I will give you the kiss of forgiveness and friendship. It is interesting that this is the signal Judas used in order to betray Jesus. The kiss of friendship is well known in modern times. When the head of the former Soviet Union would visit the leader of one of the satellite countries, they would meet at the airport, hug each other and then exchange the kiss of friendship.

Now, what did David mean? In the cultural expression that every reader of that day would understand, he was saying that he wanted to be in such a friendly relationship with God that he would be welcomed to remain in God's house not just for three days, but for life. It was a desire to be family. Family stays in the home a lifetime; friends stay three days; enemies are not invited.

BAPTISM FOR THE DEAD

Otherwise, what will those do who are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why then are they baptized for them? 1 Corinthians 15:29

There is no mention of “baptism for the dead” in the Old Testament. In fact, Paul’s mention of it in I Corinthians chapter 15 is the only reference to it in Scripture.

There are a number of pieces of misinformation concerning baptism present in the church today. There are those who believe that baptism was invented and first used by the church. That is not true. There are a large number of Christians who believe that it is baptism that redeems us from sin. There were some in the church who believed that one could not be raised in the resurrection if they were not baptized.

We know that “baptism for the dead” later became a practice among heretical factions surrounding the church. We also know that this practice ceased to be used for at least two reasons. First, there is no Old or New Testament passage that affirms or commands the practice. Second, it was ineffective in advancing the cause of the heretical groups who espoused the practice.

If you read I Corinthians 15:24-29 very carefully, it is clear that Paul did not condemn the practice. We do not know and cannot find out why this is true. We need to become aware of the history of baptism.

Baptism originates not with the church, but with the Jews and particularly the priests. There were two occasions when the Jews would practice baptism long before the time of Christ. First, if a Gentile wished to become a Jew it was necessary for the person to renounce their former sinful life and be baptized to wash away the sins of their pagan past. Secondly, on the day when a priest served at the altar for the very first time, he had to be baptized and cleansed so that he could serve at the altar with purity. This is the reason Jesus told John the Baptist that He needed to be baptized by John. This action signaled the beginning of Jesus’ priestly ministry even though He was not a member of the tribe of Levi.

We are still faced with the question, Why would these believers practice “baptism for the dead” when it is not affirmed or commanded in Scripture? There may be many reasons, but two stand out.

First, in Acts 2:37-42; Luke tells us what happened after Peter preached his Pentecost sermon. Luke quotes Peter, “Repent and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.” Later, Luke reported, “Those who had received his word were baptized and there were added that day about three thousand souls.” (Acts 2:41) This was exciting, but it later became evident that the commitment of some of the three thousand was much more complete than others. This would have a very negative impact upon the witness and reputation of the church.

They found a remedy for this unfortunate situation. They required that new converts enter upon a probationary period before being permitted to be baptized and joined to the church. This gave the church a span of time to observe the sincerity of the new converts. This practice is still being observed in some places. Persecution was increasing. More and more Christians were being killed because of the persecution. Some of these martyrs had repented, but their probation period had not ended and they were not baptized. This caused real tension among friends and family of these converts.

Secondly, at the time Paul was writing his first letter to the Corinthian church, there were some very serious epidemics sweeping through the Roman provinces. Again, people were dying before their probation period was completed.

In both instances, the fact that the people were not baptized before their death was due to no fault of their own. They were not baptized because they were unable to be.

Because the failure to be baptized was not intentional, they devised a plan to make up for this situation. An already baptized relative or friend of the deceased was baptized on behalf of the deceased believer.

Why didn’t Paul take a strong stand against this practice? We honestly do not know. It is possible that he realized that the person had not yet been baptized because of their untimely death. The practice did no damage, it just was not commanded by Scripture. This is something that on most every other occasion, Paul would have taken a very strong stand against. The reason he did nothing about it on this occasion, totally escapes our understanding.

BAPTISM FOR THE DEAD

WHAT MONTH IS THAT?!

The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah. Now it happened in the month Chislev, in the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capitol, Nehemiah 1:1

As you read through the Old Testament, you encounter some months of the year that are not like our January, February and March. Again, these names are not simply translations of the names that much of the world uses in our time. These are the names of the months found in the ancient Babylonian calendar. Not one of the months on this Babylonian calendar exactly matches a month on our calendar. Rather, in general, each month on the Babylonian calendar overlaps two of the months on our calendar by approximately two weeks.

Again, observe that the year does not begin in January. It was not a meteorological choice. This was rather a divine command. This is the way the Babylonian calendar appears in contrast to our own.

BABYLONIAN	OUR CALENDAR
Nisan	March-April
Iyar	April – May
Sivan	May - June
Tammuz	June – July
Ab	July – August
Elul	August – September
Tishri	September – October
Marheshvan	October – November
Kislev	November – December
Tebeth	December – January
Shebat	January – February
Adar	February - March

With no technology such as we have today, it is absolutely amazing that people of that time were able to calculate so accurately the way days and months of the year change. They were amazing people. We are most grateful for their observations.

The word “Pentecost” never appears in the Old Testament, but the concept is there.

T'You shall count fifty days to the day after the seventh sabbath; then you shall present a new grain offering to the LORD. *Leviticus 23:16*

In Numbers 28:26, you have a similar reference, but instead of using the word “Pentecost,” it speaks of “the feast of weeks.” The feast of weeks covers a period of seven weeks or 50 days. This was a celebration of the cessation of hard labor for the year. They came to Jerusalem from all the countries in the Mediterranean Basin to fulfill their obligation to celebrate this feast. Later on, this Jewish celebration of harvest festival became a commemoration of the giving of the law at Sinai. This celebration, however, happened precisely at the same time as the New Testament Pentecost.

The Feast of Weeks started early in the month of Kislev, the third month in the Jewish calendar, some 50 days after the offering of the barley sheaves at the feast of Unleavened Bread. The beginning of the feast of Unleavened Bread was initiated by smoke signals from Bethsaida to Jerusalem when the first barley sheaf was harvested. Fifty days later, the Feast of Weeks was observed. Because it was 50 days after the Feast of Unleavened Bread, it was also called “Pentecost” by the Jews.

The word “Pentecost” means “50.” In Acts 2:1, the Jews were gathered in Jerusalem, as they were required, for the celebration of the Feast of Weeks. It was on this occasion that the Holy Spirit came upon those in the upper room. These people were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in the languages of those who had come to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast.

In Acts 20:16, Luke gives us another picture.

For Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus in order that he might not have to spend time in Asia; for he was hurrying to be in Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of Pentecost. Acts 20:16

As he had done many times, Paul wanted to get to Jerusalem in time to celebrate the Feast of Weeks in the place where God placed His name.

At this celebration, some fifty days after the resurrection of Jesus, it marked the coming of the Holy Spirit with power. It also marked the completion of Christ’s redemption and the formation of the church.

This event was also the initiation of the outreach, the missionary effort in the life of the church. Of the 3,000 who received Christ that day, there were Jews from all over the then known world. Because of this, the fledgling early church found it necessary to go to these several nations and preach the gospel as well as disciple the host of new converts they found in every place.

The Day of Pentecost also marked the initiation of the giving of spiritual gifts. There had been gifts of teaching and healing during the three and one half years training experience, but now it was evident in the whole body of Christ. They had become the community of the Holy Spirit in the midst of the devastating paganism out of which they had come.

Is it a coincidence that the Jewish Passover and the crucifixion are precisely at the same time? And is it coincidental that exactly 50 days after these events both the Jews and the Christians have a sacred celebration? I think that is doubtful. The Jewish Passover was a celebration of God’s gift in harvest that eventually became a celebration of God’s giving of the Law to guide His people as they sought to live in obedience to His will. The Christian Pentecost is a celebration of the coming of the Holy Spirit to fulfill Jesus’ promise of sending another Comforter who would lead us into all truth and guide us to live a Christlike life.

THE FIRST FRUITS

'As an offering of first fruits, you shall bring them to the LORD, but they shall not ascend for a soothing aroma on the altar. Leviticus 2:12

There are 26 references to “first fruits” in the Old Testament and eight in the New Testament. In the New Testament, it is only mentioned by Paul, James and John.

In the Old Testament, The basic idea involved is that it is the first, the best part of the crop to be given to the priests. Eight of the 26 references in the Old Testament emphasize that this is for the priests. There are eight other emphases:

- a. It is different from the tithe Ex. 23:16,19; II Chronicles 31:5
- b. It is a gift to God. Exodus 34:26; Proverbs 3:9
- c. We relinquish ownership of this offering. Deuteronomy 26:10
- d. It was also used to help people in need. II Kings 4:42
- e. It includes the first-born son. Nehemiah 10:35
- f. Israel dealt with the first fruits in two ways: First chosen and best part of God’s increase. Jeremiah 2:3
- g. First fruits are required by God. Ezekiel 20:40
- h. First fruits are holy to the Lord. Ezekiel 48:14

The Old Testament picture is that though the “first fruits” are a gift to God, they are for the benefit of the priests who serve in His house of worship.

The use of the term “first fruits” in the New Testament is totally different. The New Testament authors place an emphasis in four different areas:

- a. It is not a gift **to** God, but a gift **from** God. Romans 8:23; James 1:18
- b. The meaning is spiritual rather than an emphasis on our gift to God. Romans 11:16; Romans 16:5
- c. An emphasis on the first. Christ is the first fruit. It does not mean that He was the first to rise from the dead. Indeed, Jesus raised the widow’s son and then Lazarus before His own resurrection. It does indicate the leader of those who rose from the dead. I Corinthians 15:20; I Corinthians 15:23; I Corinthians 16:15
- d. An emphasis on the best – A special group of heavenly, unusually holy saints. Revelation 14:4

It is very clear that the New Testament authors have not contradicted the Old Testament use of the term, but they have moved in totally different directions. Perhaps the best summary of the New Testament use of the term is that “it is not a gift to God, but it is a gift from God.”

If the New Testament and the Old Testament meanings are not precisely the same, one might wonder why the New Testament authors used the term at all. Good question! They learned well from the example of Jesus. Jesus took something that His hearers knew very well and used it to explain something that they did not understand at all. That is what Paul, James and John did in their New Testament uses of this term. Every Jew would know about the feast of First Fruits. They did not need explanation of this at all. They used this example that everyone understood in order to explain Jesus’ as the leader of all others in the resurrection. Paul, James and John used the image of the “first fruits” to help people who already understood the requirement to give their first fruits to God to also understand that the “first fruits” are a way to experience the greatness of God’s wonderful gifts on our behalf. They also used this figure to help people understand that there are those who are far superior examples of Christlike qualities than all others.

A DOUBLE PORTION

Now it came about when they had crossed over, that Elijah said to Elisha, "Ask what I shall do for you before I am taken from you." And Elisha said, "Please, let a double portion of your spirit be upon me." 2 Kings 2:9

In Deuteronomy 21, Moses gave a long list of special instructions concerning how to live in the Promised Land. He had been giving instructions to the people over the years, but he knew that he was not going into the land and this was his last chance to help them. Moses gave instructions about what to do if a man was killed out in the field by an unknown assailant. He also gave instruction for a soldier who sees a captive woman he would like for his wife, and what to do if he does not delight in her. Moses talked about what a man must do if he has one wife that he loves and one that he does not love. If the first-born son belongs to the hated wife, then when he dies, the "first-born son" designation belongs to the son of the hated wife, even though the man does not love the mother. It is the right of the first-born. The "right of the first-born," the "double portion," was highly prized in Israel and we need to understand what is involved.

"The right of the first-born" describes an inheritance. A man at some point in his life would indicate the son he had chosen to be his "heir." In almost all cases, this would be his oldest son, but that was not always the case. Joseph was the eleventh son in his father's family, but it was painfully clear to the family that Joseph was the heir. Ephraim was the second born, but his grandfather blessed him as the heir of the family over Joseph's protest. Grandfathers can do that. As in Joseph's case, Jacob did not need to make a verbal family announcement. He gave Joseph, not a "coat of many colors," but a "coat with wide sleeves." If a person wears a coat with two-foot wide sleeves, he cannot do much work. That was the announcement. Jacob intended that Joseph would assign the other brothers to work, but he would not do physical work at all. The heir or first-born would literally take the place of the father, eventually. Everyone in the family, including his mother, would be under the direction and control of the "heir." The "double portion" was sometimes misunderstood. The "heir" or "right of the first-born," had implications concerning the division of the father's belongings. This often would take place just before the father died. For illustration, assume a man had **four** sons. When the possessions were divided, and given to the sons, they would divide the belongings into **five** equal portions. The "heir" or "first-born" would receive two portions while the other three sons would each receive one portion. Some have suggested that the "first-born" would receive two thirds and the remaining brothers, no matter how many there were, would divide the remaining third equally. That was not the case. The arrangement we have described was widely accepted in ancient times.

Another facet of "the right of the first-born" is that he is responsible for the family. If any family member gets into difficulty, the "first-born" is committed to help. This is what Boaz did for Ruth and her first husband Mahlon when Boaz carried out the Levirate law. The "first-born" must defend and rescue members of the family if that becomes necessary. Abraham was Lot's father's older brother. When the father died, Abraham raised Lot like his own son. When Lot got mixed up in Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham went north to chase down the army that captured Lot and got his release.

In the second chapter of Second Kings, Elisha has been the servant of Elijah for some time. Elijah knew that in a very short period of time he would be taken away. On this occasion, Elijah spoke with Elisha about this separation. He asked Elisha what he would like for Elijah to do for him. To his surprise, Elisha asked for a "double portion of his spirit." Elijah allowed as how this was a most difficult request, but said it would be granted under certain conditions.

What did Elisha mean by, "a double-portion of your spirit." The "double portion" refers to Elisha as Elijah's son and the "heir" of all that was his. The one receiving a double portion would be in control of the family and all their holdings. We have no indication that Elijah had any family.

Our best clue as to what Elisha had in mind and what Elijah gave him is found in the paragraph that immediately follows this exchange. In II Kings 2:12b-14, Elisha took Elijah's mantle and struck the water of the Jordan and cried out, "where is Jehovah the God of Elijah?" The waters immediately rolled back as they did for Joshua here at the Jordan and for Moses at the Red Sea. Elisha was not asking his mentor for a "double-portion" of

A DOUBLE PORTION

houses, land or gold. He asked for a “double-portion” of that power that identified Elijah as the powerful servant of Jehovah. He craved a holy reputation not so that he would be known – that would be contrary to Elijah’s spirit. He wanted a reputation so that God could use his humble service as He used Elijah.

In the New Testament, God referred to Jesus as “His first-born Son.” There was no second born son, unless one considers that host to which we belong; those whom Paul described as “adopted.” When God spoke of His First-born Son,” He spoke of the primary inheritor of all things. He spoke of the one into whose control the Father had placed all people and power in all His creation.

PASSING THROUGH THE BRICK KILN

He also brought out the people who were in it, and set them under saws, sharp iron instruments, and iron axes, and made them pass through the brickkiln. And thus he did to all the cities of the sons of Ammon. Then David and all the people returned to Jerusalem. 2 Samuel 12:31

As we look carefully at this verse, there is a lot of history that needs to be kept in mind. This took place at a time of great tension for David and the leaders who worked with him. He had experienced the trauma of the whole episode with Bathsheba. There were other problems within his family. This was a time of good relations between David and Nahash, the king of Ammon. Nahash died, however, and his son Hanun succeeded him. David wanted to comfort Hanun. He sent a delegation to express his condolences. This gesture was misunderstood to be an attempt to spy on the country. David's representatives were humiliated and sent home. This destroyed the good relationships between the two countries.

Nahash was a singular bright spot in a long history of bad blood between Israel and Ammon. We must also keep in mind that the Ammonites had strong family ties with all the neighbors of Israel and they shared a common hatred, especially for David. Hanun was frightened when he destroyed the good relationships with David and formed an alliance with the other neighbors of Israel. Syria provided 20,000 soldiers, Maacah provided 1,000 soldiers and Tov provided 12,000 men. In spite of this coalition, David's general, Joab, defeated the combined forces and David captured Rabbah, the capital city of Ammon. The Ammonites were a brutal people. When they conquered a city, they would kill all the people, especially the children and pregnant women. They also would make human sacrifices of their conquered soldiers to their god – Molleck. Before going into battle, they would sacrifice their children to their god appealing for success in battle. If they were victorious, they would make a sacrifice of the captured soldiers as a thank offering to their god.

There are also some other issues that must be taken into consideration as we attempt to interpret this verse. We know that there is a problem with the words that make up the text of this verse. There is also a problem with the interpretation of the words that should make up this verse. We know that David dealt more harshly with these people than with most enemies. He made slaves out of the 20,000 Syrian soldiers. He also made slaves out of 18,000 Edomites and devastated the Amalekites. When the capital city of Ammon was captured, David brought all the people out of the city. He plundered the city and brutalized the people. We should not be surprised if David's dealing with these neighbors is much harsher than his dealings with other conquered people.

There are two possible understandings of verse 31 depending upon the translation one uses. The New International Version translates the verse this way,

And brought out the people who were there, consigning them to labor with saws and with iron picks and axes, and he made them work at brickmaking. II Samuel 12:31(NIV)

The intent of this translation is that the four pictures in this verse describe the kind of labor David forced these captives to do.

If you read the New American Standard version, you get a very different picture.

He also brought out the people who were in it, and set them under saws, sharp iron instruments, and iron axes, and made them pass through the brickkiln. And thus he did to all the cities of the sons of Ammon. Then David and all the people returned to Jerusalem. 2 Samuel 12:31 (NAS)

The intention of this translation is that these four images describe the way David punished these captive people. Granted these are very brutal just to contemplate. We must keep in mind, however, that this is exactly what the Ammonites did with every people they conquered. To be specific, when the author said, "He set them under saws, sharp iron instruments and iron axes," it is a way of describing how David's men killed these soldiers. When the author said, "and made them pass through the brick kiln," it appears that his intent is that they were killed the same way that they made sacrifices of the people that they conquered. This is more than gruesome, but it is an historical fact. One must grant that there are textual problems in this passage. Still, this appears to be what David and his men did.

PASSING THROUGH THE BRICK KILN

This writer prefers the New American Standard Version of this verse. Let me explain why I have made this choice. First, observe at the end of the verse, it says that then all the people returned home. Making captives work with stone saws and making brick is a long-term decision. It is not a single action and then everyone goes home. Whatever David did, it was done in a short period of time and then the army returned to Jerusalem. Second, though the picture in the New American Standard Version is brutal beyond imagination, still it is exactly what the Ammonites did to their captives. It appears that David is just treating them to what they had done to others more than once.

THEY DID WHAT?!

THEY DID WHAT?!

But Adoni-bezek fled; and they pursued him and caught him and cut off his thumbs and big toes. And Adoni-bezek said, "Seventy kings with their thumbs and their big toes cut off used to gather up scraps under my table; as I have done, so God has repaid me." So they brought him to Jerusalem and he died there. Judges 1:6-7

The scene was stark, but common. Joshua had died and Jehovah had indicated that Judah should lead the people of Israel against the Canaanites. Though God had given specific areas of Canaan to the different tribes, still there were pagan peoples who lived in these sections of land. These people had to be driven out.

Judah and Simeon were chosen to have adjoining parcels in the land of promise. They made an agreement to work together to drive out the Canaanites and Perezites from their prescribed parcels of land. They first attacked the Canaanites who lived under the reign of Adoni-Bezek.

God gave Judah and Simeon victory over the army of Adoni-Bezek. When it was clear that his army would suffer humiliating defeat at the hands of the lowly Israelites, Adoni-Bezek fled the battlefield. As our text indicates, the king was captured and they cut off both his thumbs and his big toes.

We are repulsed by this outrage. Indeed, if this happened in our time, the king and the soldiers involved would be dragged before the war crimes tribunal. They would receive the most severe punishment permissible under the law. This is now. In ancient times, there was no international law governing war. There were no war crimes trials. Victors did as they pleased with their captives. The best treatment a captive could receive would be to be sold as a slave. It was not unusual for a captive soldier to be forced to watch as his wife was publicly humiliated. If she was pregnant, she would be sliced open and both she and her unborn child put to death as the husband looked on helplessly. In the opening two chapters of his prophecy, Amos pronounced judgment on Ammon saying,

Thus says the LORD, "For three transgressions of the sons of Ammon and for four I will not revoke its punishment, Because they ripped open the pregnant women of Gilead In order to enlarge their borders. Amos 1:13

This is a vivid example of that kind of action. It certainly was not an unusual experience.

We know that the Canaanites were a warlike people. They would kill and go into battle just for the pleasure of the experience. They loved to fight and kill. Indeed, they worshipped their sword. Legend has it that when they were victorious in battle, they would count their captives. As they counted, every one hundredth captive was killed as a sacrifice to their sword.

Modern warfare was not a whole lot better. At the end of World War II, Soviet troops were given two full days to do as they pleased in Berlin. They did! Your imagination can fill in the blanks. The water treatment administered by the Chinese and the tiny cages in which the North Koreans forced their captives to live are stark reminders of just how uncivil people can be to other people.

In I Samuel there is another gruesome tale described for us.

But Nahash the Ammonite said to them, "I will make it with you on this condition, that I will gouge out the right eye of every one of you, thus I will make it a reproach on all Israel." 1 Samuel 11:2

This is almost too gruesome to contemplate. Nahash, the Ammonite king, besieged the city of Jabesh-Gilead. The men of that city knew that they were greatly outnumbered. It was clear that their options were to starve to death or to sue for peace. They chose to negotiate a peace agreement.

Nahash had nothing to lose by being compassionate. The city was surrounded. Everything in the city was his. All the people would be his slaves to sell or put to forced labor as the Egyptians, Babylonians and Assyrians had done.

Instead, Nahash chose to make a brutish agreement. He would end the siege, and take the city captive. That was common procedure. He also demanded that he be allowed to gouge out the right eye of every person in the

THEY DID WHAT?!

city. We can understand one reason for his horrific condition of peace. Soldiers fought with their right hand. If he put out their right eye, then these men would never again be able to defend themselves in battle. This may have been part of the king's thinking, but it was not the whole story.

Look at the quotation again. Nahash said, "Thus I will make it a reproach on all Israel." In almost every instance, the way kings treated their captives reflected a desire to humiliate both the person being abused and also make this terrible action a reproach on all the people of Israel. Somehow, they received a sordid kind of enjoyment out of humiliating and reproaching captive peoples. You may remember that the men of Jabesh-Gilead tricked Nahash by asking for a week to discuss the matter and then called for assistance. The tragic desire of the king was, nevertheless, a graphic picture of how gruesome people could be in their treatment of each other.

Return, now, to our text. It clearly states that they took the king and cut off both his thumbs and his big toes. Adoni-Bezek immediately indicated that this was not an unusual procedure. Indeed, there were 70 other kings whom he himself had cut off their thumbs and big toes. In order to understand this, you must place yourself in the place of the captives and the captors. Captive kings, were forced to eat at the conquering king's table for the rest of their lives. In that situation, he would be mocked and scorned on a daily basis as long as he lived. Death would be a welcome release. He became the entertainment at the king's table. Think for a moment what would be involved if both your thumbs were cut off. By the way, in Arab countries today, if a person is caught stealing, both his thumbs would be chopped off. Without the thumb, it is most difficult to pick up anything. Such a person would never forget what he had done. Imagine how difficult it would be to pick up an eating utensil. Or imagine how difficult it would be to tie your shoes without your thumbs. There is great weakness and awkwardness involved in having one's thumbs cut off. Now imagine trying to eat say spaghetti without your thumbs. It would be very difficult and the victors would have a great deal of fun laughing at the antics of a king who couldn't pick up his spaghetti. This would simply be done as a way to publicly humiliate the leaders of a nation they conquered. As Nahash said, "to make it a reproach on Israel."

As if that was not enough, they chopped off both big toes as well. Most people would never think of their toes. Men would ignore them; women would decorate them but they would otherwise be ignored. People would especially not think of their toes as having a very important function in their lives. People would probably think that the only loss connected with having toes chopped off would be cosmetic. That, of course, is far from reality.

Though the toes function quietly and unobtrusively; along with our ears, they are almost totally responsible for our sense of balance. Our toes feel as though they seldom move. The truth is that the toes constantly move, almost microscopically, to maintain our delicate sense of balance.

When a king was captured, however, both of his big toes would be chopped off. His sense of balance would be totally destroyed. He would be unable to walk discreetly as befits a king. He would stumble, lose his balance and fall, time after time. That is the point. His whole life would be an endless round of awkward movements, spilling things on himself and falling to the ground. All of this provided a strange sort of sport for the conquering king and his consorts. The graceless attempts, of an otherwise very graceful man, to eat his meals was humiliating beyond description. His stumbling efforts to move his formerly regal frame from one place to another became the final degrading experience.

This eventually became unbearable. As a result, the conquered king would resort to taunting the conquering king or his nobles. This was done in the hope that he could make his captors sufficiently angry that they would kill him. This, alone, seemed to be the only possible release from the degradation and humiliation he suffered at the hands of the victors.

WHEN SOMEONE DIES

Every culture has a culturally acceptable way to deal with death. To them it seems normal. I am writing this in the city of Cap Haitian, Haiti. About an hour ago, a funeral parade processed past the compound of this seminary. The family, most of them impoverished, must prepare a large feast to show their respect for the deceased. If they cannot afford the feast, the funeral must be postponed until they can afford it. The gardener here lost his mother about six months ago. Had not the seminary community provided assistance, the body would still be in the morgue and might never be given a proper burial. The Irish side of my own family have their “wakes” while the German side of my family are appalled by this practice. Together, we want to look at some of the cultural mores surrounding death that are mentioned in the scripture and point out the cultural aspects of these situations.

Remember, Israel and its surroundings are located in an area where it gets very hot even during rainy season. This has a definite impact on how people deal with death.

HOW LONG IS LONG?!

And Joseph commanded his servants the physicians to embalm his father. So the physicians embalmed Israel. Now forty days were required for it, for such is the period required for embalming. And the Egyptians wept for him seventy days. Genesis 50:2,3

As you can see from our text, the Egyptians had very definite guidelines to deal with the death of a person. We must remember that Joseph and his family were dealt with in the way royalty was treated. For the common people, the basics were the same. The time, expense and pageantry would be less.

When Israel was on his way from Israel to Egypt, God spoke with him. God said,

I will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also surely bring you up again; and Joseph will close your eyes. Genesis 46:4

On occasion when a person dies, the eyes do not close. When God spoke to Israel and said, “and Joseph will close your eyes,” He spoke of a tradition in both the Jewish and Egyptian cultures. When a man was about to die, his chosen heir, in this case Joseph, would stay with his father until the elder one died. If the eyes did not close by themselves, the heir would close the eyes and place a small coin on the eyelids to keep them closed.

The Egyptians embalmed the bodies of their dead. As the text indicates, this embalming process required forty days for completion. There was a set time for mourning – seventy days. This embalming process was very effective. The embalmed bodies of kings from 3,000 to 4,000 years ago are still preserved. Joseph and his father were embalmed because they were an essential part of the royal patronage and had to be dealt with in this manner.

The Jews otherwise did not and in many cases still do not embalm the bodies of their deceased. Some years ago, the Summer Olympics were held in Germany. Many of the Israeli athletes were gunned down by terrorists. These dead athletes had to be buried before sundown, but they were a long way from home. The bodies were flown the wrong way around the world, into the sunrise, so that these athletes could be buried before sundown.

THE WRAPPING

He who had died came forth, bound hand and foot with wrappings; and his face was wrapped around with a cloth. Jesus said to them, unbind him, and let him go.” John 11:44

This, of course, is the report of the resurrection of Lazarus. It was the customary way for the body of the deceased to be prepared for burial. They would tear cloth into narrow strips and wrap the body much like the Egyptian mummy. When Lazarus died, his body was properly wrapped in these narrow strips of cloth. When Jesus raised him from the dead, they had to remove the wrappings before he could emerge from his tomb.

WHEN SOMEONE DIES

And so they took the body of Jesus, and bound it in linen wrappings with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews. John 19:40

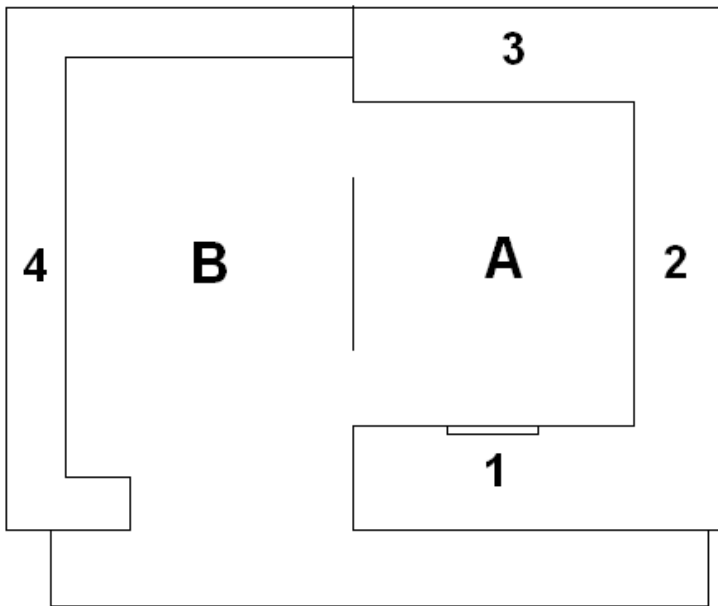
We will deal with the spices shortly. Our interest here is that Jesus was prepared for burial in exactly the same way that Lazarus was. We should keep in mind that linen was a very expensive kind of cloth. It would be very expensive to prepare a body for burial. By the way, these linen strips of cloth were essentially the same kind of strips of cloth with which a newborn baby was wrapped.

ROLL THE STONE AWAY

And they were saying to one another, “who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance. Mark 16:3

As I am sure you are aware, this is a conversation between the women who were on their way to prepare the body of Jesus for proper burial. They had not thought about how they were going to get into the tomb until just before they arrived at the place where the tomb was located.

The Jewish form of a tomb was a bit different from some others in the area. This involves their understanding of family. The family all lived together in life, no matter how many people that involved. In the same way, the whole family rested together in death. Because the family did not all die at the same time, they had to have a grave situation that could be opened as each member of the family died. Their tombs were carved out of the rock. At the front of the tomb, a stone track was carved out so that a circular stone could be placed in that track and rolled into place after a body was interred and rolled out of position when the next relative died. This stone would be at least six to eight feet in diameter and about one foot thick. It would take several men to move such a stone. You will remember that this was the situation when Jesus died. The interior of the tomb would look something like this.



The tomb was divided into two parts – A and B. In section A, you can see three places labeled 1, 2 and 3. These were three places where a body could be laid following preparation for burial until the decomposition was complete. The place numbered “4” is a place where family could come to pay their respects to the deceased. The entrance into this tomb would be near the letter “B”. Under the table marked “1” the rock was hollowed out to a depth of at least eight feet. When the decomposition process was complete, the bones would be placed in this opening with the bones of all the relatives. This is what the scriptures refer to when it says,

WHEN SOMEONE DIES

*And these are the years of the life of Ishmael, one hundred and thirty-seven years; and he breathed his last and died, and **was gathered to his people**. Genesis 25:17*

When the author of Genesis said, “was gathered to his people,” he referred to the bones of one member of the family being placed in the crypt inside the tomb with the bones of all the other members of the family.

In the book of Nehemiah, you will find a very interesting statement. It says,

And I said to the king, “let the king live forever. Why should my face not be sad when the city, the place of my father’s tombs, lies desolate and its gates have been consumed by fire. Nehemiah 2:3

Observe, Nehemiah mention “my father’s tombs” (plural). There is no doubt that Nehemiah’s father did not lie in more than one tomb. This is a way of referring to the tomb in which the remains of all the members of his family have been placed.

There is a cemetery on the east side of the city of Jerusalem right next to the Beautiful Gate that is all bricked up at present. A friend of mine was standing on a tomb in this cemetery taking pictures of this gate. It had rained that day. The cement on top of this tomb was soft and he fell in. Being alone, he wondered how he could get out. There were so many bones in that tomb that he could pile them up nearly two feet high and climb out to safety.

OH, THE SPICES

Now the women who had come with Him out of Galilee followed after, and saw the tomb and how His body was laid. And they returned and prepared spices and perfumes. And on the Sabbath they rested according to the commandment.
Luke 23:55, 56

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, bringing the spices which they had prepared. Luke 24:1

As we indicated earlier, the Egyptians embalmed their dead, but the Jews did not. Again, this is a very hot climate. A body left in this heat would quickly decompose and the odor created would be most offensive. To deal with this problem, they wrapped the body in the narrow strips of linen, as previously mentioned. As they wrapped the body with these linen strips, they smeared the spices and the salve like perfume all over the wrappings in an attempt to deal with the odor of the decaying body. It was this preparation that the women brought to the tomb on the first day of the week.

The Egyptians, however, had a different way of dealing with their dead. Many different kinds of pyramids have been found. We must remember, however, that this was the way royalty was buried, not the common people. Depending on ones financial position, the Egyptians tried to prepare their deceased relatives for the after life. For the royal family, this meant placing a large amount of food in the pyramid so that they would be well prepared for the long journey to the afterlife. Instructions were written around the inside of the coffin to guide the soul of the deceased to their version of life beyond death. We also know that many servants were placed in the pyramid so that the king would be properly cared for on this long journey. Does this raise any questions? The truth is that these servants were killed and placed in the pyramid along with the deceased member of the royal family. It seems brutal to us, but it was considered appropriate to the Egyptians.

Thinking about life after death, we have tried to show that cultural and theological understandings have everything to do with the way people care for their deceased relatives. Not too many Christians give it much thought, but our view of the resurrection should have a definite impact on the way we express our respect and love for relatives who though now deceased await the resurrection of the dead.

I talked with a funeral director about this on one occasion. He told me that he could stand in the back of his chapel during a service and could tell if the family was a group of Christians or not. The non-Christians would often be emotionally out of control while the Christians would grieve, but with a greater sense of peace.

SPEECHLESS PHARISEES SPEECHLESS PHARISEES

And no one was able to answer Him a word, nor did anyone dare from that day on to ask Him another question. Matthew 22:46

In this portion of Matthew, Jesus had driven the moneychangers, the sales people and their animals out of the temple. As he was driving them out, He quoted from Isaiah.

Even those I will bring to My holy mountain, And make them joyful in My house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be acceptable on My altar; For My house will be called a house of prayer for all the peoples. " Isaiah 56:7

Jesus then healed the blind and the lame. Immediately the Chief Priests and Scribes challenged Him because the children cried out, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" Jesus response was simply to quote from Psalm 8:2

From the mouth of infants and nursing babes Thou hast established strength, Because of Thine adversaries, To make the enemy and the revengeful cease. Psalms 8:2

The next day, the chief priests demanded that He tell them by what authority He had done the things He did. Jesus embarrassed them repeatedly and attacked their assumed purity of life.

The Pharisees made a number of attempts to trap Jesus. They asked Him about whether they should pay tribute to Caesar. The Sadducees tried to trap Jesus by suggesting a hypothetical family question – "whose wife of the seven shall she be?" Jesus, having humiliated them quoted from Scripture.

He said also, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Then Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. Exodus 3:6

Again, a lawyer asked Jesus, "which is the great commandment in the Law?" Jesus responded by quoting from Deuteronomy and Leviticus.

And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. Deuteronomy 6:5

'You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the LORD. Leviticus 19:18

In Luke's account of this story, the lawyer responded by asking another question, "And who is my neighbor?" Following Jesus' reply, you will note that there were no further questions from that lawyer.

Finally in Matthew 22:41, Jesus asked the Pharisees a question. "What do you think about the Christ, whose son is He?" They answered, "The son of David." Jesus then said, "Then how does David in the Spirit call Him "Lord," saying,

'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at My right hand, Until I put Thine enemies beneath Thy feet"?' Matthew 22:44

Having quoted, here, from Psalm 110:1, Jesus said,

"If David then calls Him 'Lord,' how is He his son?" Matthew 22:45

In this study, we have described the events that took place in Matthew 21:12 – 22:46. As you reflect upon these, you begin to see a pattern to Jesus' ministry.

1. When teaching, Jesus repeatedly used parables. In these parables, Jesus took something that they knew and understood exceedingly well to explain something they did not understand at all.
2. Especially when answering the subtle questions and attacks of the Scribes and Pharisees, Jesus repeatedly did two things:
 - a. He would answer their questions with a statement of principle.
 - b. He would then add one or two quotations from Scripture that were the basis of his answers.

SPEECHLESS PHARISEES

c. The Pharisees could not respond.

There are two good reasons for the silence of the Pharisees in response to Jesus' replies.

1. The great wisdom with which He spoke would repeatedly leave them with no response to offer.
2. The second reason had to do with the nature of truth. In Deuteronomy, Moses was restating the Law for the benefit of the next generation. He clarified the determination of truth when he said,

On the evidence of two witnesses or three witnesses, he who is to die shall be put to death; he shall not be put to death on the evidence of one witness. Deuteronomy 17:6

Jesus repeatedly blunted their attempts to trap Him by using Scripture as His responses. Not only that, He often used two quotations from Scripture in a single answer. If Jesus had simply responded with logic, then they would counter with their own logic. However, when Jesus presented two scripture passages to prove His point, then if they challenged His response, they would be contending against Scripture rather than against Him. To contend with Scripture was considered to be blasphemous even to the Pharisees.

There is no doubt that the New Testament writers learned well from Jesus' example. Hebrews chapter one is an excellent example.

In Hebrews 1:5-13, the author made one propositional statement and supported it with ten quotations from the Hebrew Scriptures. The author's plan is clear. Hebrews 1:1-4 describes the greatness of Jesus. The author then, in ten quotations, provided evidence that Jesus was far greater than the angels that some of these people worshipped.

For to which of the angels did He ever say, "Thou art My Son, Today I have begotten Thee"? And again, "I will be a Father to Him And He shall be a Son to Me"? Hebrews 1:5

In Hebrews 1:5, the author supported his contention by appropriate quotations from Psalm 2:7 and II Samuel 7:14

And when He again brings the first-born into the world, He says, " And let all the angels of God worship Him." Hebrews 1:6

In Hebrews 1:6, the author supported his statement by quoting from Psalm 97:7

"Who makes His angels winds, And His ministers a flame of fire." Hebrews 1:7

In Hebrews 1:7, the author quoted from Psalm 104:4 to support his affirmation about Jesus.

But of the Son He says, "Thy throne, O God, is forever and ever, And the righteous scepter is the scepter of His kingdom. Hebrews 1:8

In Hebrews 1:8, the author quoted from Psalm 45:6 to support his statement about Jesus.

"Thou hast loved righteousness and hated lawlessness; Therefore God, Thy God, hath anointed Thee with the oil of gladness above Thy companions." Hebrews 1:9

In Hebrews 1:9, the author continued by quoting from Psalm 45:7.

And, "Thou, Lord, in the beginning didst lay the foundation of the earth, And the heavens are the works of Thy hands; Hebrews 1:10

In Hebrews 1:10, the author quoted from Psalm 102:25 and Psalm 45:6 in support of his contention about Jesus.

They will perish, but Thou remainest; And they all will become old as a garment, Hebrews 1:11

In Hebrews 1:11, you do not have the logical presentation of the author, but a quotation from Psalm 102:26 and Isaiah 51:6

And as a mantle Thou wilt roll them up; As a garment they will also be changed. But Thou art the same, and Thy years will not come to an end. " Hebrews 1:12

SPEECHLESS PHARISEES

In Hebrews 1:12, the author continued quoting from Psalm 102 and verses 26 and 27.

But to which of the angels has He ever said, "Sit at My right hand, Until I make Thine enemies a footstool for Thy feet"? Hebrews 1:13

In Hebrews 1:13, the author made a slight change. He quoted from Psalm 110:1 and then used Joshua 10:24 to explain what he meant by his reference to the "footstool for His feet."

It would be most difficult to challenge the author's proposition in view of the evidence he has drawn together.

In Romans chapter three, Paul dealt with the Jewish feeling of righteous superiority over the Gentiles. In support of his argument, in 3:10-18, he drew supporting evidence from the following passages of the Old Testament: Psalm 14:1; Psalm 53:1; Psalm 5:9; Psalm 140:3; Psalm 10:7; Isaiah 59:7 and Psalm 36:1

Again, Paul learned well from Jesus' example. It is most difficult to debate such a mass of Scriptural evidence.

James apparently took Jesus' example seriously when he dealt with the believers behaving like unbelievers. As he dealt with the issue, in chapter 2, he quoted from Leviticus 19:18; Exodus 20:13 and Deuteronomy 5:17. He went on to apply these sacred truths to the way these believers lived their lives honoring the rich and discriminating against the poor.

The apostle Peter also followed Jesus' example. In I Peter 2, he challenged these Christians to live a holy life free from the evils of wickedness, guile, hypocrisy, envy and evil speaking. In support of his challenge, he quoted from Isaiah 28:16; Psalm 118:22 and Isaiah 8:14.

We could give much more evidence. You will find the same scenario in the writings of each of the New Testament writers. Jesus used this means to convey truth and help people understand the will of God as revealed in His word. The New Testament writers realized the wisdom of this style and followed His lead implicitly.

SPEECHLESS PHARISEES
SHOW ME A DENARIUS

*"Show Me a denarius. Whose likeness and inscription does it have?" And they said, "Caesar's." And He said to them, "Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."
Luke 20:24-25*

This experience took place in the temple, according to Mark 11:27 f.f. This is a very important piece of information. The Denarius was a Roman coin. It was the amount of the tribute each Jew was to pay. It is the coin Jesus told Peter to go and get from the mouth of the fish and pay the tax. It would probably be worth less than a quarter by modern standards.

No graven image of a person was ever to be brought into the temple. When Jerusalem was overrun by the Roman Army, the Roman General went into the Holy of Holies. In so doing, he made the entire temple unclean by bringing a Gentile into the temple building itself. He placed a statue of Caesar on the Mercy Seat and sacrificed a pig. Shortly thereafter, he destroyed the temple completely and it was never rebuilt.

All of the Roman coins had an impression of the Caesar stamped into the face of it. It would be inappropriate for anyone to bring a coin such as this into the temple. This is the reason that they had moneychangers on the temple grounds. They exchanged the Roman money for temple money that had no image stamped into the face of it.

In the passage with which we began this part of the study, the Pharisees and Herodians were sent to try to trap and discredit Jesus.

It is interesting that it was the Pharisees and the Herodians who came to try to trap Jesus. Under any other circumstances, these men would never speak to each other; much less work together. They were long-term political enemies. The Herodians favored cooperating with the Romans in order to survive. The Pharisees, however, resisted every move the Romans made to try to control an unruly people.

Jesus knew their goal. The question these men asked Jesus was carefully crafted. If Jesus answered that they should pay the tribute to Caesar, these enemies would flaunt this information because the national pastime for Israel was to hate Rome. This report, they hoped, would turn the people against Jesus.

If, on the other hand, Jesus responded that they should not pay the tax, then these men would go to the Roman authorities and report that Jesus was urging the people to rebel against Rome. Either answer Jesus might offer would create serious problems for Him.

Knowing their motive, Jesus asked them for a denarius and they produced one. Did they realize that in their attempt to trap Jesus, they were the ones who had been trapped? These men, who were known to check fiendishly to see that everyone did exactly as was required concerning the law and the temple, were themselves found guilty of violating one of the most important rules of the temple. They brought Roman coins into the temple.

These men were shocked to discover that Jesus found a way to answer their carefully crafted question in such a way that it could not be used against Him with the people of Israel or with the Roman authorities.

Many people wonder about the situations in the Old Testament where men married more than one wife and were not condemned for it. People tend to deal with all of these situations in the same way. Most of them are quite different from each other.

There is no single explanation to deal with these situations. There are some instances – Elkanah in I Samuel and Abraham in Genesis – where the first wife was barren and after many years of bearing no children, a second wife or surrogate was taken in order that the family would not be childless in old age.

There is a brief reference in Genesis that is helpful at this point.

And after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Abram's wife Sarai took Hagar the Egyptian, her maid, and gave her to her husband Abram as his wife. Genesis 16:3

In the time of Abraham, if a wife had not born a child after ten years of marriage, it was required that the wife either bear a son, or that the husband divorce his wife and take a different wife or take a surrogate.

That, however, was not the only reason for plural wives in the Old Testament. Jacob took a second wife because he tried to trick the bride's father, Laban, and was tricked by Laban and received the wife he did not want. He then worked seven more years to get the wife he really wanted. The story of Jacob's married life was a story of repeated tragedy.

David married several women, but in no instance was it because the first wife was barren. This fact led to the major downfall of David's entire life.

David's son, Solomon, married hundreds of women. These marriages were, for the most part, signs of good faith for a pact of peace between Israel and the nation represented by the bride. Solomon began his reign as the most promising king that could possibly come to the throne of Israel. He ended his reign with the nation in disaster, his son's reigns divided and ruined because of the spiritual bankruptcy which was aided by the idolatry these wives brought with them into the marriage.

It is interesting that though God intended that a man marry one woman for life, still God never condemned these men for their plural marriages. If you look carefully, however, at each of the instances just mentioned when men married more than one wife, there were tragedies that seemed to play havoc with their lives and those of their children.

THE CONCLUSION

Words are powerful. With words, one can rouse the disheartened to zealous pursuit of a vital goal. Words can totally destroy the trusting innocence of a child. God chose to use words to carefully reveal both Himself and His will. Because of this, it is absolutely essential that we understand exactly what these words mean in a given context as well as how the community of people view and use these words. Nowhere is this more obvious than in Jesus' conversation with Peter as reported in John chapter 21. If you translate Jesus question, "Do you love me" and Peter's answer, "You know that I love you" with the same meaning, you get one understanding. On the other hand, Jesus used one word translated "love" and Peter used a very different term which is better translated "like". This gives one a very different idea.

If we understand what they understood, we will be able to share their emotions, feel their feelings and grasp their reactions. From our point of view, the people wanted to see Lazarus more because he represented a miracle and a novelty. That was not so much their interest. The ability to raise a person from the dead was a Messianic requirement. Knowing this we are better able to experience this event as they experienced it.

To the modern, western mind, reading the story of the angelic announcement to shepherds simply identified the recipients. To them, it was far more. It shows how God thinks. Other people would not even speak to a shepherd. Out of all the people in the world, God did not reveal this message to the High Priest, but rather chose the outcast to hear the announcement of the coming of His glorious Son.

If we know the national and spiritual culture, it can protect us from believing error. Some people believe some strange things because Jesus said, to the adulterous woman, "Neither do I condemn you..." Actually, Jesus could do nothing else if he was to obey the Law as they experienced it in that time.

If one understands their culture properly, the story of the Pharisee inviting Jesus reveals the terrible attempt at deception and disrespect that this man displayed toward Jesus. Again, when Jesus said, "Show me a denarius," if one knows that culture, Jesus sense of humor dances before you.

The modern church is substantially divided over whether the bread of communion is in fact the body of Christ. As one theologian has put it, "be careful of the bones." If we can see that experience through the eyes of the disciples, the issue of bread had more to do with forgiveness than with "real presence." The wine had more to do with the dependability of this "new covenant" than with transforming grape juice into human blood.

Jesus riding the donkey into Jerusalem is viewed by the modern Christian as simply a primitive form of transportation. In their minds, the fact that Jesus rode on this colt was a declaration of His royal heritage. This makes all the difference in the world.

Understandings evolve and solidify. Much of the church thinks of Jesus' boyhood family as a loving household. This is their thought despite the fact that the text clearly states that animosities existed. However, if you understand their cultural practices you get a very different picture of a dysfunctional family life after the apparent death of Joseph.

God folded His revelation of Himself into two very expressive languages and clothed that message in the very demonstrative culture of that day; molding it and shaping it through the personality of those who lived these experiences. He did this in order to make it understandable to the people of that day. A part of our interpretive task is to, in effect, become one of them; to feel what they felt; to see as they saw; to be moved to decision as they were moved. It is to become a part of that culture so that these events affect us as they affected the people who listened to Jesus preach and saw Him heal the sick.

This kind of understanding does not come through quick bites of reading a "verse of the day." It comes by careful study and laborious searching the language and the culture of the people about whom the text was written and to whom the divine appeals were made. This can be every bit as important as a proper, orthodox understanding of any of the important doctrines.

The title of this book, "Fashioned by culture," is an attempt to express, in very graphic language, the way in which God used the language and cultural understandings of that day to make vivid His revelation of Himself and His will for our lives. God always chooses to do His work through the lives of His servants. We thank God

THE CONCLUSION

for this revelation which comes to us through the understandings and experiences of common people like you and me.