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## INTRODUCTION

Most of the books written about the life of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, had two overriding themes; to describe WHAT happened during His brief stay on earth, and to use this to draw some conclusions about WHAT we should do, to take advantage of the salvation that He offered us.

Nobody can deny the importance of these themes in our lives. These were the themes that I was exposed to as a child, and drummed in my little ear since I began asking my parents questions about God, And the themes that I heard in church as I grew up. I have to admit that they taught me many things about God. And when I began to teach in Sunday school, I used them to teach the children how to believe in God. They were the main themes that I used during the fifteen years, which I spent preaching in our churches.

Despite all that, I always felt that there is something missing. I remember that every time, I heard that God did this or did that, somewhere in the back of my mind lurked a question that I didn't dare mention to any body, a persistent question; why did God do that? With these why questions unanswered, I felt that my knowledge of God is incomplete, and that the image that I was given about Him has big gaps and sometimes it has some irreconcilable discrepancies. For instance, why did God ask the Israelites to destroy the nations whose land He was giving to them (Jos 6:17), while He is the one who said, "The fathers shall not be put to death for the children, nor the children be put to death for their fathers; every man shall be put to death for his own sin" (Dt. 24:16). Is this the God who is described in the Bible as a loving father? Or why did He burn Sodom and Gomorrah with all its inhabitants including the children and the babies? What sin did these commit to deserve death? Or, why did God order His prophet Hosea to marry a prostitute not once but twice? Does this make sense?

Over the years this kind of questions did not fade away, but stayed with me. As my knowledge of the Bible grew, I discovered, that the reason why most people avoid the why question is that God by and large did not reveal to man the reasons behind his commandments, or orders. When He asked Abram to leave his relatives and friends and follow Him to make him a great nation, He did not tell him why he had to travel and leave every thing as a condition for making him a great nation. He just told him, and Abram obeyed. Or when He rejected Cain's sacrifice, He did not tell him why, He just rejected it. Or when He wrestled with Jacob, why did He do that? The Bible does not tell us why? Then I discovered another reason. One of the main ideas that we were taught is that we should not try to understand God, because our intelligence is so inadequate to understand Him. For sometime I did not question those two ideas.

But as I learned that the only way to God, was to form a personal relationship with Him, I found it difficult, because I really did not understand Him that well. Those big gaps in my knowledge of Him, began to upset me, and I realized that if some of these gaps were filled, then I will have an easier time relating to God. So I began looking into the writings of the saints, and found very little which deals with this aspect of God's character. So I began using whatever knowledge I have about God, to try to probe the why questions in as much as possible. I approached this task with a great deal of humility, and prayer, but realizing that this will help me to have a more complete picture of God, And hopefully, will help me in forming a stronger personal relationship with Him, I decided to proceed. Before I began, I asked God for help, and He did. If you ask me whether He helped in every case, I must confess that He did not, and there are some situations that are still a mystery to me. But many others have been solved. As a result, I felt relief that many of those nagging questions and inconsistencies in my image of God have been answered. Then it occurred to me that putting this in a book may help others who have an inquisitive mind like mine. If you ask me whether it was useful to try to understand God, I would

say yes. But if you asked me, whether it is possible for us to understand everything that God does, I will say no. In those cases we have to accept what He did in good faith. This becomes a little easier to do, if we know what we could know about Him. If we remind ourselves that He loves us so much that His only son took flesh and became a man, and died in our place so we can live, we will be more willing to accept some of His deeds, without understanding them.

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May, 2002

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE EARLY LIFE OF JESUS

The most reliable record about the life of our Lord are the four gospels, three of which were written by His disciples, John and Matthew who were members of His inner circle of twelve, and Mark who was one of the seventy whom Jesus commissioned later. The fourth gospel was written by a physician called Luke who was not one of the disciples, not even a Jew by birth, but has converted to Christianity, and showed such enthusiasm for the new religion. He accompanied St. Paul in many of his trips, and contributed two books to the New Testament, the gospel carrying his name, and the book of Acts of the Apostles.

As we examine the four gospels, we find all of them concentrating on the life of Jesus as He began His ministry, at the age of thirty. The only episodes that happened before that, which were mentioned by at least one of the gospels, were His birth, the first visit to the Temple, the flight of the holy family to Egypt. At the age of 12, His stay in the Temple listening and talking with the scribes and Pharisees, while His family began their trip to Nazareth. The only episodes that were detailed were His birth, and the visit to the Temple. The other two were not treated with any detail, but were briefly mentioned. So the first thirty years of the life of Jesus were totally ignored by those who wrote about His life. Granted that nothing unusual happened during those long years. But usually when historians write about a famous person, who attained a degree of greatness, they usually dig in his past and write about every detail of his early life that they can find, even if there was nothing spectacular about those details. And here we are dealing with the most important human being that ever lived and we don't know much about the first thirty years of His life. Strange? Yes.

In the following pages we are going to try to give as complete a picture about the early life of Jesus as we can, using whatever those who were interested in it, have provided for us. For this purpose we are going to divide those thirty years that He lived before He began His ministry into four periods: The first visit to the Temple, the flight to Egypt, the second visit to the Temple, and the stay in Nazareth.

### **1) The First Visit to the Temple:**

The first thing that was written about the baby Jesus, after He was born, was the fact that He was circumcised, when He was eight days old (Lk 1:59). Circumcision was ordered by God for all the descendants of Abraham as a sign and a reminder to them that the Lord God has established a covenant with them. It was considered a symbolic separation from the sinfulness that every child is born with. When we ask, was Jesus in need of it? The answer is No, for the simple reason that He was born holy, undefiled by any sin. Also He was party to that covenant when it was given to Abraham, so He did not need it. Then we ask, then why did it happen? The answer for this is twofold. The first was that at that point in time, nobody knew his true identity. St. Mary certainly knew that He was not a normal child. The words of Archangel Gabriel were still ringing in her ears, "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of His kingdom there will be no end." (Lk1: 32,33).

The Bible does not tell us whether she understood the real meaning of those words or not. Most probably she did not, and may be she thought that her son will be king over her people, and that He will restore the glory of the kingdom as it was in the days of David. So, being the devout Jew that she was, she discussed the matter with Joseph and agreed that baby Jesus will be circumcised on the eighth day as stipulated in the Law (Le 12:1-6).

The second was that Jesus would have wanted it that way, if He were able to communicate with His mother. I am sure that God found a way to relay this to St. Mary. Jesus did something similar to this when He insisted on getting baptized by John the Baptist, and His reasoning that He gave to John was, "It is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness" (Mt 3:15). In these two instances, and many others, Jesus wanted to go under the Law, to fulfill every word in it, in order to release us from its yolk, and grant us the freedom that He offered those who believe in Him.

Circumcision in the Old Testament was replaced by baptism in the New Testament. The difference between them is the fact that circumcision was associated with blood shedding, and represented the intensity of our sins, and our urgent need of the removal of our imperfections. This could not happen without the shedding of blood. But when Jesus died on the cross shedding His own blood on our behalf, we do not need circumcision any more. Water is enough to wash the sin from the heart of the penitent, provided that he had accepted Jesus and His sacrifice.

After this Jesus had to be taken to the Temple to be presented to God, and a sacrifice offered on His behalf for He was the first born of Mary, and was considered holy to the Lord, according to the Law. So after the days of her purification (which were 40 days because she gave birth to a boy), she and Joseph took the baby Jesus, who was forty days old, for His first visit to the Temple. The Holy Family took the winding road from Bethlehem to Jerusalem. After a while they saw at a distance the huge walled city, with its enormous Temple compound.

The Temple itself was something to behold. It was a magnificent building gleaming with gold and white. They entered the city through the Dung gate, and went through the dirt narrow roads of the commercial area, and finally to the Temple. Joseph bought a pair of young pigeons from one of the merchants who occupied the Court of

the Gentiles. He left St. Mary in the Court of women, and went upstairs to the Court of Israel, and gave them to the priest on duty to offer them as a sacrifice.

After this the holy family were ready to go home, but as they were crossing the crowded Court, an old man whose name was Simeon stopped them. The Bible describes him as "righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel (Lk 2:25). The reason why this man was promised that he is not going to die until he sees Jesus was detailed in another part of this book.

Briefly, while he was translating the book of Isaiah and when he came to the text that says, "a virgin shall conceive and bear a son" (Isa 7:14), he did not believe that this could happen. So he decided to change the word "virgin" to the word "woman". Then God told him that he will live until he sees with his own eyes the child Jesus.

We don't know how long did Simeon wait, but it seems that he was glad that finally his wait is over. So when he saw the Holy Family, he recognized them and then he took Jesus in his arms, looked up to God and said, "Lord, now let your servant depart in peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation" (Lk2: 28).

Here we find a human being asking God to let him die, a very strange request. But it seems that Simeon lived all the years that he had to wait to see Jesus, in repentance and feeling guilty. So, he was relieved when he saw Jesus. Knowing that this was the end of his wait, he immediately asked God to end his life. He simply had nothing else to live for. He was not only ready, but also eager to die. What a blessing to be able to do that, willing to give up this empty life, to go where his life will be filled with God. St. Mary and St. Joseph were amazed at what happened, but took this as another indication that baby Jesus is not an ordinary child, and that great events are waiting for Him in the future.



Then Simeon looked at St. Mary and told her, "Behold this child is for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against, and a sword will pierce through your own soul also, that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed" (LK 2:34,35). God was sending a message to St. Mary, that the life of her son will be a controversial one. Many will believe him and many will not, and those who will believe will be exalted, but those who will not believe, will be put down, and condemned. Then His other message was that, Mary would suffer as a result of being His mother. St. Mary must have added all that to what she has already kept in her mind.

As they were still mulling over what they just heard from Simeon, and about to make their exit, they were stopped again. This time it was a woman. The Bible tells us that she was called Anna, and describes her as a prophetess, a widow, from the tribe of Asher, eighty years old. She lived in the temple fasting and praying day and night. Anna was also waiting for the salvation that the Lord God had promised. She may have witnessed what Simeon said, and realized as he did that this is the seed of the woman who is going to bruise the Serpent's head. She gave thanks to God for the fulfillment of His promise, and then began to spread the good news to all who wanted to listen. So, in a way she could be considered the very first missionary for Christianity.

## **2) The Flight to Egypt:**

This episode was only mentioned by St. Matthew. The reason may have been that the three other disciples didn't think that it is that important to be included in their account of the life of Jesus. Anyway, St. Matthew included it, and we are forever indebted to him, for that. The episode began with the famous visit of the three wise men to Bethlehem, to see Jesus. The Bible tells us that when they began to ask the people in Jerusalem about where they can find the "King of the Jews" that has just been born, king Herod was troubled and all Jerusalem with him. When Herod knew from the priests that the Christ will be born in Bethlehem,

he summoned the wise men and told them to search for the child, come back and tell him, so he too will go and worship him.

After their visit, they were ordered by an angel not to go back to Herod, because he intends to kill Jesus. When Herod found that they tricked him, he ordered all the male infants in Bethlehem two years or under to be killed. Then an angel appeared to Joseph and told him, " Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there till I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him" (Mt 2:13). It was night, but Joseph awakened his wife and relayed the important message to her.

St.Mary began getting herself and Jesus ready, and Joseph started immediately to pack their few possessions. As St.Mary was doing that, she must have remembered what Simeon said to her a few days ago. She must have wondered whether the sword that he spoke about is already working. She must have thought, 'Here we are threatened by somebody, who wants to kill my baby, and who? King Herod. Why is this happening? But ST. Mary was not one of those who question God, so she dismissed those thoughts, and may have murmured to herself," Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord".

After Joseph put whatever he packed aside, and saw that Mary and Jesus were ready, he helped her on the donkey and started, while it was still dark, their long journey to Egypt. How long did it take them to reach Egypt, we are not told. But considering the distance and the conditions of the roads at that time, and the fact that they were traveling on a donkey makes one estimates that it probably took them at least several months. How did they sustain themselves during that long trip? What did they eat? Where did they sleep? We do not know. Did Joseph think about all these concerns before they departed? Nobody knows. If these two were ordinary human beings, they may have been worried about these things, and many more such as their safety.

Who is going to protect them from attacks by thieves who were famous for taking advantage of people traveling alone? But in this case we are talking about St.Mary, and St.Joseph, who were two righteous people who trusted in God, and who were given direct orders from God. Even if such questions crossed their minds, they must have dismissed them, on the basis that if God ordered them to take this trip, He will take care of all their needs. So there is absolutely no need to panic or wonder what is going to happen.

As we reflect on the whole episode, many questions begin to emerge. Among these, why did Herod kill the children of Bethlehem? Was he really threatened by what the wise men told him? Was that realistic, for a king to feel afraid because he heard of a child who will be king when he grows up? Why did the Holy Family flee? Couldn't God have protected them if they remained in Israel? Why flee to Egypt, of all places?

Why did Herod order the slaughter of the infants of Bethlehem? The key to this question is the personality of Herod. We know that he was one of Herod's (the great) three sons, and that his name was Herod Antipas .He was made king by Emperor Augustus over Galilee and Perea. His second brother Herod Philip, ruled over the territories northeast of the Sea of Galilee largely inhabited by non-Jews. The third brother; Herod Archelaus ruled over the rest of Judah. Historians tell us that Herod Antipas was raised in Rome and was once favored to succeed his father, but had to share the kingdom with his other two brothers. This may have contributed to his greed, selfishness, and his irrational fear for his position.

It is interesting to know that his official title was not " king ", but "tetrach", but he probably insisted on being called "king". He was made tetrach by Rome, and was ruling his people in the name of Rome, so they considered him an agent of the enemy, and consequently they had no loyalty to him. To make things worse, he built a new capital,

Tiberias, on an old burial ground, making it unclean for devout Jews. He also used animal figures in decorating his palace, something that the Law prohibited. These things did not make him a popular ruler. Above all that, he was raised in an atmosphere of hatred, jealousy, and severe competition, where he had to be cunning and devious in order to survive.

We can easily see this in what he told the wise men. He asked them to search diligently for the child, and when they find him, to tell him where he was, so he also will worship him. So, we can say that if Herod was a normal king who was relaxed about his position, and who felt that his people love him and are loyal to him. If he had decency and honor, if he was secure in his position, and above all if he knew God, he would have never ordered the slaughter of one child, in order to protect his kingdom. It is interesting to note that when Herod killed the children, he was really protecting the king who will come after him, because if Jesus would become the king, this will not possibly happen before twenty or thirty years, so there was no immediate danger to Herod.

Another reason that Herod tried to kill Jesus, was his knowledge that the one born was none other than the Messiah, some one sent by God. Herod was a ruthless ruler who did not refrain from killing any body whom he saw as a threat to his authority. Consequently, he killed many of his friends, and many of those who were close to him, including his wife and his mother in-law. So when he heard that the Messiah, the light of the world was born, he was afraid, as any sinner would, for the light will eventually expose his sins. And because he loved the darkness in which he lived, he decided to destroy the light.

### **Why did the Holy Family flee?**

Discussing this in youth meetings, they often ask whether God was afraid of Herod, and this is why He fled to Egypt? Young people have a difficulty accepting such behavior as a behavior worthy of God. They

see our Lord's fleeing because of Herod as an act of weakness and not of strength. They see that God does not retreat in front of any human, no matter what. They see that God could have destroyed Herod, destroyed his soldiers, or did something miraculous like the many miraculous things that He did in the past to rescue His people from their enemies. My answer was, and still is, that we cannot judge God, using our human standards, or values. But we can try to understand His actions using whatever knowledge we have of Him. When we do that, we find that in this instance, an explanation is possible. We all know that God was never afraid of anybody, so what He did must have been motivated by something else. Our guess is that He chose this response for two and possibly three good reasons.

The first is that Jesus came to the world, to save it, not to destroy it or any of its inhabitants. He did not come to kill people but to save them. He did not come to shed people's blood, but to shed His own blood on our behalf. This was so obvious in everything that He did. The Bible tells us one story after another that he never condemned anyone, even the woman who was caught committing adultery, and who was brought to Him for His judgement, He did not condemn her. And after He challenged her accusers saying, " He who among you is without a sin, let him cast the first stone" (Jn 8:7). Then addressing the woman He said, "Woman, where are your accusers? Has no man condemned you? She said 'No man, Lord ' Jesus answered,' neither do I condemn you, go and sin no more" (Jn8: 10, 11).

Many others hurt him, but he never even criticized them. When His disciples abandoned Him, He forgave them, when Peter denied that he knew Him, He did not condemn him. After He rose from the dead, and met Mary Magdalene, He sent a message to those same disciples including Peter, telling her, " Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, there they will see me" (Mt 28:10). After all what they did when He needed their support, He still calls them His "brothers". And when He met with them, He asked Peter, " Simon Bar Jonah, do you love me

more than these? And Peter answered, " yes Lord, You know that I love you" (Jn21: 15). When Jesus repeated the same question two more times, Peter was upset. He did not know that because he denied Him three times, that those three admissions of his love was the only thing that Jesus asked in order to forgive him. This is why He repeated the question three times. Even the people who crucified Him, He forgave them, when He said, " Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing" (Lk 23:34). So, He could have killed Herod, but He did not want to.

The second possible reason is His desire to teach us a lesson in our relationships with others. He wanted us to learn that meeting evil with evil, is not the best policy. Love, mercy, and forgiveness in line with His Sermon on the Mount in which He outlined a new theology characterized this. He said on that memorable day, " You have heard that it was said, ' An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, do not resist the one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also" (Mt 5: 38,39).

So by fleeing to Egypt, Jesus was teaching us by His example, that to flee from evil is the thing to do when you are confronted with hostility. Still there are those who feel that it is a weakness to turn the other cheek or to flee from a confrontation. But when you think about it, it is much easier to respond to evil by evil. Any body can do that, but to refuse to meet evil with evil is much more difficult, and few of us can do it.

The third possible reason is that God wanted to open a new chapter in His relationship with Egypt. It is a known fact that God throughout the Old Testament considered Pharaoh an enemy, and the land of Egypt a hostile land. Egypt was the country that enslaved His chosen people and treated them with disdain and cruelty. Pharaoh was the king who thought himself God, and defied God's orders to let His people go, and God had to hit him and Egypt hard with ten plagues before he agreed to let them go. Egypt was one of the thorns in the side of Israel, invading

its land several times when they felt that the Jewish State was militarily weak.

There are more than thirty prophecies about the disasters which Egypt will sustain, some of these are recorded in the books of Isaiah (chapter 19), Jeremiah (43, 44, 46), Ezekiel (20,29), Dan (11), and Joel (3). The projected change of the relationship was prophesied by fewer prophecies. The first one appeared in Isaiah when he said, "In that day there will be an altar to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt, and a pillar to the Lord at its borders. It will be a sign and a witness to the Lord of hosts in the land of Egypt; when they cry to the Lord because of oppressors he will send them a savior, and will defend and deliver them. And the Lord will make Himself known to the Egyptians; and the Egyptians will know the Lord in that day and worship with sacrifice and burnt offering, and they will make vows to the Lord and perform them."(Isa 19:19-21). He was the one who wrote, "Blessed be Egypt my people" (Isa 19:25).

Hosea also prophesied when he said, "from Egypt have I called my son"(Hos 11:1). So the Holy family came to Egypt to begin a new era, to open a new page in the relationship between God and Egypt. God knew that there will be a thriving church for Him in the land of Egypt, and saw it fit to come to bless it with His presence. This trip was specifically prophesied by Isaiah when he wrote, "Behold, the Lord is riding on a swift cloud and comes to Egypt, and the idols of Egypt will tremble at his presence" (Isa 19:1).

There is an outside chance that God chose that course of action, to confuse Satan about His identity, something that we mentioned before. Satan having doubts about the true identity of Jesus was watching Him closely since His birth. By choosing to flee from a confrontation with Herod, probably confused Satan because his reasoning would be very similar to that of the young people who thought that fleeing is a weakness not worthy of God.

The next question is, why were those innocent babies of Bethlehem, hundreds of them slaughtered? Wasn't that blood shed? Yes, it was. But it was not blood shed by order from God, but by order from Satan. Obviously Satan is the one who urges people to break God's commandments. So, he was the one who whispered in Herod's ear to issue that order. But in this particular case, there was an additional motivation. Satan still confused about the Lord's identity, decided to take no chances and so moved to destroy Jesus before He can take aim at him. God could not have prevented that, because He chose long ago when He created Adam and Eve to grant them the privilege of making their own decisions. As we think of those innocent children, we immediately realize that they were the first martyrs who died because of Jesus. What an honor! This means that they were the first to enter the New Testament as founders and who gave their own blood to render that foundation strong and everlasting. Their sacrifice was nothing compared with the glory that was waiting for them.

### **3) The second visit to the Temple:**

We don't know exactly how long did the Holy Family stay in Egypt. Legend has it that they stayed several years, but knowing that Jesus was born around 7,or 6 B .C. and that Herod the great died in 4 B.C. , we can conclude that Jesus may have stayed in Egypt about two to three years.

When Herod died, an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream, and told him to take the child and his mother back to Israel. After the Holy Family came back from Egypt, St. Joseph was warned in a dream to avoid living in the area ruled by Herod's son Archelaus. So, he went back to Nazereth, a small village situated in the high valley among the southerly hills of the Lebanon range, and thus commanded a fabulous view. For some reason, Nazareth had a bad reputation. But the fact that the Lord and His family lived in it the major part of the first thirty years of His



life. And the fact that He was often called Jesus of Nazareth changed that little town. From a town with a bad reputation to a town that boasts that it was the home of the blessed Messiah for almost thirty years.

These are the years that the Bible does not tell us much about Jesus and what happened to Him during that important period in His life when He was preparing Himself for the role that He came to play in the human drama. The only episode that was reported was when He and His family visited the Temple as they did every year.

Before we talk about that visit, we should talk about this young boy, who was twelve years old, and who mesmerized the learned Scribes and Pharisees with His brilliance, and knowledge. All that the Bible told us about Him during that period, is that, "The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom, and the favor of God was upon Him." (Lk 2: 40). Trying to put more details in the picture, we had to find out what other Jewish boys had to go through at his age, and assume that Jesus must have gone through the same. We found that Jesus grew in body and spirit, not only in stature but also in character. The child Jesus learned a lot from His parents, especially from His mother. She was the one who kept the memory of all those events that happened since Archangel Gabriel announced to her the birth of her son. How much of those events did she share with Him, we do not know. Jesus learned also as any other Jewish boy by attending school in the synagogue in Nazareth. Since He had a keen mind, He learned an awful lot in school, and augmented that by reading the Old Testament as often as He can. So at the age of twelve, He possessed a wealth of knowledge that other children of his age did not have.

The Bible mentions few details, as it gives an account of the Holy Family's visit to the Temple when Jesus was twelve. St. Luke, who was the only one to report this episode, said that at the Passover they traveled to Jerusalem. After the feast was over His parents returned to Nazareth, and assumed that He was in the company with His friends.

After a day's journey they did not find Him, and had to go back to Jerusalem, where they found Him in the Temple totally absorbed in talking and listening to the teachers of the Law. St. Luke writes further that, " All who heard Him were amazed at His understanding and His answers" (Lk 2:47). What was the subject or subjects that they talked about, we don't know. But He must have stood alone in the depth of His knowledge and understanding compared with the other twelve years old.

When they found Him, His mother, not St. Joseph was the one who talked to him. She said, " Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been looking for you anxiously" (Lk 2:48). We notice here that St. Mary was talking to her son just like any other mother talking to her son in a similar situation. She did not hide her annoyance at what he did, and she told Him that. St. Joseph preferred not to interfere. He was keenly aware of who He was. He never forgot what the angel told him about Jesus when he was thinking to break his engagement with His mother. He was also keenly aware that He is not His son, but the Son of God. What did Jesus call him, we don't know. When Jesus heard that gentle reprimand from His mother, He answered saying, "How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" (Lk 2: 49). The Bible tells us that both St. Mary and St. Joseph did not understand what He said.

This was probably the first time that He used the word "Father", to mean God. St. Mary may have thought that He was talking about His earthly father, and this puzzled her because this is what they wanted too, to go to Joseph's house. But St. Mary decided not to seek an explanation, since she too was aware of her son's uniqueness, and His strong relationship with God. The Bible tells us that He went down with them to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. As we stop here and reflect on this fact, we find it unbelievable. The Son of God, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, the creator of everything, that we see, and that we do not see, the undisputed king of the universe, who is

worshiped by the cherubim, and the Seraphim and the Heavenly Host, was obedient to His earthly mother and "father".

This is truly amazing, especially when you compare it with what the children of the world do. But it is not really, for we are talking about God, for whom nothing is impossible. In doing this, He is teaching all the children of the world, that to obey your parents is the proper thing to do, and if God when He was in the flesh as a young boy, He too obeyed His parents. This was another example of His extreme humility, which He demonstrated during His brief stay on earth.

Jesus probably helped His mother in taking care of the humble home that they lived in. So, while Joseph worked in his area of the house that he called his shop, Jesus stayed with His mother. Their house was small, probably one room, square in shape, with a flat roof, and a door that opened directly into the street. The outside was probably painted white, while the inside was left unpainted, and had a drab natural color. The door stayed open all day. There may have been a thin linen curtain to keep the dust out. The floor was packed dirt mixed with clay and ash to make it hard, and covered with a few straw, or leather mats. The furniture consisted of few chairs, and tables. Outside, there was a wooden ladder, which was used to get to the roof, which was made from a mixture of mud, straw, and lime laid over the ceiling beams.

St. Mary's day began early at sunrise. After a simple breakfast of curds and bread, she put on her rough linen mantle, and a sandal. She took her son who was dressed either in a short linen tunic or a knee-length kilt and short, and went to the market place. At the village well they filled the water jug that they brought with fresh water, and bought few things that they will need that day, after which they went home. At home, Mary got busy cooking dinner, and baking few loafs of bread, while Joseph worked. Jesus either helped His mother or His father. At dinnertime they washed their hands, and Joseph gave the blessing.

Dinner was simple, but tasty. Beside bread, there would be salted fish, or boiled chicken. Only rich people could afford to eat meat regularly. The Holy Family probably ate roasted lamb or goat meat only on holidays. There were also vegetables such as beans, cucumbers, leeks, lentil, and onions. For dessert, they had melons, figs, grapes, or pomegranates, or sweet fried cakes. During dinner Joseph probably recited one of the stories from the Bible, and explained it to Jesus. He also taught Him the duties that every Israelite has to comply with.

Bible tells us that "Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man. This brief statement described the growing boy, who was wiser than His peers, who looked up to Him, and who refused to indulge in the pleasures that they indulged in. He was a serious young man, gentle, courteous, and full of love for every body, who never refrained from helping anyone who needed help, regardless of his social position, or his financial situation. Because of this, He was loved and respected by everyone who knew Him.

#### **4) The Stay in Nazareth:**

At the age of twelve, Joseph began to teach Jesus the skills of his trade. In the beginning Jesus must have watched intensely every move that Joseph made. Once in a while He helped by bringing a tool that His father needed, or by holding a piece of wood as Joseph was working on it. After a period of training, which was shorter than that required by boys of His age, Jesus told His father that He was ready to participate. Joseph, delighted to hear that, must have given him something to do, to see whether He is ready or not. When He began, Joseph was watching, and with a smile on his face, he saw his son's hands handle the job with considerable skill. And when He handed him the finished product, Joseph was impressed, and told his son that he did a good job, and from now on, he will work with him in the shop on a regular basis. Joseph was a skilled carpenter whose work included making frames for houses, chairs, tables, doors, windows, cabinets, benches, plows, yolks.

As expected Jesus learned all the skills needed to follow in the steps of His father. He became a skilled carpenter before Joseph died. When that happened, Jesus took his place and became the only breadwinner in the family, and had to work hard to support Himself, and His mother. What kind of a person was He in dealing with His customers? He probably did not charge them exorbitant prices for His services. As a matter of fact His prices were very low compared with other carpenters. His work was excellent, and His promises to finish any job, were always kept. He was a pleasant human being who treated people with respect and courtesy. Many times He refused to charge anything for His labor, and when He felt that some needy neighbor needed something but cannot afford to pay for it, He did it and delivered it without charging him anything.

Although Jesus did not go to school after the age of twelve, He continued to study the scripture on His own. He may have been helped by one of the local teachers. And while He did not study under one of the famous scribes who were located in Jerusalem, and few of the big cities such as Sepphoris, the capital of Galilee, yet His knowledge and understanding of the scriptures surpassed any who studied under one of those "doctors", and even surpassed their teachers themselves. But because He did not study under anyone of them, when He began His ministry, they considered Him an outsider and an imposter.

During this period of Jesus' life, the Jewish people were at a political frenzy. As they celebrated the Passover, they remembered the revolts that happened fifty years ago, when the zealots packed the Temple and began shouting slogans against the Romans, and how the Roman soldiers came in great numbers and raided the sacred precincts, and killed 3000 pilgrims. After few weeks from this episode, Jewish rebels seized control of Jerusalem, which encouraged other patriots to follow suit, and so the rebellion spread into other cities, which compelled the Roman legions to use the most brutal means to end the rebellion. When

they were finished thousands were killed, and Sepphoris was burned to the ground.

In Judea, the Roman troops burned many villages, and captured 2,000 rebels and crucified all of them. So at the time Jesus was approaching the beginning of His ministry, the talk of rebellion was still heard. At that time, the Jewish people came to realize that breaking the yolk of the Romans is getting more and more difficult, and that their hope is in the hands of God. They felt that the time is ripe for a savior to be sent by God to deliver them. The religious leaders encouraged these notions. These were the Scribes, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the priests and the High Priest.

There was another group called the Essenes. They had no interest in politics, but had a strong interest in religion. Many members of this group went into the wilderness away from civilization, where they concentrated on studying the Scriptures, and preparing themselves for the coming of the Lord's kingdom. The Jewish people believed that the desert was the most suitable place for the prophets, and religious philosophers to stay. They expected the Messiah to appear there first. This is why when John the Baptist came out of the desert, they thought that he is the Messiah. Still after he told them that he is not, they continued to listen to him, and came from all of Judea to be baptized by him.

So life went on in the home of Mary and her son, routinely and quietly for several years. From time to time, Mary would reflect on the life she was having, hoping that it continues serene and quiet as it was. But, going back to those memories which happened some thirty years ago, she could not avoid the feeling that what she is experiencing is the calm that precedes the storm. She knew that her son is the Son of God, and that great things are waiting for Him, and that things could not continue as they were. And she was right.

## **Chapter Two**

### **JESUS BEGINS HIS MINISTRY**

Shortly before John the Baptist was put in prison, Jesus began His own ministry. He saw that John has finished his job, of preparing the people to receive Him. It was time for Him to begin His. He had to do two things. To be tempted by Satan, and to choose His disciples.

#### **The Temptation by Satan:**

The Bible tells us that after His baptism, Jesus was led by the Spirit to the wilderness to be tempted by Satan. Before we discuss the details of this significant event in the life of the Lord, we have to understand what temptation is, the role it played in the life of man, and still plays in our own lives.

#### **What is Temptation?**

Temptation is defined by Webster as enticing somebody to do something wrong, promising him a reward, such as a pleasure, or an advantage over others. For this to happen three elements must exist; somebody who can be tempted, somebody who does the tempting, who may be called the "tempter", and a suggested course of action, which is the temptation. It is generally understood that the tempted and the tempter are two different entities, but in rare cases the tempted and the tempter may be the same. This is what happened when Lucifer decided to rebel against God. Nobody tempted him. So we can say that he tempted himself. But after that he became the tempter and man became the tempted. This happened when he tempted Eve to disobey God, while still in the Garden of Eden.

It is interesting to note that God did not prohibit Satan from entering the Garden of Eden, which means that He allowed temptation to happen. Why? We don't know, but probably because He knew that Adam and Eve will succumb to it. Some say that, this would have been a good reason, for God not to allow it. But God's thinking is not like ours. He probably saw this failure as the only way to begin the plan of salvation that He perfected from the foundation of the world, way before Adam was created, the plan through which God will finalize His action against Satan.

After that first temptation, which ended in the fall of Adam and Eve, Satan decided to use the same weapon with all humans in an attempt to corrupt them, and turn them against God. As he did that he became more skilful and more cunning. And it became obvious, that he was winning his battle with God. When Jesus came, he tempted Him. So temptation became an important component of human life, and since no one was able to resist its lure during his tenure on earth, it became the downfall for all until Jesus came and resisted it and defeated Satan. By doing that He gave us the hope that, we too, with the help of God, can resist it, and defeat Satan.

### **The Temptation of Jesus:**

As we mentioned before as soon as Jesus came out of the Jordan River, He went to the wilderness, to fast, pray, and to face temptation. We don't know which was the primary function of going to the wilderness and fasting. Was it a preparation for the beginning of His ministry, or giving Satan an opportunity to tempt Him? The Bible mentions the latter as the reason, and it says that He" was led by the Holy Spirit", so we have to say that it was very important for Him to be tested and tempted as any other man. We can also say that it was important for Him to be prepared for the job that lies ahead. As we think of this, we ask why was it that important for Him to be tempted by Satan? Was it necessary? If we think of Jesus as God, it seems absurd for Satan to



tempt Him. We may even wonder why did the Father allow it. But if we think of Jesus as a man, and He was, we find that His temptation was expected, and even welcomed. Expected, because Satan tempts every human being, and since Jesus was a human being, even if He was perfect, and without sin, nevertheless He was a man, and no man is above temptation.

God, for a reason unknown to us, never restricted Satan's right to tempt anybody, so He allowed him to tempt His son. Satan also had a special interest in this, because he may have had doubts about the true identity of Jesus. Was He the one who will bruise his head? Or was He just another prophet sent by God? The temptation was welcomed by the Father, because He knew that it will end with His son registering His first triumph over Satan, and that this will provide Him with an extra measure of assurance that He can conquer him. This was the first skirmish between the two, and Jesus' triumph provided Him with a strong sense that He can do the job that the Father gave Him. The temptation also provided a proof about Jesus' perfect humanity. So when the second person of the Holy Trinity, took flesh and became a man, He had to resemble us in every respect, except sinning. To save man, who was under the Law, He had to go under the Law, fulfill it to the fullest. Since temptation was an important component of the life under the Law, He had to accept it as a part of the package.

As we examine what happened, we find that Satan didn't dare to approach Jesus in the beginning when He was strong, but approached Him after He fasted for forty days, during which He did not eat or drink. This alone should have given him the proof that Jesus is not just another prophet, but it did not. He may have recalled that Moses did the same thing twice, so he dismissed it as an indication of Jesus' deity. He did not realize that Moses was the only prophet who did that and that he did it with the help of God. Still the fact remains that he approached Jesus when he thought that He was weak. This shows how crafty and cunning he is. One thing that he miscalculated, was his perception that since

Jesus was weak physically, He must also be weak spiritually. In this he was wrong, because he never experienced the power of fasting, he had no idea that it strengthens the spirit, and that Jesus at the end of His fast was weak physically, but strong spiritually.

Before we talk about the details of Jesus' temptation, we have to clarify two points. The first is the nature of temptation. The second is to what extent did Jesus feel the real struggle that human beings feel when they are tempted? Some people have a false notion about temptation, they think that it carries with it some guilt, even if it is not followed, and consequently feel uncomfortable when they read that Jesus was tempted. This is not true, temptation is an invitation to do evil, just that, an invitation, no more no less, exactly like any invitation that you and I receive.

Invitations can be to participate in doing good or evil. So If you receive an invitation to attend a wedding, this is an invitation to share in somebody's joy. In this case, it is two people who decided to unite their lives together. When you go, you are sharing with them this joyous occasion, and wishing them a happy life together. Obviously this is an invitation to do good.

But if you receive an invitation to participate in hurting someone, physically or in any other way, this is an invitation to do evil. In this case it is called temptation. If you have negative feelings about that person, but refuse to follow what the temptation suggests, then there is no reason for feeling any guilt. There may be even a reason to celebrate, and feel good, because you have succeeded in resisting something appealing to you.

We also find that the celebration intensifies as the struggle with the temptation drags on. If the temptation is rejected right off the bat, then the celebration will be very brief, or there will be no celebration at all. The longer the struggle lasts, the bigger the celebration. The conclusion

from all this is that it is not a sin to be tempted, but it is a sin to succumb to temptation.

knowing all that, many wonder whether Jesus was really tempted like you and me? In answer to that we say, He certainly was. His temptation was real, it was not a fake. Jesus was not tempted as God, but as man. So He struggled with it as you and I do when we are tempted. How long did He struggle, we have no idea, but a safe bet is that He did not struggle long, because He was ready, and being the second person of the Holy Trinity, He had more or less an immunity from sin, He simply could not sin. His hatred for sin outweighed anything that Satan can tempt Him with.

### **The First Temptation:**

The Bible tells us that Satan approached Jesus when He got hungry, and told Him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread" (Mt4: 3). Notice that he began his suggestion with telling Jesus that if He was "the Son of God". This was designed to accomplish two purposes; the first to sow doubt in Jesus' heart that He is truly the Son of God. The second was to elicit from Him a response that may reveal His true identity.

As we examine Satan's suggestion, we find that it was on the surface a very innocent one. Satan was saying to Jesus that there is nothing wrong with using your power to feed yourself. You are hungry, and away from any place where you can get something to eat. And there is no law to prevent you from doing that. He may even reminded Him of what David did when he and his men were hungry, didn't they take the bread of presence which was not lawful for them to eat, and how God did not condemn them, He will also refrain from condemning you if you did that. After all you are His Son, while David was only His servant.

Satan may have used another approach, not only that Jesus had the

power to change stones into bread, but the issue here is that the Father did not come to rescue His only son from starvation. He may have told Jesus that as the Son of God, He should not have felt hungry. He may have even suggested that the Father does not love you, His Son, otherwise He wouldn't have left you without food for forty days and forty nights, until you starved. It is better for you to take care of yourself and turn some of these stones to bread.

The Bible tells us that Jesus answered him saying, "Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Mt4: 4). Many wonder why did Jesus refuse to turn the stones into bread, since it was not against the Law? The Bible does not answer that, so we have to guess about the possible reasons behind that refusal. It seems that the Son before He became man, voluntarily gave up many of His powers, as a preparation for His incarnation, in order to share as closely as possible in our nature.

St. Paul describes this by saying, " though He was in the form of God, did not find equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, He humbled Himself and became obedient to death, even death on the cross" (Phil: 6,7,8). What does "emptied Himself" mean? It means that Jesus voluntarily decided to suspend His powers, and not to use them to benefit Himself, but only to benefit man. So we find Him refusing to turn the stones to bread to satisfy His hunger. But does not hesitate to use His powers to feed thousands using five loaves of bread, and two fish.

Another reason was His disdain for material things, something that He preached about several times. In the Sermon on the Mount, He cautioned people from accumulating treasures on earth, but to accumulate them in heaven (MT 7:19). Another time He told His listeners that if your eye caused you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away, for it is better for you to go to Heaven with one eye, than to go to

Hell with two eyes (Mt 5:29). He, the creator and owner of this incredible universe, refused to own anything in this world, and lived in poverty all His life.

So, it was not appropriate for Him to begin His ministry by performing a miracle in which He satisfies one of His physical needs. He was following the dictates of the Holy Spirit, when He refused to cater to His hunger, no matter how strong it was. A third reason was that creating His own food, is a behavior that indicates the lack of a complete reliance on the Father, something that Jesus was careful to tell the people about, and to emphasize every chance He gets.

One time He said to His disciples when they asked him to eat, " My food is to do the will of Him who sent me" (Jn 4: 34). On another occasion He told the people, "My doctrine is not mine, but His that sent me." (Jn 7:16). He also told them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing by Himself, but what He sees the Father do." (Jn 5:17). And on the night of His crucifixion, He prayed and repeated His prayer three times saying the same words, “ My Father, if it possible to let this cup pass from me, nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will." (Mt26: 39)

### **The Second Temptation:**

When Satan listened to what Jesus said in answer to his first temptation, he must have been disappointed. He thought that his suggestion was cleverly designed and worded, and reflected no animosity or hatred. But on the contrary, it had the appearance of concern and even sympathy and love for Jesus in His desperate condition. Despite all that he was rebuffed. So he swallowed his pride, and made another suggestion to the famished and weak Jesus. This time, he thought, his suggestion must be more subtle, more devious, and more attractive.

The reward in the first temptation was a full stomach, which proved not

attractive enough to lure Jesus to do it. This time, he increased the reward to the people of Israel realizing that He is the promised Messiah, and believing in Him. The Bible tells us that Satan" took Him to the holy city, and set Him on the pinnacle of the temple. And said to Him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written,' He will give his angels charge of you, and on their hands they will bear you up lest you strike your foot against a stone" (Mt 4:5,6,7).

We notice that Satan knows the Bible quite well. Here we see him quote from psalm 91, a quotation that was meant for all believers. He used it in an attempt to make Jesus try it. His goal was twofold. The first was again to sow doubt in Jesus' mind about His Sonship to the Father. The second was to lure Him to do something spectacular, and instantly earn people's approval, and their belief in Him, something that He tried all his life to attain, but failed.

Satan, in effect, was suggesting to Jesus, to take a short cut to His goal of convincing the people that He was the Son of God. He never dreamed that had the people been convinced of that, they would never have crucified Jesus, and salvation would have never happened. Jesus knew that people's disbelief in Him was the only road that will take Him to the cross. And since this is what He came to fulfill, we can see that in a way, He did not want the people to believe in Him, while He was on earth. He wanted them to believe in Him after His resurrection. This is probably one of the reasons behind His refusal to follow Satan's suggestion.

Before we discuss further the details of this temptation, it may be interesting to stop at the statement that says that" Satan took Jesus and set Him on the pinnacle of the temple". The question here is: Did this literally happen? Did Jesus actually move with Satan to the pinnacle of the temple? And Satan then and there asked Him to throw Himself down? None of the students of the Bible, with whom I am familiar, wrote anything about this. My guess is that He did not physically move with Satan to the temple, even though He was able to do that instantly.

There are few reasons. First, He will not take orders from Satan, second He did not need to go to the temple at that time., Satan probably meant that He can try this later on when He sees that the circumstances are appropriate. Satan is too sophisticated to try to push him whom he is suspecting to be the Son of God, to accompany him and subject Himself to His authority.

Going back to what transpired in this temptation, we find that as Satan has used a quotation from the Bible to lure Him, to do something, we find that Jesus responded also by quoting the word of God. Again, we see Satan's craftiness. His second suggestion, while more daring than the first one, nevertheless it was still subtle and even if it is against some obscure commandment used by Jesus as His reason for turning down the suggestion, but if followed, it will result in the people believing in Christ. What could be a worthier goal? Satan was telling Jesus that the end justifies the means, and if you want the people to believe in you, then if you follow my suggestion, you will realize your goal. He forgot that this is his character, not that of any righteous human being, let alone the Son of God.

When Jesus heard that, He immediately realized that what is being suggested here is an infraction on God's sovereignty. It is a manipulation of the Father by His son, which should not happen. It meant that the Son in throwing Himself down is challenging the Father to fulfill His promise. So, He answered " It is written, don't tempt the Lord your God." (Mt 4:8). What He was really saying was that He did not need something spectacular to fulfill His goal of saving mankind from its sins. He only needed to live a virtuous life, trusting in the Father, and calling the people to repentance, and at the end get crucified on behalf of His beloved man. All this could be accomplished without anything spectacular. He did not need sensationalism, to attain His goal.

As we reflect on what Jesus said, we find that the word " tempt" is not an accurate translation of what Jesus said. To tempt someone, is to lure

him into doing something evil. This is not what Jesus meant. He meant if He threw Himself, He will be asking the Father to fulfill a promise that He made on David's tongue. When you ask God to fulfill a certain promise that He made before, or give you an indication that it will happen, this is not tempting God, it is testing Him. Some may say what is wrong with that? Didn't God allow man to test Him before?

This what happened when God appeared to Gideon. When He greeted him saying "The Lord is with you, you mighty man of valor" (Jg 6:12). Gideon answered saying, "Sir, if the Lord is with us, why then all this has befallen us?" (Jg 6:13). And when God told him, to deliver Israel from the hand of Median, he told Him that it is impossible since his clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and he is the least in his family. And when God told him that He would be with him, Gideon asked Him for a sign. Then Gideon brought meat, and unleavened bread for God to eat But he told him to put them on the rock. And when he did, the Lord touched them with the tip of the staff that He had in His hand, and immediately fire came out of the rock and consumed the meat and the bread. This was a sign tat God provided in response to Gideon's request. This was a test that Gideon put God through, and He did not mind.

After that Gideon asked God for another sign. He asked Him to make a fleece that he put out wet, while the ground around it dry, and God obliged. Then he asked him to reverse what happened the first time, and make the fleece dry, and the ground wet, and God obliged for the second time. (Jg 6). There is another time when God Himself asked man to test Him. This came in Malachi, when He said, "Bring the full tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house; and thereby put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing" (Mal 3:10).

The question is why would God allow Himself to be tested on those occasions, and would be offended if Jesus did it? The answer, is that



God sometimes allows man to do things which are not up to His standards, because He is aware of man's corrupted nature and his inability, to live up to God's highest standards. As we look into the history of pious men, we find that God tolerated many of their behaviors that were not up to His standards. As mentioned before, God did not see the polygamy that few of God's people practiced, as a serious offense, despite the fact that He did not favor it. If He did, He would have created more than one Eve for Adam, but He did not. Another example also mentioned before is divorce. Again, God hated it, but tolerated it.

From the above we can say that God judges man's behavior in terms of his abilities, his knowledge of Him, and his experience with Him, and consequently may use different standards for different people. So He will tolerate some behaviors from ordinary men, but will not tolerate them from one of His saints, or prophets. An example of that was God's judgement of Moses' behavior that made Him punish him by preventing him from entering the Promised Land. What did Moses do to deserve this severe punishment? The Bible tells us that when the Israelites rebelled against Moses because of the lack of water, and Moses went to God to ask Him, God told him," to take the rod, assemble the congregation, and tell the rock before their eyes to yield its water" (Nu 20:8).

Moses took the rod, and instead of talking to the rock, as instructed by God, he hit it twice with the rod. Water gushed out from the rock, and the people had water. But God was not pleased with Moses, and told him, "Because you did not believe in me, to sanctify Me in the eyes of the people of Israel, you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given to them" (Nu 20:12).

If an ordinary man had committed that error, God would probably have forgiven him, but when Moses does it, it is another matter. Moses, the man who observed and participated in all the miracles that God did to

liberate His people from the mighty hand of Pharaoh, and the wonders that He performed to sustain them in the wilderness for forty long years. The man who used to talk with God face to face, and who saw the finger of God write the Ten Commandments, should not have doubted the word of God. This is why his punishment was severe.

So Jesus refused to put His Father to the test, and Satan was defeated for the second time.

### **The Third Temptation:**

Again Satan had to swallow his pride, regroup and attack for the third time. He decided to raise the stakes. So, instead of enticing Jesus with a full stomach, or the approval of the people of Israel, this time he showed Him all the kingdoms of the world. And then told Him that all these are his, and if He did what he tells him, he will give him dominion and authority over the whole world. What was the price that Satan wanted Jesus to pay? He asked Him, only to worship Him. As we reflect on this, some may think that this is too much. They cannot understand neither Satan's nor God's behavior. They find Satan's behavior preposterous, and audacious. And wonder where did he get all that arrogance, to try to corrupt even the Son of God.

These do not realize that what Satan suggested was his life time dream, to be superior to God. So when he saw God in the flesh, and saw Him weak, hungry, and alone, he saw this as an opportunity that he cannot afford to let go, so he took advantage of it. After all, he had nothing to loose. As to God's behavior, they see that it is too much that God allowed Satan to ask Him to worship him. The answer to this lies in God's character. Sometimes we judge God with our human standards, and as a result, we fail to understand Him.

When we read that God allowed Satan and his demons to survive after their fall, we find ourselves asking why did He do that? Why didn't He

destroy them? If He had done that Adam and Eve would have never been tempted to disobey God and we their children, would have known no sin, and would have lived with God in the Garden of Eden forever. But He did not, for reasons we do not know.

I guess what God did to Satan reflects one of His basic qualities, which is His goodness. He did not only allow Satan and the demons to survive, but He even allowed him to be among the sons of God who present themselves to Him every now and then. In the Book of Job, it is written that one day the sons of God came to see God and Satan also came among them. God did not only allow him to do that, but He also talked to him, and asked him, where he had been. This was the beginning of a conversation, which ended with God giving Satan permission to test Job's faith. This is God's goodness, and also His sense of justice, which we humans cannot understand.

When Satan made that preposterous statement that he owns the kingdoms of the world, and that he is willing to give them to Jesus if He bowed and worshipped him. Jesus knew that he was lying, but did not want to engage with him in a discussion about that, because He knew that no matter what He said, Satan would never admit that he was wrong. So, He decided to just refuse his suggestion, and thus end the confrontation. He must have looked Satan right in the eye, recalling what he did thousands of years ago, when he tried to raise his throne above God's, and almost telling him, that he is still trying despite all what he suffered as a result of his first attempt. Jesus may have had several other ideas, but He realized that, this is not the time for talk, it is the time for action, and He did by rebuking Satan.

Jesus probably found this to be the easiest of the three temptations because it clearly goes against the first commandment, while the other two did not conflict that openly with one of the important commandments. So, He found no difficulty in answering Satan, by just reciting that commandment, " You shall worship the Lord your God, and

Him only shall you serve"(Lk4: 8).

### **The Lessons We Can Learn:**

There are few lessons that we can learn from this unusual event, in the life of the Lord, that He probably had in mind when He went through that experience.

1) The first lesson is the fact that temptation is part and parcel of being human. It is a component of life that cannot be avoided Every human being that ever existed on this planet was tempted by Satan, even the Son of God, when He became man.

2) Some believe that God is the one who tempts us. In support of that position, they say that this was evident in the Lord's prayer, when He told His disciples to include in it the phrase, "and lead us not into temptation". Doesn't that imply that He is the one who leads us into it? This is a misinterpretation of that phrase, for the simple reason that if we agree that temptation is an invitation to do evil, is it logical to say that it is God who tempts us? O course not. Satan is the one who does that. But when we pray," lead us not into temptation", we are really asking God, to help us avoid temptation. This becomes clearer when we look at the next phrase, which is," and deliver us from evil", which means that when we are tempted by the evil one, please Lord, don't leave us alone, deliver us from his hand, because without your help we cannot prevail against him.

It appears that in the time of the apostles many also thought that it is God, who tempts man. This is why St. James clarified this in his epistle, when he wrote," Let no man say, when he is tempted, I am tempted of God. For God cannot be tempted with evil, neither does He tempt any man. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire." (Jas 1:13,14)

3) Another lesson is that being tempted is not a sin. Sinning is succumbing to the temptation.

4) Still another lesson, is the fact that Satan's powers are limited. He can only suggest, he cannot force your hand, or coerce you to do anything against your will. You suffer and sometimes fall because of our nature that was corrupted and changed by sin.

5) The most valuable lesson that we can learn here is that, even if we are so vulnerable to sin, yet we have hope that as Jesus conquered temptations, that He will also conquer it for us, if we ask Him. Every one who was baptized and received the Holy Spirit, can become immune to sin, if he called on Him to help, every time he is faced with temptation, but we don't.

6) Finally there is the lesson of love. We can look on the temptation of Jesus as one of His sufferings that He went through because of His love for us. Just imagine the Son of God, accepting to be tempted, as the first step in His plan to save man from eternal death that he deserved when he sinned against his creator.

Jesus went through this because of His love for me and for you.

Dear reader: What is your response to this unprecedented love? The least we can do is to love Him back, and try to live a life worthy of that love.

After Satan left Him, the Bible tells us that angels came and ministered to Him. What does this mean? They probably brought Him food to satisfy His hunger, and may be they showed Him their allegiance, and also the approval and the support of the Father.

Then He left the wilderness and descended to the world to begin His ministry. He appropriately repeated John's (the Baptist) message, and began by saying to the people, " Repent for the kingdom of God is at

hand"(Mk1: 15). In doing this, He was saying to the people, that John did not make up his message, but that it came from God. He was endorsing what John did and said. And by repeating what he said almost verbatim, He was telling them that He too came from God, since the message is the same, and God was the only source.

### **Jesus Selects His Disciples:**

One of the first things that He did, as He began His ministry, was to call twelve men to become His disciples. As we reflect on that, many questions come to the foreground. Why twelve? What criteria did He use? How did the people receive those whom He chose? Was He ever disappointed in them?

The Bible does not shed much light on these questions. The reason might have been, that three of the four gospels, were written by His disciples. And by the time they began writing them, they were humble enough not to say too much about themselves, or about any of the other disciples. Another reason probably was that they wanted all the attention to be focused on Jesus, not on them. And also they were simple people who did not have anything to brag about. Most of them were poor fishermen, with modest means, and scant education.

This brings us to the next question. What criteria did Jesus use in choosing them? Or why did He choose them from among that class of people? There is a possibility that He did that to show His glory. These simple poor uneducated men, who did not understand His teachings, and were unsure about His identity. And who abandoned Him in His sufferings. These twelve, who were afraid to admit that they knew Him. These twelve from whom was the one who betrayed Him, and sold Him for thirty pieces of silver. Those twelve who were hiding after He died, because of their fear of the Jews, were the twelve whom Jesus has chosen.

These same twelve were the ones who carried the message of hope and salvation to the world. They shed their fear, and with unprecedented courage and determination, proclaimed to the people that Jesus Christ, whom they crucified, is the Messiah who came to save mankind from its sins. They did not carry a weapon, use a sword, or coerced anybody to believe their message. But they went around spreading the good news using the love that they learned from their master, to gain millions to the new religion. This was a strong illustration of the power of God, which convinced people of the truth of their message.

Obviously God does not use our criteria, or looks at people the way we look at them. We look at the qualities that we can see. He looks at the other qualities that we do not see which from His point of view are more important than the ones we see. We look at the outside, while He looks at the inside. He must have seen and selected the twelve, on basis of the future that He saw in every one of them.

To dramatize the difference between our criteria and God's, someone wrote the following fictitious letter to Jesus. He imagined that Jesus submitted the resumes of the twelve to a consultant firm, for evaluation. The following was the letter

### **JORDAN MANAGEMENT CONSULTANTS**

To: Jesus, Son of Joseph

Dear Sir:

Thank you for submitting the resumes of the twelve men that you have picked for managerial positions in your new organization. All of them have now taken our battery of tests. We have not only run the results through our computer, but we also arranged personal interviews for each of them with our psychologist and vocational aptitude consultant.

The profiles of all the tests are included and you will want to study each of them carefully. As a part of our service we make some general statements. This is given as a result of staff consultations and comes without any additional fees. It is the staff's opinion that most of your nominees are lacking in background, educational and vocational aptitude for the type of enterprise you are undertaking. They do not have the team concept. We would recommend that you continue your search for persons of experience in managerial ability and proven capability.

Simon Peter is emotionally unstable and given to fits of anger. Andrew has absolutely no qualities of leadership. The two brothers, James and John, place personal interest above company loyalty. Thomas demonstrates a skeptical attitude that would tend to undermine morale. We feel that it is our duty to tell you that the Jerusalem Better Business Bureau has blacklisted Matthew. James, the sons of Alphaeus, and Theddaeus have radical leanings and they both registered a high score on the manic-depressive scale.

ONE OF THE CANDIDATES, however, shows great potential. He is a man of ability and resourcefulness, meets people well, has a keen business mind, and has contacts in high places. He is highly motivated, ambitious, and responsible. We recommend Judas Iscariot as your comptroller and right hand man. All of the other profiles are self-explanatory.

We wish you every success in your new adventure.

The next question is why did He select twelve disciples? Numbers have significance to God. Few of them have special meaning. For example 3,4,7 and 40 mean completeness, beside their other meanings. The number 12, has a special meaning. Some say that it means the kingdom of God on earth. In it, God who is represented by the Holy trinity (3) rules over the Four Corners of the world.  $3 \times 4 = 12$ . The number 12



appeared several times in the Bible. The houses of Israel were 12, so were the precious stones on Aaron's garment. Also the wells of water in Elim from which the Israelites drank after God saved them from the Egyptian army (Ex15: 27). They had to put twelve loaves of bread as the bread of presence before God every Saturday. Also the New Jerusalem will have twelve foundations (Rev21: 14). And in Revelation also, it says that John saw a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars (Rev 12:1).

So, if the number twelve means the kingdom of God on earth, it is fitting to select twelve disciples. Because they are the ones whom will be used by him to establish that kingdom.

The last question is " was Jesus disappointed in His disciples?" The problem here is that disappointment is a human reaction, which happens when what we expect, does not happen. And since God knows the future, can He be disappointed?

As we examine the Bible, looking for answers, we don't find a clear answer. The Bible did mention several instances during which Jesus showed a human reaction to what was happening around Him. It even described sometimes the human emotion that accompanied that behavior.

For example, in the Old Testament, many of the prophecies spoke of His grieve, His suffering, His sadness, and sorrow. An example of these is the one by Isaiah, when he said, "He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" ( Isa 53:3). In the New Testament, the four gospels mentioned several times episodes during which Jesus reacted as an ordinary human would react. He was described as tired after his trip to meet the Samaritan woman (Jn4: 6). He was hungry after He fasted for forty days (Mt4: 2), and He wept when Lazarus died. They also mentioned His reaction and emotions to the events of the week of suffering which ended in His crucifixion.

Matthew wrote the following," Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and taking with Him Peter, and the two sons of Zebedee, He began to be sorrowful and troubled" (MT 26:36,37). After praying, He came back and found His disciples asleep, He said to them, "Could you not watch with me one hour?" (Mt 26:40). In this episode, what He said could be interpreted as a sign of His disappointment in His disciples, because they were unable to watch with Him, but were overcome with sleep. But it does not say that openly.

Based on all of the above, we can say that because of our Lord's perfect humanity, the possibility of Him feeling disappointment in His disciples cannot be ruled out. But if He were, His disappointment would be tempered by His love for humans, His understanding of human nature, and also by His ability to see the future. It would be somewhat similar to the disappointment of a father in his son's report card, when it indicates that he got a "C" in math while he knows that he has a very high aptitude in it.

## **Chapter Three**

### **JESUS OUTLINES HIS NEW THEOLOGY**

One of the reasons that made the religious hierarchy of the Jewish nation reject Jesus, was His message. They saw in it a new theology that in their opinion contradicted in many points the one that they were teaching, and in which they deeply believed. This is why as soon as He became famous, and some of His ideas began to be known to the people, they began to get together to draw a strategy to deal with Him. This was their attempt to off set His teachings, and diminish His influence on the nation. The conflict between them and Jesus is recorded and well documented in the four gospels. That conflict continued throughout His ministry, and which ended in a tremendous triumph (so they thought), for the religious leadership.

They finally succeeded in getting Him condemned to death, and crucified in disgrace before the very people whom He tried to convert. They thought that by killing Him, His new theology will be doomed. They were wrong. Who could have foreseen that those twelve frightened disciples who did not even stand with their teacher when He was arrested, but fled, will in a couple of months, change into courageous advocates of His theology? They were not only determined to spread it, but were also ready and willing to die for it .

#### **The Sermon on the Mount**

There were many occasions on which Jesus outlined His new theology, but none was as clear and emphatic as the Sermon on the Mount. As we read it we immediately see the basic differences between the old and the new theology. Even in the manner it was given. The old theology was given to Moses while he was on mount Sinai, after he fasted for forty

days and forty nights. The word of God came amid a spectacular display of God's glory, during which the mountain quaked, lightning and thunder clapped, and fire and clouds covered it, and the Ten Commandments were written with the fiery finger of God. The new theology was also given on a mountain, the mount of the Beatitudes. What a difference between this mountain and Mount Sinai! This time when the word of God was given there was no smoke, thunder, fire, or clouds.

The sun was out, the people were sitting around Jesus, and He talked quietly with them about the Father and what He wants them to do. What a difference between the two scenes! The first suited the occasion, which was giving the people the Law of the Lord God, a law which was harsh, difficult, and which told the Jewish people that they will be severely punished if they did not keep it. The new theology was outlined by Jesus, in which He began introducing the other side of God, a loving and forgiving father who is willing to forget man's sins and give him another chance to join Him in the paradise of joy.

### **The Beatitudes**

After the multitude settled down, and the disciples sat behind Jesus, He waited for a few minutes until the noise and the talking stopped, and every eye was fixed on Him. Then He opened His mouth and began with the beatitudes. What a beginning!

**(1)"Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven"**

The people hearing this were pleasantly surprised, but surprised nevertheless. This was probably the first time in their life that a rabbi talked about blessings for them, and what people? The poor in spirit. When people hear this, they ask who are the poor in spirit? Whom did the lord have in mind when He said that? Did His listeners of that day

understand what He said? We don't know. They may have rejoiced that somebody is giving them a blessing, because they heard Him when He said, "Blessed are the poor", and they were poor. They either missed the words "in spirit", or heard it but did not understand what they meant.

Any way the Lord was talking about them, when He said that, because these were ordinary people, who were down to earth, humble, and knew that they were sinners. They felt that their behavior falls short of God's commandments, and felt that they are in need of His mercy. These are the ones whom Jesus called "the poor in spirit", and He said that they are blessed, because realizing that they need God's forgiveness and mercy is the first step toward salvation. The ones who feel righteous, don't feel that they need repentance or forgiveness, they never go to God, because they don't need Him. The result is that they remain in their sins, and eventually perish in their self-righteousness.

We notice that here again, Jesus was talking about the kingdom of heaven. This was a follow up on both His first call, and John the Baptist's, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near". Here He was attempting to introduce the New Kingdom to the people. A kingdom that was ignored by the people, whose attention was focused on the kingdom of this world. So the theme of this beatitude, is the recognition of man's sinfulness. He was clarifying to the people that the first step of the road that leads to the kingdom of God is to recognize their sinfulness.

**(2)"Blessed are those who mourn,  
for they shall be comforted."**

Whom did Jesus mean when He said that? There are many kinds of mourners in the world. There are those who mourn, because they didn't get what they think they deserve in this world. There are those who mourn because they didn't get what others got. Some mourn because they lost a loved one. Some mourn because they failed to accomplish

what they set up as their goal in life. All of these and many others like them mourn because of earthly conditions that they didn't like, and consequently are not qualified to receive the blessing that Jesus talked about.

The only mourners who are qualified to receive them, are those who mourn because of their sins. These are those who want to live according to God's specifications, but they can't, because the flesh which was corrupted, is pulling them down. When they sin, they feel sorry, and they express their sorrow, by mourning and weeping. Just listen to David, mourning and weeping after he sinned with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite. In psalm six, he said, " I am weary with my moaning, every night I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with my weeping" (Ps 6:6).

Jesus Himself was known as, " a man of sorrow and acquainted with grief" (Isa53: 3). He wept twice, not because of any sin that He had committed but because of the sins that His beloved man had committed. Then Jesus said, " for they shall be comforted". Every body who wept before God for his sins, feels relief afterwards, he feels comforted by the Holy Spirit. This is exactly what Jesus promised for those who mourn for their sins. Jesus was telling the people on that memorable day, not to weep over earthly things. None of these, no matter how dear, desirable, or expensive, deserves your tears. The only thing that deserves them, are your sins. So the theme of the second beatitude for us, is repentance. He was telling them that the repentance is the second step on the road to the kingdom of heaven.

**(3)" Blessed are the meek;  
for they shall inherit the earth"**

What does the word meek mean? Webster defines it as, enduring injury with patience, and without resentment, submission, not violent. And its synonym is humble. A meek person then, is a humble person, a person

who accepts whatever treatment people treat him with. He does not resent it, even if it hurts him. He does not ask for anything, he does not rebel against the status quo. He is happy under all conditions, and feels content no matter what happens to him. No wonder Jesus said that these people shall inherit the earth. They are happy regardless of their lot in life, nothing upsets them, and nothing can make them miserable. What else can people ever want from their life.

It goes without saying that you don't meet these people every day. They are a rare breed. As we think of this rare quality, we can think of two kinds of meekness or humility; meekness with people, and meekness with God. The person who is meek with people may behave that way because, he has a low self esteem, a bruised self concept, or a serious inferiority complex. But the person, who is meek with God, behaves that way, because he knows that God loves him. So he surrenders his life in His hands, and no matter what happens to him, he accepts it with thanks, because he knows that it is the will of God, which he has to unconditionally accept.

So the theme of the third beatitude for us, is humility. Jesus was revealing a secret, that the humble people are the luckiest people in the world.

**(4)" Blessed are those who hunger and  
thirst after righteousness, for they  
Shall be satisfied"**

Again we begin with, what is righteousness? We know that no one is righteous except God. So people who are righteous are people who want to be like Him, in every thing they do. Those mentioned in this blessing, are those who have selected righteousness, as their major and only goal in life. They decided to forgo the world and the things of the world. All that they want from life is to be like Him. After they made that choice, they found that it is not an easy goal to attain. This is why

Jesus described them as having hunger and thirst after righteousness. They crave it, want it, but they haven't reached it yet. After a while they discover that by themselves they are unable to reach it, so they enlist God's help, which is the only way to achieve it.

If man is measured by the kind of goal that he selects in life, then these people who hunger and thirst after righteousness should be regarded as the most blessed among us, for they have made the wisest choice. The man who wrote psalm seventy-three expressed this when he wrote, "And there is nothing upon earth that I desire besides thee" (Ps73: 25). Then we notice that Jesus said that these people's hunger and thirst after righteousness, which had not be satisfied before, will be satisfied with His coming. He was in a way, telling them that your craving for righteousness, which was unfulfilled before, because of your inability to conquer sin, will be fulfilled after I give myself as a sacrifice on the cross in your place, and erase your sins. And then I will give you the Holy Spirit to help you accomplish your dreams of righteousness. It is no more a dream, it will become a reality that you can attain.

So, the theme of the fourth beatitude for us is to have the desire to be like Jesus in everything, rejecting the world and the things of the world as our goal.

**(5)" Blessed are the merciful,  
for they shall obtain mercy"**

Mercy is being good to people, helping them in misery, even if they didn't deserve it. It is a quality that can manifest itself in different ways. It is not responding to those who hurt you, while you are capable of returning the hurt. It is forgiving those who hate you, and loving them in return. It is comforting those in sorrow, and having compassion on those in pain. It is trying to alleviate the pain of those who are hurt. It is taking an interest in those around you, by giving gentle advice to those



who do wrong, without condemning them, and encouraging and supporting those who do well. It is giving of yourself, your time, and your possessions to those in need.

Why are they blessed? As we look at that impressive list of the applications of mercy, one will immediately realize that nobody can do any of these, without being full of love for others, and nobody can have such love unless his heart is full of love for God. This is the reason that Jesus blessed them. The second part of this blessing is very important, because it tells us about one of the new statutes of the new theology. Jesus said, that these people are blessed because they shall obtain mercy. Whose mercy one may ask?

There are two possibilities; one is man's mercy, and the other is God's mercy. As we compare these two, we can immediately see that man's mercy may be useful in certain situations, but God's mercy is essential. An example may clarify that. If Nero had mercy on the early Christians, and did not persecute them, many of them may have survived and died of natural causes. That would have been nice, but not essential to the survival of the church. Some say that persecution may have strengthened the faith of the early Christians, and helped to spread Christianity.

Turning to God's mercy, we find that it is indispensable for each and everyone or us. Where could we be without God's mercy? What would have happened if Jesus did not come to save us from our sins? We don't need a lot of imagination or intelligence to answer this question. We would all end in the lake burning with fire and brimstone. So God's mercy is what Jesus had in mind when He said, "Blessed are the merciful ". He said it more clearly in the Lord's prayer, when He said to his disciples when you pray, say " Our Father who art in heaven..... and forgive our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us". That means that in order for us to enjoy God's mercy, we have to be merciful to others.

So the lesson of the fifth beatitude for us is to have mercy, which means forgiving those who sin against us, as God forgives our sins.

**(6)" Blessed are the pure in heart,  
for they shall see God"**

Who are the pure in heart? They are those who have struggled against the impurities that plagued human beings after Adam and Eve disobeyed God, and were kicked out of the garden of Eden. When God created them, they were pure in heart, which means that their thoughts, their desires, their feelings, and their deeds were pure; that is like God's. This is why they lived with Him, enjoying His presence, and loving His company. Did they actually see God? The Bible does not tell us, but most likely they did see Him, in a form that He allowed so their human eyes can perceive Him. Adam and Eve lost all that when they sinned.

Their thoughts were not pure. They began to think about themselves, and became selfish. They became slaves to their instincts. And because these were twisted, and corrupted, they were transformed and changed into sinful desires that they pursued. This led to impure feelings and impure deeds.

Did this happen to all human beings? Yes it did, God Himself testified to that when He said, "the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." (Gen 6:5). If this is the case, why did Jesus bless the pure in heart, if they did not exist?

What we said about the corruption of man's behavior, does not negate that few attained a state that could be described by God as purity in heart.

Let me explain. As we look into the history of mankind, we find that the

overwhelming majority followed Satan, and became impure. But, few who rejected Satan's council, and struggled against impurity, helped by God, reached a level of purity that deserved to be recognized by Him. In other words these people hated the impurities that they inherited, and fought hard to overcome them. And since they rejected to succumb to what their corrupted nature and Satan tempted them with, they were in the sight of God pure in heart, despite an occasional sin.

Examples of these people are Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Samuel, David, Gideon, Daniel, Elijah, and the rest of God's prophets. These were like beacons of light that flashed against a dark sky dominated by a long dark night. It is true that they flashed for short periods, but that was enough to declare to the world that purity is possible, even if the whole world wallows in impurity. God recognized these people and praised them, but the highest praise went to David, who was described by Him when He said, "I have found in David the son of Jesse a man after my heart, who will do all my will"(Act 13:22).

As we reflect on the second part of this blessing, we find that their reward for being pure in heart, is that they shall see God. There are two possibilities here; the first is that they will see Him on earth, the second is that they will see Him in heaven. In the first possibility, they will probably see Him in a non-visible form, they will feel His presence, listen to Him, hear His voice, and receive His guidance. However, this does not rule out that He may appear to them in a visible form, as reported by some of our people in a continuous display of His glory.

So the theme of this beatitude for us is to try to be pure in everything we do. You need a strong desire to be pure and a genuine effort on your part to attain such a lofty goal. God will do the rest.

**7) Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the sons of God"**

Peace is one of the most beloved features of life in the sight of God. Jesus was often called, "The Prince of Peace". On the night He was born, the angelic host that appeared to the shepherds sang, "Glory to God in the highest, peace on earth, and good will toward men". Peace is a godly quality that can exist between man and his fellow man, and between man and God. God wants us to enjoy both. When it is established between man and his fellow man, it preserves human life, and produces a number of other benefits. It protects his property, it fosters his prosperity. It makes him secure, and enables him to enjoy life. The absence of peace, which is a result of an unresolved conflict, produces opposite results, which are not what God wants for us. We all know who is in favor of this, none other than God's enemy and ours, Satan.

He is always sowing the seeds of conflict between men, and between man and God. Jesus in this beatitude is urging men to reject Satan's recommendations and get reconciled one to another. Realizing that this will seldom happen, without a third party, who will mediate between the two warring parties, He asked His listeners to become peace makers, to try to bring the parties involved in the conflict, together in an attempt to end the conflict between them. For these people to be able to do that they have to have an inner peace in their hearts, beside a strong belief in peace. They also need knowledge of the reasons behind conflicts in general, and knowledge of the reasons behind the particular conflict that they are mediating.

In most cases the conflict is due to one party not meeting the expectations of the other. Very often the expectations are in the well-defined field of human possessions, or in the ill-defined field of human feelings, most of which revolve around pride. To mediate such conflicts, as we all know, is not an easy task. Despite the fact that peace is extremely appealing to man, nevertheless we find that other factors interfere with that and outweigh it. When this happens many refuse to

respond to any effort to mediate their conflict with others even though it makes their life miserable.

This is another proof of Satan's strong influence on man, for we all know that conflicts are the work of Satan. Once a conflict happens between two parties, Satan does his best to maintain it, and keep it going. This is why many efforts by peacemakers often fail. The lack of peace between man and God, is the most devastating condition that any person can have. And Jesus in this beatitude is urging us to try to testify to these people on behalf of God, in an attempt to bring them back to His bosom.

In the second part of this beatitude, Jesus talks about the reward that these people will get, when they become peacemakers. He granted them the privilege of being called "the sons of God". This is understandable since He is the prince of peace. It makes a lot of sense to call those who try to make peace in the world, His children.

So the theme of the seventh beatitude for us is, to try to help establish peace between man and God, and between man and his fellow man.

**(8) "Blessed those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven"**

In this beatitude, Jesus was saying that those who follow Him would be persecuted. This was one of the themes that He touched on several times, as His time on earth inched toward its end. So we hear Him as He was sending His disciples out to the places He intended to visit, "I am sending you as lambs among wolves,..Beware of men; for they will deliver you up to councils,..And you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake." (Mt 10:16). Another time, He told them, "they shall deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall kill you. And you shall be hated by all nations for my name's sake" (Mt 24:8,9).

These are just two of the many warnings which He told them, about how are they going to be treated by the world. This persecution happened on a large scale after Jesus' ascension into heaven, carried on by the Jews, and the Romans. As Christianity began to take hold, the persecution was scaled down. But as the new religion of Islam began to spread from the Arab peninsula where it originated, to significant areas in Africa, Europe, and Asia, a new wave of persecution for the Christians living in those areas began.

In many cases, it continued there until the present time. So, it seems that persecution was and still is a part of becoming a Christian. It is a part of the package. The reason was also revealed by Jesus when He said addressing the Father, "I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world." (Jn 17:14).

In this beatitude Jesus was not telling His followers only that they are going to be persecuted, but He was also telling them that this is a blessing in disguise. The Bible tells us that the disciples were happy, when their persecution began, because they were found deserving to be persecuted for His name. The martyrs who were thrown to the lions, or tortured brutally by the Romans were heard singing on their way to their death. And what will be their reward? Jesus said that the kingdom of heaven would be theirs, which means that they will inherit the kingdom of heaven, and God will be pleased to consider them co- owners with Him. Didn't He consider them, his children, and permitted them to call Him "Father".

So the theme of the eighth beatitude is for us, to expect to be maltreated by the rest of the world, and to accept it with thanksgiving, because this is one of the signs that we are with Him.

Following the beatitudes Jesus continued in His positive approach, and told the people that they are the salt of the earth, and the light of the world.

## **You are the salt of the earth:**

Why did Jesus select salt from all the materials on earth, to describe His followers? There may be few reasons behind that selection. First, salt is an article of food, and Jesus was saying to His listeners, that they would feed the world spiritually, as the salt participates in feeding it physically. Salt also has a strong biting taste, so the Christian message will be a strong, biting message that will be spurned by many. Salt is indispensable, not too many people can do without it, so is Christianity to our spiritual well being, we have to have it. Salt makes food palatable, which would be utterly tasteless without it. Christians and Christianity will render life's disappointments, which are difficult to swallow, swallowable.

Also we find that a small amount of salt is all that it takes to season food. But this small amount of salt produces big changes in the taste of food, which it is added to, which testifies to its effectiveness. Christians in a similar way, when they carry the message of Christianity into the world, it will be highly effective and bring about big changes in those who accept it. Finally, salt prevents corruption and deterioration in the foods to which it is added to in great concentrations.

Christianity will do the same thing to those who receive it in great concentrations. We cannot say that they will be immune to corruption, but that they will be much less corruptible than the others. Theoretically, all Christians, who are faithful to God, cannot be corrupted. St. John wrote about this in his first epistle, when he said, "No one born of God commits sin; for God's nature abides in him, and he cannot sin because he is born of God." (1Jn 2:9). But we know that reality often, does not live up to theory.

From all this we can say that the analogy that Jesus used to describe His followers was suitable, and led some to literally follow it. As an

example, the Latin Church uses salt in the baptism of her children. The priest puts a small amount of salt in the mouth of every child who is baptized.

After Jesus described His followers as the salt of the earth, He then said, " But, if the salt lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trodden under foot by men" (Mt5: 13). Jesus was saying that if His followers cease to be the salt of the world, He would have no use for them. They will be so useless, that the only thing that can happen to them is to be thrown out and be trampled under the feet. It is interesting to note that when salt is exposed for a long time, it loses its taste, and there is no way its saltiness can be restored. So those Christians who will go back to their old ways, and renounce Jesus, will not regain their relationship with Him, and consequently will be worthless individuals. These are the ones who committed the unforgivable sin that He talked about, when the Scribes and the Pharisees accused Him, that He casts evil spirit with the power of Beelzebub.

### **You are the light of the world:**

As the physical world was dark, before the Lord God said, " Let there be light", the spiritual world of mankind was also dark before Jesus came. This is why He called Himself " The Light of the World". But here we hear Him calling His followers also, " The Light of the World". What did He mean by that? He meant, that His followers would carry His message, and help spread the light in the rest of the world. This is why He commissioned them before His ascension to do that, when He said, " Make disciples of all nations and baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit" (Mt 28:19).

It is interesting to differentiate between the light, which emanates from Jesus, and that which emanates from His followers. Jesus' light is His, while that of His followers, is not. It is Jesus' light, reflected to them,



and it is a gift from Him to His followers to enable them to do the job that He entrusted them with. What Jesus said, implies that every one of His followers can shine, and so has to serve. He said this because He knew that many would not serve and rationalize their situation by a host of false reasons. He elaborated on this theme, in His parable of the talents, in which a master before leaving, called his servants and gave them talents, to one he gave five talents, to another two talents, and to another one talent.

When he came back, and asked them to give account of what they did with the talents he gave them, the one who had the five talents told him, that he made five more talents, and he was praised. So was the second who had the two talents, and who made two more for his master. But the third did not use the talent that he was given and answered his master, saying that since he is a hard man, reaping where he has not sown, he hid the talent that he gave him, and gave it back to him. The Bible tells us that he was punished severely for what he did (Mt25: 14).

In other words, Jesus expects every one of His followers to serve according to whatever talents he was given. Many may find this too much for them. These are those who interpret serving as only to preach, to become a priest, to lead a youth fellowship meeting, or do any one of many important jobs in the church. This couldn't be farther from the truth. There are those who were given five talents, and others who were given two talents, these are the ones, who will be required to do the jobs, which I just mentioned.

Those of us, who were given one talent, will be unable to do those jobs. But who said that these are the only jobs that can be done which fall under the category of serving God? The person who helps in seating people in the church is serving God. Also the person who cleans the church, and who drives those who don't have cars to the church. So you don't have to do a big job to feel that you are serving God. Jesus once said that giving a glass of cold water to somebody thirsty would not be

forgotten by God.

In His statement about His followers being the light of the world, He said, " A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and give glory to your father who is in heaven" (Mt5: 16). By this Jesus was saying that if you cannot perform any service, just be a good Christian, and treat others the way I did. You are not required to talk about God, or even mention Him. It is your behavior that I want you to concentrate on. And by your behavior, you will be a living testimony for me, and that will help others to believe in me. This fulfills the requirement of using the talents that you have. I don't think that this is a difficult task, and any Christian can do it, no matter how timid or shy he is.

## **YOU HAVE HEARD THAT IT WAS SAID...BUT I SAY TO YOU:**

Before talking about His new theology, Jesus wanted to preface His remarks by telling the Jews that what He is going to say next, could be easily construed as an attack on the Law. He knew that the Scribes and the Pharisees who considered themselves the protectors of the Law, are watching Him, and will be appalled at some of the things that He is going to say. So, in an attempt to head off their criticism, He began by saying, " Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them" (Mt5: 17). And He did fulfil them. By this He was saying that despite the fact that I shortly will say to you that you have been told... but I tell you. I am really not destroying the law, I am completing it. It was the first step, now I am going to give you the second and last step.

He then proceeded to extol the sacredness of the law, by saying that,"

till heaven and earth pass away, not one iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished" (Mt5: 18). He was telling them, that the law is from God, and as you know His word will never fall, and I have as much respect for it as you have, but it needs to be brought up to date.

Before we get into the details of the new theology, it may be useful to respond to some of the remarks that are made by some when this topic is discussed. The most prevalent question is, why did God upgrade the law, when He knew that mankind had a difficult time obeying it in its original form. The Bible tells us that " All have sinned and are in need of God's glory" (Ps 14:3). If man could not live up to the expectations and the ordinances of the law, and could not meet its low standards, why is God raising them? Is He fond of observing His children fail? Of course not.

To answer this difficult question, one has to look at the whole picture, not only to a part of it. And when one does that, he will immediately see that the law was given to the people of Israel in an era that could be truly called, "The era of law and order". During that period, Satan was given a free reign, and was considered the dominant power on earth. This is why Jesus himself called him, " The Prince of this world". Man's nature was corrupted, and he was struggling against sin by himself.

He was so obsessed by his physical existence, that he was oblivious to everything else. God, who knew all that, found that man, under these conditions can not be asked to be perfect from the beginning. He realized that he will have no success whatsoever, if he was requested to live up to the highest standards. So, He gave him, the absolute minimum of what is considered an acceptable behavior. As a baby is given baby food, and when he grows up he is given adult food, so was mankind treated a baby formula first, followed by an adult recipe.

Some say, " Are you saying that all the former conditions including

man's nature have changed. Is man's nature now less corrupted, and that this is the reason that he was asked to meet higher standards? If not, how would he be able to live up to those elevated standards when he could not live up to those which were much lower? What makes it possible for somebody who failed to jump the three feet fence, to be able to jump the fence after it has been raised to ten. Again, the answer is that the conditions have changed.

Before the coming of Jesus, man was living under the harsh law, which he was asked to obey. God's face, which man saw at that time, was that of an aloof God, who demands obedience from His subjects, and who severely, punishes those who challenge His authority, or despise His council. And as we said before man was struggling against sin by himself, and in most cases he lost. But after Jesus came, and saved us by dying in our place, and forgiving our sins by the power of His blood, we became eligible to enlist the tremendous powers of the Holy Spirit, and marshal them against the powers of Satan.

Then we are also living under the banner of grace, love, and forgiveness. Our relationship with God became more cordial, and the old standards simply became inappropriate for the children of God. This is why Jesus raised them. He was simply saying to mankind that even though you have miserably failed in obeying the first phase of the law, yet I came to raise it by offering you the second phase. And with it I am offering you my power to conquer Satan and to resist his temptations. And as I have conquered him several times during my brief stay on Earth, I am ready to conquer him for you again, and again. This way, you will be able to meet the high standards of phase two.

Once Moses told the Israelites when they panicked on seeing Pharaoh's army pursuing them while their backs were against the Red Sea, "Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord...The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to be still" (Ex 14:14). He is more than willing now to do the same thing for you. He is willing to fight for you.

The only thing that is required of you is a genuine desire to obey, and to do your best, and God will do the rest. So it could be said, that Jesus raised the standards not because He saw that man could meet them, but because He knows that He can meet them on his behalf.

Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

Our Lord's relationships with the hierarchy of the religious leadership have never been cordial, or friendly, for reasons that we discussed in another chapter. From the very beginning, Jesus felt that He was not welcomed or appreciated by them. He felt their jealousy, and their hatred, and knew that they were watching Him very carefully, in the hope of catching him saying or doing something against the Law, so they can use it against Him later. Jesus never backed off from His stand against their tyranny, arrogance, and lack of compassion for the people.

This is why in today's sermon, He chose to attack them, declaring to the people that if their righteousness does not exceed that of the scribes and the Pharisees, they will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Some one may ask why did Jesus attack them from the beginning of His ministry? Why did He antagonize them and made them enemies, while He could have tried to make them friends, and gain them to His side? This is what the world calls politics, something that appeals to man very much, but never appealed to God.

He has always been blunt, brutally honest, and straightforward. He knew that these powerful leaders of the nation are not going to listen to Him, no more than Pharaoh listened, when Moses asked him, to obey God and release the Israelites. So, He decided to call them to repent and change their ways. Again people ask, why did He do that while He knew that they would not repent or change their behavior? God did this with many sinners, despite His knowledge that they will not. A case in point is His warning to Cain before he killed his brother Abel. Also His

order to Jonah to go to Nineveh, which he declined and tried to flee from God. He always managed to send messages to the kings and leaders of the nation when they strayed away from His statutes and disobeyed His commandments, asking them to repent and come back to Him. There are many reasons for God's behavior, in these and similar situations. The first, is His desire to invite all people to repentance. So man would not, when he is faced with his sins on the day of judgement to claim that he was not warned about their consequences.

Another possible reason may be God's desire to use these episodes to teach the rest of us a lesson that God is not responsible for people choosing the wrong way. For in every case He called sinners to repentance even though He knew in advance that they would not repent. Even in the case of Pharaoh, God did not hit him and his nation with those powerful plagues, to punish him, but rather to convince him and the Egyptians that he is not God. And that the God of their slaves is the true God. Unfortunately he was not convinced. It can be said then, that by doing that God is telling man, that He will always do His job. He puts the ball in man's hands, and tells him that, it is up to him, to obey or disobey. So when man decides to take the road that leads to hell, he cannot claim that he didn't know.

Jesus stated this clearly when He said, "If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin; but now they have no excuse for their sins " (Jn 15: 22). As we read this, we are immediately reminded that the same situation applies to us. When Jesus talked about this, He told the Israelites that if their righteousness does not exceed that of the scribes and the Pharisees, they would not enter the kingdom of heaven. Why did He call the Pharisees righteous, while they were not? He must have meant, that since they and most people call what the Scribes and the Pharisees do righteous, He was warning the people that if their so called righteousness does not go beyond that, they will not enter the kingdom of heaven. He was really telling them, you have to look beyond the Old testament, and its standards, and that in the new

kingdom that I will tell you about shortly, fulfilling the law will not be enough to enter heaven, the standards have been raised.

### **Everyone who is angry with his brother is liable to judgment**

"You have heard..You shall not kill... but I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, 'you fool' shall be liable to the hell of fire" (Mt 5:21-23).

Before talking about the meaning of this new commandment and its implications in our lives, there is one point that needs to be made. When Jesus says 'you have been told, but I tell you', He is saying that He has the authority to go beyond, and extend the very commandments which God gave them, at the hands of Moses. This immediately gives Him a status equal with God. This was probably one of the reasons why the scribes and the Pharisees refused to believe Him. The Jewish people did not expect the promised savior to be God himself talking a human form, but they were waiting for somebody like Moses who will be a prophet, and who will be granted the powers of God, to liberate them from the rule of Rome, as Moses liberated them from the rule of Egypt.

As we examine the details of this commandment, we find that the old commandment that says that killing is a sin is still valid, and that man has to refrain from killing his fellow man, still stands. But it is no longer enough to justify man in the eyes of God. He has to do better. He has to refrain from anger, from insulting others, even calling somebody the mild word "fool" is not permitted, and shall be punishable by the fires of hell. The logic behind this is that killing some one does not begin at this stage, a desire to kill, but rather with a series of emotional steps such as frustration, anger, and rage, that culminate in a desire to kill.

Jesus knew that allowing those steps to happen, will in most cases end in the desire to kill, and eventually in the act of killing. He knew that

once this chain reaction begins it is almost impossible to stop, so He is telling man that the most effective way of preventing the sin of killing is to kill it where it starts, by nipping it in the bud. Simple, you bet, but difficult. As we think about this, we find that it is a rare person who lives up to this new standard.

This points again to two spiritual principles that we need to keep reminding ourselves about. The first is the mighty power of Satan, and the second is the awful weakness of man. Any observer of these two facts will never put his money on man to win this contest. This brings us to the third spiritual principle that we need to always remind ourselves with, namely that despite that, we can win, because we are not banking on man's power but on God's. It is interesting to note that Jesus mentioned one specific application for the new commandment. After stating it, He followed by saying, "So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift." (Mt5: 23,24).

This was an attempt by the Lord to impress upon His listeners the importance of doing this, and applying it in their daily lives. He was really saying that having good relationships with our fellow man is of the utmost importance, to the extent that, as important as offering a sacrifice to God is, having peace with all your friends is more important. Jesus is saying that before you approach God and ask Him to forgive your sins, you have to forgive your brother if he did something to hurt you. Also if you have offended any one, you can't come to God, and expect Him to accept you, before you mend your relationship with your brother whom you have offended.

### **Everyone who looks on a woman lustfully commits adultery**

"You have heard, you should not commit adultery. But I say to you, that every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed



adultery with her in his heart." (Mt 5:27,28).

As we reflect on this new commandment, we immediately realize that Jesus is using the same approach that He used in the previous commandment. He is eliminating the sequence of events that leads to adultery, as He eliminated those that lead to killing. The reasoning here too is that committing adultery is not something that happens on the spur of the moment, but it is something that happens as a result of lusting after someone. When this happens, it becomes very difficult to stop at this. Almost always after this initial step, an assessment is made by the person, whether the object of his lust is an easy target, or not.

Based on this assessment, either nothing happens, or a plan of action is devised, and put into effect, which may end in adultery, and may not. But if no lust happens, the sin of adultery will not happen. It is interesting to note that Jesus said this commandment only to men. The reason is that it is usually the man who lusts after women. This was true in the days of Jesus, and by and large it is still true today. We may see few aggressive liberated women, who pursue men, but they are a minority, and if they do, the Lord's judgment will be the same for them as for men.

Then Jesus added the following," If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away, it is better that you lose one of your members than your whole body be thrown into hell" (Mt5: 29). Here we find an interesting new direction, from that of the Old Testament theology. In that theology, God emphasized the physical rewards that He was ready to provide the Jewish people with, if they walked in His ways, and the physical punishment He was going to punish them with, if they strayed away from Him. This was repeated over and over again throughout the Old Testament. The following is one example of that emphasis, dictated by God and recorded by Moses,

"If you walk in my statutes and observe my commandments and do

them, then I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its increase, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. And your threshing shall last to the time of vintage, and the vintage shall last to the time for sowing; and you shall eat your bread to the full, and dwell in your land securely. And I will give peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and none shall make you afraid; and I will remove evil beasts from the land, and the sword shall not go through your land. And you shall chase your enemies, and they shall fall before you by the sword. Five of you shall chase a hundred, and a hundred of you shall chase ten thousand; and your enemies shall fall before you by the sword " (Lev 26:3-8)

This is the part that emphasizes the rewards that the Jewish people will get if they walked with God. As we examine this list, we find it an impressive list of earthly rewards that did not leave anything that man usually craves during his life on earth. So God was telling His people that if they walked with Him, He would take care of all their physical needs. Some one may say isn't this the same concept that Jesus meant when He urged the people to depend on God for their physical needs using the parables of the birds of the sky, and the lilies of the field. We have to agree that on the surface it looks that the two are similar. But there is a very significant difference between the two. In the Old Testament concept, God promised all those rewards as the incentive for the people to follow Him.

In the New Testament concept, these rewards are not offered as an incentive. The incentive is to live with God here and thereafter enjoying His love and care. The physical aspects are not promised because they are that important, but because they are not important. They do not deserve all that attention that we devote for them, an attention that we should devote to improving our relationship with God. He will be glad to provide us with those necessities of life without even asking Him about them. So Jesus in His new theology is telling the people that their spiritual life is more important than their physical life. This is why He

told them, if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away, it is not that important. The important thing is to keep your eye, even if it is one eye, on your eternity, not your life on earth.

### **Everyone, Who Divorces His Wife Except for Unchastity, Makes Her an Adulteress**

"It was also said," Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce. But I say to you that every one who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, makes her an adulteress; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery."(Mt5: 31,32)

What Jesus meant by this is clear, and needs no interpretation. He reiterated this new commandment later, when the Pharisees asked Him, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" They asked Him that because they wanted Him to say something against the Law, and He did. He answered them saying, "Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one? So they are no longer two but one. What therefore God has joined together let no man put asunder"(Mt 19:3-7).

Some question what Jesus said, and ask what did He mean when He said, "the two become one"? They are still two, aren't they? This is man looking at something that is viewed by God in a totally different way. God looks on the marriage vows as sacred, and should not be discarded for any reason but Unchastity. He knows that when two people get married, they are fulfilling His commandment to Adam and Eve to multiply and fill the earth. His original design was for love to exist between the man and the woman, and that this will continue to be the motive behind marriage.

When He said that the two become one, He was really saying that the two were one when they were originally created. Eve was created from Adam's rib, and as this rib became Eve, they were still one. And they continued to be one, until sin interfered with their union. God was the first one to foresee the separation between the two, when He told Eve, before ushering them out of the Garden of Eden, "Your desire will be for your husband, and he shall rule over you." (Gen 3:16). This was not the case before they sinned. The love between them was so strong and godly, that Adam did not feel superior to Eve, and she probably never thought that she is inferior to him.

They most likely tried to make each other happy, as love continued between them. But when they both sinned, and Satan began to play a role in their lives, things began to change. The old love was lost and the seeds of what we call now the "war of the sexes" began to be sown in both of their minds. Adam, reflecting on their dilemma, probably began to blame Eve for falling into Satan's trap, and began losing confidence in her judgment. From that point, things got worse as life became difficult, and selfishness began to replace love between them. What God told Eve was not a punishment, but a prophecy that this is what will happen in the future, knowing the wickedness and the craftiness of Satan, and looking into the dark future of mankind.

The Lord's statement about divorce was designed to restore the sanctity of marriage, and was another attempt to return mankind to their status before sin corrupted their nature. He was telling the Jewish people that the Holy Spirit, when sent into the world would be able to change those who accept the salvation, which Jesus will offer, from sinful men to righteous men. These can share in many of the original qualities that man had before his fall. God will grant the sacred union between a man and a woman. This is why man cannot break it.

As we reflect on all this, and compare it with today's reality, that more than half of all marriages in this country end up in divorce, we cannot

discount, or minimize the role of Satan in bringing about the sorry state of the institution of marriage in the world today. There are probably two reasons why Satan targeted it and gave it priority over many of his other goals. The first is probably his hatred of God, and his desire to upset as many of His plans as he can. Since it was God, who created the institution of marriage, when He saw that it is not good to leave Adam alone, and created Eve to keep his company and become his helper.

Satan felt that he should try to destroy it. The second reason was his realization that, the family, which is the building block of the human society is such an important institution, that if it is destroyed, many of his other goals will be easily attained. So he set out to destroy marriage. We must admit that he succeeded exceedingly in doing that. And in the process, he was able to destroy the chances of most people to take advantage of which Jesus offered them, which meant a chance to return to the bosom of the Father.

As we look at divorce today, we find that many of those who call themselves Christians have violated what Jesus said about it on that day. He allowed it for one reason; unchastity. But the three main Christian churches have taken different stands on this very important issue. The Catholic Church allows no divorce at all. Her stand on this has no biblical support at all. When God says that He allows divorce in the case of unfaithfulness of either husband or wife, how can the Catholic church disregard what God Himself said, and prevent divorce for any reason. While this represents one extreme, the Protestant churches went to the other extreme. They allow divorce for any reason. This is also wrong, and represents nothing but a callous disregard of one of God's important commandments.

In this matter both churches have seriously erred for they have openly disobeyed God's instructions. The third church, which is the Orthodox church, which in our opinion is the only church which has kept the faith as pure as it has taken it from its original source. This church has

maintained Jesus' teaching on divorce, and has continued to uphold His order that divorce is only allowed in the case of unchastity.

## **Do Not Swear**

" You have heard that it was said,' you shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn. But I say to you, do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is His footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great king. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil" (Mt5: 33-37).

Swearing in Jesus' days did not mean what it means today. It simply meant, making an oath, as when someone says," By the Lord, I pledge to do this or that ". The Bible used the same word, when it describes a situation when God Himself wanted to make His listeners realize that He will definitely do what he said He would. An example of that came in Psalm 110, when it said," The Lord has sworn and will not repent, you are a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek" (Psa 110:4). Some may ask if God Himself swears why does He want us to refrain from it? The reason may be because man does not always fulfill what he swore to do. In this case, the name of God would have been abused, and associated with a lie, or at least the lack of commitment on the part of who swears.

But in the case of God, it is His own name that He is using, and there is no doubt that He will always honor His word, so there is no chance to dishonor it. We notice also that Jesus told the people not to swear by anything else; not by heaven, because it is the throne of God, nor by Jerusalem, because it is the city of the great king, nor by the earth, because it is His footstool. We can understand the rationale behind these because they are all connected with God, and swearing by them

would have the same shortcomings that swearing by the name of God has.

But after that Jesus also warned them not to swear by their heads. The reason, which He gave, was, "for you cannot make one hair white or black". Jesus was simply referring to the fact that since we have no dominion, or authority over anything in this world any more, then we have no right to swear even by our heads, simply because they are not ours, they are His. We have been bought with the precious blood of Jesus, so we don't own any thing in this world not even ourselves. Another reason why Jesus wants us to refrain from swearing is that swearing has become such an automatic part of our daily conversations, to the extent that it became so repulsive to hear, especially when it is obvious that who said it does not intend to honor it. Jesus does not want us to profane His name. At the same time, He wants us to deal with each other so honestly that we would not need to swear, for people to believe us. He wants our speech to be simple, and true, so our yes is yes, and our no is no.

### **If one strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other**

" You have heard that it was said,' An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; and if any one would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well; and if any one forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to him who begs from you, and do not refuse him who borrows from you. " (Mt5; 38-42).

As we read this magnificent passage, we find that it deals with four different situations. The first is a situation in which somebody is hurting you, and Jesus is asking you not to take revenge by returning the hurt, as the Old Testament allowed. He does not stop there, but He is asking you to invite him to hurt you even more, by turning the other cheek. The

second situation is different. Here we have somebody suing you for some unknown reason, and the judge ruled that you should give him your coat. This time, you are asked not to appeal, or contest the ruling, but rather to comply, and give him the coat. But here Jesus adds a bonus, by asking you to throw in your cloak also.

The third situation presents another scenario. This time someone is forcing you to walk with him one mile. Jesus is telling you, not only to walk with him the mile without complaining or grumbling, but that you should volunteer to walk with him another mile, without being asked. The fourth situation still presents a different problem. This time you have been asked to give someone a handout, or a loan, and Jesus is asking you not to hesitate to give in both cases. As a matter of fact, He did not see any difference between the two, since He recommended that you do not refuse anybody who wants to borrow from you regardless of the possibility that he may not pay you back.

There is no question in anybody's mind that these are unusual commandments, which no body before Him, dared to ask mankind to follow. But before we comment on this, we have to try to find the common thread in these different situations, and ask whether these are four different commandments or whether they are really one commandment, applied in four different situations? As we reflect on this, we find that although they look different, yet they have one thing in common. In all of them, the person who is receiving the bad treatment, is asked not to fight no matter how unfairly he felt that he was treated, as if Jesus was saying to the Jewish people not to get into a fight with anybody no matter what. The bottom line is not to return evil for evil. Jesus did not stop there, but went farther. He wants us to do good to whoever did evil to us.

The disciples, who followed it in their dealings with others, picked up this theme. Two of them wrote about it in their epistles. St.Paul wrote to the Romans," Repay no evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble



in the sight of all" (Rom 12:17). Also St. Peter who wrote in his first epistle, " Do not return evil for evil or reviling for reviling; but on the contrary bless, for to this you have been called." (1Pet 3:9).

As you rebelled against God. I know that now you are helpless, and that by yourself you cannot follow these commandments. Some people hear this, they immediately react by pointing out that this is against human nature, and that it is impossible to implement. We disagree with both statements. First, it may be against human nature? But we have to ask which human nature? The human nature as it was created by God or after it has been corrupted by sin? We say that it is the present human nature, after it was corrupted by sin. Jesus was fully aware of that when He outlined His new theology. In this commandment He was saying to the people that despite all what happened to your nature, I want you to go back to that nature. But I want you only to believe in them, and to do your best. If you fail, and I know that you will, the Holy Spirit will help you, and you will be able to fulfill them.

### **Love Your Enemies**

" You have heard that it was said,' You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust" (Mt5: 43-46).

Some people say that this is the crown jewel of Jesus' new theology. Why? Is it because it is the most shocking of all the new commandments that were outlined in that famous sermon? Or does it rise to new heights, never approached before? It may be both. It is irrelevant to the greatness of the new theology, which part of it is the greatest. Because when it was outlined Jesus never thought about any part in isolation from the others, or about which part is the greatest. It

was given as one unit, with one principle permeating it and guiding its details.

Jesus was appealing to mankind to go back to its origin. What He outlined in the sermon on the mount, and in all His other speeches was a simple call to mankind to look up to heaven, and recognize their lost relationship with the Father. And then He followed that with an open and a bold invitation to man to come back. He was saying to each and every one of us " If you do, there will be no questions asked, just to the Old Testament", 1985.

As we reflect on this commandment, we find that it moves on the same road that the previous commandments did. There is a common thread that runs through all of them. The common thread of love. Certainly, controlling anger with someone who did something that hurt you is impossible without love. Also refraining from divorcing one's wife, even if there are many reasons that justify that in the eyes of the world, is also impossible without love. Or who can resist answering evil with evil, and then going the extra mile, without love? And even though Jesus did not say it explicitly in each one of those commandments, yet He implied it. He certainly knew people's feeling about the other commandments, and their thinking about how difficult they were. So by telling them, " Love your enemies", He was really telling them that this is the secret potion that will enable you to obey all the others. Just love each other, even your enemies, and everything will be all right.

It is interesting to note that love is also valued, and preached by the world. We all recall the cry of the flower generation during the Vietnam War, " Make love not war". Of course we all know that the love that those people were advocating, was not the love that Jesus preached on that day. The love that the Vietnam protesters meant was not love, but lust. But we also find that the brand of love that Jesus talked about, is valued by many who do not call themselves Christians.

The world is finding that while hate makes people's lives miserable, love makes them happy. They also found that the frustration and the other emotions that hate produces such as rage, and stress often result in health problems, both physical and, psychological. Few diseases have been linked to these emotions, such as hypertension, stroke, diabetes, just to mention a few. Psychologically, it has been found that people who love do not have serious psychological problems. It has been said that any child who knows that he is loved even by only one person, will not become a mental patient, no matter how severe his problems are.

Lay people have found the power of love in people's lives. Lately they have discovered that senior citizens with chronic diseases improve considerably when they are visited more frequently by their relatives, or in the absence of relatives, if they are visited every now and then by a loving pet; such as a dog or a cat. One of the very latest findings was that mothers who took care of their children themselves had a lower risk of getting an array of serious diseases later in life.

They were better off when compared with those who did not spend that much time with their children, and depended more on baby sitters. So when our Lord talked about loving every body including your enemies, He was talking about a world basking in happiness, and peace. He was talking about people enjoying life and living it fully.

They did that, not by sinning but by obeying God, and following His example of loving all the people. Jesus said, " So that you may be sons of your father who is in heaven for he makes his sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust." (Mt5: 45). He said that to motivate the people to emulate God.

### **Do Not Lay Up for Yourselves Treasures on Earth**

"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume, and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves

treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consume and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." (Mt6: 17).

This is a new commandment, which simply says, that man should not be obsessed with the world and the things of the world, to the extent that He spends most of his time and energy seeking and accumulating them. Jesus was pointing to the fact that life is more important to be spent in accumulating earthly possessions. Even for those who do not believe in life after death, such as the Sadducees, pursuing earthly things, if it becomes an obsession, can take away from the joy of life. These people develop what psychologists call a " Tunnel vision", which makes them see one thing, and one thing only; whatever they are obsessed with.

Consequently, they lose sight of everything else. Among these are the legitimate pleasures of life, which are sacrificed in the process. As for those who believe in life after death, and in heaven and hell, this commandment gains an added importance, not only because of its effect on their life on earth, but because of its greater effect on their eternal life. Jesus once said, " What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and forfeits his life" (Mt 16:26). This is the wisdom behind this commandment, and indeed it packs a lot of wisdom, and makes a lot of sense.

As we observe those who spend their lives accumulating wealth, we ask, is it worth it? Does it make sense? Why do these people do that, when they know that one day they will leave this earth, and leave behind, that which they spent their whole life collecting? Why do they sacrifice their eternity for something they will not be able to keep? They do this because they have been brainwashed by Satan, who exploits everybody's weakness to his advantage. And when he spots those who have the inclination to love the world and the things of the world, he works on them, helping them to develop such an illogical goal in life.

Once this is adopted, he does not worry about them anymore. He has installed in them a gyroscope, which will keep on turning until it spells their doom.

People ask, 'why is this a new commandment?' To answer this, we have to compare God's attitude toward earthly possessions, in the Old Testament, with His attitude in the New Testament. As we pointed out before that in the Old Testament, God blessed those who walked with Him with great riches. Abraham was rich, also Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, David, Solomon, and many others. He also rewarded the Israelites with earthly possessions when they obeyed Him, and deprived them of those possessions when they disobeyed Him. Now, we hear Him, telling people to forget all that, and develop a new attitude toward worldly things. He was telling them, that it is time to grow up and forget those childish goals that you have been preoccupied with. He went back time and time again to the same theme, because He knew how deeply it was ingrained in people's hearts.

Once, He was visiting Lazarus, and his two sisters, Mary and Martha. Mary sat at His feet, listening to what He had to say, while Martha was busy fussing over what she is going to feed their distinguished guest. When Mary did not offer to help her, Martha complained to Jesus. Jesus must have looked at her, regretting that she made the wrong choice, and came to Him blaming her sister for making the right one. Then He proceeded by telling her, " Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her." (Lk 10:26).

Another time as the rich man approached Him, and asked Him about what should he do to inherit eternal life, Jesus told him, you know the commandments. The rich man told Him that he kept these from his youth. The Bible tells us that Jesus loved him, and then told him, " You lack one thing, go sell what you have, and give it to the poor, and you will have a treasure in heaven, and come and follow me." (Mk 10:21).

The rich man who observed the commandments from the time he was a young man, and who was admired by Jesus, could not follow this new commandment, and went away sorrowful, because he had many possessions.

This man who was better than most people who lived at that time, for not too many of them can claim that they have observed the commandments as he did. This man who had his doubts that the old theology was adequate to inherit eternal life, failed to comply with the new standards put forth by Jesus. He must have heard about the new rabbi, and the new theology that he was preaching. He may have listened to the sermon on the mound, and heard Jesus talk about the kingdom of heaven and listened to Him as He outlined the new requirements needed to become a member of that kingdom.

He must have wondered about the adequacy of the old one summarized in the Ten Commandments, and found out that his doubt was justified. This man who took many steps toward the realization of his desire to inherit that kingdom. This man who listened carefully to what Jesus said, and who understood it, and had the insight to realize that the old theology is no longer adequate to qualify him to enter the kingdom of God. This man who went to the source to inquire about what is needed, and who came humbly to Jesus and knelt before Him, in reverence, and humility. This man who came so close, could not take the last step, and abandoned his dream because of his many possessions. There is no other story in the Bible that tells how strong the grip that material possessions have on man more than this story. This is why Jesus talked about it and kept coming back to it many times during His stay on earth.

So Jesus was telling man that spending one's life accumulating worldly possessions is not the smartest thing to do, and that it is better for him, to spend it accumulating credit in heaven. The irony is that people know, that one day they will leave this world and will not be able to take anything with them. As I was reflecting on this one evening,

suddenly I realized contrary to that popular belief, one can take everything with him, if he listened to Jesus and gave it to the poor. This is what He actually told the people; that instead of leaving your possessions behind when you die, you can take them with you if you gave them to the poor. In this case you will be able to use them there, instead of leaving them on earth for others to use.

Another way of looking at this commandment is that the treasure that man accumulates on earth is made of things that are temporary, while the heavenly treasure is made of things that are permanent. Since temporary things do not live long, one cannot keep them, but since permanent things live long, one can keep them long, even forever. Jesus was telling the people to exchange those temporary possessions for permanent ones so they can keep them forever.

One of the missionaries chose to evangelize in a dangerous area of South America, and insisted on carrying God's message to the inhabitants of that area, who were dangerous cannibals. A newspaper reporter asked him why is he doing that while he can live comfortably enjoying the pleasures of life that millions of his contemporaries are enjoying. One of them even asked him if his behavior makes sense or was it foolish? The young missionary answered him by saying, " He is no fool, he who gives away the things that he cannot keep, to gain the things that nobody can take away from him".

**Dear reader: where are you on this issue? Do you agree with Jesus?** Or you are saying to yourself, that you are not convinced, and that this is too much to ask? If you are of this opinion, you need to go to Jesus, the author of the new commandment, and enlist His help in obeying it. If you do, He will rush to help you, if you are sincere in your request. When this happens, you will find yourself despising earthly riches, and acquiring a new desire to give them to the poor.

One of the famous saints in the Coptic Church, St. Abraam the bishop

of Fayum, was known for his giving. He never had any desire to keep anything for himself. Every time any one gave him money, he refused even to handle it, but told the giver, to put it under the pillow, and when someone asked him for financial help, he used to tell him, take whatever is under the pillow. As a result, he lived a very ascetic life. His clothes, his food, and the furniture in his room were very modest, and when people gave him expensive gifts, he refused to use them, but sold them and gave whatever money he sold it for, to the poor. Why was St. Abraam able to do that, while most of us can't? He was just another human being as weak as any of us. But he believed that the Holy Spirit that he had is capable of giving him the strength that he needs to overcome the world and the things of the world. He believed Jesus when He said, "I have conquered the world", which means that I can also conquer it for you.

### **Judge not, that you be not judged**

Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and the measure that you give will be the measure that you get. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take out the speck in your eye, when there is a log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye" (Mt7: 1-5).

This is also a new commandment, because the Old Testament law allowed people to pass judgment on each other. How else can one return the hurt, if he was not allowed to judge whoever hurt him, and based on that judgment, decides to apply the law, which allowed inflicting a similar hurt, when it said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth". So, when Jesus said that, He was charting a new course in the field of human relations. This, together with the other commandments that He outlined before such as turning the other cheek, going the extra mile,



offering the cloak with the shirt, and loving one's enemies, constitute a complete overhaul of man's relationships with his fellow man.

As we reflect on this new commandment, we immediately see Jesus dealing with one of the most common problems in people's relationships with each other. This is the problem of passing judgment on others, which is often based on biased, inadequate or incomplete evidence, and which usually ends in the belief that whoever is being judged has committed a grave sin. The irony here is that the person passing the judgment very often is guiltier of the same sin for which he condemns others. Jesus dramatized this fact when He called the sin in the other person a speck, while calling the sin in the person who is making the judgment, a log. When Jesus said that, He was pointing out another one of our most serious human shortcomings; our inability to see our own mistakes, while we are able, even eager to point out the same mistake in others.

It seems that one of the most difficult things for any human being is to admit that he made a mistake. We observe this every day. We observe it in old people, we observe it in teenagers, and we observe it in young boys and girls. So no matter how old we are, we hate to admit that we are wrong. This also is what makes us resist other people telling us what to do, even if they are our parents, our teachers, or even our friends. We call this self-righteousness, and it is one of the most common sins that people commit, and which often results in broken homes, rebellious children, and strained relationships between siblings, friends, and close relatives.

As we examine the Bible we read story after story of people doing just that. But the one that tops them all is the story of King David. The Bible tells us that after God defeated all the enemies of Israel, and gave David great victories over them, he committed the two grave sins of killing one of his most loyal soldiers, and having sex with his wife. The king, who had many wives and concubines, one day, while walking on the

roof of his house, saw a beautiful woman bathing on the roof of her house. He could not control his lust for her, so he inquired about her, and sent for her, and committed adultery with her, while her husband was fighting for him. After she sent to the king telling him that she is pregnant, he sent a message to the chief of his army, ordering him to put her husband in the forefront of the battle where he was killed.

The Bible tells us that what David did displeased God. So He sent Nathan the prophet to David with a message. Nathan used a clever approach to make him aware of his sins. He told him a fictitious story about two of the king's subjects, one was rich and the other poor. The rich man possessed many flocks and herds, while the poor man owned only one little ewe lamb, which he loved so much, that it ate of his morsel, drank of his cup, and at night lied in his bosom. One day the rich man had a guest, and instead of taking one of his many lambs to make a meal for him, he took the poor man's lamb, slaughtered it and prepared a meal for his guest. When David heard this, the Bible tells us that his anger was greatly kindled. And he passed judgment on the man saying, "As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and had no pity" (2Sam12: 5,6).

We can see that King David was very fast in condemning the rich man for taking a lamb from his poor friend. He immediately saw the sin that he committed, while he was blind to his own sin. It is interesting to point out that the rich man's sin was not as grave as David's sin, for he only took the poor man's lamb, while David took his neighbor's wife and killed him. This is a classical example of the analogy that Jesus used by calling the sin that we judge in others, a speck, and our own sin, a log. David certainly had a log in his eye, while pointing to the speck in the rich man's eye.

The above are the main components of the new theology outlined by Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount. There are other components such as

the role of the Holy Spirit, especially in the seven sacraments, belief in the Son not only in the Father, and what His followers expect, in this world and in the world to come. These topics will be dealt with in another book in this series.

## Chapter Four

### JESUS TALKS ABOUT HIMSELF

We consider those who talk about themselves self centered, egotistic People. But when Jesus talks about Himself we cannot judge Him the same way. Simply because we know He is not. During His stay with us on earth, He was humble. As a matter of fact He was so humble that we feel embarrassed every time we observe any human acting arrogantly, and we all do. His humility was one of the hallmarks of His life on earth, which was detailed in various parts of this book. As we ask ourselves why did He talk about Himself? We find that He probably did that to reveal His identity to us. God in the beginning, for reasons unknown to us, chose not to do that.

We all know the story of the burning bush, that Moses saw one day as he was taking his herd back home. It was twilight, the sun was about to disappear behind the horizon, and the wind began to kick up, raising the temperature to a chill. When Moses looked at the hill bordering the route he was taking, he saw a bush burning. The sight of a burning bush was not uncommon in those hills. Sometimes electrical storm would cause them when a bolt of lightning reaches downs and hits a tree or a bush. What was uncommon was that as Moses looked again at the bush, he saw that the fire did not consume it. It was the same as he saw it when he first noticed it. No difference whatsoever. This is why he decided to take a closer look, to see what was happening. This is when God called him from the bush ordering him to take off his shoes because the ground on which he stood was holy ground.

Moses must have remembered what he learned about God and His holiness, and consequently he knew that it was the Lord, so he obeyed, and must have knelt or lowered his head, as a sign of reverence. As he did that, God told him that He heard the cries of the Israelites because of

the persecution that they were suffering at the hands of the Egyptians. And that He has chosen him to go to Egypt to lead His people out. We are familiar with the dialogue that happened between God and Moses, in which Moses asked God, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them," The God of your fathers has sent me to you, and they ask me, what is his name? What shall I say to them? (Ex3: 13).

God responded by telling Moses, "I am who I am, Say this to them, I am has sent me to you"(Ex3: 14). Most probably Moses did not understand what God said, but did not dare to ask Him what did He mean by that. But as we reflect on that now, we come up with two possible meanings for what God told Moses. The first is that God at this point in time for reason or reasons unknown to us refused to reveal his identity to the Israelites. The second is that time does not exist for God.

We notice that He said, " I am who I am" the statement is in the present tense, which means that for God there is no today, yesterday, or tomorrow. The past and the future do not exist for God, they only exist for us humans. The fact that He chose not to reveal His identity to His chosen people may puzzle some, but if we examine the rest of the Old Testament, we will find that He talked very briefly about Himself several times. In most of them He refereed to Himself as "I am the Lord your God" or simply "The Lord". He never talked about His qualities to man.

But after Jesus came and the New Testament was ushered in by Him, He, the son began to reveal himself to mankind. He did this by finishing the incomplete sentence that God the Father said to Moses. And instead of stopping after saying "I am", we find Him saying," I am the good shepherd", " I am the way, the truth, and the life", " I am the light of the world", " I am the bread of life", " I am the true vine", " I am the resurrection and life". By this He began educating mankind about the true nature of God. He told them that He is a good Father who loves His children, and who is ready to forgive them their sins, and save them

from the spiritual death they deserve, provided they accept Him, His son as Lord and savior.

I am the good shepherd

In one of His parables the Lord told His listeners that He was the good shepherd, and the good shepherd offers himself on behalf of his sheep. When He said that, He was telling them that He would sacrifice Himself on their behalf. He also wanted to tell them how much He loved them that He is willing to die for them. This was the most important message that Jesus was to deliver to mankind, that God is love. In a way this was a new message because God's love was not so obvious in the Old Testament. St. John expressed this extraordinary fact many times both in his gospel, and his two epistles. Out of his many pronouncements none expresses it more beautifully than his statement in (Jn3: 16) when he wrote, " God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but shall have eternal life"

The Lord obviously liked the title of the good shepherd, because another time He used it when He said, "My sheep listen to my voice". By this He was telling the people that the relationship between Himself, and His people, could be likened to that which exists between the shepherd and the sheep. As we examine this relationship we find that first the sheep know the shepherd, they look for him, they follow him, they recognize his voice, they trust him, they depend on him, and feel lost without him. This is the kind of relationship that God wants us to have with Him. He wants us to know Him, depend on Him, follow Him, trust Him, recognize His voice and develop the ability to differentiate between it and the other voice that constantly talks to us; Satan's.

The sheep depend on the shepherd for all their needs, the Lord wants us to depend on Him for all our needs; physical, psychological, and

spiritual. He also wants to tell us that He will play the role of the good shepherd who takes care of His sheep. The shepherd finds grass and water for his sheep and protects them from any danger that threatens them, and goes after the stray sheep in an attempt to retrieve it.

The Lord was telling the people that He would do all those things for them if they decided to follow him, and become His sheep.

One day the Lord was talking to His disciples, and returning to the theme of shepherding, He told them that He has other sheep than those that He now has. He was referring to the fact that His salvation will not be only offered to the Jewish people, but to many others spread all over the world. This was carried out by His disciples, after receiving a specific command, when He told them before His ascension, "Make disciples of all nations and baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit" (Mt 28:19).

Shepherding seems to be a suitable occupation for many of those selected by God to carry His word to the people, and assume leadership positions. The Bible tells us that Abel was a shepherd, also Jacob, Moses, and David, even Rachel. The shepherd's main job is to take care of his sheep, which in a way prepares him to accept the transfer from shepherding sheep, to shepherding people. A similar transfer was one day mentioned by our Lord when He told Peter and Andrew his brother, " Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men."(Mt 4:19). It is also an occupation that allows those who select it, extended periods of quiet and solitude, in places rich in their natural resources. These places remind them of the creator, and His awesome powers, and make people feel closer to God.

Such an environment is an excellent place where God can talk to man, through the sound of running water, the rustling of leaves, the singing of a bird, or the glistening of stars at night. The stage is set here for deep reflection, and meditation, something that makes communication

between man and God much easier.

I am the bread of life

When Jesus said His "I am" s, most of the time He did not use whatever word He used literally, but figuratively. So when He said "I am the good shepherd, He did not mean that He is actually a "shepherd", but that He will assume a role similar to that of the shepherd in His relationship with the people. This was also the case when He called Himself the way, and the truth, or the true vine, or the light of the world. But sometimes He meant what He said literally, as well as figuratively, which is the case in His statement, "I am the bread of life".

When He made that statement to the Jewish people, He was really telling them, that He is essential to the life of their souls as food is essential to the life of their bodies.

As we reflect on this statement, it is interesting to examine the circumstances in which this "I am" was made. The day before, the Lord had fed the five thousand with five loaves of bread and two fish. He then told His disciples to take their boats and sail north to Capernaum, while He dismissed the people. He then went up the mountain to pray. Meanwhile, the disciples were facing a raging storm, and were in danger of drowning. As they tried to keep the boat afloat, they saw the Lord catching up with them walking on the waves. After He quieted the storm, they were able to stir the boat in the direction they wanted, and finally they arrived safely to Capernaum.

The next day, the people looked for Him, and realizing that He must have returned home, they took boats and sailed to Capernaum. When they arrived, they were happy to see Him, and asked Him when did He come to Capernaum. Jesus was blunt and brutally honest in His answer. He told them, " Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of loaves"(Jn 6:26). He wanted



to expose the reason that made them follow Him. He wanted to point out to them that the motivation behind any behavior is more important than the behavior itself. The Israelites refusing to admit that mentioned to Him that they need to see a big miracle before they believe in Him. Then they followed that by telling Him, "Our fathers ate the manna in the desert in the wilderness, He gave them bread from heaven to eat" (Jn 6:30,31).

They were telling Jesus that if you think that what you did yesterday when you fed us, is something that will convince us to believe in you, you are dreaming. How does your miracle compare with what Moses did when he gave our forefathers manna for forty years in the wilderness? Obviously there is no comparison, you have to do better than that if you want us to follow you as our ancestors followed Moses.

Jesus answered them saying, "Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven, and gives life to the world."(Jn 6:32,33,34). Jesus was trying to remind them that it was God, His Father who gave them the manna. He also wanted to tell them that there is another kind of bread, a spiritual bread which only God can give which will give spiritual life to the world. But the people did not understand, and responded exactly as the Samaritan women responded to the Lord when He told her that he is willing to give her the living water. They responded saying, "Lord give us this bread always" (Jn6: 34).

Jesus responded by telling them that their fathers ate manna in the wilderness and died, and that He is here not to offer them food for their bodies, but food for their spirits. To make this explicit He declared to them that He is the bread of life, which came down from heaven. When He said that, the people began to argue among themselves how can that man say that he came down from heaven," Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose mother and father we know?"(Jn 6:42). Our Lord realized that His people are still wrapped up into their life on earth, that

it will require a strong effort on their part to shift from their worldly orientation, to a spiritual one.

When the Lord said " I am the bread of life, He also meant it literally, which puzzled the people when He mentioned it one day, telling them," Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you" (Jn 6:53). He was referring to the sacrament of the Eucharist in which the penitents partake of the body and blood of Christ to obtain the forgiveness of their sins. But at the time He announced that, the people including the disciples did not have the foggiest idea about what He meant by that. What was their reaction to what He said? The Bible tells us that the people began to wonder, discuss, and argue among themselves asking," How can this man give us his flesh to eat"(Jn6:52),while many of His disciples said," This is a hard saying, who can listen to it" (Jn 6:60).

When the Lord heard that, He tried to clarify the issue. So He said," Do you take offense at this? Then what if you were to see the Son of man ascending where He was before?"(Jn6: 62). He was saying if you marvel at this, what would you do when you see me ascend into heaven in front of your very eyes? Then He continued," It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail, the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But there are some of you that do not believe" (Jn6: 63,64). He was simply asking them to believe Him, to have faith in what He was saying. At that point in time the disciples probably remained confused, but chose to wait until He explains this later.

The time for this came on that Thursday on which He ate with them His Last Supper. The Bible tell us that, "As they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed it, and broke it, and said," Take, eat this is my body. And He took a cup, and when He had given thanks, He gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it all of you for this is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many, for the forgiveness of sins" (Mt 26:26,27,28). It is hard to describe the disciples' reaction to what

happened that night.

The Bible does not give us any hint about this. It simply tells us that the disciples obeyed. They probably did not fully understand the meaning of what the Lord did on that night until they received the Holy Spirit. The Lord had promised to send the Holy Spirit, and told them that HE would explain to them many of the things that He said and done, things that made little sense to them at the time.

I am the way, the truth, and the life

In the sermon on the mound, Jesus told the people that there are two roads before them to choose from; one is wide and easy, and leads to destruction and many people will choose it, and spend their lives travelling it. The other road is narrow, difficult to travel, but leads to eternal life, and few are those who will choose it. This was not a new fact that the Lord was informing the people about, but it was a reality, that every one of His listeners not only knew but also experienced. The Lord just wanted to remind His listeners of this important spiritual fact and emphasize its importance in their lives. Man, since the dawn of history, saw two roads in front of him, one to obey God and the other to disobey Him.

This came about because of two events The first was that when the Lord God decided to create man, He chose to create him in His image. He bestowed upon him a measure of some of His own qualities, such as holiness, speech, wisdom, and the ability to make his own decisions. He could have chosen a creation with fewer gifts, but He had already created many of those, when He created the lower animals. After that He wanted to create a more superior creature to whom He was to give authority and dominion over the rest of His creation. So it made sense

to Him to equip Him with a modest quantity of some of His own qualities to distinguish him from the rest of creation, and make him qualified to rule over them.

It is interesting that so many people after they are informed about what Adam and Eve did, wonder and ask' " Why did God give them the privilege of making their own decisions, while He knew that they will abuse it. There are probably two reasons why God chose to do that. The first is that He did not want to create a species of puppets, that He can control, and who have no will of their own. He wanted to create somebody who has the freedom to follow Him, and the freedom not to. He wanted a creation that has alternatives, to obey or not to obey, a creation that will love Him because it wants to and not because it has to.

The other fact that made God create man with the freedom to make his decisions, while He knew in advance that he is going to disobey, is the fact that He was ready with a master plan to rectify the situation and to solve whatever problems that disobedience has created. The plan was that which we call salvation, in which the Son of God became man and died for His beloved yet fallen man, to rescue him from eternal death and restore him to his exalted position in heaven. The second event that contributed to his awareness of the two choices was, as you must have guessed by now, is his disobedience to God in eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

The idea of only having two choices in regard to his spiritual life seems to have been clear since that famous scene in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve discovered that what God told them about eating of the forbidden fruit was true, and that He was not bluffing. Then after they were kicked out of the garden, they began to see the rewards of obeying God, and the punishment of disobeying Him. This was made clearer to them when God gave Moses the Law. Before that, man did not have a crystal clear idea about what is allowed and what is not. He most likely proceeded on the basis of what he heard from his predecessors, and his

own feelings about what is right and what is wrong, which was the direct result of eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

So when the law was given, man had only two choices, either to obey or to disobey. Ignoring the law was not an option. Some may think that this is a third choice, but it is not. To ignore the law is to disobey it. The prophet Elijah addressing the Jewish nation during the reign of King Ahab told them, " How long will you go limping with two different opinions, if the lord is God, follow him, but if Baal, then follow him"(1 kin 18:21). Only two choices, not three. Religion is not a spectator sport. You can't be a spectator. You have to be a player, because you are involved. Your destiny, your eternity is at stake. So you can't only watch, you have to play, and before that you have to decide which team you are going to join. One day our Lord declared to the people this important spiritual reality, by warning them that, "He who is not with me, is against me, and he who does not gather with me, scatters"(Mt 12:30). The Lord was simply saying that there is no neutrality in religion. You are either with God or with Satan. These are the two choices available to man. Available to you, and to me.

So, when Jesus says, " I am the way", we know which way He is talking about. It is the way to eternal life. One day He said, "No man comes to the Father but by me" (Jn 14:13), and St. Paul wrote in his epistle to Timothy, " For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1Tim 2:5). This is true because Jesus, the second person of the Trinity is the only one who died for our sins and reconciled us to the Father. Only those who accept Him as Lord and Savior will enjoy the fruits of salvation that He gave us free of charge. To put this in a nutshell, we can say that every human being, who hears the story of salvation, will have to make up his mind. Either he appreciates what Jesus did for him, love Him, and decide to follow Him. Or to reject Him, and follow the other road, and its master Satan. Jesus told the world that He, and He alone is the way to the Father.

The irony here is that from the very beginning man has chosen to listen to his enemy; Satan, and to ignore the council of his creator, benefactor, and friend, God who was described as the "Lover of mankind". This from any point of view does not make any sense. Man who has a good measure of intelligence, using his freedom, chooses evil over good, punishment over reward, darkness over light, and death over life. This demonstrates the power of Satan, who is the moving force behind all evil, and the primary reason why man seems to cancel his rational powers when he tempts him. St. John must have asked himself the same question several times, and finally he wrote the reason as he saw it. He said, "And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil"(Jn 3:19).

I am the truth

When Jesus said, "I am the truth", what did He mean? The link between God and the truth was made manifest from the very beginning. He always said the truth, and Satan always told lies. We are all familiar with the first instance, which demonstrated both of the above facts. God told Adam that he will surely die, the day he eats of the forbidden fruit. But when Satan talked with Eve about this, he told her that you would not die. He was really telling her that God was lying when He told you that. Then he followed that by telling her that the reason He does not want you to eat of it, because when you eat, you will be like Him knowing good from evil. It seems that while God cannot say a lie, Satan cannot tell the truth.

Psychologists tell us that when someone tells a lie, and keeps repeating it, sometimes he ends up believing it himself. So it seems that this is what happened with Satan. He probably thought for a long time, that he deserved more power and authority than what God gave him. He probably kept telling himself that over and over until he believed it.

After that he probably asked himself, what would happen if I tried to assume that which I am entitled to and declared that I am equal to God? He may have theorized that because God is good, and because He loves him so much, otherwise He wouldn't have given him such great power, He will not object if he gave himself a promotion.

He saw nobody more worthy of such promotion other than himself. He may have repeated this to himself again and again until he thoroughly believed it. Based on that strong belief, one day he decided to act on it. We all know the result. He fell, and was banished from heaven. Not only that, but he also discovered that he really did not know God. Besides the fact, that He is good, He discovered that He is also a consuming fire, and does not tolerate sinfulness, and His retribution is fast and decisive. He also discovered that despite the fact that He loved him, nevertheless He can forget that love if He knows that the object of His love stopped loving him, and saw that there is no repentance in his future.

So Satan lied to himself, believed his lie, and destroyed himself and those angels of heaven whom he convinced that they too deserve a greater measure of power and authority than that assigned to them by God. No wonder God called him a liar and the father of lies.

After his fall, and before God created Adam and Eve, a period which we do not know, how long it was, Satan must have reflected on what happened. He may have realized that he blew it, and that he outsmarted himself. He definitely did not think about repentance, otherwise he would have done it. He was still convinced that he is worthier than God to enjoy the highest position in the universe. In his arrogance, he may have thought of ways to conquer God, and wrest power from Him. It is hard to imagine him and his followers engaged in anything but thinking of their situation, planning and plotting and waiting for a chance to get even with God.

Finally their chance came when God decided to create the human race. Satan must have watched with interest as the Lord God reshaped and renovated the earth, and created the new species of living things, something new that they did not know much about. When God created Adam, they were also watching. They must have wondered why did God do all that. And when they saw that God gave man dominion and authority over his other creation, they wondered. And when they saw how much God loved Adam and Eve, they became jealous. They probably looked on the new creation as their replacement, and decided to upset God's plan for filling their places in heaven, with humans.

What gave them a great deal of hope about their chances of success, was that God in creating man used an inferior material to the one from which they were created. He created Adam from the dust of the earth while He created them from light. They must have wondered why did God choose to do that. They probably failed to come up with a satisfactory answer. So they decided that this is not really important, but they were delighted that this is the case, since they knew that this would enhance their chances of outsmarting man, and enticing him to disobey God. As we mentioned before, Satan used the only weapon he has in his arsenal, which is lying, on Eve and it worked. And after Adam and Eve were kicked from the garden of Eden, Satan and his company, must have had a big celebration since they succeeded in upsetting God's plan and making God's new boy disobey Him, and join them in their defiance of their creator.

Savoring his success with Adam and Eve, Satan decided to use the same weapon with their children and to his delight it worked with them like a charm. Some may wonder what kind of lies does he use against man now. The most effective kind of lies that he uses are those which deal with God's nature and character. In his attempt with Eve, he implicitly and explicitly told her that God lied to them. And that the true reason why He did not want them to eat of the tree of the knowledge of



good and evil, is that He does not want you to be like Him, knowing good from evil. He does not want to share with you His privileges, does He really love you? If He did, why did He deny you something that He has? Can He be trusted? Isn't it time to take care of yourself? God is selfish and will not give you what you are entitled to, so the only way for you is to take it.

He continued to use those lies and more as human beings began to fill the earth. He added to them as man began to toil and struggle to survive, and as God tried to give him advice and help to keep him from slipping further into sin. He twisted God's purposes, misinterpreted His promises, and planted doubt in man's mind about His creator. He exploited any happening to his advantage in fulfilling his plan; to ruin God's image in man's mind. He whispered in man's ear as he listened to God's word, " Do you believe him? Do you believe when He orders you to love your enemies? Who can do that? Is it not your nature to hate those who hurt and hate you? And here He is demanding that you not only stop hating them, but you have to love them. Wasn't He the one who created you that way, something you had no say in, and when you behave according to your nature that He has created, He punishes you severely. Is this the loving God that the Bible talks about?

He also attacks many of our Lord's commandments the same way. He tells man when he hears about His commandment of not accumulating treasures on earth, but in heaven, by telling him, " Is this practical? he wants you to give away what you worked so hard to earn, now He wants you to give it away, and to whom ? To those whom He calls His" brethren", those who are so lazy and dependent on others as leeches, that they refuse to work, and have the guts to ask you and others for a handout. And He explodes when he reacts to our Lord's commandment, " whoever hits you on one cheek, turn to him the other". He tells man that this is the most outrageous commandment that he ever heard. He tells man, " Do you know what will happen to you if you tried to follow that? You will be taken advantage of in any confrontation. And if others know this, they will walk all over you. Not only the

strong, but also the weak and the weakest of the weak. If you want to survive in this doggy dog world, you have to assert yourself, you have to stand up and be counted.

All of this happens to each and every one of us. And the result is that those who believe him become alienated from God. One of the lies that he uses most successful, is the one in which he exploits the problems of the world, from which no body is immune. As people suffer under these problems, Satan shows his sympathy, and volunteers his explanation. He asks man, "If God is so good, why are there so many problems in the world today? Just look around you, do you see the unsolvable problems that make life on earth almost impossible. Do you see, the diseases that kill millions, every day they discover new ones, which are more devastating than the old ones. Haven't you heard about the HIV virus that causes AIDS, what about the flesh-eating bacteria, as if man needed more diseases. God seems to think that cancer, heart diseases, diabetes, alzheimer, parkinson, muscular dystrophy, and the rest of these are not enough to punish man, so He sends more diseases.

Then he adds the other world problems such as crime, drugs, divorce, poverty, famine, earthquakes, volcanoes, floods, hurricanes. Then he concludes from all this, that since God controls every thing in the universe, he has to be blamed for all those conditions. Those who do not know God may believe him, but those who know the truth cannot be fooled by him or by anybody else. So, if man has been living in a sea of lies, where can he get the truth? Here we find that the only source of truth about God was His Son who came to our earth to save us from our sins.

He decided that one of His important goals was to inform mankind about the true nature of the Father, and to correct whatever lies Satan was able to plant in their minds about Him. In other words He was eager to tell the truth about God. This is what Jesus meant when He said, " I am the truth". He was telling the Israelites that Satan has been

able by his cunning to ruin God's reputation, and I am here to correct that. Lord Jesus did that in many ways. The first by telling the people about the relationship between Him and the Father. the second by telling them about the Father and how He is a loving and forgiving Father. The third, by showing them by His deeds the true character of God.

In revealing the relationship between Him and the Father, He had first to establish that there is a relationship between them, beyond that which was between God and ordinary men. To do that He began to remind them of some of the prophecies that foretold His coming. So when He entered the synagogue in Nazareth and was given the book to read, He read what the prophet Isaiah wrote about His coming 700 years before His birth. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovering the sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord"(Lk4: 18,19).

St John continues by stating that, after He sat down, He told the people that, " Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing"(Lk4: 21). By this statement He was telling the people that He is the Messiah, something that the Jewish people never believed. Then He began to refer to God as His Father. So when the people told Him that Moses gave them manna in the wilderness, He corrected them saying, " Truly, truly, I say to you it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, my Father gives you the true bread from heaven"(Jn 6:32).

On another occasion He told them, "I seek not my own will, but the will of my Father who has sent me" (Jn5: 30). One day He was talking to the people and said, " My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me, and I give them eternal life...My Father who has given them to me is greater than all"(Jn10: 27,28,29). Before His crucifixion He said to His disciples, " When you are scattered, every man to his home, and will leave me alone, yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me"(Jn

16:32 }

After revealing that He has a strong relationship with the Father, He had to tell them more about that relationship, because all that He said in this respect did not distinguish Him from the prophets because they had a similar relationship with God. To reveal His unique relationship with Him, He began to declare that He is the Son of God the Father, and that He and the Father are the same. So when Philip asked Him to show them the Father, He answered him, " I am with you all that time, Philip and you have not known me. He who has seen me has seen the Father, how can you say show us the Father, don't you believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me"(Jn 14: 9,10). On another occasion He told the people, " I, and the Father are one"(Jn 10:30). Another time He told them, " All that the Father has is mine"(Jn 16:15)

After establishing the special relationship between Himself and God the Father, He began to tell them the truth about the Father. He told them that He is not that exacting cruel monster that Satan has painted for them over the years. And that He is a compassionate, loving, forgiving, understanding father, who loves them, and wants to dwell with them in heavens. So one day He told His disciples, "The Father Himself loves you, because you have loved me,"(Jn 16:27). And before His crucifixion, trying to quiet their fears and to assure them, He told them, " In my Father's house there are many mansions...and when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also" ( Jn 14:2,3).

He also showed them the true character of God not only by telling them about Him, but also by showing them by His behavior, what He meant. Lord Jesus was an excellent example of the perfect man, who lived such a virtuous life that He was able to challenge the scribes and the Pharisees one day when He said in a loud voice that everyone heard, " Who among you can convict Me of a sin?" (Jn 8:46). He went around doing good, He never turned away anybody

who needed help. Sometimes He helped people who did not even ask Him. The widow at Nain did not ask Him to raise her son, nevertheless He did.

The Bible tells us that the reason was that He had compassion on her. The four who carried their friend to Jesus' home and lowered him in front of Him, never asked Him to heal their friend, but the Bible tells us that, when He saw their faith, He not only healed him, but also forgave his sins. Jesus displayed God's love and forgiveness in treating people like Mary Magdalene, Zacchias, Matthew, the woman caught in the act of adultery, the woman who cried on his feet and wiped them with her hair, and many others who showed their repentance and desire to come back to God.

One day He told the people, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free"(Jn8: 31,32). He probably meant that man needs the truth to make his decisions freely. Very often decisions are made on the basis of wrong information. And when the information is tilted toward one of the options, man finds himself pushed in that direction, for the simple reason that the other options were practically eliminated. This is not the freedom that God wants us to have when making our decisions. But we find that this suits Satan perfectly. He swamps man's mind with false information, and thus guarantees himself that when the time comes for making those important decisions, that most men will exercise their so called freedom to make them in the direction favorable to him.

This was and still is the technique that he uses to make people select to follow him rather than following God. Jesus saw this as slavery to Satan. He felt sad to see His beloved man so manipulated by his enemy that he has no freedom to worship God. So He decided to provide man with the truth about God, to restore to him the freedom that he lost under Satan's influence.

On that memorable day on which our Lord was examined by Pontios Pilate, the Roman governor. He asked Jesus, " Are you a king?" Jesus answered, " You said that I am. For this purpose I was born, this is why I came to the world, to give testimony to the truth. Everyone who is a follower of the truth shall follow me."(Jn 19:37)

Pilate wondered aloud, " What is truth?", as if he was saying, who knows the truth? No body knows what to believe and what not to believe, or he may have been expressing the Roman belief that power is the only truth that matters. The Bible tells us that he did not wait for an answer from Jesus, for he went out to tell the people that he finds no fault in Jesus.

### I am the life

Jesus finished the sentence by saying that He is the life. The first interpretation is that there are no hidden meanings here. He said what He meant, and meant what He said. We know that everything in this universe whether living or non-living, was created by Him. The Apostle's creed states this fact emphatically when it says that, "By Him everything was created". Every part of this awesome universe with its planets, stars, constellation, moons, matter, antimatter, galaxies, novas, black holes, comets, meteors, suns, bacteria, viruses, microorganisms, algae, fungi, gymnosperms, angiosperms, flowering plants, non flowering plants, mushrooms, evergreens, amoebas, protozoans, jelly fish, cartilaginous and bony fish, amphibians, reptiles, birds, insects, mammals, and man. Everything existing now or had existed in the past and became extinct was created by His word. Without Him there is no life.

During His short stay on our earth, He demonstrated several times that He is the true giver of life. He raised few people from death, the son of the widow of Nain, the daughter of Jairus, and Lazarus after being dead for four days.

There is another meaning that He also meant, which is not so obvious as the first. This is the one meaning that He wanted the Israelites to understand, but they didn't. He was telling them that without Him they are spiritually dead. He mentioned this several times. Once He told Nicodemus, " The son of man must be lifted up that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have everlasting life"(Jn3: 15). Teaching the Jewish people about spirituality, He told them, "Truly truly I say to you, he who hears my word, and believes him who has sent me, has eternal life, he does not come into judgement, but has passed from death to life" (Jn5: 24). And another time He told them, "For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him, should have eternal life, and I will raise him at the last day"(Jn6: 40).

Making the Jewish people aware of their spirituality, was one of the most difficult tasks that the Lord had to face during His brief ministry on earth. The Jewish people remained world minded, materialistic, obsessed with the world and the things of the world. One must not single them out when we talk about materialism, and being worldly oriented. The overwhelming majority of humans cares most about their physical existence, and pays no attention to their eternity. No matter how many times Lord Jesus talked to them, plainly or in parables, they did not listen to Him, or heed His warnings. Dear reader, don't be surprised or shocked.

Is there a story in the history of man stranger or more shocking than the story of the Jewish people after they were saved from their slavery to the Egyptians? They had a miserable life under the tyranny of Pharaoh, and after God hit Egypt with ten powerful plagues to release them. And after God parted the Red Sea so they can escape the Egyptian army, that pursued them. And after God destroyed that army in the Red Sea. After the Jewish people observed every one of those events, when Moses was called by God to come up the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments. And He remained on the mountain forty days, the Jewish people made a golden calf and worshipped it!

This obsession with the world and the things of the world, was one of the biggest obstacles that made the Jewish nation refuse Jesus and His message, and made them end up not only rejecting His message, but also condemning Him to die on a cross. No wonder the Lord spent a great deal of His time trying to get them to change their outlook from the physical to the spiritual. So we find Him one day telling them, "Labor not for the food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life"(Jn6: 27). He was telling them, and telling us today, that you have been preoccupied with your physical existence and your physical needs. That you have been looking down toward the world and the kingdom of the prince of the world, and that it is time to elevate your sights and look up to heaven and the kingdom of God.

On another day we find Him talking to them about the birds of the sky, how they do not sow nor reap nor gather to barns, yet your father in heaven feeds them. He also talked to them about the lilies of the field, how they do not toil, yet not even Solomon in all his glory was arrayed as one of them. He openly told them that if the Father does this to his lower creation, He would definitely do more for you, because He loves you more than all of these.

I am the light of the world

Again we ask was Jesus talking literally or figuratively when He said that? He was talking both literally and figuratively. He was telling the people a fact that none of His listeners knew. When the earth was created the Bible tells us that, "the earth was without form and void, and darkness was on the face of the deep, and the spirit of God moved upon the face of the water"(Gen 1:2). Then God said, " Let there be light, and there was light."(Gen1: 3). So without God there would have been no light, and the darkness would have prevailed. So when Jesus through whom all things were created, says I am the light of the world He is justified, because He was the one who created light in the first place, a



fact that nobody among His listeners knew at that time.

St. John wrote about this in his gospel, when he said, "In Him was life, and the life was the light of the people and the light shone in the darkness and the darkness did not realize it"(Jn 1:4). Then he continues saying that, "the true light that lights the way for every man coming into the world, was in the world, the world was made by Him, yet the world knew Him not,"(Jn1: 8). And in his first epistle he wrote, "and these are the news that we heard from Him, and are saying to you, that God is light, and in Him there is no darkness whatsoever."(1Jn1: 5).

Did any human being see God as light? The Bible tells us that nobody can see God and live. There are few instances in which the glory of God, manifested itself in various forms, one of them was light. We are not talking here about God, but about the glory of God, which is His way to make us feel His presence. So in the burning bush it appeared as fire, and on Mount Sinai it took the form of smoke, fire, and earthquake. In front of the Tent of the meeting it appeared as a column of cloud during the day and a pillar of fire at night. So, we can say that in all those instances what people saw was various forms of the glory of God, and that nobody has actually seen God.

But the Bible tells us that few people have "seen God" and did not die, but lived to write about it. Among these was Moses who asked God to allow him to see Him. God told him, "You cannot see my face; for man shall not see me and live"(Ex33: 20). But because of His great love for Moses, He told him, "I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by, then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen." (Ex33: 22,23). Moses was the recipient of another gift from God, which showed that He is light. When he came down after receiving the Ten Commandments from God, his face shone with the light of God, to the extent that the people could not look at him, and asked him to put a veil on his face. The light that his face radiated was definitely absorbed from

God's light, because he talked to Him face to face.

In Exodus the Bible tells us that seventy-four Israelites saw God. Moses writing about this historic meeting, said, "Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel"(Ex 24:10). And Isaiah wrote, "I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and His train filled the temple."(Isia 6:1). We find that Ezekiel also saw what he called the glory of God, refusing to call it God out of reverence to Him, while he may have believed that it was God. He wrote, "Then I arose, and went forth into the plain, and behold, the glory of the Lord stood there, as the glory which I saw by the river of Chibar, and I fell on my face."(Ezek 3:23).

We also find that the prophet Habakkuk wrote, "His glory covered the heavens, and the earth was full of His praise. And His brightness was as the light; He had horns coming out of His hands; and there was the hiding of His power."(Hab 3:3). The Bible tells us that the prophet saw a vision. We can see that from what he wrote that he was referring to a specific incident that happened in the past, which he called an oracle.

When one reads the book of Revelation, one cannot help but feel that St.John also saw God. Listen to what he wrote, in chapter four. He wrote," At once I was in the spirit, and lo, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne! And he who sat there appeared like jasper and carnelian, and round the throne was a rainbow that looked like an emerald."(Rev.4: 2,3).

All the above people claim that they have seen God. What they saw was either a big dose of God's glory, or a special appearance of God in a form that can be seen by humans. He did this when He visited Abraham with the two angels whom He sent to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah.

The important conclusion from all this is that God can and did reveal

himself to few people for a certain reason. He still reveals Himself to some. But we do not need to see Him as these few people saw Him. We can see God's glory in every thing that He has created. David said that several times. So he wrote in psalm 19, "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows his handiwork"(Ps 19:1). And in Psalm 97, he wrote, "The heavens declare His righteousness, and all the people will see His glory" (Ps 97:6), and in Psalm 104, he writes, "The glory of the Lord shall endure forever. The Lord shall rejoice in His works" (Ps 104:31)

David never saw God, but he saw His glory in many things, mainly His creation. We can also see God through many of the wonderful things that He has created. We can see Him in a rising sun, in a shining moon, in a beautiful flower, in a germinating seed, in a woman giving birth to a child, in a chick hatching from an egg. And literally in every single detail about this magnificent universe, in which we live, even in an erupting volcano, or a powerful earthquake.

So far we have been talking about the literal meaning of the word "light" as used by our Lord. But there is also the figurative meaning of what our Lord meant when He said, "I am the light of the world". The first meaning dealt with God as the physical light. The second deals with God as the spiritual light of the world. While Adam and Eve were in the Garden of Eden they enjoyed both kinds of light. But when they listened to Satan and disobeyed God, the physical light remained with them, but they lost the spiritual light. They found themselves engulfed in the darkness of sin. This darkness is difficult to describe.

It was probably a complex feeling, which had many components that the fallen couple felt. This began while they were still in the garden. They felt ashamed, and exposed. For the first time they saw their nakedness that they tried to cover with plant leaves. They felt afraid, insecure, and alone. These feelings continued with them after they left the Garden of Eden. These feelings which can be collectively called

"spiritual darkness", were the natural consequences of getting separated from God. A very important reason for this darkness, in the case of Adam and Eve was the fact that they didn't even apologize to God for what they did.

They may have realized their mistake as they tried to live their life away from God's love, support, and protection, and as they encountered the difficulties that God warned them about as they were ushered away from His presence. But it seems that our first parents decided to take their chances and live a new life. After all they had no choice. The inevitable result was that they continued to live in spiritual darkness. Nobody knows why did they continue to trust Satan, after they saw how disastrous was his council, and after they suffered the dire consequences of following his advice. Later, they probably discovered the truth, and repented of their disobedience. But by and large, man continued to listen to Satan's lies, the spiritual darkness which surrounded him grew even thicker, and he slipped farther and farther away from God.

Man remained in utter spiritual darkness until our lord's coming, who was rightfully called "The sun of righteousness with healing in its wings"(Mal 4:2). The prophet Isaiah wrote about Him," The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined" (Isa9:2). It is interesting that His birth was announced to the three wise men in the east by a bright star, as if God was declaring that the light has finally arrived into the world. The analogy between the good spiritual life and light is very appropriate for the following reasons:

1) The light reveals to us the truth. If a man is put in a dark room, in which he has never been before, he will have no idea about any of the qualities of that room. He will not know how big is the room, what color are the walls, how high is the ceiling, whether it has any furniture or not, etc, etc. In other words the truth about that room will be hidden from him. And if the darkness stays for some time, he may begin

guessing about it and what it may contain. But once the light is turned on, the truth will be revealed to him, and the guesswork will finally stop. When Jesus came, man was in complete darkness about life, death, and God, among other things. One of the most important things was that He revealed the truth about our life, death, and our perception of God the Father, and everything that we wanted to know, but were never given the right answer.

2) The light also guides us. Jesus came so He can give us an example of how to live in this world, not as a God, but as a man. This is why He emptied Himself of many of His privileges and powers as God, and took the form of a slave, lived with us, and resembled us in everything except sin only. During His life on earth, He lived the perfect life, and showed the human race by example the way every one of us should live.

3) Light also gives us security. Have you been dear reader, in total darkness? You feel insecure, especially if the place is unfamiliar to you. You do not know what to expect, or what to do. The people who live away from God feel the same way. They feel insecure, lost, and afraid. They try to cover their insecurity in different ways. Some with worldly possessions, some with sex, some with alcohol, some with pride, some with knowledge, some with drugs, some with success, some with worldly philosophies. But despite all those cover-ups, their insecurity shows up. They have no peace inside. The Bible tells us, "There is no peace for the wicked, so says the Lord of hosts"(Isa 48:22).

I am the true vine and my Father is the vinedresser

Here the Lord is obviously using an analogy to bring the people closer to an understanding of a number of important spiritual facts. Talking in parables became one of the hallmarks of His ministry that St. Matthew wrote, "that without a parable, He did not talk to the people"(Mt13:34). In this parable He called Himself "the true vine". When we read this, we wonder, is there a false vine? The Lord implied it by calling

Himself, the true vine. Before we can answer this question, we have first to find out what did He mean when He said that.

We know that from the beginning the vine was a symbol of prosperity, which was considered a blessing from God. So when Moses sent few men to look at the land of Canaan, the land which God promised to give them. They did not find anything more impressive in convincing the people of Israel of the richness of the land more than to bring back one cluster of the fruit of the vine that was so big and heavy that two of them had to carry it. So the Lord was using this analogy to tell them that He will bring them another kind of prosperity, and as the old vine was a symbol of physical prosperity for their fore fathers, the new vine will be the symbol of spiritual prosperity for them.

He was also telling them that He, the vine, would provide nourishment to the branches and give them life. The branches, which were included in another parable, are symbols of the men and women who make up His church. These have to maintain their connection with the vine if they are to remain alive and producing. The fact that the vine itself does not carry any fruits, and that only the branches do, is a significant fact that points to an important spiritual fact. It is only by the efforts of those who believe in the Lord, will others become believes in Him, and become members of His church. This is why He charged His disciples before He ascended into heaven, saying, " Make disciples of all nations, and baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit"(Mt 28:19).

He was not saying that to His disciples only, He was saying it to each and every one of us. He wants us to spread the good news, to give testimony to the truth. He said to His disciples, " And you will be my witnesses" (Lk 24:48). We too have to be witnesses for Him.

A very important spiritual fact that we have to remember in witnessing for God is that we only do the footwork, but God can only give the life

giving nourishment that produces the fruits, through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The parable also says that the Father is the vine dresser, which means that He is the one who takes care of the vine for one purpose and one purpose only; to produce the best fruits that that vine can produce. So God the Father wants us to produce fruits, to use the talents that he gave each one of us, to bring others to His kingdom.

But, how does He accomplish that? Let us listen to the rest of the parable. Lord Jesus continued by saying, "Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, He takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit." (Jn15: 2).

The words "takes away", are not an accurate translation of the original text. It should have been "takes up". This is what the vinedresser does when he takes his daily walk in the vineyard. He looks for the new branches. And when he finds some of them growing toward the ground covered by dirt, and away from the sun, he cleans them, and lifts them up, and may tie some to older branches. His purpose is to make them produce fruits.

This is exactly what God does with sinners. He disciplines them, so they too, can produce fruits. God's discipline for His children is amply demonstrated in the Bible and His disciplinary actions cover more pages than any of His other actions. Adam and Eve were disciplined when they sinned. So were Cane, Jacob, Moses, David, Samson, Saul, and the whole Jewish nation when they persisted in disobeying God. The purpose here is to tell man when he disobeys that God does not approve of his behavior. And that he should repent of his sins, and go back to God.

Many spoke about this powerful tool that God uses. Moses wrote, "As a man disciplines his son, so the Lord your God discipline you" (Deut 8:5). Job said, "Happy is the man whom God reprove, therefore

despise not the chastening of the Almighty" (Job5: 17). St. Paul mentioned it when he wrote, " My son do not despise the chastening of the lord, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him, for whom the Lord loves, He chastens" (Heb12: 5,6).

This is the first step that the vinedresser takes to make sure his vineyard produces the maximum fruits that it can produce. The second step was described when Jesus said, "and every branch that does bear fruit, he prunes, that it may bear more fruit". Here the Lord is talking about the second step that the vinedresser uses, namely pruning. This happens once the branch begins to produce some fruit, it has to be pruned in order to produce more. This is also what God does with his children when they begin to follow Him. Because they have not reached their full potential, and did not attain the spiritual height that He hopes for them, He prunes them.

Pruning is a painful process. It may be as painful or more compared with discipline. It may be depriving us of something we enjoy, but which takes us away from being close to Him. Or it may be a problem at work, or a disease, or a problem in our relationships with one of your children. These are examples of what can come under the heading "The Testing of Faith" during which God will allow us to fail, so we will realize our inability to solve the problem. Our pride and self-confidence may be the things that God wants to prune, so we go to Him. As a result the problem is either solved, or the circumstances changed to direct us in another direction, which will bring us back to God.

The bottom line in this parable is to tell us about God's will that each and every one of us should bear fruits. It also informs us about His ways to help us produce the most fruits we can possibly bear.

This was the theme in another parable; that of the owner, who planted a farm, let it to few tenant farmers, and went away to a distant place. As the time of the crop drew near, he sent one of his servants to get his



share of the crop. The tenants beat him up, and sent him back empty handed. The owner sent another servant, and another to no avail. The tenants mistreated them, and refused to give them his share of the crop. Finally, the owner sent his son, thinking that the tenants out of respect to him will give him, what is rightfully his. But the tenants, refusing to do the right thing, plotted against the son, thinking that if they kill him, the farm will be theirs. So, they took the son outside the farm, and killed him.

The two spiritual facts that this parable emphasizes are; that the owner of the farm (God), expects fruits from those whom he has given something that could produce (that is us), to produce fruits (to bring others to the knowledge of God). The second is that the owner does not himself produce any fruits. He depends on the tenants to produce them. This puts an important responsibility on every one of us; to witness for God and help spread the good news about His kingdom.

When some hear that they panic, saying that they cannot preach, they cannot teach, they cannot even talk to others about God. Let us keep in mind that God does not expect everyone to do one of these things, because He gave different people different talents. And we are supposed to use whatever He gave us to the glory of His name. The Lord reiterated that in another parable; the parable of the talents, in which a man going on a journey gave his servants talents to use in his absence, to one he gave five talents, to another two, and to the third one talent. The first two used the talents they received and earned for their master considerable gain, while the third refused to use the talent that he received and buried it in the ground.

When their master came and asked every one of them to give account of what he received, he was pleased with the first two because they used their talents and produced a gain for their master, and they were rewarded. When the third servant came, he gave the master the same talent that he received, and the master punished him because he did not

use what he was given. So no matter how small your talent that God entrusted you with, you are supposed to use it and produce with it. Not too many people will be given five talents, most will be given one talent. But they have to use it.

This reminds me of a man who was working as a policeman in New York City. This man obviously did not have many talents, but he was given a wonderful ability to cheer up people. So, he used that talent to handle that stressful job of conducting traffic in one of the busiest intersections in the city. He did with such a charm, and happiness, that he was known to everybody in that area. People talked about him, and just loved to pass by him to enjoy his sunny disposition.

One day he was interviewed on television and when the reporter asked him for the reason for his happiness, he answered because I know how much God loves me. This man used the one talent that he received from God and probably gained more people to Him, than many who received five or even ten talents. You and I are supposed to do likewise. You don't have to teach or preach, just to live a Christian life, loving everybody, forgiving those who hurt you. If we did this we will be witnessing for God, without saying even one word about Him, and we will be doing what Jesus told the people one day," so people will see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven " (Mt5: 16).

So, Jesus is the vine who came from heaven, and who wants His branches to produce, by telling others about what He did for them, offering himself as a sacrifice on their behalf, saving them from the death that they deserved because of their sins. He is the one who gives those branches the nourishment they need to produce those fruits. This why He called himself, the true vine. Now we are in a position to talk about the false vine. The false vine is definitely Satan. He too is a vine that grows in the same farm in which the true vine grows. He also grows branches, and he too asks his branches to witness for him, and help him in recruiting people to become members of his kingdom,

instead of becoming members in the kingdom of heaven.

The Lord by calling Himself the true vine is warning us of the false vine, which will compete with Him, in recruiting human beings. Unfortunately the false vine; Satan, will be able to attract more people to become his branches. He will be able by his cunning, lies, and deceit, to brainwash many, and after they are deceived and make a commitment to follow him, he looks at them, with a big smile on his face and watches them as they destroy themselves.

I am in the Father and the Father in me

On that memorable day, when our Lord ate the Last Supper with His disciples, trying to prepare them for the events to come, He talked to them about the Father and the Holy Spirit. He told them that the Father loves them that in His mansion there are many dwellings for them. He also told them that He has to leave them to prepare a place for them, and that He will come back to take them to that place, so where He is, they will also be. Then Philip one of the twelve, said, " Lord, show us the Father and we will be satisfied" (Jn14: 8). Jesus disappointed, said to him, " Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father; how can you say 'show us the Father? Don't you believe that I am in the Father and the Father in me" (Jn 14:9).

We do not know what was the effect of that statement on Philip or the rest of the disciples. Up to this point in time, they were confused about His identity, and that statement may have deepened their confusion. But after His resurrection, the confusion cleared up and statements such as this one began to make sense to them. But as we reflect on it now, and ask what was the Lord trying to communicate to His disciples when He said it. There is no doubt in our mind that He wanted to tell them that He is God in the flesh, the incarnate word of the Father, the promised Messiah, who came to save them from eternal death. He wanted to

declare this to them on the night of His crucifixion, as an assurance to them that regardless of what will happen the next day, they have to have faith in Him. But as we think of the concept itself, we find that it is the biggest stumbling block in the way of people who are evangelized to become Christians. The concept of Trinity, which is, considered the biggest corner stone on which Christianity rests, is a concept that defies human logic. No wonder the Bible tells us that " nobody can believe that Jesus Christ except by the help of the Holy Spirit"(1Cor 12:3).

When the skeptics are told that the trinity of God, is similar to the trinity of man, and that as man is body, soul, and spirit, so is God, The Father, the son, and the Holy Spirit, they do not understand. As they are told that the Father has to have a brain, and that His brain is the second person of the Trinity, and has to have a spirit, and that His spirit is the Holy Spirit, they still do not understand. In one of the discussions about this with a non Christian, who was given the above analogy, and asked if he is convinced, he said that he has no problem with the trinity of man, but he has a lot of difficulty with the trinity of God. When he was asked why, he said that the difficulty comes from the fact that in the case of man, the three components are intertwined in one person, while the three members of God's trinity, have been seen existing independent of each other.

He gave example after example from the Bible to substantiate what he was saying. He said that the son was born of a woman, lived on earth for thirty three years, that He was seen many times praying to the Father. He also said that, even the Holy Spirit was seen separate from both Father and son, when He descended on Jesus while He was baptized in the form of a dove, and also on the day of Pentecost when He descended on the disciples as tongues of fire. Then he said that nothing of this sort happens to the so-called trinity of man. Nobody has ever seen man's brain wondering on its own outside man's body, or his spirit taking a stroll on Main Street by itself.

Going back to the baptism of Jesus, he asked, "how can you say that the Father, who was announcing from heaven that this is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased, about the son who was in the Jordan River being baptized, while the Holy Spirit was descending on Him in the form of a dove? How can you possibly say that these three are one? This makes no sense whatsoever. No wonder that Christians were repeatedly accused of worshipping three Gods. The only answer that we can say in this and other occasions in which a religious concept is denied on basis that it does not make sense to us humans, is to admit, that when we talk about God we cannot insist always on understanding Him, using our human knowledge, which we confess is incomplete.

We have to remind ourselves and those who advance this argument that we are talking about God, who is all powerful, all knowledgeable, all sovereign, whom we can understand sometimes but cannot most of the time. Man's intelligence is so inadequate to understand every thing that God does. If we cannot understand each other sometimes, how can we hope to understand God. How many of us understand Einestine's work, whose intelligence exceeds ours probably by not more than twenty or thirty points on the I.Q. scale? How can we say that we want to understand God, whose intelligence, I am sure exceeds ours by millions or billions of points if we can apply our I.Q. scale to Him.

We also find that man still does not understand many of the things that he sees around him, even in the areas in which he has made tremendous progress. For instance in the field of electricity, and electronics, Man still does not know the difference between an ordinary piece of iron and a magnet. We have a theory that explains the difference, but we don't have any proven facts about that. And in the field of molecular biology, we have been able to accomplish what can be considered fantastic results in gene splicing which can alter heredity, we have cloned animals, and discovered the reasons for many of the diseases that plague man, and we have designed ways to eradicate them. But we still do not know the answer to many puzzling questions.

For examples why does the fertilized egg when it divides to produce an embryo, that in the beginning all the cells look the same? But as the embryo reaches certain size, some of the new cells begin to behave differently from the others? So some become skin, others a brain, others bone, others liver, and others eye, etc. What is the reason for that ? Who or what makes them behave the way they do, nobody knows. Only one knows; God.

In another field; astronomy in which man has made fantastic discoveries, there are many phenomena which baffles astronomers. Among these are; the way stars are born, and the way they die, the novae, the size of the universe, the black holes, and many others. It is interesting to note that some astronomers based on certain scientific facts are concluding that there must be a Supreme Being who created the universe. Also in the area of linguistics, experts after spending years studying the various languages of the world, have come to the amazing conclusion that all languages that exist today came from one language which was the only language of all men sometime in the past. So after all the story of the tower of Babel is not just a story, it is the truth. Also some geneticists studying the genetic structure of various ethnic groups, and races, have come to the conclusion that all men are the descendants of one man, and that all women have descended from one woman. Again, we can say that the story of Adam and Eve is not a fairy tale, it is an accurate account of what actually happened.

Going back to the trinity of God, we can say that if some of those who denied the existence of God on the basis that there is no scientific support for it, are beginning to come around to the belief in God, based not on a religious dogma, but on scientific evidence. May be there is hope that the human race whose majority still does not worship God, will be convinced that there is one true God whom they should worship.

Two thousand years ago the Jews rejected Jesus because He claimed to

be God, and because He refused to be the kind of savior they wanted Him to be. He declined to become their king, and to save them from their bondage to Rome. Of all the peoples of the world, the Jews had the information and the experience that should have guided them to believe the Lord. They had been chosen by God to be His people from which the savior of the world would come. In their holy book, there are more than three hundred prophecies about His coming detailing many details of His life.

There was absolutely no reason for them to reject Him, on the ground that He claimed to be God. One of the prophecies that foretold His coming, and which tells us beyond any doubt that the promised Messiah is God, is the one by Isaiah. "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the prince of Peace." (Isa 9:6). How can anybody misinterpret that? What did they want more as proof of His deity than to call Him "The Mighty God"?

There is another point that has to be made here. It seems that the idea of God appearing in a human form should not have shocked them that much to the extent to reject Jesus. After all, their history as written in their holy book, mentions few occasions in which God appeared in a human form. The Bible tells us that God as a man visited Abraham, with two angels, before Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed. And after God sent the two angels on their mission, He began His famous conversation with Abraham, in which Abraham was bargaining with Him about the number of righteous people in those two cities that will make God stop His severe verdict on them.

Then the Bible also mentions that Jacob, on his way to meet his brother Esau met a man who was most probably God in human form. He wrestled with him until dawn. Finally he hit him and put his thigh out of joint, something that made him limp for the rest of his life. Then Jacob

feeling that he is not an ordinary man did not let go of him until he blessed him. The Bible also mentions the story of the three young men who were thrown in the fiery furnace because their refusal to worship king Nebuchadnezzar's statue. Next day, when the king looked to see what happened to them, he saw four men walking in the midst of the fire. He recognized the three young men, but he did not recognize the fourth whom he described as having "the appearance of a son of the Gods" (Dan3: 25). This too may have been God in human form.

Given all this, it seems strange that the Jewish nation would reject the deity of Jesus. No wonder God was so disappointed in them that He sent them one of His many blunt messages with the prophet Jeremiah saying, " Hear this, O foolish and senseless people, who have eyes, but do not see, and who have ears and do not hear" (Jer 5:21). And with the prophet Isaiah He said, " Sons have I reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its owner, and the ass its master's crib, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand" (Isa 1: 2,3).

I am the son of man

Whether Jesus said this about Himself the way he said the other "I am"s, the Bible does not tell us. But it tells us that when He referred to Himself, He often used the title of " the son of man". The fact that He used it so much indicates that it was one of the favorite names that He loved to use. The question here is why did He love that name more than the others. Again we don't know for sure, but we can reflect on it, and using our knowledge about Him, we can come up with possible reasons that most likely were behind His love for that title.

The first possible reason is His humility. The Lord of Lords and the king of kings delights in calling Himself the son of man. As we think of God's humility we stand in awe, and we wonder about those people who are arrogant, and why they feel that way. It is amazing that God who has



every right and reason to be arrogant is not, and man who does not have any reason to be arrogant, yet he is. This unbelievable humility shown by God, was one of the important concepts of Christianity. God knew that pride is the mother of all sins that it is one of the most difficult sins for mankind to overcome. Knowing that His beloved man had succumbed to it, decided to emphasize it in His own life, and to use as the antidote against pride, through which sin entered into the world.

The second reason is His desire to emphasize His humanity, which He acquired for one purpose and one purpose only; to offer Himself as a sin offering on behalf of the rest of humanity, thereby offering them salvation from their sins. The fact that God became a man to die in our place is one of the most important Christian beliefs that the Lord wanted to emphasize during His life on earth. This is why He repeated it several times in His private talks with His disciples, and in His public declarations to the Jewish people. This resulted often in confusion, and sometimes in denial and resentment in His listeners. This declaration was probably done for the benefit of two groups.

The first is the human group, for whom this incredible act was planned and carried out. God wants us to remember always that He became man and suffered all that He suffered for no other reason but His amazing love for mankind. The second group is that of Satan and his demons. They too had a big stake in what was happening, for Jesus was none other than "the seed of the woman who is to bruise the serpent's head". Since the time God made that promise, Satan was put on notice that the battle of the destiny of man has just begun. And that the disobedience of Adam and Eve was the first skirmish, which God may have lost. But the best is yet to come. The war will rage for thousands of years, but at the end God will triumph.

Satan probably didn't see that, and so he decided on a two-prong attack, to foil God's plan. The first was to try to corrupt every human being, making him one of his followers. The second was to use the above

procedure to test every human being. To see if he is the person who will bruise his head. The test was simple; if he succumbed to his temptation and sinned, he cannot be the one because, by sinning he joins the ranks of the fallen. So beginning with Abel and Cain, he used his plan, and was happy with the results, because every one of Adam's children sinned.

God seemed to have been conquered.. Satan thought that there is no hope for man to be saved. Even those who showed a love for righteousness like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David and the rest, could not be the saviors, because they all sinned, and were themselves in need of salvation. This went on until Jesus was born. Satan watching Him like a hawk realized from the beginning that He is different from everybody else. We talked about some of these differences when we talked about His birth. These differences made Satan focus more attention on Him. Jesus on the other hand, probably did not want to reveal His identity to him. This explains some of His actions, and utterances. So when King Herod planned to kill him, he fled to Egypt. Satan must have said to himself, if he was God, he wouldn't have fled.

Our lord kept saying things that could be construed as confessions of His humanity, such as what He told the lawyer who asked Him one day' "good teacher, what should I do to inherit eternal life?". The Lord said, "Why do you call me "good", nobody is good, only God". On the surface it sounds that He is telling that lawyer that He is not God. But as you think about it, you will realize that what the Lord was really telling him "Since you know that God is the only one who can be called good, why are you calling me that, while you do not believe that I am God?" There are other words and actions that He used to confuse Satan about His identity, but this is not the place to detail all of them, something we will do in other places in this book. The important conclusion of all the preceding discussion is to say that our Lord used that title of the "son of man" as a part of a scheme to confuse Satan about His identity, something that continued until He was crucified.

There is an amazing irony here, that should be mentioned as we discuss this title that our Lord loved so much. The second person of the Holy Trinity, who is the special and only Son of God, calls Himself the "Son of Man". At the same time, He gives every human being, who is properly the son of man, the right to call God his father, thereby conferring on him, the title of " The Son of God".

I am the resurrection and life

When Jesus told Mary and Martha that their brother will rise, Martha told Him that she knows that he will rise with the others at the last day. Jesus answered her saying, " I am the resurrection and the life, he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die" (Jn 11:25,26). What He meant by that is obvious. He told Mary and Martha in plain language that He is the one who will resurrect the dead on the last day, and nobody else will do it. And by raising Lazarus from the dead, He was telling them, that He does not have to wait to the last day to raise their brother. And since He is the source of life and its master, who gave life to every living thing on earth, He also can restore life to their brother even if he has been dead for four days and his body began to decompose.

## JESUS ASKS THE DISCIPLES ABOUT WHAT PEOPLE THINK HE WAS

We conclude this chapter by Jesus asking His disciples, to tell Him what people think who He was. So after all those declarations that He made attempting to reveal His true identity to His people, He wanted to know what those people whom He loved so much, think of Him. Was that a rhetorical question, since He knew the answer? It probably was. He asked the question to make His disciples focus their attention on the issue He was talking about; which was His identity. Because after the disciples told Him what the people are saying about Him, He asked

them," And what do YOU say that I am"(Mt 16:15). Up to that point, the disciples were confused about Him. Their behavior after His arrest, trial, and crucifixion was strong proof not only that they were confused, but also that most of them to that point did not believe that He was the Son of God.

So He wanted, once and for all, to straighten their idea about Him, and clear the confusion that they had about who He really was. Here the Lord used the outspoken Peter to provide the correct answer. So Peter blurted," You are the son of the living God"(Jn 16:17). Did Peter mean it? Probably not, for he could not have meant it, and after few days, deny Him three times before a servant. One wonders was that the same Peter who made that unbelievable confession, that should have ended any doubt in any of His disciples minds about who He was.

It does not look that way. But he was the same Peter, but it was not he who recognized Jesus, it was the Holy Spirit. To clarify this and to give His seal of approval on what Peter said, Jesus said to him," Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in Heaven"(Jn 16:17). Jesus was saying that Peter did not say this because of his belief in me. In other words, he was not the source of this declaration, it was given to him, by God the Father.

This is what Jesus said about Himself. He did that to reveal His identity and to inform His listeners, including us about the true qualities of God the Father. Now we have no excuse to reject Him as our personal Lord and savior, because this is the only way to eternal life.

## Chapter Five

### THE FATHER TALKS ABOUT THE SON

Some may think that this chapter should have been included in the one in which Jesus talked about himself. Theologically speaking we all know that the Father and Jesus are one, as He mentioned several times, but, during our Lord's mission on earth, He was not only the second person of the Trinity, but He was also the man Jesus of Nazareth. So here, we are considering what the Father said about His incarnated son, whom He sent into the world, to live for thirty-three years as a perfect man.

When the Father talked about the Son, He talked through His prophets, or He made the declaration Himself. Among those declarations and the oldest one was the title

+ The seed of the woman:

The Lord God said that, when He addressed the serpent, after Adam and Eve listened to her advice and ate of the forbidden fruit. He said, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed, he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (Gen 3:15). This was a clear indication that God had a plan to save man from his destiny that he deserved when he disobeyed Him. Why do we say that God meant Jesus when He talked about the seed of the woman?

Two reasons; the first is that nobody else could be called that for the simple reason that all other human beings had a human father except two, Adam, and Jesus. So if we are talking about saving the human race, we definitely are not talking about Adam, because he was the one who brought all that on his descendants when he sinned. Second, that it really happened, for the Lord God, in the fullness of time, sent His son

to save His beloved man. In Galatians, St. Paul writes, "When the fullness of time was come, God sent forth His son, made of a woman, made under the Law" (Gal 4:4)

+My beloved son

This was one of the other names that were given to the Lord by the Father. This was announced on two occasions, when John baptized him before He began His ministry, and when He was transfigured before the eyes of His three disciples Peter, John, and James.

+Jesus

The Father was also the one who named His son "Jesus". This was what the archangel Gabriel told the Virgin Mary when he announced to her that she would give birth to the Lord. He told her, "Behold you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus"(LK1: 31). The archangel was carrying to St. Mary God's message that she will bear a son and God's instruction about calling Him Jesus.

+The Lion of the Tribe of Judah

The Father also called His son the "Lion of the Tribe of Judah", and "Root of David ". This came in the book of Revelations. St. John wrote, "One of the elders said unto me, weep not. Behold the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the root of David has prevailed to open the Book, and to loose the seven seals" (Rev. 5:5).

+The King of Kings and the Lord of Lords

He also called Him, "The King of Kings and the Lord of Lords". This also came in Revelations, where it says, "And He shall rule them with a rod of iron, and He treads the wine press of the fierceness and wrath of

Almighty God, and He has on His vesture, and on His thigh a name written, KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS" (Rev.19: 15,16).

+The word of god

Among the names that Jesus was given by the Father, is " The Word of God". This was mentioned also in revelations, when the one sitting on the white horse was described. It said, "He who sat upon it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on His head are many diadems, and He has a name inscribed which no one knows but Himself. He is clad in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which He is called is THE WORD OF GOD" Rev.19: 13).

Summing up, we find that the Father has from the beginning testified that Jesus is His son, who is equal to Him. He certainly revealed that when He called Him, the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. He also confirmed that Jesus who came is the true Messiah, by mentioning His lineage to the tribe of Judah, and to David, who was one of those favored by God, and because of him, God relented few times from punishing the Israelites the punishment that their sins deserved. So when He called Jesus the Lion of the tribe of Judah and the root of David, He was expressing again His continuing fondness of David.

The Father also talked about His son through His prophets, who prophesied about His coming throughout the Old Testament. The following is a list of those names and a brief comment on each.

+ Shiloh

" The Scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh comes and unto him, shall the gathering of the

people be" (Gen 49:10). A scepter is the symbol of royal command. It was a long staff, which the king held in his hand when speaking in public assemblies, and which he rested between his feet, when he sat upon his throne. The word "Shiloh" was used only this time to mean Jesus. It was used because it meant peace, rest, and quietness, and the Lord perfectly reflected those concepts. He was the prince of peace, He was quiet as Isaiah testified when he wrote, "He will not cry or lift his voice, or make it heard in the street, a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench"(Isa 42:3). As to the rest, Jesus is the only one who can give man rest from all his problems, physical and spiritual. He was the one who called everyone to come to Him, when He said," Come to me all ye that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest" (Mt 11:28).

+ Star

" There shall come a star out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel, and shall smite the corners of Moab, and destroy all the children of Sheth" (Num 24:17). This prophecy was uttered by the prophet Belaam, the man who was asked by Balak, king of Moab, to curse Israel, but could not because God told him not to. Here the Lord was likened to a star, which emanates light. The association of Jesus with the light was common. He even called Himself that when He said in Revelations 22:16," I Jesus have sent mine angel to testify unto you these things in the churches, I am the root and the offspring of David, and the bright morning star (Rev 22:16). The children of Sheth meant the nonbelievers, since the word " Sheth" meant a tumult or unrest. So the sons of Sheth are those who because of their refusal to believe, will stay in a state of agitation and unrest.

+ King of glory, Lord of hosts:

"Lift up your heads, O ye gates, and be lifted up, O ancient doors that the King of Glory may come in....who is this King of Glory? The Lord



of Hosts, He is the King of Glory"(Psa 24:7-10). This prophecy pertains to our Lord's ascension into heaven and His triumphant return after He successfully finished His mission on earth. The title" Lord of Hosts was used about three hundred times in the Old Testament. It is a title of might and power, used frequently in a military or an apocalyptic context. It describes the relationship between the Lord and the heavenly host of angels, archangels, and the rest of the powers of heaven, stating that He is their Lord.

+ The stone

" The Stone which the builders rejected, is become the head stone of the corner" (Psa 118:22). The analogy here between the Stone and the Lord is used because of the strength and durability that the stone has. This foretold the rejection that the Lord suffered at the hands of His people. But after His rejection, He was accepted by the world. So whom the Jewish nation had refused became the solid foundation of the lives of millions.

+ A Rod, a branch

" And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots" (Isa 11:1). A rod signifies strength, and the ability to discipline, and the branch means life and the ability to grow and to produce. These are certainly attributes that Jesus has.

+ My servant, my elect

"Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my elect in whom my soul delights. I have put my spirit upon him. He shall bring forth judgement to the Gentiles" (Isa 42:1). Why did the Father call His son, a servant? We don't know. The only reason that we can think of is that the most valued quality in a good servant is obedience. And we know that the Son was obedient to the Father, an obedience that led Him to the cross.

### + Great light

"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. They that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them has the light shined" (Isa 9:1,2). Here again we see the analogy between the Lord and light. But we have to notice that He is no ordinary light, He is a Great Light.

### + The Holy One

" Thus says the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel and His Holy one, the one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations" (Isa 49:7). This points to the fact that the Lord, who came to redeem Israel first, was despised by them, crucifying Him as a criminal. Also the other nations did not universally accept Him, many have abhorred Him and refused to follow Him. Even after twenty centuries of spreading the word, more than half the world population still does not believe in Him.

### + Emmanuel

"Therefore the Lord Himself shall give a sign. Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel" (Is 7:14). The word "Emmanuel" means " God with us", and it emphasizes the change in the relationship between God and man, brought about by the birth and life of Jesus, and His intercessory role in reconciling us to the Father.

### +Wonderful, Counselor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace

" For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given. And the government shall be upon his shoulders, and his name shall be called, Wonderful, Counselor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The

Prince of Peace"(Isa 9:6,7). This prophecy is one of, if not the most powerful statement that the Father made about His son, and which establishes beyond any doubt, that Jesus and the Father are one, and that Jesus is non other than God in the flesh.

#### + The Shepherd

"He shall feed his lambs like a shepherd, he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom" (Isa40: 11). The Lord Himself used this name when He called Himself the" Good Shepherd".

#### + Messiah the prince

"Know therefore and understand that from the going forth of the Commandment to restore and build Jerusalem unto the Messiah the Prince shall be seven weeks" (Dan9: 24). In this verse God was giving the prophet Daniel some information about the time the Messiah was supposed to come. The name "Messiah" was used only two times in the Old Testament, but was considered the official title of the central figure of Jewish expectations. This is a complex concept. To be called a Messiah, the person had to fulfill five conditions; he has to be anointed, chosen by God, appointed to accomplish redemption, and execute judgement on his foes, and given dominion over the nations.

#### + Ruler:

" But you Bethlehem Ephratah, though you are little among the clans of Judah, yet of you shall he come forth unto me, that who is to be ruler in Israel, whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting" (Mic 5:2)

#### + The Lord

" Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way

before me, and the Lord whom you seek, shall suddenly come to his temple' (Mal 3:1). This another unequivocal declaration by the Father that Jesus is God.

## THE WORD OF GOD

Since most of the Lord's many names are relatively easy to understand, we don't see the need to examine them any further. Nevertheless there is one name that raises a host of questions, in the minds of many, as to what it really means. This name is "The Word". The following is a human attempt to trace it historically and try to use that to understand its meaning.

In the beginning was the word:

St. John begins his gospel by the famous phrase;" In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God"(Jn1: 1). And again in his first epistle, he writes," That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life- the life was manifest, and we saw it." (1Jn 1:1)

We must have read the above statements several times, and most likely admired them, but never stopped to ask why did St. John call Jesus, "the word"? What did he really mean by it? As we try to probe these questions, we first notice that St. John was the only one among the writers of the four gospels who called the Lord "The Word". He was also the only one among the other writers who made contributions to the New Testament to call the Lord by that name.

It is also interesting that our Lord never called Himself that, and while He called Himself many things such as the good shepherd, the light of the world, the true vine, the way, the truth, and the life, the son of man, He never called Himself the "Word". Why? We do not know, but there must be a reason for that.

As we consider the other names that our Lord was given, we realize that some of them were true such as the "life", and the "light", while others were figurative, such as "the good shepherd", "the true vine", the way", and the "truth".

The name which St. John used, "The word", becomes a problem, if we tried to treat it as true, simply because we feel that Jesus was much more than a word, even if it was the word of God. And as we think that any word is just an utterance, we find ourselves unable to think about Him as merely an utterance. We base this on our experience of the word of man. But even if we realize that there are many significant differences between man's word and God's word. And that man's word has no power, while God's word, is all powerful, and effective, and was likened to a two edged sword. Nevertheless we still cannot perceive Jesus as only the word of God.

As we delve into some of the background against which St. John wrote his gospel, which he began with calling Jesus the "Word", we find that he wrote it for three groups of people. He wrote it for the Jews who at

the time the gospel was written, did not yet believe in Him, the Greeks who were not yet evangelized, and the Christians who were exposed to the early heresies. This is why St. John emphasized over and over again, one theme that permeated his whole gospel, which was the divine nature of Jesus. He wanted to prove to his readers that Jesus was non other than the Messiah the son of God who came to the world to save man from the destiny that he deserved when he disobeyed his creator. But, somebody may ask, was naming Him " The Word" the most effective way of proving that He is God? Some may feel that naming Him that would have the opposite effect. But St. John definitely did not feel that, otherwise, he wouldn't have used it to begin his gospel and again in his first epistle. As we reflect on this, we come up with two questions, which if correctly answered may help solve the dilemma; where did St. John get that name? And what were his reasons for using it? We know that the Jews called the Bible "The Word of God". So this is probably the place where St. John got it. May be, may be not. But was that also the reason for using it the way he did? The answer is that this was not the only reason. There were other reasons that were behind it. As we recall that he wrote his gospel mainly for two groups, the Jews (some of whom became Christians while the majority did not), and the Greeks. We may find in the heritage of these groups what may shed light on the question at hand.

As we dig in the Greek philosophy and mythology, we find few interesting facts. We find that a philosopher by the name of Hiroclitus, who lived in the sixth century BC, talking about the origin of the universe, taught that everything in the beginning was in a state of flux. However order and pattern was preserved amidst the flow of things by something he called the "logos", which he described as the eternal principle of order in the universe. He also said that the "Logos" was the initiator of the everlasting change that makes the world, a cosmos. The word "Logos" as we know is the word " Word" in Greek. We also found that the word "Logos" was an important element in the Greek stoic theology, which states that the universe was conceived as forming a

single living whole that was permeated by a never resting primitive power, which resembles fire or fiery air, possessing the property of thought.

This power which was called "Logos" was thought to be imminent in the universe, containing within itself the conditions and the processes of all things. It also provides the rational order in the universe and supplies the standards of conduct of the rational man. We also find that a Jewish philosopher with the name of Philo who lived between 20 BC and 42 AD attempted the formidable task of wedding the Jewish religion with the Hellenistic philosophy. He saw the Old Testament as the inspired word of God. He held the Greek view of God as a God who is utterly transcendent and separated from the world. And he employed the concept of the "Logos" to be the mediator through which He created and changed the world. Philo maintained that God is absolute, and outside the physical world. He comprehends all things, but He Himself is beyond comprehension, He is outside time and space and cannot be known. So the "Logos" which also means "reason", is conceived as the universal plan of things in the mind of God. We also find in the hermetic literature the following theory about the creation of the universe. It says that in the beginning there was boundless light, and after a while, a downward moving darkness began to appear, then from the light came a holy Logos as a creative power bringing in order. This hermetic logos was conceived as the active expression of the mind of God.

As we examine the Old Testament we find that the Word of God was an important concept in the Jewish religion. Creation came into being by the word of God. Nobody can forget the authoritative word of God when, in the face of the darkness that covered the earth, He said, " Let there be light", and there was light " (Gen1: 3). After that every time God said something, it happened instantaneously. We also find that it can be a vision as in the case of the prophets Isaiah" who saw the word" (Isa 2:1), and Jeremiah (Jer2: 31). So according to that the word of God

is not merely an utterance, it is something that can go forth and accomplish the divine purpose. The Jewish people considered it an extension of the divine personality, invested with divine authority, and that it stands forever, and once spoken can not return unfulfilled. No wonder they often called it, "the living word of God".

Another possible reason that is worth exploring is the concept of wisdom, which is close to the concept of reason, which is one of the meanings of the word "Logos". As we examine the Old Testament, we find that wisdom was extensively used especially in the writings of Solomon. It was created before everything else, "The Lord created me at the beginning of His work" (Pr 8:22), and came forth to dwell in Israel to make them God's people. Solomon's wisdom is the fashioner of all things, the penetrator of all spirits, the pure emanation of the glory of God, that can do all things, renew all things, initiates men in the knowledge of God, and brings them into immortality.

It seems that St. John did what the philosopher Philo tried without too much success. He combined some of the fuzzy Greek concepts about the logos, and the well defined Jewish concepts of the word of God, and His wisdom, into a new concept that, what the Greeks had been calling the logos, and what the Jews had been calling the word of God, and His wisdom, finally took flesh, became a man called Jesus Christ, a personification of God's word, reason, and wisdom. St. John in doing this reminds us of what St. Paul did in Athens, when he saw the altar dedicated to an unknown god. He immediately capitalized on that and addressing the citizens of Athens saying, "Men of Athens, I perceive that you are very religious. For as I passed along, and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown God'. What therefore you worship as unknown, I proclaim to you"(Act 17: 23). So St. John was saying to the Greeks that the logos after which you were groping for a long time is finally here, and to the Jews that the word, the reasoning and the wisdom of God are here in the person of Jesus Christ.



It is interesting to notice that St. John even though he brought the Greek and the Jewish concepts of the Logos together, yet he went further than both. First both the Logos and the wisdom of God were never personalized, John said that they were the second person of the Trinity. Second, John said that Jesus was the one who created the universe, which means that God was in direct connection with the universe. Third, when he said, "In the beginning", he made it clear that Jesus preexisted everything. This was mentioned by the Lord several times, one of them when He said, "Before Abraham was, I am" (Jn8: 58). Fourth, he used the concept to assert the deity of Christ, when he said that the word was God, but at the same time he implied that God is more than the Logos, when he said that " the word was with God". Fifth, he declared that the Logos was incarnated, and became flesh, to reveal to us the true nature of God, to reveal to men life (Jn1: 4), light (Jn 1:4,5), truth (Jn1: 14), glory (Jn1: 14), and even God Himself (Jn1: 18).

All the above is a humble attempt by someone who tried to understand something that was written in the Bible about our Lord. Yes, we know that sometimes we cannot understand God, but man will always try, pushed into this by his God given intelligence. Did we after all that come any closer to an understanding of what St.John wrote. May be. Despite what was attempted, we had no doubt that what St.John wrote was inspired by the Holy Spirit. This became absolutely clear when one reads the beautiful description of our Lord, which St. John wrote in the book of Revelation, when he said, " Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse. He who sat upon it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name inscribed which no one knows but himself. He is clad in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called, The word of God (Rev19)

## Chapter six

## OTHERS TALK ABOUT JESUS

In the previous chapters we talked about the names that the Lord used to describe Himself, and those that the Father used to describe the Son. We discussed the reasons behind those names, and their significance in the lives of those who decided to follow Him and for our lives today. In this chapter we will discuss the names that others used to describe the Lord. We will easily see that every one of those names clearly reflects the attitude of those using it, and their stand from our Lord and His mission.

We will classify these as follows:

- 1) The religious leadership of the Jewish nation.
- 2) Other People in positions of authority.
- 3) Ordinary citizens.

### 1) The Religious Leaders:

Those leaders found that the new rabbi, is not one of them, to the extent that sometimes they said that they do not know where He came from. He was teaching a different theology from the one they were teaching. And they felt that He did not have the respect for the law that they had. So, they too called Jesus by few names that reflected their opinion of Him.

+ Friend of Beelzebul:

They said this when our Lord cast the evil spirit from the blind and dumb demoniac, and healed him. The people marveled at what happened and said, "Could this be the son of David?" But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, "It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons that this man casts out demons" (Mt 12:24).

## + Breaker of the Sabbath:

They probably said this about Him every time He healed somebody on the Sabbath. Our Lord intentionally healed some on the Sabbath, in order to correct their wrong interpretation of the fourth commandment. The instances recorded in the Gospels in which the Lord did something on the Sabbath are the following: The disciples plucking the ears of corn, and eating them in His presence and His failure to restrain them. When the Pharisees told Him about it, trying to put the blame on Him, He answered them, "Have you not read what David did, when he was hungry and those with him. How he entered in the House of God, and did eat the shewbread, which was not for them to eat.... and followed by telling them, "For the Son of man is the Lord of the Sabbath also" (Mk 2:28)

Another instance was when they presented Him with a man with a withered hand, and asked Him whether it is lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not. He answered them saying, "What man among you, who has one sheep, and it fell into a pit on the Sabbath, will he not lay hold of it and lift it out? How much then is a man better than a sheep. Then He said to the man, 'Stretch your hand. And he did" (Lk6: 1-10).

Another episode was when He healed the invalid man who has been sick for thirty-eight years also on the Sabbath. After He healed him, he told him to carry his bed and go home. When the man did, the Pharisees saw him, and told him that it was unlawful for him to carry his bed on the Sabbath. But the man told them, I did not do this on my own, the man who healed me was the one who told me to carry my bed (Jn 5:2-13).

Another instance was when He was preaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath, and saw a woman who had a spirit of infirmity for eighteen years, and could not stand straight. The Lord called her for all

who were in the synagogue to see, and healed her. When the ruler of the synagogue saw that, he criticized the Lord as he addressed the congregation saying, " There are six days in which men ought to work, therefore come on those days and be healed, but not on the Sabbath". Our Lord's reply was harsh. He said, " You hypocrite, doesn't each one of you loose his ox or his ass on the Sabbath, and lead it away to the water? And then added," This woman being a daughter of Abraham, who has been bound by Satan for eighteen years, shouldn't she be loosed on the Sabbath?". And He healed her. (Lk 13:10-17)

+Glutton, Wine Bibber, Friend of Publicans and Sinners:

Jesus was the one who revealed that these names were used to describe Him by those who rejected Him, most of them were Scribes and Pharisees. He said, " For John the Baptist came eating no bread, and drinking no wine; and you say he has a demon. The son of man came eating and drinking, and you say, ' Behold, a glutton and a winebibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Lk7: 33-35). He said this as He was talking to the people about John the Baptist.

He was telling the Scribes and the Pharisees that they have rejected John for the wrong reasons, that he did not eat their food and did not drink their drink, and in rejecting him and his message, you accused him of being possessed by a demon. You are about to make the same mistake again. This time you are rejecting me despite the fact that I am not like John. I eat what you eat and drink what you drink. But because you are rejecting God's message, which I bring you, you are falsely justifying your behavior by accusing me of being a glutton, a winebibber, and a friend of tax collectors and sinners.

+Blasphemer:

The person who called Jesus that was non other than the high priest, Caiaphas. After they seized Him, they took Him to Caiaphas house,

where He was questioned by the Council, who sought false testimony against Him, but could not find any. Then the high priest said, "I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God?". Jesus said to him, "You have said so. But I tell you, hereafter you will see the Son of man seated at the right hand of the Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven". Then the high priest tore his robes, and said, "He has uttered blasphemy" (Mt 26:63-65).

+ Impostor:

After Jesus died, and Joseph of Arimathea took His body to bury in his tomb, the Pharisees went to see Pilate and told him that, "they remember how that impostor said, while He was still alive that after three days, He will rise. Therefore order the sepulchre to be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples go and steal him away, and tell the people that He has risen from the dead, and the last fraud will be worse than the first"(Mt 27:63-65).

## 2) John the Baptist:

+The Lamb of God:

John knew Jesus while he was still in his mother's womb. St. Luke tells us that when St. Mary visited St. Elizabeth, and greeted her that St. Elizabeth told her, "Behold, when the voice of your greeting came to my ear, the babe in my womb leaped with joy" (Lk1: 44). After he was born, and while he was still young, John was taken to the wilderness, to be trained for the job that he was born to perform; to prepare the way for Jesus. So his life revolved around Jesus, and undoubtedly the Holy Spirit guided him, in every thing he did. So when Jesus came to be baptized by him, he knew Him. He also knew the purpose of His coming, so when he saw Him, he told the people, " Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world" (Jn1:29)

### 3) Other people in positions of authority:

#### The Centurion of Capernaum:

+ Lord:

This Roman soldier had a servant whom he loved, and who was paralyzed. As our Lord was entering Capernaum one day, he came and asked Him if He can heal his servant. The Lord told him that He would go with him to his house, and heal his servant. He offered to do that probably because of his strong faith in Him, a faith that became obvious when he graciously refused to accept the Lord's offer, saying, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only say the word and my servant will be healed"(Mt8: 8). The Lord must have loved him for his confidence and faith that nobody from His own people has shown. No wonder He looked at the people around Him and said, "Truly, I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such faith"(Mt 8:10). It is interesting to see a foreigner address Jesus as Lord, which He was, while His own disciples till the end were confused about His identity.

#### Nicodemus:

+ Rabbi, Teacher:

Nicodemus was one of the respected Pharisees, who came to see the Lord privately at night. He obviously did not share in the disdain that the other Pharisees had for the Lord. So he decided to have a talk with Him, to judge for himself, and decide whether to believe in Him or not. He began his meeting by expressing what he believed so far about Him,

saying, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do those signs that you do, unless God is with Him. (Jn 3:2). We notice that he called the Lord, Rabbi, and Teacher, thereby recognizing the leadership role that He assumed something that the rest of the Pharisees and the Scribes never acknowledged.

The Centurion at the Cross:

+The Son of God:

Here is another foreigner, a Roman soldier, who called our Lord "The Son of God". What is unusual about this, is that he said that while Jesus was, from a human point of view, at the weakest moment of His life on earth, the moment He died, crucified between two thieves. What made him say that while the Lord's own disciples had abandoned Him and fled out of fear of the Jews. The Bible tells us that when he saw that He breathed His last he blurted, "Truly this man was the Son of God". So we really do not know what made him arrive at his conclusion which defies all logic.

Pontius Pilate:

+The King of the Jews:

After Pilate talked with Jesus, and found no fault in Him, that deserved death, he went out, and told the people that, but he knew that they would not listen. He knew that the Pharisees and the Scribes had delivered Him, because they were jealous of Him. Then he used another approach, and hoping that the ordinary people will take advantage of it, and force their leaders to succumb to their wish. He said to them, "But you have a custom that I should release one man for you at the Passover, will you have me release for you the King of the Jews?"(Jn 18:39). But as we all know, they asked him to release for them Barabbas, who was a robber.

King Herod:

+John the Baptist:

This was what King Herod thought about Jesus when he heard about Him and the great miracles that he was doing. He said, " This is John the Baptist, he has been raised from the dead; this is why those powers are at work in Him" (Mt 14:2). This was a normal reaction on the part of Herod, because he feared John and felt that God sent him. To be added to this is the fact that he was forced to kill him, something he probably regretted for the rest of his life. So when he heard about Jesus, his tormented mind which could not get away from the memory of the Baptist, imagined that the Baptist came back to torment him.

Satan:

I hesitated to include Satan in this category. But I realized that even though he may not belong because he is not a human being, nevertheless, he certainly had authority. He has been an active player in the human drama that made the incarnation of the second person of the Holy Trinity, a necessity, in order to save man from the grip of Satan and offer him everlasting life.

+ Son of God:

This was what the demons in the two demoniacs of the Gadarenes said when they saw Jesus and knew that He is going to cast them out. St. Matthew described what happened, when he wrote, " And when He came to the other side, to the country of the Gadarenes, two demoniacs met Him, coming out of the tombs, so fierce that no one could pass that way. And behold, they cried out, "What have you to do with us, O Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?" (Mt8: 29)



### +The Holy One of God:

This happened in Capernaum, in the synagogue where He was preaching. St. Mark was the one who wrote about this in his gospel. He wrote, "And there was in the synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, 'What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.'"(Mk1: 23). The Lord rebuked him, ordering him to be silent, and cast him out. St. Mark also wrote that, "Whenever the unclean spirits beheld Him, they fell down before Him and cried out," You are the Son of God". And He strictly ordered them not to make Him known" (Mk 3:11,12)

It is interesting that the Lord never accepted Satan's recognition of Him, as if He was telling him, I don't need your testimony, in informing the people who I am.

### Ordinary People:

Under this category we will include, the Jewish people, those who listened to him, and dealt with Him on a day to day basis. Also those who were healed by Him, and those who did not, but who either witnessed or heard about His miracles. We will also include the Lord's disciples, because before they received the Holy Spirit, they were not much different from the others who did not have the privilege of being with Him and knowing Him as the disciples.

### + Son of David:

This was a very popular name that many people used when they spoke about Jesus, or called on Him to heal them. St. Matthew mentioned this,

as he was talking about what the people said after He cast out the evil spirit from the blind and dumb demoniac. He wrote, " All the people were amazed, and said,' Can this be the Son of David?'" (Mt12: 23). Again St. Matthew wrote about the two blind men who were at the roadside when Jesus was passing by. When they knew that it was Jesus, they cried out" Have mercy upon us, Son of David" (Mt20: 30). Jesus stopped and opened their eyes, and they followed Him. St. Mark gave an account of a similar story in which a blind man called Bartimaeus cried out to Jesus using the same name" Son of David"(Mk 10:45).

We also find the multitude using the same name when they accompanied Jesus on His trip to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. St. Matthew wrote that on that day, "Most of the crowd spread their garments on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. And the crowds that went before Him and that followed Him shouted,' Hosanna to the Son of David, blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord, Hosanna in the highest"(Mt 21: 8,9).

+ John the Baptist.

+ Elijah.

+ Jeremiah.

+ One of the Prophets.

All of these names were not mentioned in the Bible as used by specific people in specific events, but were reported to Jesus, when He asked His disciples, " Who do men say that the Son of man is? And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah, or one of the prophets.'"(Mt 16:13,14).

+ The Son of the Living God:

This was the name that St. Peter gave when the Lord asked His disciples," And who do you say that I am? St. Matthew wrote that," Simon Peter replied, 'You are the son of the Living God' (Mt 16:16). It is interesting to note that Jesus' responded by telling him," Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven."(Mt16: 17). Jesus was telling Peter that the source of this revelation was not a human source, but it was a divine source, the Father Himself, which means that man was not ready at that point in time to acknowledge that Jesus was the true Son of God.

#### + The Carpenter's Son:

This was the reaction of the people of Nazareth to the Lord as He preached the word of God, and healed those who needed healing. St. Matthew wrote, "Coming into His own country, He taught them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished, and said, 'Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works? Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not His mother called Mary?'" (Mt 13:54,55). The people of Nazareth obviously were not impressed by what Jesus said and did, despite the fact that they were" astonished" as St. Matthew put it. Being astonished is the first reaction when people observe something they did not expect. The step that comes after that, depends on the observer and his attitude toward the person whose behavior triggered the astonishment. If he is viewed positively, the astonishment will change into admiration and this into love and support.

This did not happen to the people of Nazareth, for a simple reason. Jesus was one of them, he grew up there, worked as a carpenter all his life, until he abandoned his shop, and went around talking about things they felt that he did not know too much about. They knew that He did not have any formal education in religion and wondered where did He get all that knowledge. They probably concluded that He is a fake, unworthy of their support. It is said that familiarity breeds contempt,

and our Lord expressed this in His own words when He said," A prophet is not without honor except in his own country and in his own house" (Mt 13:57).

+ A prophet:

That was what the Samaritan woman called Jesus, after He told her that she had five husbands and the one with her now is not her husband. She was surprised when she heard that, and immediately realized that He was not an ordinary human being. He is at least a prophet, and she told him that. St. John was the only who reported this episode in his gospel. He wrote that after she asked Him about the Messiah, and His statement to her that He was the Messiah, the woman left her jar, forgot about her need for water, and rushed to the city. She began sharing her experience with the people telling them," Come see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?" (Jn4: 29).

+ The Savior of the World:

This was what the people of the Samaritan City of Sychar called Jesus, after He stayed with them two days. The Bible did not mention that He did any miracles there. He talked to them and as a result, many of them believed telling the woman, "It is no longer because of your words that we believe, for we have heard ourselves, and we know that this indeed is the Savior of the World" (Jn4: 42).

+King:

When they crucified Jesus, they crucified with Him, two robbers. In the beginning both mocked Him, challenging Him to save Himself and them, if He was the Son of God. It was St. Matthew, who reported that when he wrote," And the robbers who were crucified with Him also reviled Him the same way" (MT27: 44). Then it seems that one of them changed his mind, we don't know why. He probably had a change of

heart after he heard Jesus say what He said. He then rebuked the other telling him," Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong. And he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom'. And He said to him,' Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (Lk23: 39-43).

So the robber who spent all his life in sin somehow, realized that Jesus was a true king, and that His kingdom is not of this world. This is why he asked Him to remember him when He goes to His kingdom. It is amazing that a robber who may not even has seen the Lord before, was able to recognize Him, while one of His disciples who knew Him, betrayed Him, another swore he didn't know Him and the rest abandoned Him and fled.

+Lord:

This is what the man who was born blind called Jesus, after the Scribes and the Pharisees kicked him out of the Temple. As he was leaving the Temple, Jesus found him, and said," Do you believe in the son of man?" He answered, 'Who is he sir that I may believe in Him? Jesus said to him, 'You have seen Him, and it is he who speaks to you'. He said, 'Lord, I believe', and he worshipped Him.

Here is another amazing example of someone who realized that Jesus was Lord, without having the benefit of living with Him, or knowing Him, or witnessing His miracles. No wonder the Lord once said' "I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding, and revealed them to babes; yes Father, for such was your gracious will" (Lk 10: 21).



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