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INTRODUCTION

Most of the books written about the life of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, have two overriding themes; they describe WHAT happened during His brief stay on earth and use this to draw some conclusions about WHAT we should do, to take advantage of the salvation that He offered us. No one can deny the importance of these themes in our lives. I was exposed to them as a child and had them drummed in my little ears once I began asking my parents questions about God. They are the themes that I heard in church as I grew up. I have to admit that they taught me many things about God. When I began to teach in Sunday school, I used them to teach the children how to believe in God. They were also the main themes I used during the fifteen years I spent preaching in our churches.

Despite this, I always felt there was something missing. Every time I heard that God did this or did that, somewhere in the back of my mind lurked a persistent question I didn't dare ask anyone. Why did God do that? With this why question unanswered, I felt that my knowledge of God was incomplete and the image I was given of Him had big gaps and sometimes some irreconcilable discrepancies. For instance, why did God ask the Israelites to destroy the nations whose land He was giving to them (Josh 6:17), when 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" (Deut 24:16)? Is this the God described in the Bible as a loving father? Or why did He burn Sodom and Gomorrah with all its inhabitants including children and 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 question did not fade away, but stayed with me. As my knowledge of the Bible grew, I discovered the reason most people avoid the question why, is because 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 everything 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, why did He wrestle with Jacob? The Bible does not tell us why. Then I discovered another reason. We are taught we should not try to understand God, because our intelligence is inadequate to understand Him. For some time I did not question these two ideas.

But as I learned, the only way to God is to form a personal relationship with Him. I found it difficult, because I really did not understand Him that well. The big gaps in my knowledge of Him began to upset me. I realized if some of these gaps were filled, I would have an easier time relating to God. So I began looking into the writings of the saints, and found some which dealt with this aspect of God's character. Then I began using these. Then applying whatever knowledge I had about God, I tried to probe the why questions. I approached this task with a great deal of humility, and prayer. Realizing this would help me to have a more complete picture of God, and hopefully, would 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 He did not. 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 the nagging questions and inconsistencies in my image of God had been answered. It occurred to me that putting this in a book might help others who have an inquisitive mind like mine. If you ask me whether it is useful to try to understand God, I would say yes. But if you ask me, whether it is possible for us to understand everything God does, I must say no. In the cases we cannot understand, we have to accept what He did in good faith. This becomes a little easier to do, if we know what we can 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.

Sami I. Boulos May 2004

CHAPTER ONE

JESUS THE MASTER HEALER

Jesus spent most of his time on earth either teaching or healing. As we have seen that He was the best teacher, He was also the best healer that ever lived. We don't know exactly how many people He healed. But if we consider the number of diseases rampant in those days, the primitive state of medicine, and all that is related to good health, one can imagine that the number of sick people in the time of Jesus was great. If we also recognize that Jesus was willing to heal all who needed healing, we can say that during the three years of His ministry, He must have healed hundreds, maybe thousands. No one has ever healed as many sick people as He did, nor healed the variety of diseases that He healed. No wonder He is considered the greatest physician who ever lived.

The Qualities of a Great Physician:

As there are levels of success in teaching and in almost every other profession, there are levels of success in healing. Good physicians excel in certain qualities, while others do not measure up to their standards. A key quality is honesty. There are many ways that a physician can be dishonest. Some make up diseases that their patients do not have, in order to charge them more. Some recommend operations that are not needed. Some lengthen treatment beyond what is needed, especially if it requires office visits. Others claim an expertise they do not have. Some charge too much even if they realize that their patients are poor. Most keep patients waiting for hours even if they had made an appointment some time before their visit. Some are rude and mistreat patients. These physicians don't care about their patients; all they care about is their pay. This does not mean that there are no good physicians. There are many who care, and are considered excellent.

By contrast a good physician is honest. He cares about his patients and is concerned when their condition does not improve, or when it gets worse. He makes house visits, and does not charge any of his patients exorbitant fees, especially the poor whom he treats free. His diagnosis

most of the time is correct, and he never tells his patients that they have a disease unless they really have it. He tries to help them get well in the shortest possible time and never prolongs treatment beyond what is absolutely necessary. He is courteous and treats every one of his clients as if he were his best friend. For these reasons his patients like him, feel comfortable with him, and never go to any other physician.

Jesus The Greatest Physician:

In the remainder of this chapter, we are going to talk briefly about some of those whom Jesus healed, and point out the qualities that made Him the great healer that He was.

1. The official's son

St. John is the only one to mention this, the second recorded miracle that Jesus performed. His first was changing the water into wine in Cana. After that He went to Samaria where He met the Samaritan woman and spent two days talking to her and the people there about the kingdom of God. He then returned to Cana. This is where He healed the official's son. This man did not live in Cana, but lived in Capernaum, and had heard about Jesus whose fame had begun to spread. So when he heard that Jesus had come back to Cana, he came especially to meet him and ask Him to heal his son who was gravely ill.

It is interesting to note that the father is the one who traveled to Cana. He did not bring his sick son with him. So it seems that he had faith that Jesus could heal his son if he could get him to go to Capernaum with him. But, as the distance was about twenty miles, and possibly to demonstrate that He could heal without limitation, Jesus did not want to go to Capernaum. The Bible tells us that Jesus told the man, "Go, your son will live." (Jn 4:50) The man somehow believed and his servants met him on his way home and told him that his son was well. When he asked when this had happened, they told him. It was the exact time Jesus told him that his son would live.

Here Jesus, as the greatest physician, displayed a few of the qualities

that made Him great. First, while He knew that he had money, He did not charge the official anything for healing his son. He also willingly healed his son and did not turn him down. He prescribed no medicine. He did not tell the father that his son would improve, and when he does, to bring him again in a week. He told him that his son, who was close to death, would live and at His word, the son was completely healed.

2. Peter's Mother in Law

This episode happened in the middle of a full day of healing that began when Jesus went to the synagogue as He did every Sabbath. While He was preaching, He was interrupted by an outburst from someone possessed with an evil spirit. After He cast out the evil spirit, He probably felt the judgment of the leaders and a few others over healing that man on the Sabbath. After this, He went to Peter's house where He found Peter's mother-in-law very sick. When they told Him about her, He stood at the head of her bed and rebuked the fever.

What does this mean? We understand when He rebukes an evil spirit, but are left surprised when we hear that He rebuked the fever. Another time He rebuked the wind and the sea when He was asleep and the storm was about to destroy the boat that He was in. It seems that sickness and storms were not part of man's condition before sin entered the world. Consequently they are among the results of sin and are favored by Satan. This is why they were considered evil in Jesus' eyes, and to be rebuked when they hurt His beloved man.

After this He had no rest. St. Mark writes, "That evening, at sundown, they brought Him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered together about the door. And He healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons." (Mk 1:32-34) So our beloved physician worked very hard that day. He refused no one who needed healing, regardless of His fatigue or the lateness of the hour. He did not complain, nor ask any to come the next day. Sacrificing his own comfort for that of his people, He cast His physical condition aside and worked to heal them all until it was quite late.

3. The Leper

St. Matthew writes that after Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount, a leper approached Him and asked Him, “Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.” (Mt 8:20) We notice that he had no doubt that Jesus could heal him. His doubt was whether Jesus wanted to or not. The reason for his doubt was the nature of his disease. Leprosy was considered a disease that God inflicted upon people who were evil, to the extent that they called it “The finger of God.” It was a devastating disease with no cure and was likened to a slow death. It attacks the body in such a way that appendages seem to decay and fall away. And since it is a contagious disease, lepers had to live away from people as outcasts in solitary colonies. The man in this episode must have had some courage to come into a big gathering of normal people, and risked being stoned by them. When he made his request to Jesus, he was not sure that He would go against all tradition and heal him. But the divine healer, the greatest physician did not hesitate a moment and not only said, “I will, be clean” (Mt 8:3), but He touched him also.

4. The Man with the Withered Hand

This healing took place in the synagogue at Capernaum. Jesus was there and, after the service, He noticed a man with a withered hand. A few agents of the Scribes and Pharisees were watching to see if He would heal on the Sabbath. Jesus knew their thoughts and decided to meet the challenge head on. He called the man and, so everyone could see what would happen, asked him to stand in the middle. Then He turned to those people, and asked them, “Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save a life or to kill?” (Mk 3:4) No body uttered a word. There was complete silence. St. Mark writes that, “Jesus looked at them with anger.” (Mk 3:5) This was one of the few times the Bible mentions that Jesus was angry. He was angry because He observed the hypocrisy of the religious leaders of His nation.

He asked, “Is it lawful to save a life or to kill?” to show them that they justified themselves in condemning and thinking of killing Him on the

Sabbath, while denouncing Him for healing on the Sabbath. Jesus paid no attention to them and looked at the man and said, “Stretch out your hand.” Immediately he moved his hand forward, and behold it was as his other hand.

The great physician did it again. He did not consider the critics; He ignored their looks of unbelief, resentment, and disgust. He saw only a human being suffering some kind of paralysis in his right hand, a condition that prevented him from working. He knew that he had come to the synagogue hoping for a miracle from the miracle worker. So He healed him, even though he had not asked.

He also did not charge him, as He never did for any healing. He instructed His disciples to do the same, when He sent them to spread the word of God in the countryside. After He Gave them the power to heal the sick and to cast evil spirits, He ended His directions by saying, “You received without pay, give without pay.” (Mt 10:8) Where can anyone find a physician like that?

5.The Woman with an Issue of Blood

A man named Jairus who was the ruler of the synagogue at Capernaum came to Jesus, knelt before Him, and begged Him to come to his house because his twelve-year-old daughter was on the brink of death. Again the Great physician obliged. On His way to Jairus' house, many people gathered around Him, to see what He was going to do. There were hundreds pushing and shoving and Jesus was in the middle of them. Suddenly He stopped and asked, “Who touched me?” (Lk 8:45) Everybody stopped and looked at Him. When nobody came forward, Peter obviously annoyed with the question, responded by rebuking Jesus saying, “Master, the multitudes surround you, and press upon you.” (Lk 8:45)

He was really saying that what Jesus asked made no sense, because many people had touched him. Jesus was not angry with him; He knew that his remark was due to his inability to see what had happened. In His answer, He informed Peter why he had said what He said. He

announced that, “power has gone forth from me.” (Lk 8:46) The Bible tells us that a trembling woman came forward. She fell down before Him, acknowledged that she was the one, and described for Him the reason why. Jesus then praised her saying, “Daughter, your faith has made you well, go in peace.” (Lk 8:48)

As we reflect on this, we can immediately see why the woman did not go to Jesus and ask Him to heal her. She had a feminine condition that was considered something people do not talk about. Then we ask “Why did Jesus force her to come out in the open instead of telling only Him about it?” Instead of asking Him to heal her, she was forced to declare it to the multitude. The Lord wanted to give the woman the full credit that she deserved, because she was sure that if she touched only the hem of his robe, she would be cured. This is great faith, and Jesus decided that such a faith should not go unrewarded. He may also have wanted to make some of the things that people find difficulty talking about, less embarrassing.

But as a physician, He was superb. He let His power more or less be stolen by that woman. He definitely had compassion on her. He knew that she had tried every avenue to get well, but her condition was beyond the means of medicine at that time. He knew how much she suffered physically, financially, and psychologically, and allowed her to do what she did. Then He did not give Himself any credit, He gave it all to her when He declared “your faith made you well.”

6. Jairus' Daughter

This happened in Capernaum, where Jesus lived. He would leave to preach the word of God and to heal those who needed healing, after which He would return to Capernaum for some rest before His next trip. As He was coming back to Capernaum He was met by a big crowd who was waiting for Him. Then He saw the people open a path for someone coming toward Him. As soon as he reached Jesus, he fell at His feet, and asked Him to go with him to his house, to heal his only daughter who was dying. The reason the people gave him priority was because he was Jairus, a ruler of the synagogue. Jesus didn't hesitate, and without

any rest proceeded to go with the man to his house.

But, as we have seen, the woman with the issue of blood delayed him on His way. By the time Jesus was ready to continue to Jairus' house, one of his servants came to inform him of the death of his daughter, and followed this by telling him not to trouble the teacher. Upon hearing this, to protect Jairus from a deterioration of his faith, Jesus told him, "Do not fear, only believe, and she shall be well." (Lk 8:50)

Jesus knew that Jairus had some faith, but it was not as strong as that of the Centurion who had not asked the Lord to go to his home to heal his slave, but asked Him only to say the word. So, He tried to give extra assurance to Jairus that despite what he heard, his daughter would be healed. This is an assurance that parents of sick children like to hear from the physician, especially if the sick child is gravely sick.

This reminds me of a personal story that happened when I was three years old. I came down with a serious disease that did not improve by administering the known home remedies and I got worse. This is when my parents decided to take me to a physician. It seems that my condition was so serious that many of our relatives suggested that they take me to the best physician in Cairo. My father was not a rich man and ordinarily he would have taken me to a less famous physician.

But because of the seriousness of the case, he and my mother took me to that famous physician. They went to his office and had to wait their turn in a crowded office. Finally they were admitted, and after he took a look at me, he exploded in my mother's face, screaming at her, "Why have you waited that long before coming to me. You have brought to me a corpse, go and bury him." He refused to examine me, and kicked us from his office. Can you imagine my mother's condition when she heard this from the famous physician? She was absolutely sure that I would die in a few minutes or at best in a few hours. She became hysterical, crying and screaming blaming herself for what happened.

She was wailing the loss of her beloved son. My father, trying to lighten the blow and inject God into the situation, told her that she should not

feel that way because this physician is not God. He then said that they were taking me to our neighborhood physician, and that they had to depend on God. If He chooses to take me away, that is His business. But if He does not choose it, I would be healed. Then my parents took me to the Greek physician next door to our house. He calmly examined me and informed them that I had an advanced case of diphtheria, it was quite serious, but he would do what he could giving me the standard treatment and God would do the rest. I don't need to tell you the end of the story.

The famous physician gave despair to my parents, while the not so famous gave them hope. Who was the greater of the two? Of course it was the one who administered hope. This is what Jesus, the greatest physician that ever lived, did in a similar situation. He gave Jairus, whose daughter was actually dead, the hope that she would live.

After this, St. Luke writes that when Jesus came to the house, He found it full of mourners, and He rebuked them telling them not to weep, because the girl was sleeping. This is how our Lord viewed death. He said the same thing about Lazarus when he died. Death is no problem for the originator and the author of life. With a simple word He can order death to leave. The mourners laughed at Him, but He did nothing in retaliation. We can compare this with the prophet Elisha when teenagers in Jericho ridiculed him. He cursed them, and then two bears came out of the woods and attacked the boys killing many of them.

Here we see the Lord of Glory ridiculed by a few women, but He does not respond. He came to save not destroy, to offer life not to administer death. The only punishment that He administered in this situation was to exclude them from witnessing the miracle. The Bible tells us that He took only the parents and three of His disciples, Peter, John, and James into the girl's bedroom. Then, in order to avoid prolonging the parent's agony, He took the girl's hand and ordered her to rise. She immediately did, as if she was asleep. What a physician!

7. The Daughter of the Canaanite Woman

As things began to turn against Jesus, He felt a need to get away from the crowds and be alone with His disciples for a period of rest. The healing of the Canaanite woman's daughter happened during one of those periods. At this point in His earthly life, conditions were not too favorable. King Herod was suspicious of Him, the nation's religious establishment was against Him, and even though fascinated by His miracles and eloquent speeches, the people began to show signs of hostility to some of His words. So, St. Matthew tells us, He withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. These two gentile cities in the northern region beyond Samaria were inhabited by pagans who worshipped the great mother-goddess; Ashtoreth, among other idols. Ashtoreth was supposed to give her followers every thing good to enjoy, while permitting them to indulge in all kinds of evil.

Going to this remote region for some rest and regrouping, Jesus was approached by a Canaanite woman. She wanted Him to heal her daughter who was possessed with a strong evil spirit to the extent that she was unable to do anything on her own. Disappointed that her gods were unable to heal her, the woman came to Jesus whose fame had spread to their territory. Addressing Him, she said, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely possessed by a demon." (Mt 15:22) Jesus, who was known to respond to such requests, did not answer her. It was as if He did not hear what she said. She was amazed at His silence and repeated her request. Still, there was no answer. She must have repeated her request several times, for the disciples, annoyed by her persistence, asked Him to heal her daughter and send her away.

As we reflect on what this gentile woman did and said, we can't help admiring her and her strong faith in Jesus. First, she called Him "Lord", thus revealing her respect for Him as a superior Being. Then she followed that by calling Him "the Son of David", which meant that she recognized Him as Israel's Messiah. But in the face of her passionate pleading, the Lord did not respond. She was not discouraged and continued to plead with Him. The disciples must have been surprised; for this was the first time they had seen Him refuse someone's request for healing. They may have thought that it was because she was a gentile, but they remembered that He healed the Centurion's slave, and

he was a gentile.

While they were thinking about this, Jesus answered them, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” (Mt 15:24) When the woman heard that, she knelt before Him, and begged Him again to help her. Then Jesus answered, “It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.” (Mt 15:26) That was one of the most severe answers that Jesus gave to someone asking Him for help. The disciples were probably shocked, but the woman was not. Looking at His heavenly face, and seeing no animosity or hatred, but only love and compassion, she felt that He was testing her. So, she was encouraged and said to Him, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.” (Mt 15:27)

Some may feel that Jesus was unduly hard on her. He did not only reject her request, but He also called her a dog. The word “dog” as used by Jesus here did not mean, what it means today. It was a word used to differentiate between the Israelites who called themselves “children”, and the gentiles whom they called “dogs.” Even though this reveals that the Jewish people felt superior to the rest of the world, the word did not carry any hostile or bad connotation. Yet, so far Jesus has not acted like the great physician that He was. But what He did exposed the great faith of that woman, so He could give her full credit. And this is what He did. He looked to her with admiration and told her, “O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.” (Mt 15:28) Finally, the great physician came through and healed the woman's daughter, after she passed the difficult test that He put her through.

8. The Deaf and Dumb Man of the Decapolis

St. Mark is the only one who mentions this healing. He must have witnessed it personally, because he gives some of the Aramaic words that Jesus used and includes details that only an eyewitness would see. He writes that as Jesus returned from His visit to Tyre and Sidon, He went through the region of the Decapolis. There they brought Him a man suffering from deafness and difficulty speaking. What was the reason? Was it due to demon possession or due to a physical condition?

The Bible does not say, but it was most likely caused by physical conditions. As soon as the Lord received the request, He took the man aside, away from the noise and interference of the crowd. It may be the man needed to concentrate on what Jesus was going to do. Then He did something He had never done before. Instead of saying a word, or laying His hand, He first put His fingers into his ears, then He spat and touched his tongue. He probably put His fingers in his ears, because He wanted him to feel His fingers, and to know that the first step in his healing is restoring his hearing. It may be when he felt our Lord's fingers in his ears, his faith was awakened and he consequently realized that his ears would be opened.

After this He touched his tongue with His spittle. This was a sign to the man that He was now working on his speech. He then looked up to heaven. Was He praying to the Father to give Him the healing power? I don't think so, for the simple reason that He did not need to be given anything; He had it. Also this was not a particularly difficult miracle, so most likely He did it for the man's benefit. He was showing him that the power that is healing him is the power of God. Then St. Mark tells us that Jesus also sighed. This was an expression of His sadness at the sorry state of affairs that His beloved man had reached because of his sinfulness. Then He said one word, as if He was speaking to his ears and tongue, "Ephphatha", which means, "Be opened." Immediately the man was cured from his deafness and his tongue was loosened. Once again the great physician performed His role perfectly, and the patient who suffered from multiple symptoms was completely healed.

9. The Blind Man of Bethesda

Again, St. Mark is the only gospel writer who includes this healing. He writes that when Jesus and His disciples went to Bethesda, a blind man was brought to Him to be healed. For the second time Jesus took someone who needed healing, away from the crowd. Why did He do that? Was it because He wanted the man to concentrate on his condition? Or was it because He did not want the people to see this miracle? They often asked Him to see a miracle. This was something

that He hated and refused to do. St. Mark writes that when they were away from the people, Jesus opened his eyes. But He did it in two steps. First He put some of His spittle on his eyes and then He touched them. He then asked him if he saw anything. The man said that he saw some light, and that men appear to him as trees. Then Jesus touched his eyes again and asked him again. This time his sight was completely restored.

Here we ask, why did Jesus choose to heal him in two steps? We know that He never did this with any other patient. Why did He do it with this man? A possible explanation is that He did that because the man's faith in the beginning was not strong. And when he received the first step of his healing, his faith got a boost and as a result he was ready to receive the second step. Another question is why did Jesus use two ways to heal this man? He used His spittle and His hands. A possible reason is again the weakness of the man's faith. People with weak faith often require strong signs to believe.

This was what happened with Naaman the commander of the Syrian army. He had leprosy and had come from a great distance to be healed by Elisha the prophet. What did Elisha do? He did not even come out to meet him. He sent a messenger; probably his servant Gehazi to tell him to go and wash in the Jordan River seven times and he would be healed from his leprosy. When Naaman heard this he was angry, for he felt that this was too simple to heal him. He said to his servants that he could have bathed in one of the rivers of Damascus and saved himself the trouble of coming to Israel. He was about to leave when his servants pointed out to him that he would lose nothing by bathing in the Jordan. And when he did he was cured of his leprosy.

It may be that this blind man needed more assurance that what Jesus did would bring a change in his case, and Jesus obliged. The great physician, who knows psychological as well as physical problems, knew that this man needed a double remedy, and He gave it to him. He demonstrated by this that He knows what works for each of His patients and treats him accordingly.

10. The Woman with the Spirit of Infirmity

St. Luke is the only one who writes about this healing. He writes that one Sabbath, Jesus was attending service in one of the synagogues, and He noticed a woman unable to stand straight. She was bent at the waist, and He noticed the agony on her face. He also knew that she had been in this condition for eighteen years. So after the service was over, and before the people left, He called her. Nobody asked Him to do anything, but He had compassion on her and decided to heal her.

Because He was the great physician that He was, He decided to treat and heal one of the daughters of Abraham, as He called her. What was the cause of her condition? Was it physical or was it mental? Jesus gave us the clue when He said that Satan bound her. He meant that the reason for her condition was that she was possessed by a demon. This time, He did not order the evil spirit to leave her, He told her, “Woman, you are freed from your infirmity.” (Lk 13:12) To seal her healing, He put His hand on her and she was instantly healed.

Other Qualities of the Great Physician:

Beside the qualities we mentioned above, there are others that add up to the greatness of our Lord as the best physician that mankind has ever seen.

a) The absence of discrimination:

Some may say that He did discriminate. Didn't He instruct His disciples to do just this, after He gave them authority to cast out unclean spirits and to heal every disease and infirmity? He told them, “Go nowhere among the gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritan, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” (Mt 10:5,6) What could be more discriminating than that? We cannot deny this, but we can explain why it happened.

Jesus came to the world as a Jewish man. The original promise that God gave to Adam and Eve as they were ushered out of the Garden of Eden was meant for the whole human race. But He chose a descendant of

Abraham to come as the Savior. Even though He came to save all humanity, He felt that He should go to His people first. These instructions to the disciples came at the beginning of His ministry. Then when His people rejected Him, His message went to the rest of the world. After His ascension, and according to what He told them before He left them, He said, “Go and make disciples of all nations, and baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” (Mt 28:19) But even before this, toward the end of His ministry on earth He showed no discrimination, as evident in His encounter with the Samaritan woman, His stay in Samaria two days to heal the Canaanite woman’s daughter, and also in healing the Centurion's slave.

b) The Sharing of His power

Even though He was a human being, Jesus had no jealousy of anyone who could heal the sick, or cast out evil spirits. This jealousy was found in His disciples when one of them told Him one day, “Teacher, we saw a man casting out demons in your name, and we forbade him, because he was not following us.” (Mk 9:38) Jesus said to him, “Do not forbid him... For he that is not against us is for us.”(Mk 9:39)

This kind of professional jealousy is common among human beings, even among people who are doing God's work. Another example is the complaint of John the Baptist’s disciples when they observed that Jesus' disciples were baptizing people and that more people were following Him than were following John. St. John is the only one who records this. After a discussion between John's disciples and a Jew over purification, they went to him saying, “Rabbi, he who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you bore witness, he is baptizing, and all are going to him.” (Jn 3:26)

What was John's response? He rejected their jealousy and told them, “No one can receive anything except what is given to him from heaven. You yourselves bear witness that I said, I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him. He who has the bride is the bridegroom; the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice; therefore this joy of mine is full. He must

increase and I must decrease.” (Jn 3:27-30) No jealousy there. He knew his position and was happy that he was given the privilege of preparing the way before Jesus.

c) No Medicine

In all His healings, Jesus never used anything that could be considered medicine. In most cases He healed by His word. This happened when He healed the official's son, the paralytic who had been sick for thirty eight years, the demoniac at the synagogue, Peter's mother-in-law, the leper, the paralytic who was carried by his friends and lowered in front of Him, the man with the withered hand, the Centurion's son, the dumb demoniac, the demoniac of the Decapolis, the ten lepers, Bartimaeous the blind, and also when He raised the widow's son, Jairus' daughter, and Lazarus. In the cases of the man born blind and the blind man of Bethesda, He used either His spittle, or His spittle and some clay from the soil. These can hardly be called medicine. Our Lord used them for a reason and when they were used, they were given free.

Jesus' disciples, who like their master, either said a few words or laid their hands on those who needed healing, continued this tradition of using no medicine in healing patients. This continued until the number of believers increased to the extent that it became almost impossible for the disciples to physically reach each person in need of healing. This is when they began to use oil to carry the healing power to the people, instead of waiting for the physical touch of one of the disciples. St. James is the one who told us that this practice began while the disciples were still living. He wrote in His epistle, “Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed a sin, he will be forgiven.” (Jas 5:14,15)

d) No Charge

Jesus never charged anything from the people He healed. But some say that sometimes He required faith, and they wonder whether this is not

some kind of a charge!

As we explore the relationship between healing and faith, we find that there is no consistent pattern. Jesus Himself emphasized the importance of faith, not only in relation to healing, but also for all His miracles. One of His clearest statements about this was to His disciples when they showed their amazement at His ability to cast an evil spirit from a boy when they couldn't. Jesus told them that they could not “Because of your little faith. For truly, I say to you, if you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move hence to yonder place,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you.” (Mt 17:20,21)

So, it seems that faith is essential for those who are to perform miracles. How about those receiving the miracle? Do they need faith too? The answer is sometimes yes and sometimes no. Jesus sometimes asked the person seeking healing whether he had faith or not. But in many cases He did not ask and there was no mention of faith as a condition for Jesus to heal him. A few examples may help clarify this.

In some cases, those asking for or receiving the miracle had faith. For instance the Centurion had strong faith not only that Jesus could heal his servant if He went to him at home, but also that He could heal him if He just said a word. The same can be said about the Canaanite woman and the friends of the paralytic who carried him to Jesus. The Bible tells us that when Jesus saw their faith, He looked at the man and told him “My son your sins are forgiven.” (Mt 9:2) Then He healed him.

But we also find that this is not always the case, some received healing when their faith was not strong. An example of this is the man who brought his son who was possessed by an evil spirit to Jesus. He pleaded with Him to heal him and Jesus said to him, “All things are possible to him who believes.” (Mk 9:23) Hearing this, the man panicked because he realized that his faith was not strong. He cried out and said, “I believe, help my unbelief.” (Mk 9:24) Did the man have faith or not? His statement indicates both. He began by saying that he believes, and ended pleading with Jesus to tolerate his lack of belief. He

had at best, a very shaky faith. When Jesus heard this, He appreciated his honesty and healed his son.

We also find that Our Lord performed healings with no faith mentioned at all. An example is the son of the widow of Nain. St. Luke tells us that Jesus had not seen the boy before and knew neither the mother nor anyone from her family. He met the funeral outside the town of Nain, and when He saw the mother crying her heart out, He had compassion on her and raised her son. No one asked Him to do anything, and He did not bother to find whether she had faith or not. He raised this young man because He felt sorry for his mother. Other examples include Peter's mother-in-law, the woman with the spirit of infirmity, and the man with the withered hand. With the paralytic of Bethesda, Jesus did not ask whether he had faith or not, but asked him whether he wanted to be healed.

The faith that Jesus talked a lot about is that which makes people accept the salvation that He offered them, believe in Him, and decide to follow Him. This was the most important goal that He tried to accomplish in His ministry on earth. Time and time again, He asked the people to believe in Him. Even with the things He said and the things He did, they didn't. They decided instead that He did not deserve to live, and they killed Him on a cross.

e) A Perfect Track Record

Jesus has a perfect record as a physician. Every patient that He treated was healed. His record was 100%. How many physicians can claim success even close to this? None. To add to this, Jesus' treatment, if you want to call it that, did not take any time. Many were healed instantly. The second Jesus said the word; the patient was healed. A few had to wait, but the wait was not for more than a few minutes. This happened when Jesus wanted to take the patient on the side or away from the crowd. We don't need to cite examples, because all His healings show those extraordinary features of His work.

f) Jesus as a Physician Went Beyond the Body

Jesus did not only take care of the physical condition of His patients, but also took care of their spiritual condition. So it can be said that his patients got much more than what they bargained for. Most of them came to Him to be healed of their physical infirmities. They were healed, but in addition they were deeply touched by His personality and His spiritual message. Even though the Bible does not mention this, early legends state that many of those whom He healed followed Him and many became instant believers. The man born blind met Jesus after being chased from the Temple by the Scribes and the Pharisees. And when He asked him, “Do you believe in the Son of man.” (Jn 9:35), he asked, 'who is he?' Jesus told him, “You have seen him, and it is he who speaks to you.” (Jn 9:37) St. John tells us that he said, “Lord, I believe, and he worshipped Him.” (Jn 9:39) The spiritual benefits of His healings were not confined to those who were healed, many of those who watched were impressed by what He did and believed in Him as a result of what they had seen.

Conclusion:

In summarizing why Jesus is considered the greatest physician that the world has ever seen, we see reasons that are compelling. He treated and He healed all who came seeking a cure; He never failed no matter how difficult the disease. His diagnosis was always correct, and the treatment always suited the diagnosis. He did not charge any fees for His services. Those who came to see Him did not wait long. He saw them without any delay, and His treatment was short, simple, and the cure was immediate. He did not discriminate against anyone. He loved His patients and very often He stirred in them interest in their spiritual condition. He did not act superior to His patients, and was willing to make house calls.

We can say that He presents a model of what a successful physician should be and the ideal that every Christian physician should emulate. Our Lord's behavior when He was dealing with the physical infirmities of the people should become the blueprint of every physician who

wants to be like his master. I am aware that some of the things that Jesus did are beyond the reach of any physician. But there are many aspects of His behavior that can be copied by today's practitioners.

CHAPTER TWO

JESUS PRAYS

Prayer is probably one of the most written about topics in Christian literature. It is something that man has practiced from the beginning, whether he was praying to the true God, or to another deity whom he considered his god. It is also one of the most controversial topics. Many believe in it, and many don't. Many practice it every day, while others have never tried it.

Prayer's importance becomes obvious when we know that even though He was the Son of God, the second person of the Holy Trinity, Jesus prayed. The scriptures report several instances, some in front of His disciples and sometimes alone. As we reflect on this, it becomes rather important to shed whatever light we can bring to reveal the truth about this activity and its effects, if any, on the lives of people.

What is prayer?

The first important question is to clarify what prayer is, and what it is not.

Webster defines prayer as, "a request in a humble way, an address to God, or to a god, with adoration, confession, supplication, or thanksgiving".

From this, prayer happens when someone asks for something from somebody to whom he looks up, and who is believed to be superior to the person who is asking. This could be a false god, a person perceived as superior and capable of providing that which is asked for, or it could be the true and living God. The definition also provides us with some important conditions before the act of asking can qualify as prayer. It mentions adoration, confession, supplication, and thanksgiving, which means that if these are absent when we request something, our request

would not be called prayer.

We will elaborate about these later in this chapter. In religious circles prayer is defined as a communication with God. Some interpret this to mean talking TO God, while others interpret it as talking WITH God. Many prefer the former than the latter definition. The difference is that when people talk to God, the communication between them is one way. Man talks to God and presents Him with a laundry list of requests. But when he talks with God, the communication between them becomes two-way, in which man talks to God, and God responds. Some may say that this is highly speculative and absurd, for no one has ever heard any response from God while praying. They may add that God has finished talking to man, because He has said everything He wanted to say through His prophets and said His final words to mankind through His son Jesus Christ.

As we reflect on this, we have to say that when people talk about prayer as a conversation with God, they are not necessarily saying that God will speak to them in an audible sound when they pray. He is capable of communicating with man in many other ways. He will somehow deliver his message to man when, and as, He wants. He may put an idea in his head, and keep repeating it until man realizes that this message is from Him. Sometimes He may deliver His message through a priest, a friend, through a sermon, or a verse from the Bible.

We all know the story of St. Anthony. He was a rich man and one day entered the church as the priest was preaching. The first thing that he heard, was the priest repeating the advice that Jesus gave to the rich ruler when he asked Him what should I do to inherit eternal life. “You need one thing, go sell all that you have and give it to the poor.” St. Anthony considered this a personal message from God, and sold all that he had and entered the wilderness to devote the rest of his life to worshipping God.

It is true that during Old Testament times God did talk to man in an audible voice, but He found that this way of communication was not effective. It was counterproductive, especially when He spoke directly

to the people. The Bible tells us that when God came down on Mount Sinai to give the Israelites the Ten Commandments, they were afraid. They told Moses afterward that they did not want to face God again, but asked Moses to continue to speak to God on their behalf and then tell them what He wants. They did not want to repeat the experience. It was too much for them. God probably revealed Himself that way to help them to realize that their God is the real and true God. They had been attracted to the gods of the nations whom they conquered because they were concrete entities that they could see. But their God, whom Moses preached, was an invisible God, and probably most of them were not convinced that He was a real god.

So God chose to talk to them directly, in an attempt to convince them that He is real. For this purpose, His presence was preceded and accompanied by thunder, lightening, fire, thick clouds, and an earthquake. All of this was intended to give the Israelites the most concrete presence of their God. So His presence was seen, heard and felt. This went on for some time. Moses in the Book of Exodus records verbatim what God said on that day to His people, and it occupies four chapters in the book. In addition, God allowed Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel to go up on the mountain and, “they saw the God of Israel; and there was under His feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone.” (Ex 24:9,10)

We do not know what exactly they saw. We know that God the Father was never seen by humans. So what the Israelites saw that day was a manifestation of God's presence that they had never seen before. What was that manifestation? It is impossible to speculate about it. We also know that God talked directly with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and all of His prophets. He was not rebuffed by any of them, as He was by the Israelites in the Sinai desert, because of their deep reverence and love for Him.

In summary, we can say that God spoke to many people directly, but He probably stopped because He found it ineffective. He may still do it with a few people, but as a rule He does not do it any more. But, He always finds ways to communicate with man, if man is eager to listen to

what He has to say.

Another reason that we do not hear God when He sends us a message is the fact that we never stop to hear Him. When most of us pray, we speak all the time without giving God a chance to talk. We cannot hear God unless we stop speaking and begin listening. But before we try it we have to know that this is not something that everybody can do, it requires a relatively high level of spirituality that not many can attain. For anyone to be able to do that, he has to have a strong relationship with God.

So it seems that for beginners, prayer will start with talking TO God, and when people grow spiritually their prayers become talking WITH God.

The History of Prayer:

If we stick to our definition that prayer is a conversation with God, we then find that prayer is as old as man himself. When the Lord God created Adam and Eve, He talked to them often. He expected that they would respond to Him and they did. So we can say that prayer is a behavior that God expected with man from the very beginning. And then, God continued to speak to mankind through his prophets and His written word and He certainly expected us to respond.

As we scan the Bible we find that beginning with Adam and Eve, everyone who knew God, talked to Him. All His prophets did. Even some of those who did evil in His sight, talked to Him. Cain did, Jacob did before he surrendered his life to God. I am sure that Saul of Tarsus talked to God, before he was converted. Many others did as well. Jesus himself mentions this when He said, in the Sermon on the Mount, “In praying do not repeat empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard for their many words.” (Mt 6:7) Also, in His parable about the Publican and the Pharisee who went to the temple, both prayed.

How important is prayer?

There is no disagreement on this point. Everybody agrees that prayer is extremely important in the life of any believer. The prayers recorded in the Bible make up a significant part of its volume. All the prophets were men of prayer. And when the Son of God came to our earth, He prayed many times. It is important because it is our way to communicate with our heavenly Father. Earthly fathers enjoy it when their children open up and share what happens to them with them, even when there is nothing important to report. It is a sign that their children love them and trust them. Sharing is an indication of love. People are not known to share anything with those whom they hate. God feels the same way. He loves us to the extent that He enjoys hearing us talking to Him. When we don't talk to Him, He feels that we don't love Him. This makes Him sad. Even when we ask Him for this and that, He is happy to hear it, even though He knows our needs, before we ask. So the importance of prayer in our lives is to keep the channel of communication opened between God and us. This keeps our relationship with Him strong. As well as asking Him for our needs, we are also telling Him how much we love Him.

How are we to pray?

As we examine the prayers of the people in the Old Testament, we find that they were true conversations between God and His people. These people did not recite well-known phrases. When stricken by disasters, peril, or persecution, they poured their hearts out to God in simple words void of philosophy or pretence. Many experienced the power of prayer, even if they were not spiritually sophisticated or highly educated. Man did not need anyone to teach him how to pray. He prayed when he felt a need to talk to his creator. The first such experience must have been Adam's. God gave him, among other things, the gift of speech. Undoubtedly God spoke with him even before He created Eve, but the Bible does not mention any specific exchange between them. The first words that the Bible records for Adam are, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh, and she shall be called Woman because she was taken out of man." (Gen 2:23) He must have said this to God, so this could be considered the first prayer in the

history of man.

After this, we find the dialogue that took place between God and Adam and Eve and we are shocked by their lack of reverence in what they tell Him. When God asked Adam, “Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” (Gen 3:11) Adam answers, “the woman whom you have given to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.” (Gen 3:12) Instead of expressing his sorrow that he disobeyed God, he blames God for his mistake. The same thing is repeated with Eve. Eve also blames Him for her mistake, because it was He who created the serpent. This rudeness and lack of respect is the natural result of our forefathers listening to Satan. He was probably the author of those words. Later we find the exchange between God and Cain. Cain's response also was rude and lacking in reverence.

As we follow the story of mankind as it is recorded in the Bible, we find the first explicit mention of man praying to God in Gen. 4:26, when it says, “then men began to call on the name of the Lord”. If we compute the time that this was supposed to happen we find that it was about the year 235 after creation. It is hard to believe that no man or woman before that date had looked up to heaven and expressed to God his anger, frustration, despair, joy, or any other human emotion. We expect that Adam told his sons and daughters about God and what had happened in the Garden of Eden. We can imagine that he told them about offering sacrifices to God, so it is difficult to imagine that they did not try to reach Him one way or the other.

The next person to consider is Enoch. He was so righteous that God took him to be with Him. It is hard to believe that Enoch was not a man of prayer, but the Bible does not tell us much about him. It says that, “And Enoch lived sixty-five years, and fathered Methuselah; and Enoch walked with God after he fathered Methuselah three hundred years, and had other sons and daughters. And all the days of Enoch were three hundred sixty five years. And Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him.” (Gen 5:21) Another saint who definitely prayed to God was Noah, who was also described as “walking with God”. Again though, the Bible does not record any of his prayers

Abraham is the next man whom the Bible mentions as a man of prayer. He is a man who was called by God to follow Him. He did, and he built an altar to God in every place he went; and when you have an altar you have prayer. The Bible records several exchanges between God and Abraham. In these, Abraham responds to God as if he were responding to a friend, and indeed he was God's friend. But we notice that in all his speech with Him, he respected and revered God. He must have talked to God when things got bad, and he felt that he needed him. Even Hagar Sarah's servant learned from her mistress how to pray. When Sarah dealt harshly with her and she fled, the angel of the Lord found her and told her, "Behold, you are with child, and shall bear a son, you shall call his name Ishmael, because the Lord has heard your affliction." (Gen: 16:11)

We ask what did the Lord hear? He must have heard Hagar's appeal to Him in her distress and this was God's answer. And after this He ordered her to go back.

We find in Abraham's life a prayer that merits our attention. This happened when God visited him and told him what He intended to do to Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham began to bargain with him about the number of righteous people it would take to avert His anger against the city. At this point, Abraham recognized God, addressing Him as "the judge of all the earth", and the "Lord." The importance of this prayer is that it is the first intercessory prayer offered to God. Abraham pleaded with Him to spare the city. It shows also that Abraham had such a strong relationship with God that he was able to talk with Him that way.

As we follow the Patriarchs of the Old Testament, we find that all of them prayed, addressing God as the occasion dictated. When God inflicted the women in Abimelech's household with infertility, Abraham prayed to God to lift up the affliction, and He did. When Eliezer, Abraham's slave who had been charged to find a wife for Isaac, came to the land of Nahor, he prayed to God to choose his master's wife. And when Isaac found that Rebecca was barren, he prayed to God to open her womb.

This brings us to Jacob, who began his life as a second-class citizen, even though he was a twin with his brother Esau. Because he was born few minutes after him, he was not considered the first-born. His mother loved him while his father loved his brother. Jacob used his cunning to overcome this. He got his brother to sell him his birth right for a pot of lentil and deceived his father pretending that he was Esau in order to obtain his blessing. He then fled to his uncle's land and worked as a shepherd for him. Using devious methods, he got rich and wanted to go back to his territory. At this point in his life, Jacob was a self-made man who had used his own intelligence and hard work to get ahead. And although God had a few contacts with him before, he did not surrender his life to him until now. On his way back, he heard that his brother Esau was coming with four hundred men to meet him. Possibly for the first time in his life, he felt afraid. Here, Jacob did not feel equal to the situation and did not know what to do.

He then called on God to help him. He prayed, and what a great prayer it was. He said, "O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O Lord who said to me, 'Return to your country and to your kindred, and I will do you good', I am not worthy of the least of all the deeds of steadfast love and all the faithfulness which you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two companies. Deliver me, I pray you, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I fear him, lest he come and slay us all, the mothers with the children. But you did say, 'I will do you good, and make your descendants as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered, for multitude.'" (Gen 32:9-12)

As we examine this prayer, we find that it is a genuine outpouring of a heart in stress. Jacob felt inadequate for the first time and turned to God. He remembered that God had promised to bless him and make him a great nation, something that did not move him before. But under the present circumstances, he realized this as his only hope. He reminded God of His promises and asked Him to save him from sure destruction at the hands of his brother. He also realized that all he had accomplished was not solely due to his efforts. He was humble, and put

his life in God's hands.

We don't know how much faith he had at this point, but he said what he wanted to say and waited for the result, hoping that the God of his fathers will hearken to his rescue. But he was not absolutely sure that God would come through for him, so he made arrangements to send a generous gift to his brother to be delivered to him before he reached him. He also divided his flock and his people into droves that he sent ahead of him. He thought if his brother was after him at least his possessions and family would escape. As a result, possibly for the first time in a long time, Jacob was left alone.

The Bible then records an incident, which many do not understand. It tells us that a man appeared from nowhere and began to wrestle with Jacob until dawn, and when he could not prevail against him, he touched the hollow of his thigh, and Jacob's thigh was put out of joint. We notice that the man just “touched” the hollow of his thigh, he did not hit him hard, but only touched him, and that touch was enough to dislocate his leg.

So this man had a supernatural power, he was not an ordinary man. And we ask why did he hit Jacob? It seems that the man was trying to convince Jacob to do something and Jacob was resisting. What could that be? It was nothing material, or physical, because the man did not end up taking anything from him. So it must be something intellectual, or spiritual. It must be something related to his fear of his brother and his prayer to God to save him. Most probably this man was God. He was asking Jacob to surrender his life to Him and Jacob was unwilling to do that. It is very difficult for someone who is a self-made man to surrender his life to God. So when God could not make him do that, He resorted to something that would impress him. He touched the hollow of his thigh and his thigh was put out of joint. At that point, Jacob realized that the man was either God or one of His angels, so he gave in and asked Him to bless him. This is when God changed his name from Jacob to Israel, which means the prince who fought with God. This was the beginning of the complete change in Jacob from a man who depended on himself in everything he did, to a man of God, who

depended on his God in everything.

As we go through the Old Testament we find that hundreds of people such as Moses, Joshua, Samuel, David, Solomon, the prophets Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, and others prayed to God, for specific reasons. We also find that ordinary people prayed when they felt oppressed or distressed. Why then, did Jesus' disciples ask Him to teach them how to pray, when their Bible was full of hundreds of prayers, which were acceptable to God? It may have been that when Jesus outlined His new theology, especially the relationship between God and man, the disciples felt that the old way of praying was inadequate in light of the new concepts and understanding. What Jesus had told them opened a new page in our relationship with the Father. The Lord answered their request. This makes their question a valid question, which He honored by His answer.

Looking at the present situation, we find that people still ask what is the right way to pray. Some recommend using the Agpeya, some insist that the only prayer people should use, is the "Lord's prayer." Didn't He say when you pray say, "Our father..." Others do not subscribe to this, arguing that they cannot talk to God, or with Him using somebody else's words. They feel that they must use their own words; otherwise they will be just repeating written words mechanically without any awareness of their meaning especially if they do this day after day. This would be like performing a ritual, and going through the motions, without the faintest idea about what it means.

They say that if prayer is opening one's heart and pouring one's self before God, then recorded prayer is not too helpful. It may even hinder communication with God. So instead of being helpful, it becomes a handicap. There may be some truth to that, if prayers are recited without meaning. But no one has said that we should confine ourselves to the Agpeya or to any other written prayer. We combine the two as many do. The value of the Agpeya is that it offers a variety of prayers that can fit many of our needs, written by men of prayer as David, Asaph, the sons of Korah, and others who had deep spiritual experiences with God. So using these prayers could be a learning experience, because many especially the neophytes are lost when they are told that they have to

pray. They ask, what are we going to say? The prayers in the Agpeya can be a tremendous help to these, and could teach them their first lesson in how to address God.

One last word before we shift to another aspect of prayer. Whether you use the Agpeya or your own words be sure to think about every word you say, and be absolutely honest with God. Don't say one word that you don't feel and believe. If you are confused, tell Him that, if you are sad tell Him that, if you are frustrated tell Him exactly how you feel, and even if you are mad at Him, tell Him. He will appreciate your honesty, and sincerity.

What should we pray for?

As we examine the many prayers that are recorded in the Bible, we find many different things that people have prayed for. We find prayers for almost everything under the sun.

Here is a sampling of the things that people have prayed for: an heir (Gen 15), a wicked city (Gen 18), a bride (Gen 24), obedience (Gen 22), a barren wife (Gen 24), a vow (Gen 28), blessing (Gen 48,49), praise (Ex 15, and many Psalms), benediction (Num 6:24), preservation and protection (Num 10:35), upholding of divine honor (Num 12), the removal of judgement (Num 11:1), meekness (Num 12), relief from death (Num 21), a new leader (Num 27), a privileged task (Deut 3:23), thanksgiving (Deut 26), direction (Judges 1,53), signs (Judges 6), an unborn child (Judges 13), a lost tribe (Judges 21), national trouble (1 Sam 7), courage (1 Sam 17), deaf ears (1 Sam 28), restoration of war spoil (1 Sam 30), understanding of affliction (2 Sam 22), a wise heart (1 Kin 3), confessing a sin (2 Sam 24), dedicating a building (1 Kin 8), a withered hand (1 Kin 13), vision (2 Kin 6), longer life (2 Kin 20), fear (1 Chr 5), triumph over anger (Neh 4), intercession (Job 42), divine action (Ps 7), escape from trials (Ps 2,103), peace (Isa 26), justice (Jer 10), divine vengeance (Jer 15), believing (Jer 42), forgiveness (Mt 5), healing (Mt 21), adoration (Lk 2), the bread of life (Jn 4), and a successor (Act 1)

We find that the majority of these are worldly requests, because this was the predominant goal in following God before Jesus. But when He came, He began His efforts to de-emphasize the worldly and to draw attention to the spiritual. As a result, people began to learn new concepts about prayer. What are these new lessons?

1) The first is that God loves man and stands ready to help him with his needs. No verse in the Bible describes this love better than what St. John writes in his gospel, “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that he whosoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” (Jn 3:16) His readiness to help was expressed by Jesus when He said, “If you then being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?” (Mt 7:11)

2) Because He knows that we are physical entities, God allows us to ask for our material needs, yet He wants us to ask first for the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all the other needs will be granted to us. This means that we have to change our priorities so our spiritual life will come first followed by our physical life.

Jesus shows us to ask for our physical needs when He included the phrase “Give us this day our daily bread”, in the prayer that He taught to His disciples.

3) If you want to be given, you have to ask. God ordinarily will not volunteer giving you anything. He wants you to initiate the action. Jesus proclaimed this in the Sermon on the Mount, when He said, “For every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him that knocks it shall be opened.” (Mt 7:8)

This, however, does not preclude God from giving to his people without being asked by them. He has done this many times since He created man. He certainly gave man everything that he enjoys in this world without being asked. He gave to the Israelites, and even after they rebelled against Him, fed them manna and quail for forty years. He expressed this in the Sermon on the Mount. In exhorting people to love

their enemies, He said, “Your Father in heaven; He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends His rain on the just and on the unjust.” (Mt 5:45)

When He came to Earth, His deeds were good for everyone, those who asked and those who did not. Among these were, the man born blind, the son of the widow of Nain, and Lazarus. He gave spiritual gifts to many without being asked. This is beautifully expressed by St. Paul when he wrote, “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are inspired by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as He wills. (1Cor 12:7-11)

4) We need faith when we pray. Jesus did not spare any effort to teach the Israelites this simple spiritual principle, which is so important to our spiritual well being. This seems to be the general principle. But there are exceptions. As we read the Bible, we find in a few cases, the person receiving the blessing or whatever was received, did not have faith in God, or did but failed to show it. A few examples will demonstrate that this is possible. The son of the widow of Nain, was dead when Jesus stopped his procession and raised him from the dead, His mother didn't show any faith, and didn't even ask Jesus to raise her son. Yet Jesus raised him, because He had compassion on his mother. This compassion was strong enough to bypass the requirement of faith.

Another example is that of the man born blind. In this case we find that he didn't even ask the Lord to open his eyes, there was no faith displayed. The only thing that was discussed was whether the man or his parents had sinned for him to be born blind.

5) In order to elicit a response from God, prayer has to come out of the heart, not from the lips. It has to be offered with fervor, and zeal. Isaiah

wrote about this when he said, “And the Lord said, 'Because this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment of men learned by rote; therefore, behold, I will again do marvelous things with this people... the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hid.’” (Isa 29:13)

6) We must pray for each other, which is an indication of our love for each other, and a proof that God allows us to intercede on behalf of others. St. James wrote in his epistle, “Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effect.” (Jas 5:16)

The unanswered prayer:

When the topic of prayer is brought up in any group, one of the questions often raised concerns unanswered prayer. We all have experienced this in one form or another during our spiritual journey. It is a rare person who can claim that he never suffered from it. I cannot think of anyone who escaped this except Jesus.

The Bible deals with this important problem by identifying some of those who experienced it. It tells us about St. Paul's unanswered prayer. When he asked the Lord three times to remove from him a thorn that he had in the flesh, God refused. He records this in his second epistle to the Corinthians. He wrote, “A thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to harass me, to keep me from being elated. Three times I besought the Lord about this, that it should leave me; but He said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’” (2 Cor 12:7,8) This is one of the rare instances in which God explained His action to a human being. In this case He plainly told St. Paul that the reason was to protect him against pride. In almost every other case God does not reveal His reasons for not granting what was prayed for.

Another unanswered prayer was that of David. When God struck his son by Bathsheba sick, David fasted and prayed for seven days hoping

that God would spare his life, but He did not. David did not have to ask anyone why. He knew that God had done this because this child was the result of David's sin with his mother.

As we reflect on this, we find that, in both of these cases, God's reason for denying the request was either revealed or was obvious. But when people bring up unanswered prayer, they are always confused, and often say, "didn't God say, 'If you shall ask ANYTHING in my name, I will do it?'" (Jn 14:14) Why did He refuse to give me what I asked for?" In these cases, the person asking obviously does not see the reason behind God's refusal of his request. Jesus touched on this subject when He said, "You have asked nothing in my name; ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full." (Jn 16: 24) The key word in this verse is "in my name".

This may give us a clue to one of the reasons why God rejects some of our requests. The requests are not appropriate to be asked in the name of our Lord. In other words, Jesus has to approve those requests first. If they are according to His will, He will grant them, if they are not, they will be rejected. Earthly fathers behave in a similar way. When their children ask them for something that they believe will hurt them or hurt others, they refuse. So if earthly fathers whose knowledge is limited are allowed to do that, isn't God entitled to do the same?

Sometimes people ask for something that does not conflict with God's will, yet still do not receive it. There are a number of other reasons that can hinder the fulfillment of a prayer. Among these are a lack of faith, lack of perseverance, or God's desire to use the situation to bolster the spirituality of the person making the request. Often this is not obvious, and may result in confusion and frustration. It may lead them to give up on God and to refuse to maintain a relationship with Him. We should try to keep our faith and wait on God, until things get clarified. This requires a strong faith in God and His love for us. An example here will be helpful in understanding this.

Let's consider the story of Joseph. He must have prayed many unanswered prayers, beginning with the time that he was thrown in the

dry well by his brothers. He was left there for some time during which he must have prayed to God to rescue him, but God did not. After his brothers sold him to the Ishmaelites, they took him to Egypt. During that long trip he must have prayed to God to save him, but God did not. Later, when Potiphar's wife accused him of sexual harassment, he must have prayed to God to vindicate him, but He did not. When he was thrown in prison, again he pleaded with God to save him, but to no avail. After he interpreted the dreams of Pharaoh's chief butler and chief baker, he asked the chief butler to remember him to Pharaoh, but he did not. Joseph must have prayed that the chief butler would not forget, but he did.

At this point, if Joseph were an ordinary man, he would have left God a long time before, but he did not. He had confidence in God and may have realized that there was a good reason for His inaction. That reason, which was hidden from him all those years, was revealed to him later.

Two years after the head butler was restored to his job, Pharaoh had a dream that no one could interpret. This is when he remembered Joseph. He told Pharaoh about him and after Joseph interpreted Pharaoh's dream, he was made Prime Minister. If God had granted Joseph any of the requests that he made before this, he would have remained nothing more than one of Jacob's sons, and the apple of his father's eye. He would have never become the strong man of Egypt, who lived in splendor and glory and was able to provide millions of people, including his family, with food during those severe seven years of drought. This episode must have strengthened Joseph's faith, and that of his brothers and his father.

The Lord's Prayer:

Without considering the Lord's Prayer, any treatment of the topic of prayer would be incomplete. It is the only prayer that is written by God. If we compare it with some of the other significant prayers in the Bible, such as that of Solomon at the dedication of the Temple or Moses after the Israelites made the golden calf and worshipped it, we find no comparison. The Lord's Prayer is shorter, yet it is comprehensive. It is

captivating, powerful, and reflects a new relationship between man and God.

Our Father:

The word “Our” presupposes that people will often pray in groups and will address God as “Our Father”. These two words carry more meaning than all the other words in the Bible. The Lord God, after sending His Son into the world, is giving us, who defied His authority from the very beginning and disobeyed His commandments over and over again, forgiveness of our sins and granting us the privilege to call him father.

Jesus paints a picture of that father in the parable of the prodigal son. In that parable the father did not interfere in his son's decision. When he asked for his inheritance, he didn't even tell him that he was not prematurely entitled to it. He gave him what he wanted and was sad to see him leave. The heavenly father does the same thing; He does not interfere when one of his children chooses to leave him to follow Satan. But He feels sad like the father in the parable. During the period that His rebellious child is away, He hopes that one day he will come back. He does not write him off, but waits for him until he comes to his senses. Many never come back. But those who do are welcomed with open arms and restored to their original place in the kingdom of God, with no questions asked.

God calls Himself our father, because this is the closest analogy that He can use with us. He is superior to the best human father who ever lived. He does not make the mistakes human fathers do. He never hates His children as some human fathers do. He will never run out of patience as human fathers do. He is capable of everything that human fathers are not. He is infinite in His power, His knowledge, His love, and His grace. Human beings will never find a better father. As we reflect on this great gift that God bestowed on mankind, we can't stop wondering is man worthy of this wonderful gift? As we survey human history, we find nothing but resentment, defiance, and rebellion against God. We find a sinful creature, who threw away God's kindness and love and disobeyed His commandments, which are given to guide his behavior

toward peace and happiness. He did not trust the Creator who loved him, but trusted the enemy who hated him. This is man whom God loved so much and gave the right to call Him “Father”.

God loved us and did whatever He could to save us, not because we are lovable, but because He is love.

Who art in heaven:

Every human being has two fathers, one on earth and one in Heaven. They are supposed to work together to guide their child to the road that leads to Heaven. When they do, the child will have a better chance of reaching that road and following it for the rest of his life. But when they do not, it is much tougher for the child to make the right decision to follow God. This puts a heavy responsibility on earthly fathers, because they deal with the child when he is most prone to outside influences. Childhood is the period in the life of any individual during which he can be guided toward good or evil. Many parents do not know how to guide their children in the right direction. This is a problem that every newly married couple faces when their first child is born. The majority of parents don't fare any better than these new parents.

No one tells them how to raise their children. College courses deal with everything under the sun, but are completely silent on one of the most important topics in the life of their graduates; how to raise a child. The result is either that new parents treat their children the way they were treated, which in many cases leads to disaster, or follow “their instincts”, which may also lead to disaster. One of the two vital components of raising children is love. The other is discipline. They are both of crucial importance in raising children. Beside its influence on shaping the child's character in the right direction, love is said to be vital in anybody's decision to follow God. The person who has never felt his father's love will find it difficult to believe that God loves him.

Hallowed be thy name:

What does this mean? Often we recite the Lord's Prayer so quickly that we don't realize how beautiful it is. One of the least understood parts is "Hallowed be thy name". We repeat it like parrots. This reminds me of the story of a young boy. Jim was seven years old. Every Sunday his parents took him to Sunday school, before they went to church. He was a good boy, nice, obedient, and good-natured. One day his teacher wanted to know what the children thought about God. Instead of asking a direct question, he thought of using the indirect approach, and asked them to write a letter to God. After they finished, he collected their papers and began reading them and discussing each with its author. Suddenly, he stopped as he looked at Jim's letter. It did not begin with "Dear God" but with "Dear Harold".

The teacher called on Jim to explain, asking him why did he write to his friend instead of writing it to God? Jim answered "I did write it to God, Isn't his name Harold?" The confused teacher asked him where he got the idea that God's name is "Harold". Jim said that he got it from the Bible. Before the teacher could say anything, Jim blurted, "It is in the Lord's prayer, Our Father who art in heaven, Harold be thy name". The teacher trying not to laugh, told him, "Jim, it is hallowed be thy name", and proceeded to explain it to him.

What does it mean? In simple language, it means, "holy be your name". This simple phrase can be interpreted three different ways. The first is, when we pray, we are telling God that His name is holy and we wish that it continue to be holy. Someone may say, "He already knows that, why does He want to hear it from us?" The answer is that when we say it, it becomes praise. Is God hungry for praise like us? Does He need it? To answer these questions we go to the Bible. When we do, we find that the behavior recorded most is the sin that the Israelites committed against God and God's response. We find that praise is a near second. You will find praise in almost every book besides the Psalms and the Song of Songs, which are totally devoted to praise. So we can assume that God loves to be praised by man. Even though the angels, the archangels, the Cherubim, the Seraphim, and millions upon millions of the heavenly host praise him day and night, He still delights in man's

praise.

The reason is that when we praise Him, we are telling Him that we love Him as He loves us. This is the kind of relationship that He delights in. He is happy when He sees some of His children resisting Satan, and refusing to succumb to His temptations. He is delighted and proud to tell Elijah that there are seven thousand knees that did not worship Baal (1 Kings 19:18)

Secondly, when we say, “Hallowed be thy name” we remind ourselves that He is the only one who is holy, and that the rest of us are sinful and are in need of His holiness. This goes a long way toward eliminating traditional human arrogance and helps us to feel humble as we compare our corrupt status with His complete holiness.

The third meaning is the result of the above. When we feel our sinfulness and our desire for the holiness of God to continue, we become aware that it is because of our sinfulness that the name of God is not holy on earth. The name of God is blasphemed and dragged in the mud, because of man's behavior. Look around you. How many people deny His existence? How many worship idols? How many worship Satan? Even among those who say they believe in Him, how many disobey His commandments? How many reject His love? How many turn down His salvation? All this is a denunciation of God as the Supreme Creator of the Universe. The name that is supreme in the world today is the name of Satan, whom our Lord called “the Prince of the World”. So when we pray “Hallowed be thy name, we are really asking Him to give us the strength to resist Satan, and then His name will be holy in us. People will read the holiness of God in our behavior. Jesus said it beautifully when he exhorted His followers to “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” (Mt 5:16)

Thy kingdom come:

When we pray ”thy kingdom come”, we are acknowledging that God is a King, and that His Kingdom is not here yet. We are saying that the

other kingdom, the kingdom of Satan, is the one that has been well established on earth since the dawn of history. Every human being who lived on earth before Jesus' death on the cross was a citizen of that kingdom, whether he liked it or not. All have strayed, the Bible tells us, all have disobeyed God, and all have followed Satan and became citizens in his kingdom. We are praying that God's kingdom becomes more accepted on earth and that it will overtake Satan's kingdom.

We are also praying for the fulfillment of His promise that He will come again for the final confrontation with the powers of evil. This will end in the defeat of Satan and his followers and establish the kingdom of God forever.

Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven:

Here we are praying that God's will prevail on earth as it is in Heaven. God's will is carried throughout the universe. It is He who created this unbelievable universe and who controls everything that we see and cannot see. If this is true, why are we asking Him to do this on earth? Many believe that God's will is active and well on earth. This is one of the arguments that Satan uses against God and draws from it the conclusion that God is responsible for all the suffering that exists in the world today.

One of the most important things about the will of God though is that it covers the entire universe except the will of man. He refused to control this, because He wanted to create a race that would love and obey Him not because they had to, but because they want to. The result is that man decided to rebel against God and the overwhelming majority of human beings have trashed the will of God. This became the rule and those who fulfill the will of God are the exception. This is why we pray to change that, so His will becomes the rule and ignoring it will become the exception.

From this, we can recognize three wills at work in the world: God's will, Satan's will, and man's will. As we compare the three, we find that God's will is the most extensive. It covers the whole universe, except

the wills of men and Satan. God's will is righteous, exact, consistent, benevolent, merciful, holy, loving, and forgiving. Satan's will is limited. It is evident on earth only, and it is evil, harmful, deceitful, tricky, and devoid of truth and holiness. It is interesting to note that some Bible scholars classify God's will into three wills; the moral will, the sovereign will, and the personal will.

The sovereign will is that which controls every physical object in the universe, from the smallest subatomic particle to the biggest galaxy, from the smallest virus to the largest dinosaur. These billions upon billions of physical entities exist and operate ruled by the sovereign will of God. It is He who created them and also the physical laws that will forever rule their behavior. These together with the lower forms of life will never deviate or act on their own. They will, remain forever obedient to the sovereign will of God.

The moral will of God is revealed in His word, His commandments, and in the recorded history, written in the Bible, from the creation of Adam to the present time.

The personal will of God is His choice for every member in His kingdom, it tells each what to do and what not to do. This applies to all the heavenly creatures and also to man. Some, as a matter of fact many, of those who call themselves Christians, believe that this determines our behavior. They claim that since God knows what everyone of us will do, what chance does any person have to behave differently? The answer is that God's prior knowledge does not rob us of the ability to make our own decisions.

The question now is, which of these three wills are we praying for when we say "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven"? It is not His sovereign will. It is His moral will that we are praying for, and when we do, we are asking Him to give us the strength to select the behavior that reflects His will and not ours. Some people include the personal will, and say that when they pray for His will, they are also asking Him to choose for them according to His will. I agree with the principle, but I don't agree with those who ask God for everything, big or small. I feel

that I should ask God for guidance only when I cannot see clearly, or when my knowledge and experience are not adequate to deal with the situation. God wants us to do whatever we can, to put forth the best effort that we can, and ask him to put in the rest, but we have to do our part. We do the possible, and call on Him to do the impossible.

Give us this day our daily bread:

This verse is one of the easiest verses to explain. Here Jesus is telling us to ask for our physical needs. He knows how important these are for us, so He allows us to include them in our prayers. But we notice that this part was not put at the beginning of the prayer, which shows that our physical needs are not the most important thing in our lives. We also notice that we ask for “our daily bread”, not our weekly or monthly bread. He wants us to have faith in Him and ask him for one day's supply only, because we know that tomorrow we can depend on Him as we have today. This resembles God's order to the Israelites when He provided manna and quail. He told them not to gather more than one day's need. But on Friday, He allowed more because on the Sabbath they had to abstain from any kind of work.

And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us:

This verse addresses an important spiritual point that our Lord wanted to make absolutely clear. Every human being needs his sins forgiven to have hope of joining the kingdom of God. Jesus came to the world for this purpose, to pay the price of our sins. He did this when He died on the cross on our behalf. But He did not make this a free offer; He informed His followers that in order to obtain forgiveness for their offenses against God, they had to forgive those who committed offenses against them. Jesus said, “The measure you give is the measure you get.” (Mt 7:2) The issue is clear, if you want God to forgive you, you have to forgive your fellow man.

Some people find this extremely difficult, and refuse to forgive those

who did wrong to them. Needless to say that God will not forgive them. Others claim that they have forgiven but have not forgotten the hurt. This is not exactly what God wants. He wants us to follow His example. St. Paul made this clear in his epistle to the Hebrews when he said, “I (God) will remember their sins and their misdeeds no more.” (Heb 10:17) God wants us to forgive and forget completely, if we want Him to treat us the same way. This may be difficult for many, but we have to remember that what is impossible for man is possible for God. He is ready to help you with any spiritual problem that you have. The only thing that you have to do is to be honest, and of course you have to ask.

And lead us not into temptation:

This verse has confused many about a crucial issue in the teachings of Christ. They say that from the wording of the verse, it can be concluded that God is the one who usually leads us into temptation, and in this prayer we are asking Him to refrain from doing that. So the question is: Is God the one who puts us into temptation or is it Satan? As we read what St. James said about this, we can see the answer to this important question loud and clear. He said, “Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am tempted by God', for God cannot be tempted with evil, and He Himself tempts no one, but each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin; and sin when it is full grown brings forth death.” (Jam 1:13-15)

From this, we can say that God is not the one who tempts us; it is Satan. This is supported by the definition of “temptation”. Webster defines it as enticing someone to do evil, to commit sin. We know that God never entices anyone to do evil. He may sometimes put us in a difficult situation, but this is not a temptation, it is a test. When we pray not to be lead into temptation, we are acknowledging that God allows temptation to happen, but He does not allow us to be put in a situation that we cannot handle. St. Paul wrote about this in his epistle to the Corinthians. He said, “God is faithful, and He will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.” (1Cor 10:13) So God allows Satan to tempt us, He even allowed him to tempt His only Son. But He allows it

because it has spiritual benefits for us. Temptation hardens our spiritual fiber; it allows us to accumulate experience that will benefit us, and also those who may seek our advice in the future. It will keep us humble, especially when we succumb to it.

Deliver us from evil:

This verse covers a lot of ground and has many interpretations. Before we get into these, let us see what conclusions we can draw from it. The first is that there is evil in the world. The second is that man is helpless against it and this is the reason we need God's help to escape its grip. The third is that when man is trapped in evil, he becomes a slave to it, and needs to be delivered from it by someone who has more power and can conquer it. When we ask what does it mean? We find many interpretations. Evil can be committing sin. In this case we are asking God that when we face temptation, to give us the power to resist it, so we will not commit sin. In other words, it is not bad to be tempted, but it is bad to sin, because sin separates us from our Father.

Another interpretation of evil is the evil world. Here we are asking God to protect us from the evil world. This includes, the evil influences of our surroundings, the events that happen around us, and what the media communicate to us which can greatly influence us. A third interpretation is to ask deliverance from the evil people around us. These also can have a huge impact on our behavior and us. A fourth interpretation is deliverance from Satan the evil one. This acknowledges that no human being is equal to him in cunning and strength, and if we have to conquer him, we cannot do it alone, we need God's help and we need it badly.

Conclusion:

To summarize what all this tells us about prayer, we can say that prayer is the most important activity that we have to practice if we are to form and maintain a good relationship with God. We need to do it every day, accompanied by faith and persistence. We need to realize its power. We need to know that it is the only key to God's heart. We have to ask Him

for the spiritual before the physical. We need to accept that He sometimes does not give us what we ask for, and sometimes He delays His response. We need to surrender our lives to Him and ask Him to manage it the way He wants. When we do this, we will draw closer to Him and become true children of God.

CHAPTER THREE

JESUS FASTS

Fasting is a religious behavior that is widely practiced by people all over the world. We find people who fast among the followers of all the major religions of the world. And yet while it is widely practiced, it is not fully understood.

Before we get into that, we have to define fasting.

What is fasting?

Webster defines it as, “abstaining from food, or eating sparingly, or abstaining from some foods”. The first and the third definitions are the ones which most of those who fast follow. The fathers of the church have used these definitions too, so in some fasts people abstain from food and drink for a period of time, in others they abstain from certain foods such as animal products. In most fasts, the two are combined, so people start the day abstaining from food for a period of time and for the rest of the day they abstain from certain foods.

Misconceptions about fasting:

When we survey people's thinking about fasting, we find that there are more misconceptions about fasting than any other practice in religious behavior.

One popular misconception is that God is pleased when man fasts, no matter the way it is done. Where did this come from? Nobody knows. It probably came from those who fasted hoping to get some wish granted by God, and it happened. God granted the wish, He may have granted it for another reason, but man sees what he wants to see. The conclusion is that God was pleased when they fasted and as a result He granted the wish. I am not saying that fasting is useless in soliciting a favor from God. In some cases it does. What I am saying is that it does not always accomplish what people claim it does.

Another misconception is that fasting, again regardless of the way it is done, whether associated with spiritual fervor or not, earns those who do it credit with God. Again there is no evidence that this is true. Another misconception is that fasting is a virtue. There is no supporting evidence for this either. If it is a virtue, when done right, it is not a big virtue, it is the least of all virtues. It does not reach the spiritual level and effectiveness of praying, giving, forgiving, or repentance.

Again I am not saying anything against fasting, but I am saying that there is a widespread exaggeration about the effects of fasting. These exaggerations are the products of one major mistake in looking at fasting. Many people think that fasting is an end in itself, while in fact it is a means toward an end. In other words, people have been known to fast to accomplish some other goal, and did not fast for the sake of fasting.

The history of fasting:

As we examine the history of the Jewish people, who are among the first people who practiced fasting, we find that none of them fasted for the sake of fasting. All of them fasted for a specific reason. According to the records that we have, the first human being who fasted was Moses. The ancient Egyptians fasted, but we don't know when it began or for what purpose it was practiced. It is not unreasonable to think that there is a possibility that Moses, who was raised in Pharaoh's palace, may have learned about fasting from the ancient Egyptians. The question though is, why did he fast? Did he fast for a specific reason or did he fast for no particular reason?

As we read about this episode in the Bible, we find very little that sheds light on these questions. It mentions only that, when God ordered him to come up the mountain to get the Ten Commandments, "Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. And Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights." (Ex 24:18) The fact that he fasted is not even mentioned. It is concluded from the circumstances. He obviously did not think about food or drink or any of his other bodily

functions when God called him. He hurried taking Joshua with him and went up the mountain to meet God. So it appears that on this occasion Moses did not consciously and deliberately fast, it happened due to the circumstances in which he found himself.

We notice in this case, that Moses was able to survive for this period without anything to eat or drink. This is something that no one can do unless God sustains him, which obviously was the case here. The Bible tells us that the same thing happened again when God called Moses the second time to give him the Ten Commandments. But this time the account was more specific, for it mentions that Moses fasted. In recording what happened Moses wrote, “and he (Moses) was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights; he neither ate bread nor drank water.” (Ex 34:28) Did he intend to fast this time? He spoke about this in his farewell speech to the people before he died. He said, “Then I lay prostrate before the Lord as before, forty days and forty nights; I neither ate bread nor drank water, because of all the sins which you had committed, in doing evil in the sight of the Lord.” (Deut 9:18)

There is a possibility that when he said this, he was telling them that because of your sins, I had to go a second time to get the ten commandments, and I had to fast another forty days and forty nights. He may have also noticed that he did not eat or drink during his first stay with God, and that he felt no hunger or thirst for forty days. So this time he may have planned on it. He may have felt it better not to eat in the presence of God who is spirit, that fasting would help him tone down his body, boost his spirit, and that this would better prepare him to meet with God. This may also give him a better chance to placate God's anger against the people.

After these two episodes in which Moses fasted, we do not find another word about fasting even in the books of Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. In these the Law is very accurately recorded and gives direction for every detail in the life of the Israelites including the food that they should and should not eat. But we do find fasting mentioned in the book of Judges, when the eleven tribes fought against the tribe of Benjamin and were defeated. The Bible tells us, “Then all the people of

Israel, the whole army, went up and came to Bethel and wept; they sat there before the Lord, and fasted that day until evening, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the Lord.” (Jud 20:26) After this, they inquired of God whether to go after Benjamin the next day and whether He will give them into their hands. So in this case, fasting was their way of showing their humility before God with their willingness to obey whatever He said to them. They may have felt that this would bring them closer to God. After this, God told them to go after the Benjaminites and they did, and won a great victory.

Then we find fasting mentioned in Samuel, when the Israelites were afraid of the Philistines, who were poised to do battle with them. The Bible tells us that all the people, “gathered at Mizpah, and drew water and poured it out before the Lord, and fasted on that day.” (1 Samuel 7:6) After this they asked Samuel to pray for them. Samuel offered a sacrifice and a prayer, and God responded by thundering with a mighty voice and the Philistines were confused and routed before Israel. In this episode, the people fasted for a goal, which was defeating the Philistines. We can see from the narrative that they fasted a whole day, without food or drink. They brought the water but did not drink it; they poured it before the Lord.

Next we find something, which also happened during Samuel's life. When King Saul was killed in battle against the Philistines, they cut off his head, stripped his armor, and put it in the temple of Ashtaroah their god, and fastened his body to the wall of Beth-shan, one of their cities. When the people of Jabesh-Gilead heard this, they walked all night and brought back the bodies of Saul and his two sons. Then they burned them, sparing their bones, which they buried. They then fasted seven days. They fasted to show their grief for their king and his sons. When David and his men knew what happened, they rent their cloths, mourned and they too fasted until evening for Saul and for Jonathan his son.

Then we find that David fasted again when his son from Bathsheba became sick, and prayed to God to spare his life, but He did not. Here it is clear that the fast had one specific goal, saving the child's life.

As we survey the other instances in which the Jewish people fasted, we find that there was a specific goal in every case. No one fasted for the sake of fasting. When Queen Esther fasted and asked the rest of her people to do the same, the purpose was to entreat God to avert the disaster that Haman had plotted against her people. When Nehemiah and the people fasted, they did that to express their repentance for the sins that the nation had committed against God. In the book of Jeremiah, we find that when he called Baruch and asked him to go to the Temple and read the word of God in the hearing of the congregation, he told him to do that “on a fast day”. What does this mean? Were there days on which the people fasted? Or did Jeremiah mean that you have to fast on the day you do this? We don't know, but we know that fasting here was for the purpose of showing God their utter respect for His word. We also find David indicating that his purpose in fasting was to demonstrate his humility to God. He wrote, “But as for me, when they were sick, my clothing was sackcloth; and I humbled my soul with fasting.” (Ps 35:13)

Finally we find God Himself speaking about fasting. He expressed to Jeremiah His utter disgust with the sinfulness of the Israelites and their stubborn refusal to repent of their sins and come back to Him. He told Jeremiah, “When they fast, I will not hear their cry.” (Jer 14:12) So in this case, the people were fasting to supplement their cry to God.

We also find that the people fasted after some of them came back from exile and wanted to repent of their sins. The Bible tells us, “On the twenty fourth day of this month the people of Israel were assembled with fasting and in sackcloth, and with earth upon their heads...and stood and confessed their sins and the inequities of their fathers.” (Neh 9:1-5) Here we find that the people fasted to express their humility and sorrow for their sinful behavior, asking God to forgive them. Daniel did something very similar to this, when he read what Jeremiah wrote about the time that will pass before the desolation of Jerusalem ends. He wrote, “In the first year of his reign (King Darius), I, Daniel, perceived in the books the number of years which, according to the word of the Lord to Jeremiah the prophet, must pass before the end of the desolation

of Jerusalem, namely, seventy years. Then I turned my face to the Lord God, seeking Him by prayer and supplication with fasting and sackcloth and ashes.” (Dan 9:1-4)

When we come to the New Testament, we find that Jesus was asked once about fasting by John's disciples, when they inquired about the reason why His disciples do not fast while they and the Pharisees do. Jesus told them that when He would go to the Father they would fast. We also find that Anna the prophetess fasted. When Jesus’ parents came to the Temple to present Him to God, as described by St. Luke, “there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, She did not depart from the temple, worshipping God with fasting and prayer day and night.” (Lk 2:36-38) We find in this case, that fasting was considered a means of worshipping God. We also find fasting mentioned in one of the Lord's parables, the one about the tax collector and the Pharisee who went to the temple to pray. The Pharisee prayed thanking God saying, “God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get.” (Lk 18: 11,12) So this Pharisee fasted to get credit from God.

Jesus dramatically demonstrated the importance of fasting when He fasted. The Bible tells us that after He was baptized in the Jordan River by John the Baptist, He was “led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward He was hungry.” (Mt 4:1,2) So we can say that the purpose of His going into the wilderness was to be tempted by the devil, not to fast. He fasted to be ready for the temptation when it came. The fasting was done for a specific purpose and was not done for its own sake. This again points to the fact that fasting is not an end in itself, but a means to an end.

As we reflect on this, we find ourselves faced with some important questions. Why did he fast? Did He need to? How did this make Him ready to face Satan? As we mentioned before, He fasted as a part of His preparation to face Satan. But we do not know the exact effect of fasting on Him. We do know that, when people want to concentrate on an

important issue, they do better if they do not engage in many things, which distract them and affect their concentration. So abstaining from eating and drinking could have helped Jesus focus his attention on the important event, which was to come. It is also widely assumed that when fasting weakens the flesh, the spirit gets stronger. As to whether He needed to fast or not, we can say that as God, He did not need to fast, but as the man Jesus Christ, He needed it. In our liturgy we say “He resembled us in everything except sin only.” So, He needed to fast, because He was about to go through a difficult test, and yes it was a difficult test and He was really tempted. It was not a fake performance; it was real. He also did it because He wanted to teach His disciples and His followers the importance of fasting in facing temptation.

Again what is fasting?

We ask this for the second time, because we realize that as a result of the above historical survey, we may have gained new insights in the nature of fasting. Now we can say that fasting is a human activity, which man originated, for a specific purpose, related to his relationship with God, mostly to get closer to Him. It is also an activity, which despite the fact that He never ordered man to fast, God found acceptable if done properly.

What are the factors, which make fasting acceptable to God?

Jesus alludes to this in the Sermon on the Mount when He said, “And when you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face that your fast may not be seen by men but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” (Mt 6:16-18)

It is obvious from this that the purpose of fasting is not to be praised by men. Therefore it is important not to declare it or talk about it with others. It is also obvious that God will reward it in a way that meets our needs. So it seems a condition for an effective fast is secrecy. But this

cannot be done now, because fasting has been standardized and everybody fasts at the same time. In this case, we have to abstain from mentioning that we are fasting and of course boasting about it.

The second condition is that fasting has to have a purpose, a spiritual purpose. So if somebody says that he fasts because the church leadership said that he should, or because he would be embarrassed if he did not, or for any reason other than to get closer to God and make him a better Christian, or to be better able to withstand temptation, his fast is good for nothing.

We are used to seeing the majority of those who fast go through it without getting any spiritual gifts from it. We see them abstain from eating certain foods, without associating it with a serious attempt to repent of their sins or renew their effort to conquer sin. We see them go into fasting and come out of it spiritually the same. We see them wait anxiously for the end of the fast to return to the foods that they craved during the fast. We see them celebrate the feast that follows the fast with joy, not because they have renewed their commitment to God or reached new spiritual heights, but because they will enjoy what fasting had deprived them of eating.

As we examine the lives of those who were spiritual giants, the hundreds of saints who attained spiritual heights that very few people are able to attain, we find that without exception, all of them fasted long fasts and despised all worldly pleasure including eating. We also find that prayer always accompanied fasting. Our Lord mentioned this when His disciples asked Him why they had failed to cast the evil spirit from a boy whom it made epileptic. He told them that this spirit could not be cast out except by fasting and prayer. (Mt 17:21) What Jesus said, and the lives of the saints provide us with strong testimony, is that when man fasts to get closer to God, and humbles himself before God, repents of his sins, asks Him to have mercy on him, or to grant him a favor, God listens, and in most cases, he gets what he asked for.

CHAPTER FOUR

JESUS TALKS ABOUT HIS SECOND COMING AND THE END OF THE WORLD

This is a hot topic these days. There are a lot of predictions about the end of the world and the Second Coming of Christ. These come from all sources, some of which are credible religious leaders and writers. There is also news about people who have decided to do something about it. Some have sold everything they own, and bought one-way tickets to Jerusalem where they expect to witness the second coming of Christ. This produces a lot of headaches for the Israeli government. There is also unusual activity in some cults that have tied their destiny with the end of the world. A few years ago, the members of one of them, planned their suicide with the arrival of the comet Hale-Bopp, behind which they were sure there was a vehicle that would take them to safety while the rest of the world was destroyed. They made headlines when they committed suicide en mass. More recently, many computer experts realizing the difficult problem of coping with the coming of the year 2000, for which it seemed no computer was ready, predicted the possibility of a gigantic confusion that could result in the total collapse of public utilities, food production and distribution, communication technology, and almost everything connected with, or run by, a computer. Many people interpreted this as the beginning of the end. Some dug caves and bunkered themselves underground. Others stockpiled canned food and bought gas powered electric generators in anticipation of the end of the world.

Such interest is not new. There has always been a keen interest in the end of the world. A possible explanation is that man, who has always craved immortality, may consider this the beginning of his immortality in which he will continue to exist. Granted, this would be a different kind of existence. But in the opinion of many, it is even a better kind, since in this existence man will be a spirit that defies death, not a body that has to taste its bitter taste. This is the realization of his dreams of immortality. According to most religions, this immortality will not be

the same for all human beings. Some will spend it in happiness and others in agony and misery. But not many people classify themselves as part of the latter group; even those who are evil do not see themselves that way. So, in looking forward to the end of the world, most think that they are going to spend their eternity in peace and happiness.

This recent interest coincided with the approach of the end of the second millennium. This has been predicted by a few as the time, which will see the end of life, as we know it, on earth. As the first millennium approached its end, a similar flurry of predictions about the end of the world filled the news media. But as the second millennium began and nothing happened, the interest died away. Will the same thing happen this time also? This is what a lot of people are asking these days.

It seems that this topic has been always of great interest to people, regardless of the time they lived in. This is why Jesus took time to talk about it. The Bible tells us that one day as Jesus and His disciples were leaving the Temple, they were so awestruck by its beauty and size that they commented to Him about it. They may have said something like this, “Look Lord, isn’t this a magnificent temple.” It is obvious that they were impressed, while He was not. St. Matthew writes that Jesus said to them, “You see all these do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another, that will not be thrown down.” (Mt 24:2) They were probably shocked, and couldn’t contain their shock for long. As soon as they settled and saw Jesus sit down, they approached Him for an explanation of what He said. They asked Him point blank, “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and the close of the age?” (Mt 24:3)

Before considering Jesus’ response, we have to clarify what the disciples had in mind when they asked the question. This will help us understand the answer that Jesus gave. Examining the sequence of events, we can conclude that the disciples were upset when they heard His answer. They were pointing to their teacher, the magnificence of the Temple and were expecting Him to agree, but He did not. Why did they ask Him in the first place? Wasn’t every Jew impressed by its beauty, and proud of its existence? Yes, but it seems that Jesus did not share

this. They probably felt this before, and may have discussed it among themselves and could not come up with an answer. “Why is He so indifferent to the holiest place on earth, the house of God? If He is God’s Son, why doesn’t He show His admiration for His Father’s house?” One possibility they may have thought of is that He might have overlooked it, because of the many things on His mind. So on that day they pointed out to Him what might have escaped His attention before. They were hoping to hear an answer that would solve this dilemma for them. But instead, they heard Him predict its destruction. On their way, they wondered did they hear Him right? After asking each other, there was nothing they could do except ask Him to tell them when this terrible thing was going to happen. But as we examine their question, we find that it asks about the end of the world. Jesus did not mention anything about the end of the world. He only prophesied the destruction of the Temple. So why did they ask Him about the end of the world? The only explanation is that when Jesus told them that the Temple will be destroyed, they thought that this couldn’t happen unless it was the end of the world. They were devastated to the extent that they were sure that if God let this happen, it must be the beginning of the end.

Jesus’ answer:

As we read our Lord’s answer, we are confused. And our confusion hits its highest point when we read, “Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away till all these things take place.” What does this mean? Does this mean that some of those who were living when Jesus said this would observe what He said come true, including the end of the world? We all know that this didn’t happen, so this could not be what He meant.

In examining what He said, we notice that He answered the two questions; when is the Temple going to be destroyed and what are the signs of His second coming? In our human understanding, these are two distinct and different events. For God, they may be one event happening in two installments. And because a few of the signs apply for both, Jesus did not repeat them. This is why it is difficult to separate them into two distinct sets of signs that apply to the two occasions. Let’s look

at what He said and try to sort those signs in terms of the two events.

1) The appearance of false Christs:

The first thing that Jesus warned them about was that many false prophets would appear. He said “Take heed that nobody leads you astray. For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and they will lead many astray.” (Mt 24:5) This was mentioned in the very beginning, not necessarily because it will happen first, but because this will be one of the most dangerous threats to the church. Nothing can be more destructive to the church than those who destroy it from within. They deceive the believers with wrong teachings or strange dogmas, while presenting an image of righteousness. Their appeal becomes even greater when people live under distress and persecution. This is another of the signs that Jesus talked about. This will happen when Satan begins a series of measures that will make life almost impossible for Christians, such as requiring everyone to carry his mark.

As we look back, we find that almost every age has had its share of false prophets and many have claimed they were Christ. Two years ago, a revered rabbi in the United States, who was called “The Messiah” by his followers, fell sick, and none of them imagined that he was going to die. They declared this, and thousands of his followers offered continuous prayers on his behalf, but he did die. Many others throughout history have claimed that they were God, and some succeeded in attracting a few followers, but they all died and with them their claim. So, if it is a common phenomenon, why did Jesus include this in His list of signs?

Before the destruction of the Temple and his Second Coming, more of them will appear. We have to understand that Jesus spoke of this and the other signs in order to alert His disciples and us to watch for them; not for the purpose of recognizing the end time, but rather to avoid their negative impact. It appears that this sign will happen before each of the two events. This may have been the reason why our Lord mentioned it two times in His answer to His disciples.

Jesus also mentioned that there would be many false prophets, not only one. I imagine that they will be in some kind of alliance with the Antichrist and will help him in deceiving the faithful. He then said that they “will show great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect.” (Mt 24:24) As we reflect on this, we ask, “Why would God allow them to do that and where do they get the power to perform those signs and wonders?” Again we are confronted with some difficult questions about God’s behavior. And again the Bible does not explain. So we have to guess.

The best guess is that God allows Satan to use the supernatural powers that He gave him a long time ago for his benefit. This is a part of His sense of justice. When this happens, Satan will lend some of those powers to his false prophets who will be able to perform signs and wonders in an attempt to convince as many believers as possible to renounce their God. One question remains, “Is this fair to the believers who will live during those days?” How will they know that these signs are performed by the power of Satan and not by the power of God?

Most likely the wonders performed by the power of Satan, will be evil wonders, such as hurting someone, or causing a violent storm that will destroy and devastate, or making the image of the Antichrist to talk. He will not heal a sick man, or raise someone from the dead, or feed the multitude. This is because since his fall, Satan has been unable to do anything good. Our Lord told the people once, that they have to be aware of false prophets, and specifically told them how to recognize them. He told them “You will know them from their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles?” (Mt 7:16) He followed this by saying, “A sound tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit.” (Mt 7:18) The key word is the word “cannot” which means that Satan cannot do anything good. So, watching these wonders, the believers will be able to tell whether the hand of God or the hand of Satan is behind what they are observing.

2) Wars and rumors of wars:

This is another sign that will probably happen before both events. Jesus said, “You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, see that you are not

alarmed.” (Mt 24:6) In fact wars between countries, between groups in the same country, and between people who belong to the same group have never stopped. Man is never satisfied with what he has or the conditions under which he lives. He always looks at what others have and craves it. Our Lord said once, “Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again.” (Jn 4:13) If this is the case why did Jesus talk about wars and rumors of wars as a distinctive sign of His Second Coming?

It seems that this time, the number and size of the wars that precede these events will be much more than what we are accustomed to. They will probably be big wars, engaging many nations, and be felt and known to people around the world. Our Lord was talking about a sudden rise in the number and the range of wars. The probable reason for this is Satan’s sense of time, that the end is near, and his doubled effort to capture every human being that he can to turn against God.

This may seem to some as a senseless thing to do, since he knows that at the end he will be thrown in hell. But, for Satan, it may make sense if every human captured by him and turned against God is a triumph for him and a defeat for God. So he will try to make the life of those who follow Jesus as hard and as miserable as possible. He does this by inciting their enemies, or those who believe in a different set of beliefs, to annihilate them. But we notice that Jesus told His disciples, “Don’t be alarmed.” He was assuring them that He will be with them and will protect them. This way He will foil Satan’s plan to scare them into leaving Him.

3) Famines, earthquakes and other natural disasters:

These are a part of the misery that Satan will put the people of God through to break their resistance to him. These natural disasters have always had an effect on human behavior by creating threatened people who struggle to survive under severe and brutal conditions. Under such conditions, people usually do not adhere to any values or decent standards of behavior. They do whatever is needed to survive. This may include unethical and unlawful acts that definitely violate whatever Christianity has taught them. Under such extreme conditions decent

people have been known to commit atrocities and crimes that they couldn't imagine doing under normal circumstances. The difficult question that remains unanswered is: Why does God permit this to happen?

We know that He controls nature in all its forms. Will He continue to retain that control, or will He, in those days, allow Satan to have some say, or a measure of control in what happens? Some may find this unfair to God's people. But God's sense of fairness and justice may be different from ours. Another puzzling question is about a certain event which we are given account of in the Book of Revelation. This is what will happen after Satan's imprisonment for a thousand years, the Bible tells us that he will be released for a little while. In Revelations 20:7, St. John writes that "And when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be loosed from his prison, and will come out to deceive the nations which are at the Four Corners of the earth, that is Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle." Why release him after he has been captured and chained in the bottomless pit for a thousand years. Only God knows.

4) The persecution of Christians:

Jesus mentioned that before His second coming, "they shall deliver you up to be afflicted, and they shall kill you, and you shall be hated from all nations for my name's sake." (Mt 24:8) More than once during His ministry, The Lord referred to this as something that His followers should expect at all times. He told His disciples that, "In the world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have conquered the world." (Jn 16:33) Another time He told them, "the servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you." (Jn 15:20) On another occasion He told them, "But take heed to yourselves; for they shall deliver you to councils; and in the synagogues you shall be beaten, and shall be brought before rulers and kings for my sake." (Mk 13:9)

Again, we notice that this has happened many times since Christianity began. In the beginning, the church was persecuted by the Jews and the Romans. This continued in both the Eastern and the Western Empires,

until Emperor Constantine adopted Christianity as the official religion of the Eastern Empire in the year 313 A.D. This influenced Emperor Lucinius to follow suite and to sign the Edict of Milan in which the Roman Empire reversed itself from persecuting the Christians to embracing the religion it had hated for a long time.

Soon after this, the church began to fight itself. Heresies began to appear in many places. During the next several hundred years the universal church struggled to maintain its unity. It failed, not because it could not settle its religious differences, but because politics played a strong role in influencing the outcome. The feuding factions of the church persecuted those who differed with them in opinion. This struggle went on even after Islam appeared on the world stage as a major force to be contended with. Christians living in the countries that were invaded by the Muslims were severely persecuted, sometimes with a brutality that brought back memories of the savage Roman persecution.

Even today we find Christians persecuted in every country in which they are a minority. In the two thousand years since the Lord ascended into Heaven, Christians have been persecuted in some place or other. Satan, who never stopped his efforts to fight God's church, instigated all this persecution. So why did Jesus include this as one of the signs for His second coming? We know that this happened before the destruction of Jerusalem. Will it happen also before the end of the world? It seems logical to conclude that it will.

We have already seen that other signs such as the appearance of false prophets, natural disasters, and wars are all designed to force Christians to leave the worship of God. So we have to assume that persecution will join those forces to break the will of as many Christians as possible in an attempt to make them the enemies of God. The only difference between the persecution of Christians throughout history and their persecution before the end of the world is that the latter will be worldwide. There will be no place on earth that will treat them well. Everywhere they go, they will face persecution, because the Antichrist will dominate the whole world, and will pursue those who will not

worship him.

5) The destruction of Jerusalem:

Jesus expressed this when He said, “So when you see the desolating sacrilege spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the Holy place (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains; let him who is on the housetop not go down to take what is in the house; and let him who is in the field not turn back to take his mantle.” (Mt 24:15-19)

Jesus was making a reference to Daniel’s prophecy about the destruction of Jerusalem at the hand of Antiochus IV Epiphanes who ruled Syria between the years 175 and 164 BC, and who destroyed Jerusalem, in the year 167 BC. This was to tell His disciples that the same destruction will happen again soon. He also wanted them to know that this will happen again at the end of time before His Second Coming.

As we reflect on what He said, we find that He mentions three conditions men will be in and His recommendation in every case. He recommended that those in Judea should flee to the mountains, those on the housetop should not to go down to take anything from the house, and finally those who are in the fields should not turn back. These are most likely small parables that go beyond their simple literal meanings. The Lord is saying that as the end draws near you will see signs that Jerusalem is attacked, probably by the Antichrist, He is warning those who are in Judea to go to the mountain, to climb to new spiritual heights, and those who are already on the housetop, those who are high spiritually, not to go down for any reason. He wants them to remain on the housetop, spiritually sound. Then He tells those who are in the field not to look back, repeating something He said to one who wanted to follow Him, but asked Him to let him first go home to say farewell to his parents. St. Luke writes that Jesus answered, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” (Luke 9:62). Looking back often means renegeing on your commitment to God. An example is Lot’s wife, who during their flight from Sodom, prodded

by the two angels who destroyed the city, against their order looked back and was turned into a pillar of salt. Jesus was telling His disciples that as the persecution of the Antichrist intensifies, although many will renege on their commitment to God, He wants them to remain strong and committed.

6) The Gospel will be preached throughout the whole world:

While the previous four signs also preceded the destruction of Jerusalem, this sign and those dealt with after this one will only precede the end of the world, because they did not happen before General Titus leveled Jerusalem in the year 70 AD.

As we reflect on this sign, we find that it has been literally fulfilled. The spread of Christianity was helped in the beginning by the extensive network of roads built by the Romans and by Greek, the strong universal language that existed at that time. This helped to spread the new religion to those nations who knew Greek and which the Roman roads reached. But the spread of Christianity to every place on earth depended on two very important future developments. The first was the translation of the Bible into every language in existence today. The second is the invention of the technology of telecommunication that has carried the Gospel message to every corner in the world. The question that many ask is, "Why did God decide to postpone the end until this takes place?" The obvious answer is that He probably did this so people would not be judged on the basis of the gospel when they had not received it. But, how about those generations who came after Christ, but did not receive the Gospel because those two accomplishments were not in existence yet? Nobody knows for sure, but knowing our Lord, we are sure that He will deal with them in the most merciful way. In a situation like this we hate to speculate.

7) Great changes in nature:

Jesus describes a great change in the most important components of nature. Listen to what He said. He said, "Immediately after the

tribulation of those days, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of heaven will be shaken.” (Mt 24:29)

There are two possible explanations for what Jesus said. The first is that these things will literally happen. There are precedents to this. When Jesus was born, an unusual star appeared to the Magi in the East and guided them to Him. When He gave up the Spirit, there was darkness on the earth for three hours, and many of the dead rose from their graves. Another occasion, on which nature changed in connection with an important event, was when the sun stood still and did not move as Joshua fought the five kings of the Amorites until he completely overcame them. (Josh 10:12) Another example is when the water of the Red Sea was parted to provide an escape route for the Israelites from the pursuing Egyptian army. (Ex 14:21-31) One can also include the plagues of turning the Nile water into blood, the frogs, flies, locusts, and hail, which God hit Egypt with. So it is not unreasonable to say that these signs will happen before the Second Coming of our Lord.

There is also the possibility that these will not take place, but they were mentioned to denote a sudden change in the order of things. Chaos, and confusion sometimes precede the end of an era or a rule. There are a few examples of this in the Old Testament. When Ezekiel wrote about the demise of Pharaoh, he wrote, “When I blot you out, I will cover the heavens, and make their stars dark; I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon shall not give its light.” (Ezekiel 32:7,8) And when Joel wrote about the return of Israel to its glory after the exile, he said, “I will give portents in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon into blood.” (Joel 2:31)

As we think about the phrase “The powers of heaven will be shaken,” we stop and ask, what does this mean? Jesus may have meant the powers of the universe, not of heaven, the word that we always use to designate the holy abode of God and His angels. So, when He said that the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give off its light, He meant that He will suspend some of the laws of nature, which He had

established. And when this happens, the very foundations on which the universe is built will be shaken.

8) The sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven:

Here Jesus is talking about the very last sign before His Second Coming. The sign, which He meant, is undoubtedly the cross, on which He died and which became the symbol of Christianity adopted by His followers worldwide. The cross, which was a symbol of disgrace and guilt, became the symbol of grace, righteousness, and holiness after Jesus was crucified on it. It acquired not only a new status, but also a new power, as it was used to offer blessings, to chase evil spirits, and to heal every affliction in the people. So before the appearance of Jesus, He will send His sign for all the nations to see, as a means of establishing His identity, so there will be no doubt in anybody's mind about who He is.

We also notice that He used His favorite title "The Son of Man" in making this statement. He may have used it to emphasize the fact that He is the one designated by the Father to judge the world, something that He foretold before when He said, "The Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son." (Jn 5:22) His use of this title here also reveals that His identity as the man Jesus Christ did not cease when He ascended to the Father but continues forever. The fact that He lived as a man on our earth, sharing our nature and subjected to all that we are subjected to, suffering from what we suffer from, even tempted as we all are, makes Him uniquely qualified to judge us. The second reason why the Father gave Him that privilege is that He was the one who satisfied the Father's justice by offering Himself as a sin offering on behalf of man's sins. So, as He was the one who paid the price, it is only fair that He should be the one who judges those He attempted to save when He died.

9) All the tribes of the earth will mourn:

When the Lord appears from heaven on the clouds, surrounded by millions of His angels, archangels, and other members of the heavenly

host, the inhabitants of the world will be shocked into reality. Many will be awakened from their obsession with this world into the reality that their world is about to end. This sudden realization will result in extreme sorrow and the shedding of tears. In every nation there are those who refused to believe His story. This is why all the nations of the world will mourn at His coming. For some, this mourning may mean repentance, but for most, it probably will mean the sorrow that accompanies despair and death. These are the people who lived all their lives rejecting Jesus as their God and Savior and tried to prove that He is not. So, when He comes in His glory they will realize their mistake, but cannot imagine that He will forgive them.

The parable of the fig tree:

Jesus told His disciples that as once they saw the fig tree beginning to put forth its leaves they knew summer is near, when they see these signs they will know that the end is near.

This is the simple straightforward interpretation of that passage. But some say that the fig tree is a symbol of the Jewish nation and that the true interpretation is that one of the signs of His Second Coming is the return to the faith by the Jewish nation. The Jews reclaimed their homeland in 1945. Since then they have built a strong state, which has survived strong attacks from the Arab nations who outnumber her by more than 30 to 1. They have succeeded in becoming a formidable military force in the region, but they remain opposed to Christianity, and reject Jesus as their Messiah. Will they believe in Him before He comes? There is only one verse that may shed light on this. It is what our Lord said to the Jews one day. After a long dialogue with them, in which He exposed the Scribes and the Pharisees, He ended by saying, "For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, 'Blessed he who comes in the name of the Lord.'" (Mt 23:39)

Conclusion:

As we mentioned before, many people, whether when they read this chapter or the book of Revelation, begin to engage in the useless

exercise of trying to predict the exact day on which all this will happen. This is a trick that Satan plays on many. He takes advantage of man's curiosity to make him engage in exercises in futility, thereby distracting his energy to this rather than directing it toward his spiritual condition. The Lord warned His disciples of this by telling them "No one knows the day or the hour, not the angels of heaven, nor even the Son, but only the Father." (Mt 24:36) He tells us not to try to figure this out because the Father does not want anyone to know. This knowledge is not the purpose of what He told them.

The purpose is our Lord's desire to inform us that there will be an end to human life on earth and there will be judgment. He wants us to be ready when it comes. He mentioned this when He said, "Watch therefore, for you don't know on what day your Lord is coming." (Mt 24:42) Even though the end of the world is of great interest to everyone, we should not be obsessed by it, because the end will come to everyone of us, when he receives the call to leave this earth. This is the moment for which everyone should be ready, because after this there is no use, as David beautifully but brutally expressed it when he said, "For in death there is no remembrance of you, in Sheol who can give you praise?" (Ps 6:5)

Dear Reader:

I hope and pray that you will be ready when He comes back. Don't be sidetracked by any other matter. The only thing that matters is your eternity. So, don't lose sight of it. And may the Lord guide you in your struggle to achieve that.

CHAPTER FIVE

JESUS' DEATH

Death as man's destiny:

Death is one of the most consuming topics in human thinking. It ends our lives and interferes with our desire to continue to live on earth. From the dawn of history men have tried to conquer death, or at least, delay it.

Death has been considered man's primary enemy from the beginning. It is true that man brought it on himself, when he disobeyed God and ate the forbidden fruit. But many today, do not believe the authenticity of the story of Adam and Eve, nor that death was the punishment man deserved for his disobedience. They see death as a disease that cannot stand long before the advanced technology of the modern age. As we look at the statistics for the average life span of mankind, we find that it has risen steadily for the last twenty years. Some scientists, elated by this, are already claiming victory. They declare that in few years they will be able to completely stop death and man will be able to live as long as he wants.

Arrogance? Yes. Possible? No. Because no accumulated knowledge nor sophisticated technology will ever enable man to reverse what God decreed from the beginning; if man sins he will die, and since all sinned, all will die. St. Paul beautifully expressed this when he wrote to the Romans, "Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned." (Rom 5:12) So no matter how skilled man becomes he cannot reverse one word of what God said.

We may have been able to change a few characteristics in a few animals or plants using gene splicing or genetic engineering. We may be able to duplicate a living organism, by cloning it. We may even be able to transplant organs from a dead body to a living person, but we cannot do

two things, stop death or create something from nothing. Someone may claim that they created a machine, a statue, or a painting. But as we examine it, we find that he really did not create anything, he merely rearranged some already existing materials into a new configuration. Creation and death remain the sole domain of God and death will remain man's destiny till the end.

This chapter is not about death per se; it is about the death of the Son of God, the immortal who took flesh and became a mortal man and lived with us. His life ended at the tender age of thirty-three, crucified on a cross. When a man dies, it is not news, but when God dies, it is news. This is why we will devote a whole chapter of this book to the death of Jesus.

Why did Jesus die?

The reason, which we all know, is that He died in our place. Death was our portion, not His. We are the ones who disobeyed God and deserved the punishment that God declared as the price of our disobedience. We are the ones who deserve to die. But He chose to die in our place, in order to fulfill God's justice embedded in His warning to Adam and Eve that “the day you eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you will certainly die.” (Gen 2:17)

Does this make sense? Man, who was created by God, disobeys his creator. So what happens next? Instead of receiving the punishment that he was warned about, His creator volunteers to take the punishment Himself, in an unusual display of humility and love. Amazing? Yes. Incredible? Yes. True? YES indeed.

Two kinds of death! Or are there three?

When the Lord God warned Adam and Eve that if they ate the forbidden fruit they would die, that death was meant to be more than one death. The first is physical death, the second is spiritual death, or as it is sometimes called, the second death. In Revelation St. John mentions it when he writes, “He that overcomes shall not be hurt by the

second death.” (Rev 2:11) What are these kinds of death, and what are the differences between them?

Some add another death, which is moral death. We will discuss it, because it is the significant change that happened to mankind as a result of sin, even though most do not consider it a kind of death.

Physical death:

This is the easiest death to understand, because we all have heard about it or seen it in someone dear to us. We are familiar with it. There is no disagreement about what it is. Man is a body, a soul, and a spirit. Some may deny the existence of the soul, the spirit, or both, but no one denies the existence of the body. We all see and recognize the signs that the body displays when it is alive. It moves, it eats, it breathes, it discards waste, and its organs perform as they are supposed to perform. It also grows until it reaches its potential, makes its own decisions, succeeds or fails in attaining its goals, and shows reaction to what happens to it. We also observe signs, which indicate that there is something wrong with any of its organs. In many cases, those conditions can be corrected by applying whatever knowledge man has been able to accumulate about it. We also observe the weakness that the body develops as it gets older, and we observe that, at some time, every body expires and dies. Death deprives the body of those signs of life that we mentioned above, by simply stopping them.

This death is the most feared thing on earth. Man can stand slavery, poverty, disease, depravation, humiliation, and famine. He fears all of these, but nothing equals his fear of death. Yet, God's children do not share this fear with the rest of the world. They realize that their life on earth is a brief period compared with the eternity that will follow. St. James expresses this when he wrote, “For what is your life? It is a vapor that appears for a little while, and then vanishes.” (Ja 4:14)

Accordingly, those who know God despise their life on earth because to them it is short and a period of testing. They look forward to their life in heaven with their beloved God. Many of the saints expressed their

attitude toward death in different ways. Isaac told his son Esau, “I am old now, I know not the day of my death.” (Gen 27:2) Isaac knew that he would die and wanted to bless his son before his death. Joshua told his people, “Behold, this day I am going the way of all the earth.” (Josh 23:14) Joshua also recognizes the inevitability of death but unlike Isaac, he knew when he was to die.

We notice that both of them did not show any sadness nor mourn their death. They informed their people as a matter of fact, that they would leave this world. Solomon said, “There is a time to be born and a time to die.” (Eccl 3:19) He too acknowledges the reality of death and accepted it. Accepting death became stronger when Jesus died to save us from death and promised His followers an eternal life in Heaven with Him, the Father, and the rest of the heavenly host. This was obvious in the thousands of martyrs who were seen marching to their death with happy faces, smiling, encouraging each other, and singing the praises of Him who saved them.

Many expressed their joy in leaving this world. Simeon after seeing the baby Jesus and holding Him in his arms looked up and said, “Lord, let your servant depart in peace, according to your word, for my eyes have observed your salvation.” (Luke 2:29) St. Paul expressed his attitude toward death several times. The first is when he wrote to the Corinthians, “We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord.” (2 Cor 5:8) Another time, he wrote to the Philippians, “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” (Phil 1:21) He also wrote to the Romans, “O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death?” (Rom 7:24)

This is the physical death that Adam, Eve, and their children after them tasted as a result of their disobedience. But we notice that the Lord God said, “For IN THE DAY that you eat of it, you will surely die.” (Gen 2:1) And we know that Adam and Eve did NOT die on that day. So what happened? Did God go back on His word? Did He feel sorry for them? Did He repent that He had said that, and consequently changed the verdict? The answer to all these questions is an unqualified NO. The

death that took place on that day, and which God intended, was not the physical death. It was another kind of death, moral death.

Moral death:

Moral death is the result of temporary separation from God. Man is created by God to live with Him. Living with Him means building a strong relationship with Him. It means loving Him, depending on Him for everything that we need. It means sharing with Him in holiness, righteousness, and the lack of sin. It means a life full of peace, happiness, and joy. One cannot, no matter how hard he tries, imagine or describe the state of mind, the thoughts and the feelings of Adam and Eve before they sinned. They must have felt very happy, elated, and blessed. But if this is the case, why did they throw it all away and disobey their God? This is a puzzle that no one will ever be able to completely solve. The only explanation is that despite all this, man was not alone in the universe.

There was someone else who had a strong motive to make him fall from grace. Unfortunately, man was not equal to his enemy in intelligence and cunning. Did he know about him? Nobody knows. He probably did not, and the fact that Satan used the serpent to hide his identity from Eve is an indication that she did not know about him. Why didn't God warn them about Satan? We don't know that either. God probably saw no value in telling them. It may have scared them. We could assume that His love for them should be enough to sustain them, and make them immune to any temptation. But it was not enough. And because God knew in advance that they would disobey, telling them would not have helped anyway.

After they sinned, God gave them the chance to repent, but they arrogantly refused it and rudely accused God of being the reason for their disobedience. God did what He had to do. He removed them both from the Garden of Eden the same day and their separation from Him happened there and then. So on that day, Adam and Eve did die a moral death, as the Lord God said they would. Their innocence died, their hopes died, and their peace died.

After this, Adam and Eve lived estranged from God, away from Him, and on their own. This gave Satan a better chance to entice them and their children to sin more. And as they did, their separation from God got worse and worse. More and more, men lived for their bodies and forgot their spirits and God. Every human being who lived on this earth, with the exception of the few chosen by God to carry His message to the people, did evil in His sight. They all died the moral death and after a number of years, they died physically.

Spiritual death or the second death:

Why is this called “the second death” when we have discussed two other deaths already? Before we answer this, we ought to explain what it is. The second death is what will happen to many after the Day of Judgment. Jesus talked about this several times during His stay on earth. In the Sermon on the Mount, He mentions two gates and two ways. He said, “Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many.” (Mt 7:13) The destruction is the second death. Another time, He said, “Fear not them who kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul. But rather fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.” (Mt 10:28) On another occasion, He told the people, “If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell.” (Mk 9:47)

A puzzling question about this death is, when it happens, those who suffer from it will live forever. True, they will be tormented and severely punished, but they will continue to exist. So why is it called death? It seems that our concept of death is different from that of God. He calls even the temporary separation from Him death, while those who suffer from it also continue to exist. The only death that we are familiar with is physical death. So we have associated death with the stopping of life, while God does not.

Which death did Jesus die?

In order to adequately answer this question we have to understand the circumstances that surrounded the life of Jesus: His mission, the factors that lead to His conviction and death, and the political and religious forces at play when He was crucified.

We know that Jesus was the Son of God, who took flesh, and became man. He was born to a young Jewish girl named Mary who was engaged to an older carpenter named Joseph. He grew up in an obscure village called Nazareth. He worked there as a carpenter to support Himself and His mother. At the age of thirty, He began to call the people to repent and come back to God. After three years of teaching and healing, the religious leaders accused Him of treason and the Roman governor sentenced Him to be crucified.

His mission was to save mankind from the punishment they deserved when they disobeyed God and refused to go back to Him. He came to die in our place and to carry all our sins. He declared this many times during His short life on earth. St. John recounts one of the many occasions in which He talked about His death. Jesus said, “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up. That whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” (Jn 3:14,15)

This is an analogy. As the statue of the serpent that Moses put on a pole saved those who looked at it from certain death, so will the Son of Man save them when He is crucified. The occasion that Jesus alluded to was the punishment for the Jews when they rebelled against God, calling the manna and quail “worthless food.” God responded by sending fiery serpents that bit thousands and caused their death. When the people repented and went to Moses, God told him to make a statue of a serpent and raise it on a pole, and whoever looked at it after being bitten was instantly healed.

He also talked about His death openly a few times. St. Matthew recalled one of those instances when he wrote, “and (He) said to them, 'Behold, we go up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man shall be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes, and they shall condemn Him to death.

And shall deliver Him to the Gentiles to mock, and to scourge, and to crucify Him, and on the third day He shall rise again.” (Mt 20:17-19)

The conclusion is that Jesus came to die. He knew it, the Father knew it, the angels possibly knew it, but man did not. The Jewish nation did not recognize Him as the woman's seed that will bruise the serpent's head. They did not identify Him as the Messiah whose coming was prophesied in more than three hundred prophecies in their holy book.

Satan was the only one who had doubts that Jesus might be the enemy who would come and conquer him. He kept a close vigil on Jesus and looked for signs that would tell him whether He was the one or not. As we mentioned before, Jesus was aware of this, and kept him in doubt by mixing His words and deeds between the divine and the human. He was able to do this because He was both God and man.

A few examples will clarify what we mean. For instance when He was born there were some signs that indicated his deity. Among the divine are the Archangel Gabriel announcing His birth, His birth to a virgin, the angels celebrating His birth. But among the human are His birth in a filthy place surrounded by animals, and His fleeing to Egypt from Herod's wrath. Then His long ordinary life as a carpenter made Satan doubt that He was the one.

After He began His ministry, He continued to send confusing messages to Satan about His identity. He revealed His true identity several times. One time to the Samaritan woman, when He told her, commenting on her statement that the Messiah will come, He told her, “I who speak to you am He.” (Jn 4:26) Another time, Jesus found the man who was born blind after he was kicked out of the Temple and asked him, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” (Jn 9: 35) And when the man asked Him who was the Son of Man, Jesus answered, “You have seen Him, and it is he who speaks to you.” (Jn 9:37)

But on other occasions He would say something that could indicate that He was just another prophet. For instance, when the scribe asked Him what should he do to inherit eternal life and addressed Him, “Good

teacher.” Jesus asked him, “Why did you call me, ‘Good’?” Nobody is good except God alone.” (Mk 10:19) This could be taken as a proof that Jesus was not God, which probably was Satan's interpretation. Jesus' statement to the scribe could be this: Why are you calling me good, while you know that no one could be called that except God? And since you do not think that I am God, then you are not accurate in using your words, something that a scribe shouldn't do.

We know how crafty and shrewd Satan is. Most likely, as he surveyed these conflicting signs, he remained in doubt. He must have said to himself that the most appropriate course of action is to assume that He is the One and act accordingly. So if he is the One, the action he would take will lead to victory over God, and if he is not, no harm is done. There would be no victory, but also no defeat.

So Satan decided to attack Jesus and destroy Him. He planned his plot with a great deal of care. He used the widely accepted idea that the Messiah, the promised Savior, would save his people from the tyranny of Rome, and failing to do that, He should be condemned.

He found an ally in Judas, who was disappointed in his teacher to the extent that he was ready to betray Him. This had the advantage of convincing the public that if one of His own betrayed Him, the accusations against Him must be true. Satan also made sure that the religious leadership who could condemn Him, was against Him. And when Jesus exposed their hypocrisy and spoke against them, Satan must have rejoiced, thinking that Jesus had just given him the rope to hang Him.

The irony, which Satan never saw, was that the only way Jesus could conquer Satan and save His beloved man from Satan's lethal grip was to die in his place. So when Jesus was suffering on the cross and getting closer and closer to death, while Satan was celebrating his victory over God, the angels in heaven were preparing their own celebration as their Master was about to deal the final blow to His archenemy.

The details of Jesus' death:

Since the death of Jesus can be counted among the few most important events in the history of the universe, a blow-by-blow reflection on this extraordinary event is in order. During this reflection we will answer the original question of what kind of death He suffered when He died.

The case against Jesus began the minute He was called King. The first who called Him King, were the three wise men who came to Jerusalem from the Orient. They asked, "Where is he who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him."(Mt 2:2) St. Matthew follows this by telling us that when King Herod heard this he was troubled and all Jerusalem with him. By Jerusalem, St. Matthew undoubtedly meant the rest of the governing class operating under the king. So official Jerusalem was troubled, and a hostile attitude was adopted against the newly born Jesus. He was viewed as a threat to King Herod, who wanted his son to become King after him.

We cannot ignore the role that Satan played in this. He must have had doubts about the identity of Jesus, and decided to destroy him before he grew and become a formidable foe. This was behind Herod's order to kill all the infants in Bethlehem two years of age or less. That was according to the date that the three wise men said the star had appeared to them. After the massacre, King Herod thought that Jesus was destroyed and felt secure that his son would succeed him on the throne, which did happen. As to Satan, he knew that Jesus had escaped. His plan to destroy Him had failed. So, he continued to watch him and looked for another chance to destroy Him.

During the next thirty years nothing happened and official Jerusalem forgot the stir that happened over His birth. But when Jesus began His ministry and began to call people to repent and return to God, another concern began to form in the hearts and heads of the nation's religious leaders. First, they considered Jesus an outsider; He was not one of them. He had not studied with any of them. He was not from the house of Levi, and consequently should not accept the title "Rabbi" that people used for Him. They tolerated Him when He called the people to repent, for this was essentially what they were doing.

But He began to outline a new theology and gave new commandments that replaced the old ones. And as He began to criticize them, pointing out their hypocrisy and adherence to ritual and not the spirit, they began to realize that they could not coexist with Him and so He must go. As Satan helped King Herod plan to destroy the child Jesus, here too he helped the Scribes and Pharisees plan His destruction.

He probably planted the thought in the heads of many that the Messiah should save them from the bondage to Rome as Moses had saved them from the bondage to Pharaoh. This was not so obvious during the first three years of His ministry. But as His fame began to spread, especially after some of His spectacular miracles mesmerized the multitude, those feelings began to be seen in public. One time a group asked Him for a sign. He knew that they were asking Him in the hope that He would do or say something that could be used against Him later, so He answered them. “An evil and adulterous generation seeks a sign, and none will be given to it, except the sign of Jonah.” (Mt 12:38) Other times they objected to His healings on the Sabbath (Mk 2:23), they criticized Him and His disciples for eating with unwashed hands. (Mt 15:20) Another time they told Him, “You are bearing witness to yourself, your testimony is not true.” (Jn 8:13) Jesus dismissed this by telling them that His testimony was true. Another time He told them that they did not believe what He said, but should believe His works. (Jn 10:25)

As the events of the last week began to unfold, these things came to a head. It began when Jesus decided to ride to Jerusalem on His last trip to celebrate Passover. His disciples hoped that He would enter the city unnoticed; for they knew the religious leaders’ hatred for Him and feared the consequences. So, when He asked two of His disciples to get Him an ass with her colt to ride on, they panicked because everyone in Jerusalem would certainly see Him. They didn't reveal their fears, as they knew that no matter what they told Him, He would go. The matter seemed worse as the people began to gather around Him shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David. Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.” (Mt 21:9) As they looked at Jesus, they did not see any signs of sorrow or sadness. They saw a face full of

determination and joy.

No wonder, for the hour for which He had waited thousands of years was almost there. His confrontation with Satan, which would end in Satan's defeat and the release of man from his fatal grip, was at hand. So the disciples, swept up by the joy in their master's face, and the jubilation that the people displayed, decided to enjoy the trip while it lasted. When the procession reached Jerusalem, the people may have expected Him to march on Pilate's palace and take over power from him. But Jesus went to the Temple instead. He was appalled at what He saw, and attacked the moneychangers and those who sold animals and birds for sacrifice. He overturned their tables and chasing them out, cried in a voice heard by all, "My house shall be called a house of prayer, and you make it into a den of robbers." (Mt 21:13)

Any one of those merchants or moneychangers could have stopped Him. Many were physically stronger than Him, but none dared to. There were also about one hundred Roman guards in and around the Temple ready to stop any disturbance. Any of these could have stopped Him, but none did. He had authority and He showed it. Some of the people who were waiting for him to wrest power from Pilate, must have rejoiced as they saw this display of authority, and may have entertained the hope that after this He would advance on Pilate's palace. But He did not. Instead, He healed those who needed healing and taught the people about the kingdom of heaven. At the end of the day, He went to Bethany to spend the night with His friend Lazarus and his two sisters Mary and Martha. For the next few days, He repeated the same schedule, spending the days in Jerusalem teaching the people and healing their sick and retreating to Bethany for the night.

The last supper:

On Wednesday, He asked Peter and John to go into the city and follow a man carrying a jar, and ask him to show them the place where they would eat the Passover meal. On Thursday, He went to the city and ate His last meal with them. It was Thursday evening. But what an evening that was! Jesus had told His disciples that He was going to be crucified.

So, this was not an ordinary Passover celebration with the usual jubilation and joy. It was a somber occasion, in which the disciples who had accompanied their teacher and supported Him in His ministry were sad because they were observing the end of something they thought had a chance of success. They had followed Him, because they were convinced that with His wisdom, supernatural powers, and His message to the people to go back to God, nothing could go wrong.

They expected Him to succeed in His mission and they dreamed to be part of that success. Here they were observing the tragic end to that dream. They felt sorry and frustrated for their young leader who had done nothing wrong, yet was to be destroyed by their religious leaders because of their jealousy of Him. They remembered that Jesus had not heeded their advice not to come to Jerusalem, but had insisted on coming. Not only that, but He knew and had told them that He would be killed. Why He chose to do this, they couldn't figure out.

As they looked at Him, they saw the same loving person that He always had been. They saw no sign of sorrow, sadness, or despair. They felt the peace, calm, and serenity that always characterized His presence. He was not upset, but was joyful and confident. He was about to go into a mock trial, a lynching by Roman soldiers, and a crucifixion ending in His death, but He was the only one in the room who was cool, calm, and collected. The disciples were agitated, upset, and nervous. This is why Jesus began to calm them. Even at this time, with so much on His mind, He took time to cheer up His disciples, whom He loved despite their shortcomings and flaws.

He said to them, "Don't let your hearts be troubled." The one who knew that He would be killed the next day was the one calming His disciples who were agitated because of what He had told them. He followed this by saying, "You believe in the Father, believe also in me." (Jn 14:1) The key to Heaven is to believe in Him and He asked them not to lose faith in Him when they see Him the next day on the cross. Then He told them that He had to go to the Father and that the Father loves them. He has many mansions and that He wants to dwell among them.

To calm their fears of death, He told them that when it was time for them to leave, He would come and take them, so where He will be, they would also be. Did the disciples understand what He said? They probably didn't. First Thomas asked Him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going, how can we know the way?" Jesus had never said that they would come to where He is on their own; He said that He would come and take them. He answered him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." (Jn 14:6) Then, showing his confusion, Philip blurted, "Lord, show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied." (Jn 14:8) Again, He quietly looked at him and said, "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 14:9,10) By this declaration, Jesus wanted to wipe away any doubt that He was God in the flesh, something that they should have discovered a long time ago.

After this, He took a towel and began to wash His disciples' feet. When Peter refused to let Him wash his feet, Jesus insisted, and he let Him. He did this to teach them humility. He knew that pride, the most deadly sin, was rampant among the disciples. So He wanted to teach them a lesson in humility they would never forget. What could be more dramatic than what He did? While He was their teacher and master, He was perfectly able to bow down to wash their feet, the dirtiest, and one of the least respected parts of the human body.

He then told them that one of them would betray Him. And it would be one of His closest friends, one who sat near Him, and who dipped his morsel in the same plate. At this point Judas left to put into effect his plan to deliver Jesus to His enemies. He then told them that they would all abandon Him that night. Peter resented this, and told him if all the rest abandoned Him, He would never leave Him. Jesus looked at him and quietly said to him, "Truly, I say to you, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times." (Mk 14:30)

While they were eating, He founded the sacrament of Holy Communion. St. Mark reports this, "He took bread, and blessed and broke it, and gave it to them, and said, 'Take; this is my body.' And He

took a cup and when He had given thanks, He gave it to them, and all drank of it. And He said to them, ‘This is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many’.” (Mk 14:22-24) As He did this, did the disciples understand what was going on? Most probably they did not. They must have wondered, “Why is He calling the bread His body, and the wine His blood?” They were confused, but nobody dared to ask Him to explain what He did.

They understood this and many other things that they had not understood before, after He sent the Holy Spirit as He promised and they received Him.

At Gethsemane:

After He finished talking to them, knowing that His hour was drawing near, He took His disciples and went to a garden called Gethsemane. This is the last place that Jesus went before His arrest. He wanted to be with His disciples during these last hours, and He wanted also to be with the Father.

Gethsemane reminds us of another garden, the Garden of Eden. What a contrast between these two gardens. The Garden of Eden had the first Adam, where he found comfort and happiness, but Gethsemane had Jesus, the second Adam, where He found nothing but sorrow and grief. Eden saw the beginning of the sinfulness of man, while Gethsemane saw the beginning of his salvation. Eden saw the first Adam act in arrogance, while Gethsemane saw the second Adam behave in humility.

The first Adam sinned and refused to repent or admit his sins, and the second Adam carried all of our sins as if He himself had committed them. Eden was the place where the first Adam disobeyed the Father, while Gethsemane was the place where the second Adam obeyed the Father even to His death. Eden did not see one tear from the first Adam for his sin, but Gethsemane saw the second Adam shedding His sweat as precious drops of blood, for sins He had nothing to do with. Eden never saw the first Adam go on his knees before God, but the second Adam went on His knees before the Father asking if it were possible

that this cup be removed from Him.

In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prepared Himself for the events to come. His disciples except Judas Iscariot were in the garden. They were all tired and confused because of what had happened that night, so they slept. Even though they knew that He would soon be taken away from them, they could not stay awake to keep Him company. Occupied by the events that would soon unfold, Jesus wanted to be alone with His Father. So, distressed and troubled, He fell on the ground and cried to the Father, “Abba Father, all things are possible to you, remove this cup from me, yet not what I will, but what you will.” (Mk 14:36)

He was distressed because all the sins of mankind were about to be put on Him. He who never sinned was about to shoulder every single sin that was ever committed by man from Adam's disobedience to the last sin committed before the Day of Judgment. After praying the same prayer three times, He was ready to face His enemies. Soon after, Judas accompanied by a crowd with swords and clubs, approached Him, greeted Jesus calling Him “Master”, and then he kissed Him.

When they tried to arrest Him, one of the disciples drew a sword and hit the slave of the high priest and cut his ear. Jesus stopped what would have been a fight between His disciples and the crowd. He touched the ear and restored it. Then He ordered the man who drew the sword, to put it back in its sheath. He told him that He was not helpless and could ask the Father to send twelve legions of angels to defend Him, but He would not because He came to die. At this point, the disciples fled and the mob took Him to the High Priest.

The mock trial:

After they seized Him, they took Him to the high priest's house. Many were gathered there, they were people bribed by the scribes and the Pharisees in preparation for the trial that was supposed to take place the next morning. These people treated Jesus very badly. They hit Him, mocked Him, and said many bad things against Him, rehearsing their testimony against Him. How did these people do this, when they knew

what they said was untrue? How could they lie about a man who never hurt anyone in His life? How could they utter those things against the man who went around doing good, who healed their sicknesses, opened the eyes of their blind, cleansed their lepers, made their lame walk, cast the evil spirits from those who suffered from them, and made the dead rise from the dead?

Among them, there were probably those who were deeply disappointed in Him because they hoped that He would give them their political independence, which He refused. There were also those bribed by the Pharisees. Anyway Jesus spent a night like no other in His short life on earth. He, who is worshipped by the Cherubim and the Seraphim and the countless heavenly host, was hit and mocked by none other than the very man who caused Him all kinds of grief and who He came to save. The angels must have resented what they saw, but were restrained by the Father who monitored every move that happened.

Very early the next morning while it was still dark, the high priest, together with the elders and scribes, began questioning Jesus about what He taught the people. He refused to say anything, but simply told them that He spoke publicly and if they wanted to know what He said, they should ask those who heard Him. They did just that, and began to call the witnesses that they had lined up to testify against Him. One witness after the other made conflicting statements about Him, and it was obvious that they had no case against Him.

Finally, two came forward and said that they had heard Jesus say that He would destroy the Temple and rebuild it in three days. Here the chief priest stood and called on Jesus to answer the accusation. But Jesus refused to say anything. The high priest again pleaded with Him, urging Him to tell them whether He is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. Then Jesus answered, “You have said so. But I tell you, hereafter you will see the Son of man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven.” (Mt 26:64) What did He mean by that? Some ask, “Did He mean that all those attending His trial then and there, would see that? No, of course not. He meant that all these people would see Him on the day He comes again on the clouds to judge the earth,

and afterwards on the right of the Father. When the chief priest heard this, he declared that He had blasphemed, and tore his robe in a gesture to show his utter contempt. He then asked the assembly for their verdict. They all said that He deserved to die.

The last phase in this travesty was to take Him to the Roman governor to sentence Him to death, since they did not have the power for it themselves. In preparation for this, they accused Him of treason by claiming that He forbade the people to pay taxes to Caesar. The whole company that convicted Him took Him to Pilate. There they repeated their false accusations and added that He told the people not to pay tribute to Caesar, saying that He was King. Pilate listened to all their accusations and looked to Jesus expecting Him to defend Himself. When he heard nothing, he realized that Jesus did not want to dignify any of these lies with an answer.

Then he looked at Him, and asked Him, “Are you the king of the Jews?” Jesus answered, “You have said so.” (Luke 23:3) Pilate knowing that the religious leaders had seized Him because of their jealousy of Him, went out to the crowd which had quickly assembled, and told them that he found nothing wrong with their prisoner. But they cried more condemning Him, adding that He stirs people throughout Judea, from Galilee to this place.

When Pilate heard this, trying to get rid of the case, which was becoming burdensome and difficult, he sent Jesus to King Herod who was at that time visiting Jerusalem. As the soldiers took Him to Herod, the chief priests and the scribes went along. There they repeated the accusations they had against Him. The Bible tells that Herod was very glad when he saw Jesus, because he had hoped to see some signs by Him. Of course Jesus refused to do or say anything. Disappointed, he humiliated Him and sent Him back to Pilate.

Pilate realizing that he had to render judgment called the chief priests, the rulers, and the people and told them that he did not find any guilt in this man and neither did Herod. So, he would chastise him and release Him. They cried louder asking him to put Him away. As a last resort, he

asked them which of the two prisoners they wanted him to release as was his custom every feast, Jesus or Barabbas. They chose Barabbas, who was a thief and a murderer.

At this point, the weak governor, frustrated and upset, washed his hands in disgust saying to them, “I am innocent of this man's blood, see to it yourselves.” (Mt 27: 24) The people answered, “His blood be on us and our children.” (Mt 27:25) So Pilate buckled under the pressure of the scribes, and the Pharisees, and gave them Jesus to be crucified.

The crucifixion:

The crucifixion of Jesus was the last event in an eventful week that is often called the “week of suffering.” Even though His physical suffering did not happen until Thursday night, His psychological and spiritual suffering began on Palm Sunday when He went to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover for the last time. While the people greeted Him with joy shouting, “Hosanna, Hosanna, blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord,” He knew that a few days later, they would shout “Crucify Him, crucify Him.”

He knew that He was marching to His death. He knew that He would be betrayed by one of His friends. He knew that His disciples would abandon Him. He knew that one of His favorite disciples would deny that he knew Him. He knew that He would be subjected to a fake trial, that He would be ridiculed, flogged, hit, and spat upon. And He knew that this suffering would climax in His death on the cross.

Every one of these weighed heavily on His heart. Some say that God has suffered since He created Adam and Eve. He suffered when they believed Satan and rebelled against Him, defying His authority, and throwing away His love. Even after He declared His love, as He clothed them and promised them a savior, they continued to sin. The first man born to Adam killed his brother, and when God gave him a chance to repent, he refused as his parents did before him. After this man went deeper and deeper into sin, to the extent that Moses wrote that God “was sorry that He created man.”(Gen 7:7)

The sinfulness of man became so awful that God decided twice to destroy him. The first time He destroyed every human being living on the earth except the eight people of Noah and his family. The second time He destroyed two cities and saved only three people. Then He chose Abraham and promised that from his seed will come the savior. What this chosen people did with their relationship with God in return for His love, protection, and support, is written and documented in the Old Testament. One needs no imagination to conclude that they caused God a lot of pain. They rebelled against Him; they disobeyed his commandments and worshipped other gods.

They killed His prophets and refused to repent of their sins. They did what was evil in His sight most of the time. The periods, during which they obeyed Him, were short and usually came after God hit them hard for their disobedience. But this did not last long; they soon went back to their sins as a dog goes back to his vomit. Finally, when the Son of God, took flesh and came to our earth to save His beloved man from death, He came to His people but His people rejected Him. They did not listen to Him, and when they did, they argued with Him and did not believe Him. They refused to follow Him in the knowledge of God, but wanted to crown Him an earthly king over them. At the end, they condemned Him to die like a criminal on a cross.

The physical suffering:

When they first seized Him, they tied His hands. One may ask “What is the suffering here?” It may not be in man's case, but we are not talking about just another man, we are talking about the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords, whose hands were never tied before. He allowed this to happen because He was the one who was to take all our sins and the full punishment that came with them. Tying the hands was the first step in that punishment. Then they put a crown of thorns on His head. Can you imagine how painful that was? Just one untreated wound produces a lot of pain, so how much was the pain as tens of thorns penetrated the scalp and the face and remained there? Here there is a symbolism.

Jesus allowed this to happen, because after Adam sinned, God cursed the soil and told him, “In toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life, thorns and thistles shall it bring forth to you.” (Gen 3:17,18) Adam found this to be true, the soil gave him a hard time to produce what he had to live on. He also discovered that life away from God produced other thorns such as disease, famine and death, which remained the biggest thorn in the side of man. Jesus allowed a crown of thorns to be put on His head, as a sign that He was taking unto Himself all the thorns that man endured during his life away from Him.

The third physical pain that He suffered was the flogging. Pilate ordered that Jesus be flogged, in an attempt to satisfy the Jews and their desire to make Him suffer. He thought that this would make them agree to His release, but it didn't. Flogging was done using a handle attached to several strips of leather, each of which was full of sharp pieces of metal. When used on someone, it was used on his back. Each time that it hit the skin, hundreds of pieces of metal would tear the skin and the muscles under it causing painful wounds. These would not heal because they were left untreated. This was done to Jesus by the Roman guard before He was crucified.

Then there was the agony of carrying the cross. The cross was heavy and Jesus, who was weakened by what He had been through since His capture the night before, was forced to carry His weapon of execution, under which He fell. Jesus saw the cross all His life. He knew that it would end His life on earth. Even before Adam disobeyed, He knew that he would disobey, and that the only way to save him was to die on the cross. He showed His familiarity with the cross when He said to the people one day, “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” (Mt 16:24)

He carried His cross until they saw that He would not make it to Golgotha, so they forced Simon the Cyrene to carry it the rest of the way.

Try to imagine what happened next. First they took His robe and the rest of His clothes, which left Him completely naked. They were not

ashamed to expose His nakedness despite the fact that He committed no sin, while He was the one who covered the nakedness of Adam and Eve when they sinned. He was the one who clothed every living thing. He was the one who clothed the lilies of the field in a glorious covering that “Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of them.” How dare man strip His God's clothes and expose His nakedness? He allowed this to happen because nakedness was a sign and a punishment for sin. Many times God threatened Israel that she would be naked and those around her will see her nakedness. Isaiah wrote this about her, “Your nakedness will be exposed and your shame uncovered. I (God) will take vengeance; I will spare no one.” (Isaiah 47:3)

The next agony was nailing Him to the cross. I don't need here to detail the physical suffering that this produced. It is enough to mention that the cruel soldiers who were used to this kind of execution did it without any regard to the humanity of those whom they crucified. They put huge nails in the hands and the legs and drove them using heavy hammers. The toughest men screamed when this was done to them. The Bible does not tell us whether Jesus screamed when they drove those nails through His hands and feet, or not. Most likely He endured the unbelievable pain without screaming. He probably showed signs of suffering but took it in silence.

The next agony was raising the cross and putting it in the hole they had dug for it in the ground. As they do this, the body is pulled down, and its whole weight pushes on the three spots where the nails are. This produces tremendous pain. The three huge wounds of the hands and the feet bleed profusely; the internal organs are under physical stress and begin to deteriorate because of the diminished amount of blood getting to them. The whole body is severely dehydrated. Finally the vital organs begin to stop functioning, and when the heart stops, the crucified dies. All this happened to Jesus on the cross. He stayed on it about six hours, and He died before the two thieves who were crucified with Him. The soldiers broke their legs to hasten their death, but when they came to Jesus they found that He was already dead.

The psychological suffering:

There are many things that contributed to His feelings as a man who reacted like any other to what happened to him. It is true that He was much more disciplined than other men, and the threshold of His emotions was much higher than ordinary men, but the Bible mentions that He cried twice, once before He raised Lazarus and the other when He prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem. St. John writes that at Lazarus' tomb, "When Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews also weeping...He was troubled in the spirit." (Jn 11: 33) And when He was in Gethsemane, "Then He said to them, 'My soul is exceeding sorrowful even unto death'." (Mt 26:38)

As we reflect on the events of His last week, we find many that contributed to Jesus' sorrow. The closest people to Him abandoned Him, when He needed them most. His chosen friends, Peter, John, and James could not even watch with Him one hour, and fell asleep, while He was struggling with the cup that He had to drink. Also, one of His friends betrayed him while another denied that He knew Him three times. Added to all this, was the ungratefulness and the malice that He saw in the people whom He loved and had served all His life, as they cried, "Crucify Him, crucify Him." And even though He knew in advance that all of this would happen, He suffered when it happened.

The spiritual suffering:

This suffering happened to Him as a result of being the Son of God. He would not have felt it so strongly had He not been. Part of it was the strong influence that Satan had on His beloved man, which resulted in sin's dominance over him and the absence of concern on his part for his eternity. Satan has brainwashed mankind and rendered it oblivious to its future. And as Jesus knew this all along, it grieved Him to observe and feel it.

He watched over the thousands of years of human history with grief in His heart. So we could say that there was really nothing new until now. But as He was put on the cross, something new happened. The sins of mankind from the time of Adam until that time, and those that would be

committed until the Day of Judgment were put on His shoulders. This He had dreaded most since the beginning, and was something that made Him suffer more than anything else that He had to endure. It was this that He prayed about to the Father in Gethsemane. This was the cup that He asked the Father if it were possible to pass from Him.

The Bible never mentions that He objected or complained about any other suffering that He faced up to this point. But here He expressed His dislike and wondered if it were possible to avoid it. The reason was not that the load was heavy, but that the load was something that strongly conflicted with His nature. The righteous one, who hated sin, was asked to carry all our sins, filth, and shame. St. Paul expresses this when he wrote to the Corinthians, “For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Cor 5:21) So the pinnacle of purity, the Holy One, who even sees imperfection in His angels, took on all the sins of the world, and since sin is punishable by death, He had to taste death.

The Seven Words on the Cross:

Jesus spoke seven times on the cross. Seven is one of the numbers that means perfection, and in this particular case, it meant that Jesus' mission was perfectly completed. Jesus Himself declared this to the world when He said from the cross, “It is finished.” (Jn 19:30)

The first word: “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.” (Luke 23:34)

This was the most logical thing for Jesus to say as He was crucified. The reason for His crucifixion was to pardon all of man's sins, so it makes sense for Jesus to ask the Father to add this sin to the heavy load of sins that was being loaded on Him. The reason, which He gave, was a true one. Those who participated in condemning Him never realized that they were condemning the incarnate Son of God. They thought that they were dealing with a false prophet, an imposter who wanted to pause as the long promised Messiah.

St. Paul stressed this, “None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they did, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.” (1 Cor 2:8) St. Peter also reinforced it addressing the Jews after Jesus' ascension, “And now brethren, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers.” (Acts 3:17) Here we find Jesus, motivated by His infinite love for mankind, defending those who crucified Him to the Father, and ignoring all His suffering. This is the exact opposite of Satan's continual accusing us to the Father. What a great God we have, and how great is His love for us!

The second word: “Today you will be with me in paradise.” (Luke 23:43)

Jesus said this to one of the two thieves who were crucified with him. This event was recorded because it has many spiritual concepts, which declare the beginning of a new era in the relationship between man and God. St. Mark records that, in the beginning, both thieves were hostile to Jesus. (Mk 15:32) But, for some reason one of them changed his mind and began to fight with 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.” (Luke 23:40,41) Then he looked to Jesus and said to Him, “Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingdom.” (Luke 23:42)

We don't know what made him change his mind. It may be Jesus' prayer to the Father to forgive those who crucified Him, or was it the heavenly glow that radiated from His face despite the dirt and the blood that covered it? Whatever it was, this man who lived all his life doing evil, had the intelligence to recognize the Lord, when there was nothing around him that suggested that this man was different from any other who was put on a cross. He saw Jesus at His weakest, and despite this, he recognized Him. He was the only one who recognized the glory of God in the midst of darkness. We also notice that he confessed his sins when he said that he and the other thief were receiving the due reward of their deeds. He most likely repented of all the sins that he committed during his life and asked Jesus to forgive him.

What was the result? Without hesitation, Jesus told him that He had forgiven his sins and that he would be among the first to enter paradise with Him. This tells us that it is never too late to repent of our sins and go back to God. It also tells us that God will not ask us anything when we do, just like the father in the parable of the prodigal son who never blamed his returning son, but embraced him and restored to him his status as his son. It also shows us that while on His road to death, Jesus took the time to accept the repentance of one of His children and save him from eternal agony in the fires of hell. This is what He came for and He was happy to do it.

The third word: “Behold your son...Behold your mother.” (Jn 19:26,27)

Jesus was careful to take care of His mother and to see who would provide for her after His death. He knew how much agony He had caused her. He knew that during the last three years He was not the best son for His mother. He had to do the job that the Father had entrusted to Him. This made Him travel a lot going from city to city preaching the word of God, leaving her in the care of relatives. His mother followed His news from His disciples and other friends. She knew of His rejection by the people of Nazareth and other places. She knew of the jealousy of the scribes and the Pharisees and their plotting to destroy Him. She knew that when He went to Jerusalem for the last time He was going to be crucified. From the time she gave birth to Him and Simeon had told her in the Temple, “and a sword shall pierce your own soul.” (Luke 2:35), she expected trouble. Her suffering began when God ordered them to go to Egypt because King Herod sought to destroy Jesus.

So Jesus was concerned about her future and told His beloved disciple John to take care of her and consider her his mother. There is little doubt that St. Mary felt comfortable with this arrangement. She loved John as her son and John loved her as his mother. She must felt a measure of happiness when Jesus said this. He did not forget His mother during the time when He was suffering the most.

Another thing that we learn from this event, that St. Mary did NOT have any children after Jesus as some of our brothers and sisters claim. They say that the proof for this is in the Bible. St. Matthew wrote, “While He was still speaking to the people, behold, His mother and His brothers stood outside asking to speak to Him.”(Mt 12:46) His brothers in this verse referred to His cousins. They were the sons of His mother's sister who was also called Mary and who was married to a man called Clopas. She is mentioned by St. John as one of the women who were standing by the cross. (Jn 19:25) It may seem strange that two sisters were given the same name. But this happened because the first Mary (Jesus’ mother) was promised to God, since her mother was barren and asked God to give her a child. She went to serve God when she was three years old. So, her parents considered her to be God's, and not their's. So, when God gave them a second daughter they called her Mary also. She was the one who had children, James and Joseph.

These were Jesus' cousins who were called by St. Matthew his brothers. The word “ brother” was not used in ancient times to strictly mean male sibling, but was used for close male relatives such as cousins and nephews. For instance, Abraham called Lot his brother while he was his nephew. Moses mentions this when he wrote the story of Abraham pursuing the five kings who conquered Sodom and Gomorrah and took Lot and his family captives. He wrote, “When Abraham heard that his brother had been taken captive, he led his trained men...three hundred and eighteen, and went in pursuit.” (Gen 14:14) Also if Jesus had true brothers why did He ask John to take care of her? One of His brothers would have been the natural choice in this case.

The fourth word: “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”
(Mt 27:46)

This is one of the most powerful and most puzzling of the seven words that Jesus uttered on the cross. First, we notice that this is the first time He addresses the Father using the word “My God.” In His first utterance, He addressed Him “Father.” Why did He call Him “My God” this time? A possible reason, that at this point in time, He was Jesus the

man who was carrying the sins of the entire world. He was representing the fallen human race, and found it fitting to address the Father on our behalf as His God. The prodigal son upon his return said to his father, “I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” (Luke 15:21) Jesus was saying the same thing to His Father.

As we reflect on the meaning of what He said, we find it difficult to really understand what He meant when He said, “Why have you forsaken me?” The word forsake means abandon. So did Jesus mean that at that moment the Father had abandoned Him? If this is the case, what does it mean that the Father has abandoned the Son? We know that His divinity did not leave His humanity for one moment or the twinkling of an eye. And Jesus Himself told His disciples, “I am in the Father and the Father is in me.” (Jn 14:9) Why now does He say to the Father, “Why have you forsaken me?” Many theologians have tackled this problem. Many of them interpret what Jesus said as an indication that when the sins of the world were put on Him, the Father could not look on His son in that condition, so He looked away, hid his face, or gave His son His back. Others have said that He said this to declare His humanity, and that as the man Jesus he felt separated from the Father because of the sins that He carried.

On further reflection on what Jesus said, we find that He was asking the Father why did He abandon Him? Did He know the reason? If He did, why did He ask? In answer, we say that He definitely knew the reason, but cried this in a loud voice for all humanity to hear that what happened was because of our sins. He was telling every human being that lived since then, that because of your sins the Father hid His face from me, but I endured it because of my love for you.

This was the hardest thing that Jesus had to go through, to finish the task that He was born to fulfill, the salvation of mankind. He did not complain about any other condition that the Father asked Him to go through. He did not ask Him, “Why have you allowed Judas to betray me? Or why have you allowed the soldiers to ridicule me, or to flog me? Or even why did you choose for me to die on a cross, and did not choose an easier death?” He did not, because all that He gladly endured

because of His love for man and His obedience to the Father. But the Father hiding His face from Him was something He found very difficult to cope with. A good guess is that this is the cup that He was praying to the Father if it was possible for Him to avoid.

The fifth word: “I thirst” (Jn 19:28)

This is the only time that Jesus talked about His physical condition. He felt pain when He was flogged, when they put the crown of thorns on His head, and when they nailed Him to the cross, but He did not utter one word. He did it voluntarily. He must have felt thirst a long time before He said “I thirst.” The bleeding from His wounds, sweating, having no food or any liquids since He ate the Passover meal, and the long exposure to the sun, all contributed to His thirst. He mentioned it shortly before His death. Why? Some say that He said it to fulfill the prophecy. The prophecy is the one that says, “In my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.” (Ps 69:21)

We don't agree with this explanation. The prophecy was made because this would happen, it didn't happen because the prophecy was made. St. John wrote this to show that Jesus was the one who was meant in that prophecy and many others. So, there was a good reason why Jesus said that. One of the possibilities is that Jesus wanted to show His great love for mankind. Here is the Son of God, who gave man everything he needed. And here is man who met His creator's love with defiance, and His generosity with denying Him a drink. No words can describe man's meanness in this situation. Even the cruelest of men will not deny someone who is thirsty a drink, no matter how evil he is. This shows that as man becomes more cruel and overbearing, the stronger the love of the Creator will have to be, in order to be willing to forgive all that and to sacrifice Himself on his behalf.

Jesus expressed his thirst twice as recorded in the Bible. The first time, was when He asked the Samaritan woman to give Him a drink. She also did not give him what He wanted. She rebuked Him for asking and told Him in effect that He has no business talking to her, since the Jews and the Samaritans do not even talk to each other. Jesus told her, “If you

knew the gift of God, and who it is who is saying to you, ‘give me a drink,’ you would have asked Him, and he would have given you the living water.” (Jn 4:10) He was telling her that He didn't really need her water, and that He asked her this to begin a conversation that would make her realize how sinful her life was. This exchange that began with Jesus' expressing His thirst ended in the woman and many others getting saved. The same thing happened on the cross.

What did man do when he heard a dying man say that he is thirsty? He responded by giving Him vinegar. This was worse than not giving Him anything. By this deed man sank to new depths of cruelty and arrogance. But Jesus tasted the vinegar, as the last suffering that He voluntarily accepted on our behalf.

The sixth word: “It is finished.” (Jn 19:30)

By this word Jesus told His Father that He had done the job that He had entrusted to Him and that man's salvation had been accomplished. He also declared this to the rest of the world. He told us that He gladly sacrificed Himself to give us salvation and restore us to our original position in Heaven. Now it is up to man to take advantage of this. If we refuse to pick this new fruit, rejecting God's advice as we did before, we will die. But if we choose to follow God's advice and pick this desirable fruit we will live forever.

The seventh word: “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” (Luke 23:46)

As we reflect on this, we find that He addressed God as His Father. He was able to say this because He had finished His role as the man Jesus who died to save mankind from eternal death. He knew that the Father would no more hide His face from Him, because He had obeyed Him all the way to the cross. So He found it fitting to call Him “Father” as He had called Him all His life on earth. We also notice that He asked the Father to receive His spirit and He said this with confidence, knowing that the Father would be glad to receive it and restore it on the third day. This way Jesus drank the cup of death to the last drop. No

other spirit ever left a body with such triumph and joy.

Up to this point, Satan was jubilant because he thought that he had finally succeeded in destroying his enemy, the seed of the woman who was to bruise his head. Watching what happened, he saw his head intact, while Jesus was the one dying. When did he know that he was the one who was defeated? He probably had doubts when he heard Jesus ask the Father to receive His spirit. Up to this point in time, Satan was the one who claimed the spirits of all human beings, because all have sinned. But when he tried to capture Jesus' spirit, he could not. Jesus was the one who captured him. After that Jesus took Satan and went to Hades and released the spirits of all His saints who died with the hope that one day the Messiah would come and release them from their captivity. This was impossible to do before Jesus died in their place and wiped out their sins with His blood.

Finally, reflecting on this important event, we find that two opposites converged on the cross. We find the best of God and the worse of man. On the cross, man's arrogance met with God's humility and God's goodness with man's sinfulness. We find that God's love for man met with man's hatred for God. On the cross, we observe the beauty of God and the ugliness of man. We see the selflessness of God and the selfishness of man, the light of righteousness and the darkness of evil. But God's goodness overcame the sinfulness of man. This is how we are saved.

CHAPTER SIX

JESUS' RESURRECTION AND ASCENSION

JESUS' RESURRECTION

After Jesus died on the cross, Satan discovered that he had been outsmarted and defeated by God. The Scribes, the Pharisees, and the Priests did not. They thought that they destroyed their enemy and probably celebrated their victory. Suddenly they remembered something they had heard about the imposter whom they just killed. He said that he would rise from the dead. Trying to prevent a possible attempt by His disciples to steal his body, to convince the people that He did rise, they went to Pilate. They told him to put guards on His tomb, to prevent them from stealing His body.

Pilate feeling that they had maneuvered him into sentencing an innocent man told them, why do you come to me? You have Roman Guards assigned to the Temple. Do it yourself. So, they secured the tomb the way they wanted.

But on the third day very early on Sunday morning, Jesus rose from the dead and left the sepulcher. Then the Archangel Michael came down and removed the stone from its opening. This was done to alert those who would come to visit the site that He had risen.

A few women, among whom were Mary Magdalene, Jo-Anna, and Mary the mother of James, went to the site early carrying with them spices for the body according to their custom. They were shocked to find the stone rolled away and the tomb empty. They stood there confused not knowing what to do. Suddenly two angels in dazzling apparel appeared to them and said to them, "Why do you seek the living among the dead? Remember how He told you, while He was still with you in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and on the third day rise." (Lk 24:5,6,7) After a while they left, and went to tell the disciples.

When they did, the disciples were so confused that they did not know what to believe. Two of them, Peter and John ran to see for themselves. They observed the empty tomb and went back to their hiding place. Mary Magdalene also went back to the tomb. While she was crying, the Lord appeared to her and told her to go and tell the disciples that He had risen.

Thomas doubts

That evening, Jesus Himself appeared to them in the upper room where they were hiding while the doors were locked. He stood in their midst and said to them, “Peace be with you”. Then He showed them His hands and His side, to convince them that He had truly risen. Thomas was not with them when this happened. So when he came, they told him that Jesus had risen and was here. He did not believe them. Declaring his doubt, he told them, “Unless I see in His hands the prints of the nails, and place my fingers in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe.” (Jn 20:25)

As we reflect on this, we are faced with the question whether doubt in situations such as this is sin. The Bible does not answer the question. Another episode that mentions doubt, is the one in which the disciples were sailing back to Capernaum, while the Lord chose to stay behind to pray. Suddenly the weather began to get rough, and the waves began to violently rock the boat. They were in trouble and waited for the Lord to do something to save them. But He did not. They did their best to keep the boat afloat, but their efforts were dangerously challenged by the storm. Finally in the fourth watch, close to dawn, they observed Jesus coming to them walking on the waves. In the beginning they thought that He was a ghost. When He assured them that it was He, Peter asked Him to tell him to come to Him. When He did, Peter began to walk on water. But as he felt the power of the waves and the wind, he panicked and began to drown. Jesus lifted him up, rebuking him saying, “O man of little faith, why did you doubt?” (Mt 14:31)

From these two episodes we see that doubt is a weakness, a human

weakness. It is fed and abated by Satan, who sows doubt in everyone about a lot of things, especially those that deal with God. It is a tendency, which is also fed by our intelligence and our desire to scrutinize whatever we are told, lest we are taken advantage of. We are drawn to accept that which we understand and question that which we do not understand. It is not rejecting something; it is waiting for evidence one way or the other. Atheists reject the idea of a God, agnostics do not, and they are doubters who are ready to be convinced. And when they are convinced, they usually believe strongly in whatever they doubted before. After a week of agonizing whether to believe his friends or not, Thomas did see Jesus. When he did, Jesus invited him to put his fingers in the prints of the nails, but he did not. But he fell on his knees calling Jesus, “My Lord and my God.” (Jn 20:28)

The most important event in history

Before we talk about the opposition to the resurrection and the strong proof that He indeed has risen, we would like to talk about the greatness of this event. It is no exaggeration to say that it is the most important event in human history. When compared with any other event, even His birth, His resurrection stands alone as the premier event in history.

The day on which our Lord was born is considered one of the greatest days that were etched in God’s memory. It was the day that mankind had waited for so long and the day on which the angels and archangels were awed by the act of incarnation. The King of Kings and the Lord of Lords emptied Himself, broke into human existence, took flesh and became man. They may have wondered why, but with God, they celebrated the occasion and sang to the newly born child, “Glory to God in the highest, peace on earth and good will toward men”. This was a great day, but the day that witnessed His resurrection after He had been in the tomb three days, ranks higher and tops all other events in importance.

The resurrection offered us salvation

There are many reasons behind its importance. The first is that His birth was the beginning of the last chapter in the human drama that began when Adam and Eve disobeyed God. It was the beginning of salvation, but the resurrection was its completion. Salvation did not happen when Jesus was born, it happened when He was crucified. But if He had not risen, salvation would not have happened. In this case, Jesus would have been just another prophet, another sinful man. A sinful man does not have the qualifications to deliver mankind from their sins. We needed God to do it, and His resurrection was essential to show that He is God incarnate, and thus had the qualifications of the One who was supposed to bruise the serpent's head. He is the Messiah, the Son of God. A fact that the Roman Centurion, one of those who lead Him to His death confessed it while He was still on the cross when he said, "Truly, this was the Son of God." (Mt 27:5)

Jesus declared from the cross that salvation was complete when He said, "It is finished". He was telling the whole world that the job that the Father gave Him, is done. So the resurrection is the stamp of verification that He put on our salvation. If He had not risen, He would have been judged as an imposter and a rebel who tried to attract the Jewish nation away from the religious leaders to Himself. For this, He was tried and punished by death.

But when He rose from the dead, nobody could dismiss Him or ignore His story. People by the millions flocked to His side, many of whom were glad to die for Him. The poor carpenter from Nazareth became the most famous man that ever lived.

A very important consequence of our salvation is that Satan does not have as much power over us as before. Before Jesus, man was helpless against the power of Satan. He was fighting a losing battle with a powerful enemy, without much help from God. But after Jesus died in our place and conquered Satan for us, we can call on Him to help us conquer him. We are not alone anymore in our struggle against sin. The Holy Spirit is ready to help anyone who will call on

Him. The only thing that He requires is for you to call on Him. He will help.

The resurrection conquered death

Salvation was the first and the greatest reason for the importance of the resurrection. The second is conquering death. What do we mean by this? When God created Adam and Eve, He meant for them to live forever. He also meant for them to live with Him, loving Him and enjoying His love and His Company. He did not want them to love Him because they had to, but because they wanted to. This is why He granted them the privilege of making their own decisions. To exercise that privilege, He asked them not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He also told them that if they did, they would certainly die. When they did, they had to die.

There are two kinds of death, physical, and spiritual. The physical death with which we are all familiar is the departure of the spirit from the body. The spiritual death is permanent separation from God. There is a temporary separation from God, which happens when we sin. The permanent separation will happen on the day of the Lord when He comes back. He will invite those who accepted Him to go to Heaven, and sentence those who rejected Him to the lake of fire and brimstone. This is the spiritual or the second death.

Adam and Eve's sin marked them for the two kinds of death. But because God loved man so much, He did not want him to suffer both. He allowed the physical death to happen, but He suspended the spiritual death. He had a plan for saving man from that terrible destiny, which would give him another chance to choose right. If he accepted salvation, and lived up to its requirements, he would escape spiritual death, and live with God forever. If he did not, he would suffer the consequences.

The fear of death is universal, and man considers it his principal enemy. But when Jesus died in our place and rose from the dead, he conquered death not only for Himself, but also for all who accept Him

as Lord and Savior. This is expressed by St. Paul when he wrote to the Corinthians saying, “For as in Adam all died, so also in Christ all shall be made alive.” (1 Cor 15:22) So, we will all rise from death as He did. This is why St. Paul challenged death when he said, “Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death where is your sting?” (1 Cor 15:55)

In the sacrament of baptism, the child is immersed in water three times symbolizing the three days that the Lord spent in the tomb. And when he is lifted up the third time, he is rising with Him, a new creation.

The resurrection made man a new creation

The resurrection also makes man a new creation. The Bible tells us that man was created in the image and likeness of God. This means that he was holy, sinless, trusting, and loving God. This was his nature before he sinned. He enjoyed his relationship with God, who used to talk to him and visit with him from time to time. But after he sinned, he changed. Instead of waiting for God’s visits, he hid himself when he heard Him coming. He felt ashamed of his nakedness and tried to cover it up. He felt separated from God. His nature was corrupted by sin and he did not feel as comfortable with God as he used to.

All this changed when Jesus rose from the dead. When He was born, the angels found a reason to sing “and good will toward men”. The good will here meant that with the birth of the second person of the Trinity as a man, God was showing His good will toward fallen man. To come, He had to take our nature, and in doing so, he opened the door for man to regain his old nature, which he had lost when he sinned. This was made possible when the man Jesus died in our place on the cross. By atoning for our sins, He was able to reconcile us with the Father, from whom we were separated when our nature was changed by sin.

When He rose from the dead, ascended to, and entered Heaven as the first to rise, he opened the door for us to follow him into the Father’s bosom. We would not have been able to do this if we remained in our

old nature, but changed into our new nature, we could. St. Paul wrote about this to the Corinthians when he said, “Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, old things have passed away. Behold all things have become new.” (2 Cor 5:17)

Jesus bought us with His blood

When Jesus died on the cross, and the Father accepted His sacrifice on our behalf, He claimed mankind as his own. He paid the price of our sins, which means that He bought us with His blood. St. Paul draws our attention to this when he said to the elders of the church of Ephesus, “Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you guardians, to feed the church of the Lord, which He obtained with his own blood.” (Acts 20:28)

Who is the church that He bought? It is the body of believers. It is you and I. As we reflect on this, we get some feelings about the enormity of what we just said. If we have been bought, this means that **WE DO NOT OWN OURSELVES**. Jesus owns us. We are His property, and His resurrection put the official seal on the deal.

If we begin with this, we can draw some logical conclusions with unsettling results. If we have been bought, then we are no more free men and women, but slaves. And slaves have no love for their master. The relationship between us would be nothing but fear and hatred. This could have been the case, if Jesus had a different personality. But Jesus removes that fear when He said, “I no longer shall call you slaves, but children”. He came to save us from our slavery to sin and Satan. It is not possible that He would substitute one slavery with another. He said once, “If the Son makes you free, you are indeed free.” (Jn 8:36)

Our relationship with Him is a relationship built on love. He came in love. This is expressed several times in the Bible. But no one said it more beautifully than St. John when he wrote, “God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but shall have everlasting life.” (Jn 3:16)

Reflecting further, we find that this has tremendous implications for our lives as Christians. First, if Jesus owns us, we have to accept what He does in our lives whether it is good or bad. But this good and bad is our judgment of what God allows to happen to us. If things seem bad to us, it is useful to try to understand the situation before jumping to conclusion that God is the reason.

Most of the suffering that we meet in the world is not of God's, but of Satan's making. He is the one who tempts us and invites us to disobey God. The consequences of our sin sometimes make us suffer. Sometimes we bring it on ourselves when we choose wrong. If someone chooses to drink a lot of alcohol, he cannot accuse God of making him sick. He did that, not God.

Our God is a good God. He heals, He comforts, and He alleviates pain. It is true that He allows something "bad" (in our opinion) to happen to us, while it may be really "good". We may discover this later, but when it happens, we have a tendency to blame Him.

Sometimes the reason is that He wants us to feel inadequate, or to realize our failure, so we will go to Him. We all remember the disciples, who were expert fishermen, when they failed to catch any fish after a long frustrating night. What happened after they came back? He came to the rescue. He got into one of the boats and told them to try again. This time they caught so many fish that the two boats began to sink. Why did He do that? He did it to strengthen their faith in Him.

Some may ask, why does God do this? Why can't He allow us to succeed on our own? Why does He want us always to go to Him? In answer, we have to remind ourselves of a few facts that may have escaped our attention. The first is that God loves us and He wants the best for us. The second is that what He considers good, we may judge as bad. This is because He cares about our spiritual condition, while most of us think only of our physical condition. He once said to the people, "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 go into hell.” (Mt 5:29) The third reason is that against Satan, nobody has a chance. None of us is a match to him. This is why Jesus told us that without Him we could do nothing.

So, based on all these, God wants us to understand His attitude. He wants us to surrender our lives to Him, based on His love for us, and our love for Him. He wants us to feel as a loving child feels toward his loving father. He obeys him, trusts him, and goes to him with all his problems, whether they are large or small.

Surrendering our lives to Him means giving Him what is rightfully His. It means relying on Him completely. It means depending on Him in everything we do, and not on our knowledge, strength, intelligence, wealth, or experience. We have to realize that no matter how knowledgeable, strong, intelligent, wealthy, or experienced we are, our resources are nothing compared to God. To put it simply, we are much better off, if God takes charge of our lives.

There is also a bonus for surrendering our lives to Him. We will have no worries. We will have a joyful life. Nothing will upset us. Nothing will take away our peace. We will enjoy that peace that our Lord promised when He said, “My peace I leave to you, my peace I give you, not like the peace that the world gives.” (Jn 14:27) You will have that peace because you know that the creator of the world is managing your life. What a relief!

Another result of feeling that Jesus owns us is the realization that, since we don't own even ourselves, we don't own anything in this world. We don't own any of our earthly possessions, such as our homes, our cars, our money, or anything of value. God has loaned all of these to us. The loan is for a given period, the period that we live on this earth. This is evident when we leave; we can't take anything with us and we leave it behind. This should motivate us to use whatever God has loaned us wisely. In this case, we should not become obsessed with it and willingly give to those who are less fortunate than us. This will also help us to heed St. John's advice not to love the world or the things of the world.

Another consequence of realizing that all that we have is a gift from God is that we see it is not the result of our efforts. When we realize this, we stop boasting about anything. We did not do it; He did it. If so, why do we feel proud, and boast about it? If we want to boast, listen to St. Paul when he said, “Let him who wants to boast, let him boast of the Lord.” (2 Cor 10:17) David also talked about this when he wrote, “In God we boast all day long.” (Ps 44:8) The only thing worth boasting of is God’s love for us. It is the reason behind all the good things that we enjoy in this life, much less the salvation that He offered us, without our deserving it.

If we feel this way, we will certainly feel humble, a quality that God loves to see in us. Jesus, who owns this universe that we cannot understand or imagine, was humble. He never boasted about any of its components, or anything else that He created. He was an example for us, and urges us to emulate Him. He once told His disciples, “Learn from me, for I am meek and lowly at heart.” (Mt 29:11)

The resurrection as a proven fact

1.The empty tomb

As we mentioned before, the resurrection of Jesus proves that He is God. Those who deny His deity, deny also His resurrection. They accuse Christians of worshipping three Gods. These subscribe to the theory that His disciples stole His body. As we answer this, we find ample evidence that proves beyond any doubt, that the empty tomb found by those who visited early Sunday, was indeed true and that He has truly risen.

A. First the Roman Guards guarded the tomb. These were known for their cruelty and strict obedience to orders. If His disciples had stolen His body, they would have to overcome the heavily armed guards, which was impossible. The disciples were peaceful people who had just two swords. We remember that they were hiding out of fear of the Jews. Can anyone imagine that any in this group would challenge a mighty

Roman guard?

B. Even if they had managed to gather a small army and conquer the Roman garrison, these soldiers would have been tried, convicted and severely punished. Nothing of the sort was reported.

C. When the Jewish leaders arrested Peter for healing the lame man, he addressed the gathering of the high priests and the rest of the council. He boldly told them, “Rulers of the people, and elders, if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a cripple, by what means this man has been healed, be it known to you all, and to all the people of Israel: it is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. By Him this man is standing before you well. This is the stone which was rejected by you builders, but which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:8-12)

The Bible tells us that none of those present challenged what Peter said, especially what he said about the resurrection of the Lord. All they did was tell him not to preach about Him again.

2. He rose on His own power

Others say that even if He died and was resurrected, what is so strange about that? God raised a few others before raising Him and a few after Him. Then they ask why is this treated differently from these? The answer is simple. Some one raised all those, but Jesus rose by Himself. No one else raised Him. The others were raised on the same day they died, but our Lord rose after spending three days in the tomb. This was intended to refute another accusation that some subscribe to, which is that He did not really die on the cross, but just fainted. And when they put Him in the tomb He regained consciousness and claimed that He had risen.

3. It was prophesied

It was mentioned in the Old Testament, when the Holy Spirit said, through David, these words in Psalm 16, “ For you will not leave my soul in Sheol; neither will you suffer your Holy One to see corruption.” (Ps 16:10) This prophecy obviously is intended for Jesus and not for David. The designation Holy One was never given to any human, only to God. Second, David saw corruption after his death, as does any other human being. The only one who did not see corruption was our Lord. Despite the fact that His spirit left His body, no microorganism had a chance to attack His body. How could they attack the one who created them?

Jesus Himself prophesied his death and resurrection. This is another proof that it really happened. This is why He came in the first place. He knew before He created the universe, that He would be crucified to save His beloved man from the destiny that he deserved, and that He would rise from the dead. He made this clear to His disciples many times. All four gospels have quotations from our Lord about this. Here is one from each.

- A. From the gospel according to St. Matthew: Jesus said, “Behold, we are going to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man shall be delivered to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn Him to death. And deliver Him to the Gentiles to be mocked and scourged and crucified, and He will be raised on the third day.” (Mt 20:18,19)
- B. From the gospel according to St. Mark: He reports, “and as they were coming down the mountain (after witnessing the Transfiguration), He charged them to tell no one what they had seen, until the Son of Man should have risen from the dead.” (Mk 9:9)
- C. From the gospel according to St. Luke: Jesus said, “Behold, we are going to Jerusalem, and everything that is written of the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. For He will be delivered to the Gentiles, and will be mocked and shamefully

treated and spit upon. They will scourge Him and kill Him, and on the third day He will rise.” (Lk 18:31,32,33)

D. From the gospel according to St. John: Jesus said, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” (Jn 2:19) The Jews did not understand what He said. Then St. John continues by saying, “He spoke about the temple of His body. When therefore he was raised from the dead, His disciples remembered that He had said this.” (Jn 2:21)

Conclusion:

Concluding this we can ask you our dear reader, where do you stand on all this? Do you understand the full meaning of His resurrection? Are you willing to act on it? Do you really feel that God owns you, and that you do not own anything in this world, not even yourself? Do you feel humble or proud? Do you feel that God is taking care of you, or that you have to look after your own welfare? Do you accept everything that happens to you, or blame God, when things go wrong? Do you feel that inner peace that God promised His children or you often feel upset and unhappy?

If you have the right answers, then you really understand the true meaning of the resurrection of our lord. If you didn't, it is not too late. Tonight, in the quiet of your bedroom, drop to your knees and ask the Lord who came and died for you, to help you, with whatever you find difficult for you. He will be happy to oblige.

JESUS' ASCENSION

The ascension of Jesus, which followed His resurrection by the forty days He spent on earth, is another contested fact about His life. Those who contest His resurrection also contest His ascension. Those who believe the first believe the second. The only source to authenticate both is the Bible.

The Bible says a lot about His ascension. The Old Testament

prophesied it. David wrote about it in Psalm 24, “Lift up your heads O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of Glory may come in. Who is the King of Glory? The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle! The Lord of hosts, He is the King of Glory.” (Ps 24:7-10) And in Psalm 118, he says, “I shall not die, but live and declare the works of the Lord. The Lord has chastened me sore, but he has not given me to death. Open to me the gates of righteousness, I will go into them, and I will praise the Lord. This gate of the Lord, into which the righteous shall enter.” (Ps 118:17-20)

In the New Testament, there is record of it in three of the four gospels, the Book of Acts, and in a few of the other books. St. Mark mentions it when he wrote, “So then the Lord Jesus, after He had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God.” (Mk 16:19) St. Luke wrote, “He led them out as far as Bethany, and He lifted up His hands and blessed them. And it came to pass that, while He blessed them, He was parted from them, and carried up into heaven.” (Lk 24:50,51) Also in the Book of Acts, “When He had spoken these things, while they beheld, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight.” (Acts 1:9) St. John wrote, “He said to His disciples, ‘I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world. Again, I leave the world and go to the Father.’” (Jn 16:28)

Before His ascension, He appeared to His disciples and others during the forty days that He stayed on earth. He probably did this for several reasons. First, to make sure that His resurrection would be well established in the minds of both His friends and enemies. He wanted to give credence to His rising from the dead because of its importance for the spread of His gospel. Second, He wanted to spend this time with His disciples, to strengthen their faith and guide them in establishing the foundations of the new religion. He told them about the Holy Spirit and the role He will play in the life of the new church. He explained things that had confused them before His crucifixion, and opened their minds to understand many facts about the Kingdom of God. He instructed them not to leave Jerusalem until they received the power of the Holy Spirit.

With the ascension of our Lord, the curtain fell on the last scene of the most dramatic event in history, the story of God's love for His lost creation. It is the story of mankind who rejected their creator's love and defied His authority with the counsel of Satan; of a compassionate God, who refused to condemn and destroy them, but saved them by sending His only Son to die in their place and take the punishment Himself; of the triumph of life over death and light over darkness; of the Lord conquering Satan and death; of His resurrection, and ascension; of the Son completing the mission that the Father gave Him, and going back to Him victorious.

CHAPTER SEVEN

JESUS' LEGACY TO MANKIND

When people compare Jesus with the great men who lived on earth, we find that their opinions differ widely. This is expected since individual judgements and opinions are based on subjective evaluation. Even when men develop criteria, to put objectivity in the process, we find that they usually use roughly two sets of criteria. One set is composed of visible standards, such as intelligence, wealth, education, power, authority, fame, and knowledge. The other uses intangibles such as love, forgiveness, mercy, sacrifice, and humility. Using these different sets of criteria, we often see that those favorably judged by one set are usually judged unfavorably by the other. This is not the case of Jesus Christ.

We may find differences that reflect prejudices among Jesus' evaluators, but we find an almost universal respect for Him and His influence on the lives of those who followed Him and accepted Him as their Lord and Savior. Even those who do not respect Him cannot deny His greatness. The reason is His uniqueness among the great men and women who have distinguished themselves and made significant contributions to mankind.

If you compare Him with Alexander the Great, Napoleon, Genghis khan, or Caesar, you find that these men are considered great by the world because of their ability to destroy others. Jesus was great because of His great ability to save them.

If you compare Him with Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, Confucius, or Buddha, who did not destroy, but were considered great because of their teachings, we find that He stands above them all, not only because of what He taught, but because of what He did. No other man has ever suffered on behalf of man as He suffered, loved him as much as He loved him, or sacrificed because of him as much as He sacrificed. Beside this there is no doubt that His teachings are superior to those of any of them.

Another aspect that makes Him different is that He was infallible. Even though the others lived good lives, each of them made mistakes. The only one who did not was Jesus Christ. He is the perfect example of how man should live his life. Beside this, He offered to help those who wanted to follow His example but could not. He promised to send the Holy Spirit to help sinners overcome sin and all its powerful temptations.

Obviously there is no need to compare Him with those who were great worriers, for He never was one. He never hurt anyone much less kill him. He emphasized time and again that He came not to condemn man but to save him. He did not believe in violence and because of His exemplary humility, He turned down His people's invitation to be their king. He definitely belongs to another league. It is rather degrading for Him to be compared with people like Napoleon or Alexander the Great, especially as many people no longer consider them great. Their lives were devoted to killing and destroying others and their motivation was selfish and vainglory. We will compare Him with those considered reformers, who were concerned with human behavior and who dealt with the human spirit.

In the following pages we will talk briefly about some of these great men, their records, and influence on the lives of people, in an attempt to show that Jesus of Nazareth stands head and shoulders above them all.

Socrates:

Socrates was a stonemason, who began a revolution in the thinking of Athenians. Up to this point in history they had little tolerance for philosophy. They saw no practical applications for it. They believed in science and rhetoric. The first had immediate applications for the physical world in which they lived, and the second improved one's chances of winning an argument, which can have far-reaching consequences. Socrates was the first to demonstrate the values of philosophy.

He surrounded himself with a number of rich and handsome young men, and went around engaging respectable citizens in arguments about topics like “justice”, “honor”, “bravery”, and “piety”. Through these exchanges, he demonstrated to the Athenians that these concepts also have practical implications. Because he was skilled in conducting arguments, he made many of those who participated in them look rather foolish. These, being people of influence, accused him of corrupting the youth. He was tried, found guilty, and executed.

His teachings are not clear from the records that were left, so we cannot speak with any degree of certainty about them. But we can see his influence in attracting attention to philosophy, which as a result of his efforts, prospered and continues to the present. He talked about many virtues and made it clear that these have definite value in our daily living. He also developed the question and answer technique, and through this he discovered and demonstrated the value of logic.

Plato:

Plato is Socrates’ most famous disciple. He left Athens in disgust when his teacher was executed, but returned after a few years to develop further what Socrates had begun. He formalized and defined logic and perfected the question and answer technique. He taught that there are two worlds, the world of form, which is comprised of such things as knowledge, light, beauty, truth, and reason. The other world which he called matter includes things as change, ignorance, darkness, error, falsity, the body, and sensation. He favored the first since he believed that the good life is an escape from the world of matter into the world of form. Based on these beliefs, he outlined utopia as the ultimate escape from evil into good.

Aristotle:

Aristotle is Plato's most famous disciple. He wrestled with the problem of categorizing knowledge and the emerging concept of specialization. He began the process of clarifying the differences between the fields of logic, physics, zoology, psychology, ethics, political theory, and

rhetoric. He is also credited with creating much of the scientific terminology, which has made the classification of knowledge much easier.

Buddha:

Buddha is not a proper name. It is a title and means “the enlightened one”. The real name of the founder of Buddhism was Siddhartha. Nobody knows the exact date of his birth, but it is generally agreed that he was born sometime between 560 and 480 BC. He was born in a very wealthy family. His father built three palaces for him, so he could avoid the sharp seasonal changes in weather. He over-protected him from the world and had a dream that one day his son would be the sole ruler of India. Buddha could not be confined to his palaces, so he wandered outside and learned about the evil and misery that touch almost everyone. Faced with this reality, he gave up all the splendor of his privileged life and decided to become a monk.

He sought salvation for himself. For him, this meant the conquest of his desires and lusts. He tried philosophy and found it useless, so he rejected it. He tried asceticism, to the extent that he ate sparingly, sat on a patch of thorns, lay in a cemetery among decaying corpses, and let filth accumulate on his body. He felt that this would help him conquer fear, subdue lust, and make his thinking clearer. He later found that this also did not work. One day as he was resting under a tree, it suddenly occurred to him that he had attained salvation since he had no desires for anything on earth. After staying under the tree for seven days, he was confronted by “Mara” the evil one. His temptation was whether to keep this new state of happiness to himself or communicate it to the rest of the world. He won the confrontation when he decided to go into the world to teach people how to attain the salvation, which he had discovered.

Buddhism is a complex religion. It is built on spiritual achievements accomplished through prescribed techniques. It has also elements from Asian moral philosophy. It embraces mysticism, magic, ritual, forms of yoga, and some psychology. It preaches kindness toward all forms of

life, tolerance, and gentleness. As an example of tolerance, Buddhism incorporates many of the deities of India and does not proclaim that its way is the only way toward salvation. One of its characteristics is the absence of a belief in a Supreme Being. Buddhism teaches that there is no God.

Confucius:

Confucius was born in China in the year 551 BC to a family that was considered low-level nobility. He studied history, ritual, and music for many years. After this he began to teach. Since he believed in the effectiveness of education and its influence in shaping the future of mankind, he spent the rest of his life as a teacher. He was concerned about the relationship between people and came to the conclusion that if he is taught how, man can live a virtuous life. This is best accomplished when those at the top are virtuous and provide good examples for those under them. To facilitate this process, he taught the proper observance of five important relationships. This means that every participant in these relationships should understand and learn the proper relationships with others. These relationships are parent and child, elder and younger brother, husband and wife, friend and friend, and ruler and subjects.

Confucius was not an innovator. He did not come up with anything new. He only wanted to bring moral reform to the people at the top of society, and hoped that this would filter down to the lower echelons until all society was reformed.

The Legacy of Jesus:

As we look in the lives of those great thinkers and reformers, we can easily see that none of them can be compared to Jesus. None of them believed in God. They wanted to reform society, using their own intelligence, powers of persuasion and experience, and none of them can be considered a success. Their efforts were human efforts doomed to failure. Man is far from being spiritually or morally perfect, and everything that he does in this area will carry the stigma of his imperfection. They were good men who wanted to change the evil that

they saw in the world. But they did not succeed because man's nature had been corrupted by sin from the beginning and was beyond any human effort to repair it. Also, these men constantly searched for solutions and changed their goals a few times before they settled on what they wanted to do.

By contrast, Jesus knew His goals from the beginning and what He wanted. He never changed His plans or His goals. He was on course from the day He was born to the day He ascended into heaven. It is not even necessary to mention that none of these reformers rose from the dead or ascended to heaven. They were all mortal men, while Jesus was God in the flesh. He was perfect in every thing that He did, while those reformers made mistakes, possibly fewer than others, but they were not infallible.

The questions now are: What did Jesus leave for mankind? What unique contributions did He make to the human story? What ideas did His influence bring to the foreground of human thinking?

To ask these same questions about any of the so-called great men who lived on earth would bring brief answers. What the best of those great people contributed is summarized above, and it is clear that none of them can be compared with what Jesus has contributed.

The main areas of Jesus' legacy to mankind are knowledge of the nature of God, the relationship between God and Man, and the future of man.

The nature of God:

As we mentioned, before the coming of Jesus, man had an incorrect picture of God. When Adam and Eve were created, they had a true picture of Him. They lived in the Garden of Eden, enjoying His company and fellowship. This was God's intention from the beginning. This is why He created the lower forms of life to serve Adam and Eve and to provide them with all the necessities of life. It can be said that they were created for man's sustenance, survival, and enjoyment. This is why none of them was created in God's image or likeness, or received

the breath of life from God. Only Adam was granted these privileges. So, he was in effect, the crown jewel of God's creation.

Adam and Eve undoubtedly enjoyed God's company and had a different image of Him than their descendants. They found Him caring, loving and generous. That true picture of God was changed when they disobeyed. Satan sowed doubt in their minds about God. He began by telling them that He lied to them. He then said that the true reason for forbidding them from eating of the fruits of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is that God did not want them to be like Him. And he followed this by telling Eve that if they ate, they would not die, making God a liar for the second time. We know what happened after that.

As soon as they ate, they realized that they were naked and wanted to hide their nakedness from God. Previously they were covered with righteousness. When their righteousness was gone they felt their nakedness. Instead of God being their close friend, they felt Him a stranger, from whom they must hide. Their love for Him changed into fear. They probably saw Him as the enemy who kicked them out of the garden of Eden and who cursed and punished them for the simple act of eating of a tree that He had planted "for them" in the garden.

As man wondered farther away from God, his ideas about God became more twisted. This is due to Satan, whose mission is to upset God's plans especially those having something to do with man's destiny. As man sinned more, God did two things; He first sent prophets with a promise of forgiveness, if men changed their ways. But, at the urging of Satan, we did not only refuse to listen to God's message, but also killed His prophets. After this, God had no other alternative but to punish man for his sins. With this vicious circle perpetuating itself, Man's idea about God got worse and worse.

God became in his eyes, an arrogant creator who demanded complete and blind obedience from man. He was a creator with unlimited power, who used it ruthlessly to punish and destroy all those who dared to disobey Him. He also saw Him as the one responsible for all the problems, disasters, and calamities that have plagued mankind since the

beginning. This was man's idea about God until Jesus came to earth. From the beginning of His ministry, time and time again, Jesus told the people about the Father. He talked about God as HIS Father, and then toward the end of His life on earth, He began to tell them that God is their Father as well. When He declared one day that He is “The way, the truth and the life”, He showed that He came to correct man's idea about God, by telling them the truth about Him.

He told them that until now, Satan has been filling your heads with one lie after the other about God, and I am here to correct those ideas and reveal to you the true character of God. The first time He mentioned God as our Father, was when He said to His disciples “When you pray, say our Father who art in heaven”. But He made it clear that He is not among us when we pray “ Our Father”. He never addressed Him as “Our Father”, But “My Father”, or simply “Father”. Then He told His disciples that the Father loves them, and that He will be delighted to live in the midst of His people. He said this while He explained His death and resurrection on that fateful Thursday when He ate with them the Passover meal for the last time. He said, “In my Father’s house there are many mansions” (Jn 14:2). Then He told them that when He comes to take them, they would be with him in the same place with the Father.

Man's relationship with God:

As we mentioned before, after he sinned, man's relationship with God was built on fear. Moses expressed this when He told the Israelites, “The fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning.” (Ex 20:20) David repeated the same theme when he wrote, “The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom.” (Ps 111:10) Man's sinfulness was the factor that initiated and sustained this relationship between man and God. Under this condition, God's love was not revealed to him. It is true that God did not punish man immediately after he sinned, but gave him a chance to repent and come back to Him. Nevertheless He did punish him when he refused to repent. It is also true that God's motivation in punishing man was and always is, to encourage him to repent. As it is written, “God wants that all be saved and for the knowledge of truth come to Him.” (1 Tim 2:4)

But at the urging of Satan, man generally refused to repent and God had to punish him. When this happened, Satan used this to drive man even farther away from God, whispering in his ear that God is really cruel and selfish. Another factor that had a strong influence on shaping that relationship is the law that God gave to Moses, in which God outlined the behaviors acceptable to Him and those that He abhors. The law also prescribed the rewards and punishments that He will administer to those who obey and those who do not obey. This is not the atmosphere in which love can grow between man and God. Yet, God's love is the only motivating force behind everything that He did for man.

Because of this love, He created him the superior being that he is, making him in His image, and breathing the breath of life in his nostrils. He gave him dominion over the rest of His creation and groomed him to take the place of the fallen angels. But when he sinned and refused to repent, God had no other alternative but to punish him. And when even a loving father administers punishment, his love is obscured. The obstruction becomes stronger as the punishment administered becomes more severe. This was what happened to the relationship between God and man.

All this changed when Jesus displayed God's love to mankind by the incarnation, in which the second person of the Trinity, the Son of God appeared in the flesh. To do this, He emptied Himself, took the form of a slave and became a man who lived on our earth thirty-three years with a life full of sacrifice, misery, and suffering. He did this in order to save us from our sins, and offer us a second chance to regain our good relationship with the Father and spend the rest of our eternity with Him in heaven. This changed man's old ideas about a cruel God and presented a new picture of a loving and forgiving God. This motivated man to love God instead of fearing Him.

Changing the destiny of man:

Before the incarnation of our Lord, man was overwhelmed by the many problems, which plagued him. He was at a loss as what to do to bring a measure of happiness in his life. These problems were the results and

complications of his sinful behavior. Adam and Eve certainly got a hint of what awaited them as they were ushered out of the Garden of Eden. As the Lord God clothed them, He said addressing Adam, “Cursed is the ground because of you, in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life, thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you, you shall eat the plants of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread.”(Gen 3:17-19) And to Eve He said, “I will greatly increase your pain in childbearing, in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire will be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.” (Gen 3:16)

I am sure that Adam and Eve never expected or dreamed of the variety of problems that they would face as they descended into the world. Not only did they meet the specific difficulties that God mentioned in His declaration as they left the garden, but also they soon discovered that they had lost their dominion over the rest of God's creation. Other organisms began to attack them and to attack each other. They lost the security that they had before and also lost the feeling of belonging to God. In their struggle to survive, they had failed in their relationship with their creator and began to feel alone in a hostile and an unfamiliar world.

They witnessed sin's ugly face when their first-born killed his brother. Remembering the Lord God, and having the knowledge of what is good and what is evil, they realized that He loved good and hated evil. So, they tried to avoid it. We don't really know how successful were they in doing good and refraining from evil. The Bible does not tell us much about their behavior after they left the garden. Most likely, they learned their lesson and tried to avoid anything that would make God mad at them. They probably missed God's love and approval and tried to do what is right in His sight. As man began to fill the earth, he moved farther and farther away from God. His problems multiplied and his evil reached new heights.

God was so sad that He created the human race that He destroyed them in great numbers twice, once by a flood and the other by fire and brimstone. As man continued to do what was evil in the sight of God, He began His plan for saving mankind from its dark destiny. He

selected a righteous man (Abram) and asked him to leave his people and follow Him. Abram followed God, and his grandson Jacob became the father of the Israelites. God chose to bring, from their seed, the Savior who would restore man to his exalted position in heaven and reconcile him with the Father. We know what happened with the chosen people. They rebelled against Him, defied His authority, and worshipped every foreign god that they could find. He punished them and when He did, sometimes they repented, but most of the time they delved deeper in their sins.

Before Jesus appeared, the human condition was miserable. Man was sinking in a sea of sins, unable to solve his material problems, let alone his spiritual ones. He lived in a mess, in a world dominated by hate, envy, greed, selfishness, malice, and immorality. He had to struggle with an environment, which was becoming more and more unfit for human existence, with famine, disease, and new social problems increasing every day. If he thought about his life after death, there was no hope either. All that he found were a few Jewish prophecies about a savior who will come in the fullness of time. What exactly was His mission? Nobody seemed to know. Some interpreted those prophecies that the savior would return the kingdom to Israel. When He came and He did not, they killed Him.

Even those who wanted to act wisely had a difficult time doing it. Satan was too strong for them, and they had no help from God, for salvation had not come yet and man was under the law. And the law said if you break one commandment you have broken all of them.

All this changed when Jesus came to our earth. He showed us the way to the kind of living that God had in mind when He created Adam and Eve. He lived that life, explaining that we too can live such a life, if we want. He offered His help to mankind to enable them to accomplish it. But the most important contribution that He made to change man's destiny is to carry the heavy load of his sins. He did this by paying the penalty that man was supposed to pay. He died in his place and paid the price of all his sins.

This salvation, which was God's promise to Adam and Eve as they were ushered out of the Garden of Eden, was fulfilled when Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead on the third day. By His resurrection, He offered us victory over sin and death. Man was thus restored to his original status with the Father and, for the first time in his history, was given the chance to go back to God and enjoy eternal life with Him.

This is the legacy that Jesus of Nazareth left to mankind. No wonder many consider Him the greatest man that ever lived. This is also the reason why many believe in Him.

Dear Reader: Is this enough reason for you to believe in Him and follow Him all the days of your life? If you haven't, it is not too late. As long as you are still in the flesh, you have a chance. Don't listen to Satan when he tells you not to believe that. I hope you won't. God loves you, and He is waiting for your return. Do it now.

CHAPTER EIGHT

JESUS' CHURCH

The church

When people hear the word “Church”, many think that it is the place of worship that Christians go to on Sunday. Some think that it means the clergy, and a few think that it means the body of believers. As we examine these three different interpretations of the same word, we find that historically the word was used to mean the body of believers. Gradually it was applied to the place of worship, and then it was used to mean the clergy.

The first time the word church appears in the Bible, is when Jesus asked His disciples, “Who do men say that the Son of Man is?” They said, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ the Son of the living God.” (Mt 16:13-16) When Jesus heard this He said, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in Heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall never prevail against it.” (Mt 16:17,18)

First, Jesus definitely did not mean by the word “church” a structure or a building. We remember that He was not impressed with the Temple when His disciples pointed to Him its beauty and magnificence. So it makes no sense for Him to talk about a building when He announced the birth of His church. He also did not say that His church would be built on Peter, a sinful man. We notice that at this particular moment, He was addressing Simon whom He had called earlier Peter or the “Rock”. What He announced to him, to the rest of His disciples, and indeed to the whole world, was that His church will be founded on the rock of faith that Peter declared when he confessed that Jesus was the Son of the Living God.

As we examine the rest of the New Testament, we find other indications that the word “Church” was used to mean the body of believers. For instance, St. Luke writes in the Book of Acts, “And those who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need. And the Lord added to the church day by day those who were being saved.” (Acts 2:43-47) It is rather obvious that he did not mean that God added more disciples or church leaders every day, but believers. This is supported by what he wrote about Saul before his conversion. He wrote, “But Saul laid waste the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.” (Acts 8:3) So the church was inside those houses and its members were the men and women whom Saul put in prison, not the leaders of the church.

We also find further evidence for this in the writings of Paul. When he wrote his epistle to the Romans, he said, “Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I but also the churches of the Gentiles give thanks. Greet also the church in their house.” (Rom 16:3-5) By this, St. Paul did not mean the leadership of the church, but obviously meant the believers. We also find that St. Luke distinguishes between apostles, elders, and the believers as the church. He wrote, “When they (Paul and Barnabas) came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders.” (Acts 15:4) We notice that the church was not the apostles or the elders; it was the believers.

Nowhere in scripture do we find the word “church” used to describe the other two of the three different meanings we find today. This is not that important, because words change by the way they are used. This often depends on who is using them. The change in its use comes so gradually, that it becomes extremely difficult to pin it down to a certain date or a certain person. But using the word “church” to mean the building where believers worship, its leadership, and the body of believers is confusing to say the least. Now the word is seldom used to mean the believers, which is the officially accepted meaning of the word, which we still teach in Sunday school to our children.

If the word is to be used properly as the institution that our Lord died for and bought with His own blood, we have to use it exclusively to mean the body of believers. The clergy are part of the church, but they are not THE CHURCH. They should be called the church leadership. As to the building in which the believers worship, it should be called “God’s House”.

What happened to the church?

THE FIRST FOUR CENTURIES

Before His crucifixion, Jesus prayed to the Father. He asked that those who believe in Him would remain united. He said, “The glory which you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one.” (Jn 17:22,23) As we look at the church now, we find that it is no more the one church that Jesus hoped and prayed for. We find hundreds of churches spread all over the world. Each one believes that it is the true church that Christ died for. And we ask, “What happened to that group of believers, which Jesus left as one church?”

It is obvious that Jesus’ wish was not fulfilled, because God chose to grant us the privilege of making our own decisions when He created mankind. He wanted us to love Him and trust Him. But He did not want to force us nor have us to do so under coercion. If Satan were not there, Adam and Eve would not have disobeyed God. But when he tricked them, they did. The same thing happened to Jesus’ church. From the day Christ ascended to the Father, Satan began to attack the church, hoping to conquer it after his failure to conquer Jesus.

The church resisted some of Satan’s early efforts to destroy it. For about 450 years it remained united. After that, it succumbed to his influence, and gradually became the many warring churches, which are still antagonistic to each other. Not only that, but they are even trying to destroy each other. How did this happen? This will be explained in the rest of this chapter.

The early heresies

As we said before, the church remained one for 450 years. This does not mean that Satan did not try to destroy it from the beginning. He tried to do that using two different strategies. The first was the persecution that he instigated against the young church and its leaders. This came from the Jews who rejected Jesus and also the Romans and other pagan nations who resisted the idea of one God ruling the universe. This idea came from none other than the lowly Jewish nation.

We don't need to detail this persecution, because it is well documented and described in the Bible and in the annals of history. Satan thought that he could easily wipe out the young church. It had about eighty simple, unsophisticated advocates and its leader had been publicly condemned and crucified by His people. But Satan was wrong. Those simple unsophisticated advocates carried the message of their leader with a courage and fervor that surprised the world. They were not only ready to face their tormentors, but they were ready to die for what they believed in. The church grew by leaps and bounds.

It did not take Satan long to realize that this first line of attack did not work. The young church grew stronger as the persecution against it became more and more devastating. He shifted his strategy to fight the church from within. He began to plant heresies in the minds of some of its leaders, hoping that with their influence on the believers, they would help him destroy the church.

There are many of these. Historians count close to thirty early heresies. We are not going to discuss all of them, but we will summarize the most important ones as a representative sample of what the young church faced during that period.

1. The Arian heresy

Arius was born in Libya in the year 270 AD. As a young man he enrolled in Alexandria's Divinity School and was noticed for his brilliance. When he graduated, His Holiness Pope Peter of Alexandria

ordained him in the year 307 AD as a deacon. Later he was promoted to the office of priest and preacher. Soon after this, he came out with an idea that proved to be the strongest heresy launched against the church because it denied the most important doctrine of Christianity.

He claimed that Jesus was not equal to God, but inferior to Him. He said that he was created by God and not born of Him. This is why He is not worthy of our worship, but only of our respect. He made his claim based on some of the statements that the Lord made during His short stay on earth. Among these statements were the following.

When He was asked about the end of the world, Jesus said, “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only” (Mt 24:36)

He said to His disciples before His crucifixion, “You heard me say to you, ‘I go away, and I will come to you. If you loved me, you would have rejoiced, because I go to the Father; for the Father is greater than I.’” (Jn 14:28)

After His resurrection, He said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” (Mt 28:18)

He also said, “I can do nothing on my own authority, as I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me.” (Jn 5:30)

He said, “As the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself.” (Jn 5:26)

Arius was ordered by Pope Peter to stop his attack on Jesus’ divinity, but he refused and the Pope had no choice but to excommunicate him. But he defied the judgment against him, and continued to preach. Finally he was kicked out of Egypt and fled to Palestine, where he continued to spread his heresy. The damage that he caused in the church was so great that a petition was sent to Emperor Constantine the Great, to call a conference of all the bishops of the Christian churches to

discuss the problem.

The world council at Nicea

This was the first world council and it met at Nicea in the year 325 AD. It was attended by three hundred and eighteen of the bishops who represented the Christian churches that existed at that time. The Egyptian Pope Alexandros was appointed by the Emperor to chair the meetings.

When time came for Arius to speak, he repeated his heresy saying that the Son was not equal to the Father, neither in His eternity nor His nature. The Father was alone, and He created the Son, on whom He bestowed some of His divinity. So he is not equal to Him.

His thesis was debated by a few. But the most outstanding voice against him came from St. Athanasios, the young archdeacon in the church of Alexandria, who had accompanied the Egyptian Pope Alexandros. He tried to convince Arius that Jesus spoke sometimes as a human being, which He was, and reminded him of many things that He had said that indicate that He is the Second Person of the Trinity. Consequently He is equal to the Father who is the first Person of the Trinity, but Arius refused to listen.

They pointed out that He said the following about Himself:

“The Father is in me and I am in the Father.” (Jn 10:39)

“ I and the Father are one.” (Jn 10:30)

“You have heard that it was said to the men of old, you shall not kill, but I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment.” (Mt 5:21,22)

“Son your sins are forgiven.” (Mt 9:2)

“Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me Philip? He

who has seen me has seen the Father.” (Jn 14:9)

“I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father, but by me.” (Jn 14:6)

“Every one who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.” (Jn 6:40)

“I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever.” (Jn 6:51)

“For the Son of man is Lord of the Sabbath.” (Mt 12:8)

“The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son.” (Jn 5:22)

After several days of debate, the council ruled that Arius was a heretic, excommunicated him, banished him, and ordered that his books be destroyed.

The Nicene Creed:

After defeating Arius’ heresy, the council saw fit to state the basic beliefs that all the churches agreed on. They stated this in what is now known as the Nicene Creed. It is important to note that the Egyptian archdeacon St. Athanasios had a major and a crucial role in shaping that creed.

The creed states, “We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only begotten, begotten of the Father before all ages. Light of light, true God of true God, begotten not made, of one essence with the Father, by whom all things were made, who for us and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became man. And He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried. And the third day He rose again, according to the Scripture, and

ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of the Father. And He shall come again with glory to judge the living and the dead, whose kingdom shall have no end.”

2. The heresies of Mcdonius, Yusabius, and Apolenarius

Mcdonius was the bishop of Constantinople, who was given that position under the influence of the followers of Arius. He spread a new heresy that claimed that the Holy Spirit was created by God, and is thus inferior to Him.

Yusabius, on the other hand, claimed that God is one person who has one nature, and not three persons. Consequently, the Trinity does not exist.

Apolenarius denied the existence of the human nature in Jesus. He claimed that His divinity took the place of His humanity. Consequently it was His divinity that suffered his death, and the rest of His physical pain.

The council at Constantinople

In the year 381 AD, the Emperor Theodosius called the Second World Council. One hundred and fifty bishops from all over the Christian world attended. The bishop of Rome did not attend, but he endorsed all its deliberations afterwards.

After listening to the three heretics, they were responded to and given the arguments upon which the decision was made that what they claimed was heresy. They were ordered to repent and deny their heresies. When they refused, they were excommunicated and dismissed from their offices.

The council added to the Nicene Creed the following words:

“Truly we believe in the Holy Spirit, the life giving Lord, who proceeds from the Father, we worship and glorify Him, together with the Father

and the Son, who speaks through the prophets. We believe in one Holy, Universal and Apostolic church, and we acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins. We await the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.”

THE FIFTH CENTURY AND BEYOND

3. The Nestorian heresy

Nestorius was born in Syria in the last decade of the third century. He was a monk in a monastery near Antioch, and his great fervor in resisting the Arius heresy had made him famous. He was chosen by the Emperor to become the Bishop of Constantinople. Soon after, he began to teach that St. Mary does not deserve to be called the Mother of God. His reason was that she did not give birth to the divine part of Jesus. So she should be called the mother of Jesus the man. He said that Jesus was two persons, one human, and the other divine. He believed that the divine nature did not unite with the human nature. This meant that St. Mary did not give birth to God, but to a man. That which is born of flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the spirit is spirit. The created cannot give birth to the creator. So, St. Mary gave birth to a man whom the divine God used to fulfill His purposes.

At this time St. Cyril was Pope of Alexandria. He tried to correct Nestorius’ ideas. He wrote to him explaining that St. Mary did not give birth to just another human being. She gave birth to the incarnate Son of God. This is why she is truly the Mother of God. He explained that Jesus was God in the flesh and cited all the evidence from both the Old and the New Testaments that prove that He is God. But Nestorius refused to change his mind.

The first world council at Ephesus

So, there was nothing left except to petition the Emperor to convene another World Council to consider the matter. Emperor Theodosius called all the heads of the churches to meet in Ephesus. This council,

which was held in the year 431 AD, was attended by 200 bishops from all over the Christian world. St. Cyril, the Pope of Alexandria, who was accompanied by 50 of his bishops, was the presiding officer of the council.

Nestorius came to the council with 40 bishops who supported him and his heresy. He claimed that the divine nature of Jesus was separate from His human nature. Consequently the divine nature was not born, was not crucified, was not risen and St. Mary should not be called the Mother of God, but rather, the Mother of Jesus. But after the council heard Pope Cyril's answer, Klestinus the Bishop of Rome's, and others, they ruled that Nestorius was a heretic and excommunicated him. They stated unequivocally that Jesus had one nature in which His humanity and His divinity were united without mix, alteration, or change and St. Mary should be called the Mother of God. The council also approved the following statement to become the preface of the Nicene Creed.

“We magnify you, O mother of the True Light, and we glorify you, O Virgin Saint, Mother of God. For you have given birth to the Savior of the world, He came and saved our souls. Glory be to You, Our Master and King, Lord Jesus Christ, the honor of the Apostles, the crown of the Martyrs, the Joy of the righteous, the strength of the churches, and the forgiveness of sins. We profess and preach the Holy Trinity, One Divine God. We worship and glorify Him.”

The Emperor ordered that Nestorius be banished to Upper Egypt. He was sent to Akhmim where, rejected and despised by all, he stayed for the rest of his life. But his followers spread his heresy in Persia and India. A few churches that believe this are called Nestorian and have survived to today.

4. Eutyches' heresy

Eutyches was the head of a monastery near Constantinople. He began his public posture by vehemently opposing Nestorianism. This drew attention to him. He then began to have second thoughts and became confused between the two views. So, he attempted to reconcile those

who opposed it with those who supported it. After reflecting on the problem, he came up with a compromise that he thought would unite the church again. He said that the two natures of Christ, which Nestorius alluded to, existed when Jesus was born. But the divine nature overtook and dominated the human nature. This resulted in His superior nature and consequently made Him not on par with the ordinary human nature. So, He was not really tempted, nor did He suffer from the things that all other human beings suffer from. So in essence, He was equal to God but unequal to man.

The second Ephesus council

Both sides however, rejected this compromise. And when Eutyches did not abandon his belief and continued to spread it, he was summoned to appear before the second Ephesus council. This council was convened in the year 449 AD, under the chairmanship of Pope Dioscoros of Alexandria, and was attended by 130 bishops. Eutyches was excommunicated, but afterward he repented and declared that he had abandoned his effort. He was forgiven, and spent the rest of his life in obscurity. But his compromise did not die with his repentance, but was spread by some of his supporters in a limited area in Syria.

The beginning of the Schism

The background:

When Eutyches, who was the head of a monastery in Constantinople, came out with his heresy, Flavian his bishop was upset. But he thought that as Eutyches was an old man, he would not be able to spread his heresy beyond his monastery and it would eventually die with him. When he shared this with his friend Osabios bishop of Dorelia, he did not agree and predicted that it would do a lot of damage to the Universal Church. So, Flavian asked him to talk with Eutyches since they were friends. When he did, Eutyches refused to recant what he believed.

Then Flavian heard that Eutyches had sent a letter, trying to convince

him of his heresy, to Leo bishop of Rome. So, Flavian saw it as his duty to write to him as well to warn him about the heresy and ask him to help educate Eutyches that he was making a serious mistake. Bishop Leo answered him with a letter that has become known as “Leo’s Tome” of faith. Unfortunately, the letter did not incriminate Eutyches, but leaned heavily toward Nestorianism.

Flavian had no other alternative but to call a council of his bishops in Constantinople to consider the matter. Eutyches did not appear before the council until the seventh day. When he was faced with his heresy, he responded orally and in writing with vague and twisted language that gave no clear indication that he had abandoned his heresy. So he was found guilty, consequently excommunicated, and all his priestly authority was taken away.

But Eutyches did not accept this, and using his connections with powerful bishops such as Leo and also his literary and oratory abilities, pursued the matter with the Emperor. Finally Emperor Theodosios agreed to call the council in Ephesus, as we mentioned before, under the chairmanship of Bishop Dioscorus of Alexandria.

When Eutyches was called to state his opinion, he gave the chief clerk a written statement in which he agreed with the Nicene Creed. Based on that he was judged repentant and restored to his position.

They then decided to punish Flavian for what he had done to Eutyches and excommunicated him with six of his monks. Flavian did not take this sitting down. He appealed his case to Leo, Bishop of Rome, who sent a letter to the Emperor very critical of the Council of Ephesus, and asked him to call another council some where in Italy. But the Emperor did not oblige and defended what had happened.

Another aspect of this relates to the personal life of Emperor Theodosius. He was married but had no sons to sit on his throne after him. His ambitious sister Pulcheria advised him to marry another woman who would give birth to an heir to the throne. But when he wrote to the famous Egyptian monks of the wilderness of Shehete,

they responded by telling him that his sister's advice was not according to God's will. And if he married ten women, he would not have a son. The Emperor listened to them, and refused to marry another woman. When he died, his sister who had been a nun for many years, came out of her solitude, with the blessings of Bishop Leo, cast her nun's clothes aside and married Marcian one of the army generals, and with him they became the rulers of the Eastern Empire.

After strengthening his friendship with the new ruling duo, Bishop Leo began to plan revenge on those who punished his friend Flavian. He targeted especially Bishop Dioscorus of Alexandria, who had presided over the council that punished him. He also thought that this would weaken the influence of the Eastern churches, especially the Church of Alexandria, and strengthen his own, the Church of Rome.

The council at Chalcedon

Against this background, Emperor Marcian and Empress Pulcheria called the Council of Chalcedon in late 443 AD. Four Hundred Greek bishops, several representatives from the Church of Rome, and Pulcheria's own commissioners attended. The actions of the Second Council of Ephesus were cancelled and Pope Dioscorus of Alexandria was deposed.

The council put out another creed, which was a composite taken from Leo's Tome, Cyril's, and other documents. The new creed was more or less a compromise that was designed to please the Romans and their friends.

It stated:

“We all with one voice confess our Lord Jesus Christ one and the same Son, at once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, truly God and truly man, consisting of a reasonable soul and body; of one substance with the Father as regards his Godhead, of one substance with us as regards his manhood, like us in all things, apart from sin; begotten of the Father before the ages as regards his Godhead, the same in the

last days, for us and our salvation, born of the Virgin Mary, the God-bearer (theotokos), as regards his manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, without confusion, without division, or without separation; the distinction of natures being in no way abolished because of the union, but rather the characteristic property of each nature being preserved, and coming together to form one person (prosopon), and one entity (Hypostasis), not as if Christ were parted or divided into two persons...”

So this council legitimized the two natures doctrine, which continues to this day. The decrees adopted in Chalcedon became imperial law, which after this became normal practice. This offended some of the Orthodox Eastern churches, which cherished Cyril’s one-nature portrayal of the incarnate Christ. Those who were offended, and do not recognize what transpired in Chalcedon, were the Coptic church of Alexandria, the Syrian Orthodox church of Antioch, the Ethiopian church, the Eretrian church, the Indian church, and the Armenian church. Other churches, namely the Roman Orthodox Church and the Church of England followed the council of Chalcedon.

The Council at Chalcedon began the fracture of the universal church, which had remained united for four and a half centuries. Finally, Satan had succeeded in breaking the church that Jesus died for. The break was not big. It resulted in a few churches resisting one of the doctrines that the universal church had rejected for some time. But politics, personal matters, jealousy, and revenge were used by Satan to accomplish his goal. This schism though small, was the beginning of bigger and more serious schisms in the future.

After Chalcedon

The Church of Alexandria

Before we deal with those, let’s first follow what happened to the Church of Alexandria and its deposed Pope Dioscorus. Emperor Marcian ordered that St. Dioscorus be banished to a small island off the coast of Asia Minor called Ghinghra. Pope Dioscorus went to his new

home with two of his bishops, his secretary, and his historian.

When he arrived there he found most of the inhabitants pagan and a few Nestorian Christians. These displayed their contempt for St. Dioscorus and his company, ridiculed them, and called on others not to deal with them. The Egyptian Pope dismissed what those people did, began evangelizing the pagan population, and converted many of them to Christianity. He spent the rest of his days in that far place, doing God's work, spreading the good news, and healing those who needed healing. After five years in banishment, he died and joined the other Popes in Paradise.

In Egypt, the Emperor needed to appoint someone to lead the Church of Alexandria. He chose a priest from the city of Preterius to become Bishop and replace St. Dioscorus. With the decree that gave Preterius the position, there was another decree that declared that anyone who objected to the new Bishop would be severely punished. One by one, the Egyptian Bishops refused to obey and were persecuted. Some of them were tortured and killed. A new wave of persecution was unleashed against the Copts of Egypt. But they did not bend. They continued to resent the appointed bishop until he died.

His death is a story of how oppression leads to violence. After the death of St. Dioscorus, the Copts had elected St. Timothy to succeed him. This made the Emperor furious. He ignored the new Pope, and ordered the people to support and obey his appointee. The Copts and the leadership of the church did not comply. So, the Emperor sent Deyonisius, the top general of his army, with new orders. He used extreme brutality to carry the Emperor's orders and the persecution of the Copts became more severe.

When Deyonisius arrived, Pope Timothy was on a tour to bolster the faith and the morale of his flock. When he returned and tried to enter Alexandria, he found all gates closed and heavily guarded. The Copts felt that enough is enough, and reacted violently. They engaged the Roman garrison and many fell on both sides. But they finally reached the place where Bishop Preterius was staying and they killed him.

The result was that the Emperor banished St. Timothy to the same island that had seen the last years of his predecessor St. Dioscorus. But God did not want to let him remain there long. In the year 466 AD, Emperor Marcian died and the throne passed to another part of the royal family. The new Emperor was Baciluis, who appointed a physician from Alexandria to become his personal physician. The Copts asked him to try to get the Emperor to release their Pope and he did. St. Timothy returned to Egypt amid huge celebrations in honor of his return and the Roman persecution of the Coptic Church, the Church of Alexandria, finally stopped.

The Anglican Church

The Anglican Church was one of the churches that approved what transpired in the Council of Chalcedon and abided by its decrees. Since that Council, the influence of the Church of Rome had begun to grow and its Popes gradually became head of the Chalcedonian churches. So the Anglican Church of England was under its leadership and did not like it. They tolerated that relationship until the year 1538 AD. At that time King Henry the Eighth was the King of England. He wanted to divorce his wife, but the Archbishop of Canterbury could not, because of his boss, the Pope of Rome. He took advantage of the situation and promised the King that he would allow him to divorce his wife, if he gained the church's independence from Rome. The King was happy to do it. He got his divorce, and the Church of England got its independence.

The Catholic Church

The word "Catholic" means "Apostolic." This name did not designate the Church of Rome in the beginning, but described the universal church before it began to break up. But when the Church of Rome became stronger and more controlling, it acquired the name and the other churches, which broke with it, called themselves by other names. Now the word is used exclusively to designate the Roman Catholic Church. This church assumed the leadership of Christendom for a long

time. And as power corrupts, this church was no exception. Corruption began to spread through it, changing many of its beliefs and practices to the extent that a monk named Martin Luther led a rebellion against his own church, which resulted in the biggest schism that the church has ever seen. The result was the beginning of the movement that led to the appearance of the Protestant Churches, which began as one church, but soon splintered into the hundreds of denominations that exist today.

Martin Luther and the beginning of Protestantism

As the Catholic Church grew in power, its Popes became more demanding and more controlling. They not only lived like emperors, enjoying the luxuries that were despised by Jesus and many of his early followers, but they also demanded complete obedience from their subjects and all the other churches that followed them. As they say, absolute power corrupts absolutely. And this happened. Popes became tyrants. They were greedy, cruel, and ruthless. They not only behaved in a non-Christian manner, but also changed many of the doctrines that were espoused and respected by the early church.

Martin Luther lived at that time. He was born in Eisleben, Germany in the year 1483. He studied law at the University of Leipzig. In 1505, at the age of twenty-two he joined the Augustinian Hermits and became a monk. He was ordained in 1507 and after he studied theology, he was sent to teach in the University of Wittenberg. In 1509, he began to show signs of his disapproval of what was happening in his church, and many of the things he had been taught. His views became widely known when he posted his criticism in the “95 theses” on the church door at Wittenberg.

The following is a brief summary of his main objections. When he examined the beliefs and the behavior of his church, which he did not approve of, he noticed that it was part of what the church called “Tradition.” He did not find justification for many of the accepted beliefs and doctrines of his church in the Bible. More specifically he wrote against:

1. Tradition: which had many human elements that did not have Biblical support. He said that the Bible is the only source of our doctrine and our practices. He noted that the people seldom read the Bible. The only ones who read and interpreted it were the clergy.

2. Justification by works: He said that we are justified not by our deeds but by faith alone.

3. Indulgences or as it was called “The holy trade”: According to this, people bought their forgiveness for a price. The original practice was the merciful release of a penitent sinner from a penance imposed on him earlier by a priest. But it evolved, was abused, and triggered scandalous behavior from the fathers of the church.

4. Purgatory: This is the place that believers are supposed to spend some time after death, to be cleansed from whatever sins they committed. The church detailed and portrayed this period of punishment, to the extent that, just thinking about it, believers were terrified. Indulgences insured that this punishment would be reduced or eliminated altogether.

5. The supremacy and infallibility of the Pope: He rejected the spiritual supremacy of the Pope, whom he considered another human being who could make mistakes. He denied the Pope’s claim that he had the authority to shut the gates of Hell and open the doors of Paradise.

6. The divine nature of St. Mary: He rejected the status that the Catholic Church had given St. Mary. She was first called the divine protector of the city of Constantiople. They claimed that she appeared to Dominic of Guzman (The founder of the Dominican order) and asked him to recite a prayer, which became known as “Ave Maria”, and do it accompanied by a rosary. This became a common practice and other prayers were composed for the same purpose. St. Mary was assumed to have been coronated in Heaven and became the Queen of Heaven. This was the ultimate glorification of Jesus and Mary as the divine King and the divine Queen of the Universe. It also became fitting to spare her from the original sin that everyone is born with, so she had an immaculate

birth.

7. The mediation between God and man: He rejected all the ritual and practices that emphasize that priesthood is needed, and that priests are the mediators between God and the believers. He preached a personal relationship with God that eliminated the need for saints, mass, or sacraments.

Martin Luther was advised to repent of his heresies, but he refused. Eventually he was excommunicated in the year 1521. Despite being discredited by his church, his thesis spread like fire in Europe, mainly because of the corruption of Catholicism at that time.

More schisms

As we mentioned before, Martin Luther's rebellion was the first break with the strong and well established Church of Rome. Soon, even during the life of Luther, other rebellion began against the Catholic Church and the budding Protestant Church. It seems that Luther had opened the floodgates, and what happened was really a flood of rebellion, which was collectively called the "Reformation". Here is a taste of what happened.

John Calvin:

John Calvin was born in France in 1509. He developed the Presbyterian form of church government. In this, all ministers serve at the same level and lay elders represent the people. He rejected more of the church rituals than Luther, who had retained much of the medieval ceremony in worship. Calvin did not allow a great deal of church music, art, architecture, the use of rings in marriage, or signs of devotional practice. He also believed and proposed the doctrine of predestination. In this, God determines man's destiny, and His grace is directed toward a few, while the majority perish.

Ulrich Zwingli:

Ulrich Zwingli was born in Switzerland, in the year 1484. He preached against the veneration of saints and all religious images such as pictures, icons, and statues from the church. He also claimed, contrary to Luther, that there is no conversion of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Jesus in the Eucharist.

As a result of these ideas planted in their minds, people were incited to act against Catholic Churches. They took the Reformation in their own hands by attacking churches, overturning altars, breaking statues, and stealing consecrated objects.

John Wesley:

John Wesley was born in England in the year 1703. He began the Methodist movement. The name was taken from the goal of “Providing a disciplined method of spiritual improvement”. He emphasized intimate personal experience as the only form of service. He believed that Christian doctrine, ritual, and organization were relatively insignificant. He talked about that intimate experience as “the heart strangely warmed”. He said, “This by the grace of God, will beget, preserve, and increase the life of God in the soul of man.”

John Smyth:

John Smyth was a British priest who founded the Baptist movement. He believed in baptism only when the person has become a believer. In 1608 he baptized himself in Amsterdam. He was a fellow of Christ’s College in Cambridge. He had fled from the repressive rule of King James I and lived in Europe. After his death, Thomas Helwys, one of his followers came back to England with a group of Baptists, which became the first Baptist congregation in London. The American Baptist movement began in 1639, when Roger William began to convince people with the Baptist doctrine. A congregation was assembled in Providence, Rhode Island that year.

George Fox:

George Fox was born in 1624 in England. He founded the Quaker movement. The name came from the fact they quaked before God. At the age of nineteen, some friends invited him out. When he drank and got drunk, he was disgusted at the gap between what was preached and what was practiced. Out of this experience came the firm conviction that every person receives from the Lord a measure of light, and if this inner light is followed, it leads surely to the “Light of Life” and to spiritual truth. He believed that the Spirit of God speaks directly to man, gives him his messages, and quickens him to service. Based on this, professional ministry is rejected and the true ministry is that of any man or woman whom God chooses. Artificial titles are unacceptable and war is unlawful.

Anne Lee:

Anne Lee was born in the year 1736, in the United States. She was a nun, who was held to embody the feminine aspect of God. She founded the “Shakers”. This new church was dedicated to simplicity, celibacy, and the communal ownership of property. The Shakers looked back to original Christianity and forward to the Second Coming of the Lord. They therefore rejected all forms of church organization as practiced by the other denominations. They called themselves “Christians”, which assumes that members of all other churches are not. They claimed that the existing churches have turned the world upside down. To restore the world we need “Bible government, Christian equality, and the Christian name”.

Joseph Smith:

Joseph Smith was born in 1805 in the United States. He was the founder of the Mormon movement. While praying, he claimed that he was seized by a strange power, surrounded by a brilliant light, and confronted by God the Father and the Savior who warned him that the teachings of all existing churches were wrong. During the following few years, he was able to recover the truth of Christianity. According to him, around the year 600 BC, a group of ancient Israelites was directed by god to immigrate to America. He told them that they would prosper

if they kept His commandments. This was written in the Book of Mormons, in which the secret history of America was linked to the secret history of Israel.

He later came up with the new idea that since God became man; man can aspire to become God. He said that salvation could be extended to the dead. Baptism for the dead, performed by proxy on their behalf, became an important Mormon ritual. He also wanted to reinforce the collective relationships of kinship, affirming that connections with ancestors are necessary. This collective character of perfection was further reinforced through Mormon rituals of marriage, which under Joseph Smith's leadership allowed for plural marriages.

Mary Baker Eddy:

Mary Baker Eddy was born in the United States in 1821. She founded the "Christian Science" Church. She had long been plagued by illness. She claimed that following a fall on ice in the year 1866, she was remarkably healed, was led to the discovery of how to be in good health, and how to cure others. She believed that Christians could depend on the power of the "Divine Mind" for health and healing. Through the powers of positive thinking and spiritual affirmation, "New Thought" churches, Religious Science, and the Science of the Mind, healing becomes a reality. So, healing became an important part of their religious work.

Charles T. Russell:

Charles Taze Russell was born in the year 1852 in the United States. He founded the "Watchtower Bible and Tract Society", which came to be known later as "Jehovah's Witnesses". Russell was inspired to begin his movement, by a famous prophecy made by William Miller about the end of the world. By publishing biblical commentaries, pamphlets, and the "Watchtower Magazine", he created the basis for a new Christian Church, dedicated to the worship of Jehovah and the preparation for the return of Christ. Russell rejected all forms of ritual and tradition. Since all members were preachers, there was no need for clergy. Communion

was replaced by an annual meal called the “Lord’s Meal”. The study of the Bible became the only true form of worship. Based on the prophecies of the Bible, Russell calculated that the end of the world would happen in the year 1914. The failure of this prophecy resulted in defections from the church. But it still exists and is considered to be one of the most aggressive churches in trying to convert others to its beliefs.

This, as I said before, is a very small sample of the movements that developed as a result of the corruption that permeated the Catholic Church.

When Martin Luther challenged the ironclad authority of his own church, others who did not like what they saw, were so encouraged by Luther’s rebellion that, as they say, all hell broke loose. The result was hundreds of new innovations with little resemblance to the form of Christianity that was practiced by the early fathers of the Church, and was begun by the apostles, and had lasted for four and half centuries. The “Yearbook of the Christian American and Canadian Churches” list 220 denominations, while other sources list up to 1000.

The Church of Alexandria revisited

While all this was happening in churches all over the world, we wonder what happened in the Coptic Church, the Church of Alexandria?

After the turmoil and the persecution that followed the banishments of Pope Dioscorus and Pope Timothy, things settled down after Pope Timothy’s return to Egypt. The Copts preferred to live in isolation from the rest of Christendom. They closed their borders to any influence or person related to the religious hierarchy of the rest of the world. While they saw the major part of what they and the rest of the apostolic and universal church had believed and practiced go to shambles, they preserved the faith as they received it from St. Mark, one of the seventy disciples in the fourth decade of the first century.

Beside that important contribution to Christianity worldwide, the Coptic

Church made many other contributions, which are worth mentioning. First, the Catechetical School of Alexandria, which was developed before 200 AD, became the first great seat of Christian learning in the whole world. It was here that Christianity and the Bible were subjected to the most rigorous studies that resulted in the first systematic Christian theology. Some of those involved in this were Pantaenus the founder of the school, Clement, Origen, Athanasius the Apostolic, and Cyril the Great.

On this foundation, the World Ecumenical movement was able to build what could be called functioning Universal Christianity. To accomplish this, doctrines and dogmas had to be formulated, discussed, and agreed upon. This took place in the official gatherings and the general councils of all the bishops of the Christian world. So it can be said that the Coptic Church provided the skeleton on which the Ecumenical movement put the flesh of the early Christianity. It is also important to remember that the Coptic Church played a central role in the second phase.

Another significant contribution of the Coptic Church to Christendom was the gift of monasticism. This movement, which now is worldwide, had its humble beginning in the deserts of Egypt. The founder of this way of life was St. Anthony who lived in the fourth century and who began his monastic life in the year 336. But some reports were found that as early as the year 161, about seventy men under the leadership of someone called Frontonius shunned the pleasures of the world and lived a simple and celibate life in the Nitrean desert. Even St. Anthony who penetrated deep in the Eastern desert, was surprised when the Holy Spirit told him that he was not alone and that another hermit named Paul lived nearby. He was led to him and found him to be an old man 113 years of age and long established in that remote region.

We do not need to say too much about the monastic movement in the world. It contributed many of the most captivating examples of Christian living provided by champions of faith and has influenced millions of people.

The Russian Church:

It is amazing that while all this was happening in the world, the country that we call Russia now, was not even a country. Tribes and gangs competed and fought with each other and roamed this vast and distant land. For more than eight centuries after the birth of Jesus and the events that happened during His life and after His death, this land did not know the true God and continued to worship gods of their own making. Christianity finally reached them in the ninth century, through Greek missionaries who traveled to the area known as Kievan Rus, which became Russia.

An organized Christian community is known to have existed at Kiev as early as the first half of the tenth century. In the year 957 Olga, the Regent of Kiev was baptized in Constantinople. Olga's grandson Vlademir I, who was born in the year 956 and was the Prince of Kiev, chose to follow the Byzantine rite in the year 988. He led the Kievans and the rest of Russia to Orthodox Christianity. Despite the Mongol rule, which began under Genghis Khan, who conquered Russia in the year 1220 and lasted until the fifteenth century, Christianity continued and flourished until the Bolshevik Revolution, which outlawed all religion. The rest of the story of the Russian Church is well known.

THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE THREE MAIN BRANDS OF CHRISTIANITY

The inevitable conclusion is that Satan was successful in fracturing the church that Jesus came to build and which He promised that the gates of hell should never prevail against. What happened was expected. Since his fall, Satan's goal has been to upset God's plans. He was successful until Jesus came and conquered him on the Cross. Then, he did what he could to destroy the church. Was he successful? Yes and no. He has swayed millions away from salvation, using human pride, ambition, and greed. But he did not sway all. Some have resisted his temptation and stayed the course. These are the church that Jesus died for. It did not succumb to Satan. So, Jesus' promise and prophecy that the gates of hell shall never prevail against it was fulfilled.

Being a member of the Coptic Church, I would like to end this series of four books about the life of our Lord and Savior, with a brief comparison between the three main brands of Christianity. Without making judgment, or drawing conclusions, only focusing on the facts, here is the comparison.

The hundreds of denominations that call themselves Christian can be classified under the following three, the Orthodox, the Catholic, and the Protestant. The first two are considered traditional or conservative, the third liberal.

The differences between the Coptic Church, which is considered the purest form of Orthodoxy in the world today, and the Protestant and Catholic Churches can be summarized in the following.

The differences between the Orthodox and the Protestants

1. The Coptic Church believes that after His incarnation, Christ had one nature in which the divine and the human were united. The Protestant church believes that Christ had two natures, one divine and the other human.
2. The Coptic Church believes that the Holy Spirit emanates from the Father, while the Protestant church believes that He emanates from both the Father and the Son.
3. The Coptic Church has a hierarchical priesthood, and uses an altar, incense, and other rituals associated with worship. The Protestant Church believes all of this is wrong.
4. The Coptic Church believes that faith and works are required from believers. The Protestant Church says that faith is enough, and that works are the result of faith.
5. The Coptic Church believes that “Tradition” should be followed and preserved. The Protestant Church rejects “Tradition”, and follows only the Bible.
6. The Coptic Church believes in the seven sacraments and practices them, while the Protestant churches do not believe in them.
7. The Coptic Church believes that fasting is important for the spiritual

health of the believers and sets given times when people fast, while the Protestant churches do not.

8. The Coptic Church observes and celebrates several remembrances of certain martyrs and saints, while the Protestant Churches do not.
9. The Coptic Church believes in the intercession of St. Mary and the saints and asks them in certain prayers to intercede on its behalf to God. The Protestant Churches do not believe in intercession.
10. The Coptic Church uses pictures and icons of saints to remind believers of their example, while the Protestant churches do not.
11. The Coptic Church believes that the dead should be prayed for. The Protestant Churches do not.
12. The Coptic Church believes in monasticism and considers monks as good examples for believers in asceticism and self-denial. There is no monasticism in Protestantism.
13. The Coptic Church believes that after Jesus died, He went to Hades and released Adam, Eve, and all those who died in original sin but had hope that the Messiah will come and save them. The Protestant churches do not.
14. The Coptic Church recognizes the books collectively known as Apocrypha, which are Tobias, Judith, Sirach, Wisdom, The First book of Macabees, The Second book of Macabees, Baruch, The First book of Esdras, The Socond book of Esdras, and Additions to Esther. The Protestant Churches do not.
15. The Coptic Church believes that there are three orders for the clergy: bishops, priests, and deacons. Most Protestant Churches accept two: priests and deacons.

The differences between the Orthodox and the Catholics

1. The Catholic Church believes in two natures for Christ, while the Orthodox Church believes in one nature.
2. The Catholic Church believes that the Holy Spirit emanates from the Father and the Son, while The Coptic Church believes that He

emanates from the Father only.

3. The Catholic Church believes that there is Purgatory, to which almost everybody goes, except those who attained spiritual perfection. In this place, people will be purified by suffering for whatever unforgiven sins they may have. The Orthodox Church does not believe in its existence.
4. The Catholic Church believes that sins can be forgiven by what it calls indulgence. According to this, people can buy their forgiveness with money or other gifts to the church. The Coptic Church believes that the only way people can have their sins forgiven is through penitence, remorse, and partaking of Holy Communion.
5. The Catholic Church believes that there is hierarchy in church authority, and that the Pope of Rome being the heir of the throne of St. Peter, should be the head of all the churches. They also believe that he is infallible. The Coptic Church believes that all apostles are equal, and that no one is infallible except Jesus.
6. The Catholic Church believes that baptism is done by sprinkling the baptized with water. The Coptic Church believes that since baptism is an act in which the baptized is supposed to be buried with Jesus, it must be done by total immersion in water.
7. The Catholic Church postpones the anointing with unction until the baptized is 18 years of age. The Coptic Church does it after baptism regardless of the age of the person baptized.
8. The Catholic Church uses wafers in place of leavened bread in the Eucharist, and does not always offer the blood to those partaking in Communion. The Coptic Church uses leavened bread and offers the Holy Blood to all who partake in Communion.
9. The Catholic Church prohibits the marriage of its priests, while the Coptic Church requires priests to marry before they are ordained. But if a priest's wife dies, he cannot remarry.
10. The Catholic Church allows pictures, icons, and statues of saints, while the Coptic Church allows only pictures, and icons.
11. The Catholic Church forbids divorce for any cause, while the Coptic Church allows it in cases of adultery.
12. The Catholic Church does not anoint sick people with healing oil unless they are about to die, while the Coptic Church does it as soon as they become sick.

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