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Matthew - Luke

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## [7] Matthew

### 1. One Gospel in Four Books

*The unity of Christ's gospel.* Those who are familiar with the Bible know that the New Testament begins with four "gospels." Yet, in the first chapter of his letter to the Galatians, Paul tells his readers in no uncertain terms that there is only *one* gospel. Cursed be anyone who maintains that there is any other gospel!

Paul is right, of course, and we should take his warning seriously. There is only *one* gospel, one joyous message for us. Therefore we would do well *not* to speak of the Gospel of Matthew or Mark or Luke or John. Instead we should use the headings above the "gospels" as we find them printed in our Bibles; in other words, we should speak of the Gospel *according to* Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John.

Of course we intend no evil when we speak of the Gospel of Matthew, for this Gospel is "of" Matthew in the sense that it is written by him. But it's better to stress the *unity* of the gospel of Jesus Christ when we speak of the Bible books. Thus the first book of the New Testament is the Gospel *according to* (the description of) Matthew.

[8] The one true gospel is contained in the four books with which the New Testament begins. All four testify about Jesus Christ, who became flesh, was crucified, and arose from the grave. The framework of the stories narrated is roughly the same in all four, even though Matthew and Luke include the story of Jesus' birth while Mark and John do not.

*Synoptic gospels.* As you read these "gospels," you can't help but notice that the first three have a lot of material in common, while the one written by John is somewhat different. In 1774 the German scholar J. J. Griesbach characterized the first three "gospels" as "synoptic" because they have a lot of material in common that can easily be surveyed "synoptically" by arranging the material in three parallel columns. (The word *synopsis* means *survey* or *overview*.) Indeed, parallel editions of Matthew, Mark and Luke have been published. In any event, since the time of Griesbach, these three gospels have been known as the *synoptic* gospels.

The Gospel according to Mark is made up of about 660 verses. Some 606 of them reappear completely or partially in Matthew, and about 380 in Luke. Scholars concerned with the relations between these three Bible books therefore like to speak of the "synoptic question."

It was the Lord's will that our knowledge of the words and deeds of Jesus come to us from four separate sources. As I pointed out earlier, this is a great advantage. The work of our Redeemer is illuminated from four sides; we are given different perspectives on it.

Each gospel writer, because of his own individuality, brings different facets to the fore. Each of the four books follows its own plan and has its own purpose. When we look at something stereoscopically, the two converging points of view sharpen our perceptual judgment. When it comes to Christ, we are allowed to look at Him from *four* [9] separate points of view. Doesn't this enrich and deepen our knowledge of Him?

*Not collections of unrelated stories.* It was not the intention of the gospel writers to provide a collection of unrelated stories presented in random order. No, they definitely had their hearers and readers in mind. As they passed on the words and deeds of Christ, they kept one eye fixed on the questions that had arisen and the heresies threatening the church. What they told the people of their day was not only of interest and importance then but has retained its relevance right down to our time.

Each of the four witnesses has his own style, his own way of taking hold of the reader. Each evangelist, following a well-circumscribed plan, sketches the apostolic witness. As we study the four gospels in succession, we shall see how the Holy Spirit made use of the unique nature and past history of each of the writers. Matthew was a Jew and a former tax-collector. Mark was a Jew from Jerusalem, who kept up contacts with both

Peter and Paul. Luke was born a heathen and was a physician by vocation. And John, of course, was the disciple Jesus loved so dearly.

## 2. The "Gospels" as History

*The critical approach to the Scriptures.* C. H. Dodd defends the critical approach to Scripture as follows:

Biblical criticism means nothing but applying to the biblical documents the rational or scientific methods of scholarship which are applied in other fields of study....

Granted, however, that biblical criticism is a legitimate, and even a useful, branch of scientific study, is it important for the general reader, who has no particular interest in <sup>[10]</sup> matters of archaeology or ancient history? ... I should be sorry to suggest that the only way to an understanding of the Bible lies through the latest refinements of critical scholarship. But the problems with which criticism is concerned are problems that face any reader who wishes to understand the Scriptures, and the critical *method*, as a means of approach to the Scriptures, is acutely relevant to any serious study of the Bible as a religious book.<sup>1</sup>

Anyone in our time who thinks seriously about Scripture cannot dodge the question whether a critical approach to the Biblical givens about Jesus is permitted. Like it or not, we are confronted with the question whether everything we read about Jesus in the first four books of the New Testament is indeed true.

*History or a message?* Some students of the Bible maintain that what the "gospel" writers give us is not really history at all but a *message* about Jesus clothed in a narrative form, a form that could well be disputed on historical grounds. From a scientific standpoint, Jesus' feeding of thousands of people with a small amount of food is simply impossible.

But the issue, according to this school of thought, is not what science will permit. We are assured that such stories are to be read as proclamations that Jesus is still with His church and cares for her. The question whether everything happened just as it is recorded is not our concern—not even when it comes to the story of the resurrection! Jesus should be viewed not as a historical figure but as a source <sup>[11]</sup> of inspiration for people living in our time. In fact, we should not be talking about redemption and its history at all. The desire for "redemption" and "eternal life" is a form of egoism.

In any event, we have *no solid historical knowledge* of Jesus' life: much of what we read must be regarded as myth, we are told. We must "demythologize" what the writers of the "gospels" tell us in order to uncover the message embedded in their words.

*The testimony of the early church.* We are also told by some that what the "gospels" contain is not the preaching of Jesus Christ but the preaching of the *early church*. The writers of these books arose out of the church community. They did pass on to us some of Jesus' actual words, but they often put words into His mouth and packed a meaning of their own into the words they attributed to Him. In other words, they transformed some of Jesus' statements in order to make Him affirm what they themselves believed.

Thus we are advised to regard the "gospels" more as the testimony of the early church than as a record of the authentic words of Jesus Himself; they represent not a divine revelation but a *theology of the church*. The Gospel according to John, for example, is a

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<sup>1</sup> *The Bible To-day* (Cambridge University Press, 1962), pp. 23, 27. Dodd proposes to approach the gospel message in a strictly critical way in order to "recover the earliest and most trustworthy forms of the Gospel tradition" (*The Authority of the Bible*, Harper Torchbooks, 1958, p. 228). According to Dodd, there are contradictions between the four "gospels."

series of sermons delivered by preachers of the early Christian church, sermons interwoven with a certain fixed historical kernel.<sup>2</sup>

[12] Many scholars of this persuasion will accept Mark as the author of the book attributed to him while arguing that Matthew, Luke and John are made-up characters who cannot be identified as authors of any of the "gospels."

*Authoritative, eyewitness accounts.* To all such arguments, whether they come from Protestants or Roman Catholics, Scripture has only one answer: "We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were *eyewitnesses* of his majesty" (II Pet. 1:16). In the introduction to the Gospel according to Luke, we read that the events are presented "just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were *eyewitnesses* and ministers of the word." Luke continues: "It seemed good to me, having followed all things *closely* for some time past, to write an orderly account for you . . . that you may know the *truth* concerning the things of which you have been informed" (Luke 1:2-4).

Scripture comes to us with an authority of its own and demands to be received as *authoritative*. It does not present itself as a hodge-podge of views and writings stemming from various theologians of the early church or a product of later reflection by pious Christians of assorted [13] outlooks. Scripture is not a loose collection of documents that scholars and computers can analyze into mutually contradictory and historically unreliable "proclamations." The New Testament brings us a message with great authority; it tells us what was said and what happened. It does not represent a re-creation or re-shaping of the words and deeds of a certain radical named Jesus. Instead it gives us a revelation from *God*, a revelation that is not to be put on the same level as purely human books and documents subject to questioning, doubt and—ultimately—rejection. When we approach the New Testament (including its historical books), we *must* proceed from the belief that Scripture is accurate and trustworthy.

*God's unbroken Word.* We should not be afraid of those who point to alleged conflicts in the Scriptural record. Many of these "problems" are invented by scholars intent on proving that Scripture contradicts itself.

God's Word cannot be broken. If you proceed from this rule, you will be in a strong position over against the suspicions and doubts about the Bible, for in the final analysis the issue is whether the Bible is really *God's Word*. Many theories once presented as scientifically unassailable have since proved untenable.

Let Scripture be its own interpreter. Those who call Biblical history into question are really sawing off the branch on which they are seated. After all, what good will the gospel do me if the assurance that this or that actually happened has no more weight than the familiar "Once upon a time..." with which so many fairy tales open?

*Narrative style and historical accuracy.* Neither should you let yourself be influenced by those who argue that in the "synoptic gospels," events and sayings are presented in a confused order, with later events sometimes preceding earlier events. The conclusion

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<sup>2</sup> T. Baarda argues that "there can be no talk of historical reliability in the sense in which we understand this term" (*De Betrouwbaarheid van de Evangeliën*, Kampen, 1967, p. 83). "At the edges of the tradition we run into popular legends, rumors, and sometimes also the personal impressions of those who passed the tradition on. How could an editor ever sort all of this out? Sometimes a personal interpretation of a story or a word may have played a role in determining the form in which his gospel was cast" (p. 76). Baarda's argument, then, is that fantasy played a role in the composition of the gospels, that there was a *transformation* of material, as often happens in the case of a rumor. We have a hard time determining just where we stand with regard to the gospels, for we cannot assume that everything recorded in them actually happened or was said (p. 80). For Baarda the issue is not who Jesus *was*; what the proclamation really tells us is who Jesus *is* (p. 50). In this existentialist interpretation of the gospel, history is viewed as a garment in which the proclamation is clothed, a box in which it is contained. By the time Baarda is finished, there is not much left of the affirmative language in which the gospels were written.

drawn, of course, is that <sup>[14]</sup> these three Bible books contain nothing that we can safely regard as historical fact.

The flaw in this argument is that it imposes *our* method of recording history on the authors of these three 'gospels.' Were the writers of Scriptural history under an obligation to present the facts and dates in a chronological sequence? The Old Testament historical books (e.g. Kings, Jeremiah) certainly did not do so.

What we find in such books is a different kind of order, an order bound up with the author's purpose in writing. Yet, this is not proof that there is no genuine history presented in such books. In the case of the Old Testament books, there is a fair amount of independent, extra-Biblical material to corroborate what we read, but in the case of the New Testament there is very little. Is that a reason to doubt the historical sections of the New Testament?

As for the arrangement of the material, which hardly corresponds to what we find in twentieth century works of historical scholarship, is it really so strange? How do we proceed when we tell others about the things that have happened to us? First we describe the predicament we were in: "There I was in the middle of the night, not a house within sight, with a crying baby in my arms and a car with two flat tires . . . ." Then we proceed to explain to our hearers how we got into such a predicament.

Is our narrative style any different from that of the "gospel" writers? We would not want our reports of what happened to us yesterday or the day before to be dismissed as fantasy because they are not cast in the form favored by historical scholarship. The point to remember, then, is that we must bear the author's purpose in mind and not take him for a twentieth century historian.

### <sup>[15]</sup> 3. Matthew and His "Gospel"

*A tax-collector from Capernaum.* Luke and Mark speak of the calling of the tax-collector Levi, of Capernaum (Luke 5:27; Mark 2:14), but they do not mention that he is the apostle Matthew, whose name means *gift of God*. Matthew does bring this out in his account of the gospel: he speaks of the calling of a man named Matthew (9:9) and identifies him as one of the twelve apostles.

Matthew was a tax-collector. Hence the writer of the first book of the New Testament must have been well suited to the task to which he was called, for his work in the tax office had given him extensive experience in writing things down. He must have known at least two languages. Moreover, he must have been capable of recording facts, good at arithmetic, and able to size up a situation.

*The strategic midpoint.* For a while Jesus and Matthew lived in the same city—Capernaum. Thus it is possible that Matthew was familiar with Jesus' words and deeds *before* he was called to be an apostle. Perhaps he already believed in Jesus when he was called.

We must do our work where God places us. Therefore we should not take it ill of Matthew that he manifests a special interest in Capernaum and speaks of this city through his entire book. After Jesus was baptized, He

withdrew into Galilee; and leaving Nazareth he went and dwelt in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

"The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali,  
toward the sea, across the Jordan,  
Galilee of the Gentiles [the nations]—  
the [covenant] people who sat in darkness  
have seen a great light,  
<sup>[16]</sup> and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death  
light was dawned" (4:12-16; see also Is. 9:1-2).

Capernaum is the strategic midpoint of all that Matthew tells us about Jesus, including His last journey to Jerusalem. It was in Capernaum that the servant of the centurion, Peter's mother-in-law, the woman who had bled for twelve years, and the daughter of Jairus were healed. Matthew even speaks of Capernaum as Jesus' "own city" (9:1).

Just before His dramatic entry into Jerusalem, Jesus was at Capernaum, where He paid the temple tax in an amazing way (17:24ff). Yet, Matthew also reports that Jesus said: "And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You shall be brought down to Hades" (11:23).

*A Jew writing for Jews.* Tradition has it that Matthew, at someone's request, first copied down the words of Jesus in Hebrew or Aramaic. It is possible that he later translated this material into Greek and added some narrative sections, thereby producing the Gospel according to Matthew as we know it.

It is clear that as Matthew composed his "gospel," he was thinking especially of his own people, the Jewish people of the covenant. Didn't the Old Testament Scriptures already prophesy that there would come a "ruler" who would be the "shepherd of *my people Israel*"? (2:6; Mic. 5:2; II Sam. 5:2).

Jesus was Israel's General, its King. But the heart of the covenant people "grew dull" (13:15; Is. 6:10); despite the lip service they paid God, their heart was far from Him (15:8; Is. 29:13). Unlike Mark, Matthew not only mentions the leaders of the people but explicitly declares that the chief priests and elders of the covenant people *rejected* Christ (26:3, 47; 27:1). He alone records the cry for covenant wrath when the mob demanded that Jesus be <sup>[17]</sup> crucified: "His blood be on us and on our children!" (27:25).

Matthew's own attitudes also surface in his repeated quotations from the Old Testament. On at least ten separate occasions, he points out that this or that passage of Scripture was *fulfilled* in Jesus.

Matthew appeals to his readers to recognize Jesus as the King of Israel, the one promised in Scripture. Jesus has established a new people, a church (*ekklesia*), a new covenant community. The Jews who had already become Christians should not return to the worship of the synagogue, and those who were still hesitating should take the decisive step, for covenant judgment on the apostate people could not be far away. Matthew records some stern words of warning addressed to Capernaum and Jerusalem (11:23; 23:1–24:35).

*A carefully organized book.* Matthew composed his gospel account with great care. As one of the despised officials of Herod Antipas, as a tax-collector for the Romans stationed in the border city of Capernaum, he knew how to keep track of things and arrange material. He made good use of his skills when he sat down to write about Jesus and His mission.

The symbolic use of numbers plays an even greater role in the writings of the ancient Near East than most of us would suspect. The Bible is no exception. The Gospel according to Matthew is built around five addresses of Jesus. You can check this point for yourself.

After the first address, the Sermon on the Mount, we read: "And when Jesus finished these sayings .. ." (7:28). We read something similar in 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; and 26:1. In between are stories of healings and other events. These five addresses are spread throughout Matthew's entire book.

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1:1-4:25: Genealogy, the story of Jesus' birth, His baptism, the temptation in the wilderness, the beginning of His ministry.

5:1-7:27: *First address*, the Sermon on the Mount. Seek first the Kingdom and the Father's righteousness.

- 7:28—10:4: Jesus' work in Capernaum and vicinity.
- 10:5-42: *Second address*, delivered when the twelve apostles were sent out.
- 11:1-12:50: More work in Galilee by the Coming One, the Son of the Father, the Son of man, the Lord of the sabbath, the Servant of the Lord, the Son of David.
- 13:1-52: *Third address*, made up of parables about the Kingdom of heaven.
- 13:53-17:27: Continuation of the work in the shadow of the rejection by Israel and the coming suffering, but also in the light of the coming glory and the establishing of the church.
- 18:1-35: *Fourth address*, about the order required by the Kingdom of heaven and the gathering of the church.
- 19:1-22:46: Work on the way to Judea, the entry into Jerusalem, and the controversy there.
- 23:1-25:46: *Fifth address*, about the judgment of the Son of man.
- 26:1-28:20: Suffering, death and resurrection.

Once we are aware of this structure, we see just how much care and effort Matthew put into the composition of his book. His apologia for Jesus and his appeal to meet the coming Bridegroom is divided and organized systematically. In earlier times, people were much more oriented toward symmetry and harmony and watched for it when they read.

We should try reading right through the Gospel <sup>[19]</sup> according to Matthew, underlining freely to get some sense of the unfolding of the whole work. That way we will be sure to catch sight of its chief divisions.

We should note that there are *seven* petitions in the Lord's prayer as presented in Matthew, *seven* parables in the address recorded in chapter 13, and *seven* cries of woe in chapter 23. The Immanuel theme (i.e. God with us) occurs at the very beginning (1:23) and again at the end, where Christ promises to be with His chosen ones "to the close of the age" (28:20).

Keep an eye open for these elements in the composition of Matthew. The writers of the "gospels" were not chroniclers mindlessly copying down one event and saying after another. As we have seen repeatedly, the Bible was not written by robots. The "gospels" we are given to read have been very carefully constructed.

*Matthew's purpose in writing.* Matthew did not provide us with the date of composition. Given the heavily Jewish flavor of his appeal, we must assume that he wrote his book when an appeal still made sense, that is, *before* the drama of the year 70, when Jerusalem was destroyed in judgment. Could it be that Matthew was already making notes while Jesus was on earth working among the covenant people, and that soon afterward he proceeded to write his account of the gospel, perhaps to fill a need in teaching the youth of the church?

#### **4. The Genesis and Exodus of Jesus Christ (1:1—4:25)**

*The "toledoth" of Jesus.* Matthew begins with the words: "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ." In the King James Version we read: "The book of the *generation* <sup>[20]</sup> of Jesus Christ." The Greek word translated as *generation* or *genealogy* is *genesis*, the same word used in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew word *toledoth*, as in Genesis 5:1: "This is the book of the *genesis/toledoth* of Adam." In a Dutch Bible translation of 1560, the book of Matthew introduces itself as the book of the "births" of Jesus Christ. Is Matthew the book of births in that the first chapter gives us a genealogy, or is the entire book to be read as the "toledoth" of Jesus?

The New Testament's connection with the Old Testament is already emphasized in the opening sentence and chapter of Matthew. The two Testaments are related by way of the *torah*, the teaching. The first "gospel," which gives us the words of Jesus in the form of

five addresses that remind us of the fivefold Torah, formulates the message about the Messiah in terms the Jews would understand: Matthew begins by speaking of *toledoth*—the toledoth of Jesus Christ!

*The new David.* All of redemptive history leads up to the coming of the one who reveals Himself as the Son of David (the promised King) and the Son of Abraham (the promised Seed). Genesis and the books that follow it are given their full meaning in *His* genesis.

The family tree in Matthew is carefully arranged: 3 times 14 generations. First comes a period of *ascent*, from Abraham to David. Next is a period of *glory*, from Solomon on. Finally, there is a period of *decline*, from the exile on.

The number 14 may well have a special significance. In Hebrew, the letters of the alphabet were used as numerals as well: the first letter of the alphabet stood for one, the second for two, and so on. Now, the name *David* is spelled DVD in Hebrew. (Vowels do not count as letters.) When we turn the letters in this name into numbers, we get: D(4) plus V(6) plus D(4) equals 14. ("V," the Hebrew *waw*, is the <sup>[21]</sup> sixth letter of the alphabet.) Could the arrangement of the genealogy into three groups of 14 be a way of reminding readers that each group speaks of David, and that Jesus is the *new* David, the *last* David?

*Jesus' genealogy.* Matthew's genealogy does not give us the descent of Jesus' bloodline, as Luke's does. In Luke's genealogy, we learn that Joseph, who served as Jesus' father, was a son of David (1:20), but not of *Solomon's* line. Instead he was descended from *Nathan*, another son of David (Luke 3:23ff; II Sam. 5:14; Zech. 12:12). What Matthew gives us is the *line of the rulers*, that is, the *kings* and family heads.

We could perhaps compare the genealogy he presents to the family tree of the House of Orange, the royal family of the Netherlands. If you trace the actual descent by blood, it turns out that the ruling dynasty of the Netherlands is *not* descended from the country's founding father, William of Orange (i.e. William the Silent), but from his brother John of Nassau. Yet the succession of the *line of rulers* runs as follows: William of Orange, Maurice, Frederick Henry, William II, the childless William III (who became king of England), William IV, and so on. Matthew's genealogy shows us that Jesus has a right to claim the kingship, for He is surrounded by the aura of David and his house.

The genealogy in Matthew also points out something else of great interest: it mentions four women not descended from Abraham, namely, the Canaanites Tamar (Gen. 38) and Rahab (Josh. 2), the Moabite Ruth, and Bathsheba, the Hittite wife of Uriah. As a tax-collector, Matthew knew what it was to be despised by people. But Jesus called him anyway. At the very beginning of his "gospel," then, Matthew opposes the "leaven" of the Pharisees, which leaves no room for the grace and forgiveness of sins in which Matthew himself delights.

<sup>[22]</sup> *Prophecies fulfilled.* The "genesis" or birth of Jesus Christ (1:18) brought into the world the one who was to deliver His people and free them from their *sins* (1:21; Ps. ] 30:8). He would be Immanuel, that is, God with us. The Branch of David's house was capable of such things because He was begotten by the Holy Spirit (1:18).

Lured on by some "natural phenomenon," wise men from the east who come to worship the king of the Jews are advised to move on from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, on the basis of a passage of Scripture (i.e. Mic. 5:2). Although they have seen only the star, they already believe in the scepter (see Num. 24:17, which is a prophecy of Balaam, who was also a wise man from the east). Yet the Sanhedrin does not follow the path of adoration, even though it consists of the "chief priests and scribes" of the *covenant people* (2:4). Herod, the ruling king of the Jews, plays the role of an oppressing Pharaoh. We hear Rachel weeping for her children, as Jeremiah 31, the famous chapter about the new covenant, is fulfilled (see vs. 15).

Jesus Christ, the new Moses, is saved from the clutches of Pharaoh/Herod and is taken to Egypt at the command of a heavenly messenger. Wasn't Jesus to be "like his brethren

in every respect"? (Heb. 2:17). Moreover, a prophecy of Hosea also awaited fulfillment: "Out of Egypt I called my son" (Hos. 11:1).

Matthew never tires of showing his fellow Jews (i.e. his fellow members of the church) how the necessary *fulfillment of the Scriptures* has taken place in the life of Jesus. The same Jesus who has mercy on a tax-collector is also the new Moses of the last exodus, who wanted to show His solidarity with His people.

*A New Testament Elijah.* This Moses/Messiah is preceded by an Elijah (Mal. 4:5) wearing a penitential garment of camel's hair. This Elijah preaches to the leading classes (i.e. the Pharisees and Sadducees) about the <sup>[23]</sup> coming judgment. Drawing on the song of Moses, he denounces them as a "brood of vipers" because of their apostasy from the covenant (3:7ff; Deut. 32:32ff).<sup>3</sup> Matthew shows his readers that Moses' testament in his swan song will be fulfilled just as John warned unless the people repent.

The end of Matthew's book points back to the beginning: it appears that Israel's leaders and people have rejected the King of the Jews. This title for Jesus is used again at the end of the book (see 2:2; 27:29, 37, 42). Jerusalem will fall because of this rejection. In His message of judgment (ch. 23-24), Jesus affirms what His predecessor said on this score.

*One with His people.* Jesus is baptized in the Jordan River. (This river is important in Israel's history because the people entered Canaan by crossing it.) His baptism is a fulfillment of righteousness (covenant obedience). By being baptized like any sinner, He demonstrates His solidarity with His people. But when this Joshua/Jesus emerges from the water, He proceeds to carry out the task <sup>[24]</sup> God has given Him, drawing on the power of the Holy Spirit, God's righteousness.

Jesus is one with His people. Wasn't Israel earlier called out of the *wilderness*? Didn't the Israelites stumble repeatedly and do a lot of complaining? (Think of the history recorded in Exodus and Numbers.) This Son of God is now *tested*, just as Israel was tested. Satan tempts Him in the wilderness for 40 days, just as the covenant people spent 40 years there. Three times Jesus responds to satan's temptations by quoting from the last book of Moses (Deut. 8:3; 6:16, 13). Get behind Me, satan! Jesus responds in the same vein when His disciple Peter becomes a satan, an opponent, someone standing in His way (16:23).

*A new exodus.* The Savior's only desire is to do His Father's will. Therefore He will bring about the definitive exodus. This Joshua—*Jesus* is an Aramaic form of the name *Joshua*—will lead His people to *rest*. It is for this purpose that He calls His first helpers and leaves Nazareth to live by the Sea of Galilee, in the despised area that had earlier belonged to the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali.

The first four disciples were fishermen by calling. The blessings of Jacob and Moses had established a connection between Zebulun and Naphtali, on the one hand, and ships and beaches and the affluence of the sea, on the other (Gen. 49:13; Deut. 33:19). Jesus transformed these four disciples from fishers of *fish* into fishers of *men*.

Jesus then started preaching, singing the same melody that John the Baptist had sung (4:17; 3:2). The Kingdom of God was proclaimed in the synagogues. From far and wide the sick came to be healed, for the Messianic era had dawned. Matthew was later to give

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<sup>3</sup> Deuteronomy 32 was familiar because it was used in the liturgy. The fact that some parts of Deuteronomy 32 were found in the caves by Qumran indicates that special copies of Moses' song were made for use in the worship services. Compare Deuteronomy 32:18 with Matthew 3:9, where we read about children being raised up from stones; Deuteronomy 32:22 with Matthew 3:11-12, where fire is emphasized; Deuteronomy 32:32-3 with Matthew 3:10, where Jesus speaks of the tree that does not bear good fruit. See also Deuteronomy 32:22ff and 35ff, which deal with the wrath to come and the impossibility of escape. To understand the New Testament, from Matthew to Revelation, we must be familiar with Deuteronomy 32, the song that testified against Israel while at the same time serving as Israel's "national anthem"!

examples of the healing, but first he tells us about the Word preached by Jesus.

**[25] 5. The Sermon on the Mount (5:1-7:27)**

*The letter of the law.* The Ten Words were proclaimed from Mount Sinai. After that the Israelites tried all sorts of means to dodge the law (torah). The scribes and Pharisees upheld it in name but robbed the law of its power through numerous additional stipulations. They imposed a heavy yoke on the people, a yoke no one could bear.

At the same time, they created many loopholes in the law, through which the intent of the commandments could be dodged. The torah of the Pharisees, those strict upholders of the law, was a collection of formal rules governing outward conduct; it was foreign to the Spirit of the one who requires wholehearted love (Deut. 6:5) as a condition for carrying out His kingly will.

*Informal respects,* of course, the people did live by the rules—and even went beyond the demands of the rules. The prayer known as the "Shema," which includes Deuteronomy 6:5, was nailed onto the doorposts. And when the Jews prayed, they had tied to their heads and arms little containers that included a prayer text in which they were commanded to "love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."

Yet, the real righteousness needed for the Kingdom of God was nowhere to be found. These Jews hoped to earn salvation by formal obedience to the law. As a result, they fell prey to the tyranny of slavery.

*A restatement of the law.* The Lord Jesus now ascended a mountain and stepped into the role of teacher. Matthew records what this new Moses said to His disciples and to the crowd of people who had come to listen to Him. After reporting on the beginning of Jesus' ministry, Matthew, who had felt the deathly effect of the Pharisees' teaching so strongly in his own life, gives us the content of this <sup>[26]</sup> glorious, liberating address—the gospel for those who appear before God as poor.

There are some who argue that this address was meant only for a certain class of people, for super-Christians. But do you suppose that the Lord Jesus divides His people into classes and categories? Other Bible scholars have argued that Jesus Himself was expecting the world's end to come very quickly and therefore turned all existing laws inside out for the brief period that was left.

The Anabaptists have used the Sermon on the Mount to support various revolutionary ideas, arguing that when Jesus spoke out against murder and oaths, He was denying the legitimacy of authority, judges and any military might. Leo Tolstoy also embraced this point of view. Gandhi, who claims that reading the law of Moses put him to sleep, likewise felt drawn to the Sermon on the Mount, thinking that Jesus, too, proposed to introduce a new society by advocating passive resistance and pacifism.

Such approaches tear the words of Jesus out of their context. Jesus is then turned into some sort of universal reformer and idealist and is not allowed to be the Christ of the *Scriptures*, the Messiah of His *church*, His new people, as He wanted to be.

Those who argue that Jesus' Sermon on the Mount was meant as an improved edition of Moses' law are also wrong. They like to point out that Jesus repeatedly declared: "You have heard that it was said . . . but I say unto you ...." If Jesus did indeed mean to repeal the laws given by Moses, He would be a true revolutionary, attacking the words of the Father. But that was not His intention.

*The law in our hearts.* Like the prophets of old, Jesus was emphasizing that God's covenant will is absolute. As Messiah, He wanted to write the law in the hearts of His people (Jer. 31:33). He wanted to break through the <sup>[27]</sup> half-hearted service of God that left as much room for self-seeking as for service. His purpose was to make the meaning and purpose of the law clear again.

Murder is forbidden, He pointed out, but so is cherishing a grudge; adultery is forbidden, but so are evil desires; perjury is forbidden, but so is the misuse of oaths. Jesus certainly did not oppose all use of the sword (see John 19:11), and He did recognize government (see 22:21). He swore an oath before Caiaphas (see 26:64), and on at least one occasion He refused to turn the other cheek (see John 18:23). He knew what it is to appreciate luxury (see 26:6ff), and He did not condemn money as such (see Luke 8:3).

*Love and grace.* What Jesus wanted to show His people is that love for God and subordination to His kingly will is central: "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness [i.e. the righteousness promised and given by God], and all these things shall be yours as well" (6:33). He warned: "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (5:20). He also spoke the following sobering words: "Not every one who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (7:21).

In some situations involving personal matters, obedience might require us not to "stand up for our own rights" but suffer injustice instead. It may be that we must make heavy financial sacrifices for the sake of God's rule. We must also learn to hate all dodging of the law that is paired with an ostentatious pretense of virtue (something in which Israel's leaders led the way). Neither "liturgy" nor the work of deacons (not even worldwide missions of mercy) can guarantee us a place in "heaven." Anyone who thinks the contrary need not expect anything of God; he has already received his reward, in the form of public <sup>[28]</sup> admiration (6:1 ff). To seek God's rule is to live by grace.

The very first sentences in the Sermon on the Mount already speak of grace. Like Psalm 1, this famous address begins with the word *blessed*. The King speaks to His subjects, who, like the poor in the Psalms, only wish to live by grace, hungering and thirsting for God's righteousness, The old promises made to Abraham go with them. Although they are the King's children and will inherit the earth, they must first persevere "meekly" during a time of oppression (5:5, 10-12). For them the "seeking" of God's Kingdom is no uncertain experiment. The Father who is in heaven will let them find Him (7:7ff) and give them what they need to serve as citizens of His Kingdom (6:25ff).

## **6. Signs of the Messianic Age (7:28—10:4)**

*Signs of the times.* After this impressive proclamation, Matthew goes on to tell us about various deeds of Jesus in Capernaum and vicinity, deeds that are also indications of His full Messianic power. Jesus Himself spoke of such deeds as "signs of the times" (16:3). These signs gave Him legitimacy in the eyes of others; they showed that He was actually the Servant of the Lord (Is. 53), the one who has come to bear our diseases (8:17). Jesus came to bring about the complete re-creation of which the prophets already spoke:

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,  
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;<sup>4</sup>

<sup>[29]</sup> then shall the lame man leap like a hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing for joy (Is. 35:5-6).

We are used to thinking of the "signs of the times" as signs announcing Jesus' coming beforehand, but that is a mistaken understanding of this term. The "signs of the times" are Christ's revelation in word and deed that the Messianic era has come. Although Jesus will come like a thief in the night and although He warned against relying on signs (24:4ff), we are commanded in Scripture to regard the wonders He performed as "signs of the times." Israel had to realize that the Messiah had indeed arrived on the scene. The

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<sup>4</sup> We read that the eyes of the blind will be "opened" and the ears of the deaf "unstopped," but in the Hebrew text we find the word *opened* in both instances. Jesus once alluded to this prophecy, by using this verb when healing a deaf man ("Ephphatha"—Mark 7:34). Embellishing a translation for literary purposes by introducing greater variety in the words used can sometimes hinder our understanding of the connections between the Old and New Testaments.

deeds of Jesus were the melody by which the people would *recognize* the restored kingdom of David.

Thus the leper who was healed was ordered to obey the law of Moses and report to the priest in the temple (8:4). Israel would not listen, but the faith of the centurion whose servant was healed foreshadows those outside the nation of Israel who would indeed enter the Kingdom. The children of the Kingdom, to whom the promise of divine rule was originally given, will be cast out (vs. 10ff). Even the waves obey the Messiah, for He is mightier than the waves of the sea (Ps. 93:4). Since the time of the final reckoning has not yet come, spirits may enter unclean pigs, but this change in habitation ends with the pigs rushing into the sea (vs. 28ff).

*The Son of man.* All power is given to Jesus (28:18; 7:29; 8:27, 32; 9:6), the Son of man. We come across this Messianic title in Matthew, a title that points back to <sup>[30]</sup> various passages, including Daniel 7:13, where we read that someone "like a son of man" went to the Ancient of Days on a cloud.

The figure of the "son of man" represents the church or the saints, but at the same time it symbolizes the Messiah. He is given "dominion and glory and kingdom." Jesus is the Son of man, the last Adam (Ps. 8:5ff). Thus what this title emphasizes is not His earthly nature but His *power*. That power is manifest in the wonders He performs.

His authority is revealed not only in His deeds of healing but also in His *words*. When He heals the lame man at Capernaum, He already speaks words of forgiveness. The restoration of life in deeds of healing presupposes the forgiveness of sins, for sin is the cause of our hunger and misery. The Son of man is the Deliverer who redeems His people from their sins (1:21). If the forgiveness of sins is accepted, everything else will fall into place.

*Healing and suffering.* It was probably the case of the lame man (9:1ff) that opened the eyes of the tax-collector Levi/Matthew. This dramatic healing was followed by a festive meal in which Matthew participated (vs. 10ff). Matthew also saw Jesus exercise His power over the sleep of death (vs. 18ff).

Jesus, the Son of David (1:1; 9:27), knew what it meant to suffer and could therefore sympathize with others. At the beginning of Matthew it becomes apparent that the Son of man will *triumph* by following the way of *suffering*. "The Son of man has nowhere to lay his head" (8:20). Later Jesus would go into this great riddle more deeply: He, the world's Judge, the heir to the throne, must be rejected by His own people if the price for the redemption of His church is to be paid. His cross became a sign of the times, the sign of Jonah.

## <sup>[31]</sup> 7. The Messiah's Heralds of Peace (10:5-42)

*Israel confronted with the choice.* Jesus chose twelve disciples and gave them authority to preach the Kingdom of heaven to the lost sheep of the house of Israel and perform healing miracles. Of course the number 12 had something to do with the twelve tribes of Israel.

The evangelists sent out were instructed to limit themselves to *Israel*: there was no thought of visiting the pagans or the Samaritans. Later, after the ascension into heaven, there would be time to preach to the Gentiles (10:5; 28:19). But first the covenant people would have to be confronted with the choice.

The word *peace* (*shalom*) was already used as a greeting, but now it took on its full meaning. The apostles, those who were sent out by Jesus, were to take back this greeting and shake the dust off their feet if they were not properly received (see Acts 13:51; 18:6). This deed would be nothing more or less than an announcement of judgment.

Here again the schism in the national community became visible. It appeared that the "church" and the "people" were not identical.

*Not peace but the sword.* The heralds of peace would unleash warfare. Christ had not come to bring peace on earth but the sword (10:34). The position of Jesus' missionaries was that of sheep among wolves. The pupil is not greater than his teacher. There would be suffering ahead, and the apostles would have to persevere. Yet they were given *promises* (10:29-33, 39). "He who receives you receives me" (10:40). Here Jesus expressed solidarity with His apostles.

Bear in mind that Jesus' remarks to these apostles were really a sermon about the office they had assumed. As such they bear on the entire apostolic era. Jesus spoke in an earnest way about the persecution to come and declared:

[32] When you are persecuted in one town,  
take refuge in another;  
I tell you this:  
before you have gone  
through all the towns of Israel  
the Son of Man will have come (10:22 NEB).

Here we have an allusion to the coming of the Son of man in judgment—a judgment meant for Israel. Therefore the apostles are exhorted to persevere to the end (10:22), the consummation of the judgment on Jerusalem.

*The choice facing the church.* The reason Matthew's book was so timely is that it brought out the task of the church in the twilight of the day of judgment descending on God's disobedient people—the judgment of Jerusalem's destruction. Lay the axe to the root of the tree!

Matthew's relevance for today should not escape us either. In our time the gospel continues to drive a wedge between real believers and nominal members of the church. The gospel demands that we surrender our very lives (10:39; Rev. 12:11).

Sometimes Matthew 10 is quoted to support a revolutionary overthrow of authority or of the church's confession or to defend some experimental venture in the area of politics or the church. But how could the Savior possibly have exhorted His disciples to let go of His teaching for His sake in order to find life? This kind of "losing" actually amounts to confessing a Christ who preaches a false peace. It's like running with the hares and hunting with the hounds!

### [33] **8. Jesus Christ Gives Offense and Causes Wavering (11:1–12:50)**

*John the Baptist's question.* The section of Matthew that now begins shows how Jesus gave offense, gave others reason to waver and fall. (The Greek word used here is *skandalon*, which is related to our word *scandal*.)

First there was John the Baptist, who was in prison by this time. He had preached judgment while he was free, but now he heard that there was no Messianic judgment toppling the tall trees. Instead Jesus was going around helping people and healing them. From Herod's prison he sent a deputation to Jesus with the question: "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?" (11:3; see also Ps. 118:26). Apparently they sought something or someone different in the role of Messiah. Wasn't the Messiah going to judge the world with righteousness? Even the forerunner wavered.

*The Servant of the Lord.* In His answer Jesus pointed back to the prophets. At the time of His baptism by John, the Father had declared that Jesus was His Son in whom He was well pleased: this identified Him as the Servant of the Lord (3:17; Is. 42:1).

Was it not written that this Servant would go about His work without stirring up a lot of commotion, as a meek person who would not break the bruised reed before the triumph of justice was achieved? He would let the signs of the times be seen in healing wonders (Is. 35:5-6) and bring glad tidings especially to "the poor" (Is. 65:1ff; Matt.

11:5; Luke 4:16ff).

Here we have "the poor" again, the ones described in the Sermon on the Mount as "the meek"! Judgment would indeed come. In time Jesus would wield the axe, but first *the* <sup>[34]</sup> *gospel* would have to be proclaimed. The emissaries were sent back to John with a benediction.

*Jesus' forerunner.* In this context Jesus was saying something about the meaning of His forerunner's work. The four gospel writers sometimes make explicit references to John's position—partly because John, after his death, was transformed by some of his own disciples into a messiah opposed to Christ's gospel (see Acts 19:1ff).

The gospel had to do battle with John's unfinished reformation. John's position was not the final one. Through the work of this Elijah, the believers were called to press on and take hold fully of the Kingdom of God in the new covenant (11:12).

*Judgment for rejection.* Although John had wavered, he did ask for more enlightenment. But what about "this generation" (Deut. 32:5, 20, 28; Ps. 12:8), that is, the majority of Jesus' hearers? They had rejected John as too severe and uncompromising, but they also rejected the Bridegroom Jesus, who was much more gentle than John.

Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum, the cities north of the Sea of Galilee where so many wonders had occurred, put themselves in the same position as Tyre, Sidon, Babylon, and Sodom. In fact, they had sunk below the level of those heathen cities (11:16ff; Is. 14:13-15; see also Rev. 18, where the Jewish city of Jerusalem is called *Babylon*, and prophecies against Tyre and Sidon are applied to it).

*A promise of rest.* Thanks be to God, there were still children who did not take offense at these harsh words, children who shook off the rabbinical yoke of needless burdens and came to Jesus. Tenderly the Savior called to them: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn <sup>[35]</sup> from me ... and you will find rest for your souls" (11:28-9).

The rest Jesus promises here is not a personal rest of the "soul" but a Messianic peace that goes beyond all understanding, re-creating and restoring everything. When He made this promise, Jesus was quoting from the prophet Jeremiah:

Thus says the LORD:

"Stand by the roads, and look,  
and ask for the ancient paths,  
where the good way is; and walk in it,  
and find rest for your souls."  
But they said, "We will not walk in it."  
Therefore thus says the LORD:  
"Behold, I will lay before this people  
stumbling blocks against which they shall stumble"  
(Jer.6:16,21).

I will lay *stumbling blocks* before them! Jesus also came to bring about the *fall* of many in Israel.

*The sin against the Holy Spirit.* Matthew continues his account of how people took offense at Jesus. People were deeply offended at what He said; it was not just a matter of bad humor. Jesus gave offense in the sense that people stumbled over Him as over a stumbling block. He was denounced for violating the sabbath.

Israel's leaders argued that Jesus was capable of amazing deeds only because He was in league with Beelzebul, the prince of demons, whose name probably means *lord of the house* (12:24; 9:34; 10:25). While undergoing humiliation as the Son of man, Jesus could still suffer such reproaches and forgive them, but in the time after Pentecost, when the revelation was clearer thanks to the Spirit, such blatant rejection of Christ could no longer be forgiven (12:31-2).

<sup>[36]</sup> Some people are of the view that the sin against the Holy Spirit can only be

committed by incarnate devils, such as "the Antichrist" at the end of time. There are others who have destroyed their very lives with the painful question whether they may be guilty themselves of that horrible sin and therefore forever excluded from salvation. In both cases, the question of the sin against the Holy Spirit is being approached from the wrong angle. This sin is not something that will happen some day under most extraordinary circumstances: the first letter of John speaks of antichrists at work on earth, committing this deadly sin.

The sin against the Holy Spirit represents a definite danger for all who live in the time after Pentecost. But we should not suppose that this sin is an incidental event for which there is no forgiveness. No, what this sin really amounts to is perpetual opposition to the Holy Spirit (Acts 7:51). Let's not forget that when Stephen prayed, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them," his prayer was heard in the case of Paul, at least. Paul, who had played the role of an antichrist in his zealous opposition to the church and who later confessed that he was the greatest of sinners, was shown grace. His opposition was broken by the One who came to save sinners.

The sin against the Holy Spirit occurs more often than we sometimes suppose. Think of the open attacks made on God's Word and gospel. All the same, no one should allow the reality of this sin to *paralyze* him spiritually. On the contrary, the gospel appeal heeded by the Benjaminite wolf Saul of Tarsus becomes all the more pressing: "Save yourselves from this crooked generation" (Acts 2:40). Paul's case is a comforting example for all who have come to trust in Him and find eternal life (I Tim. 1:16).

*Hardening and opposition.* For the church living after Pentecost, the words of Matthew 12 are full of warning, but they also contain comfort and evangelical power.

[37] When believers see hardening around them, they remember that *Jesus* experienced the same thing before them. Jesus responded by declaring that the charges made by His accusers were the work of satan, and He depicted Himself in the role of conqueror: "If it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (vs. 28). This gives the church all the more reason to summon others to conversion.

From the outset, then, the church had been aware that many would take offense, just as the Pharisees did. The Jews would continue to demand a sign (12:38; I Cor. 1:22), and the crucified Christ (I Cor. 1:23) would refuse to give them any sign except the sign of the prophet Jonah (12:39ff). There would not even be a guarantee that one's own family would be free of offense and would be included in the great family of those who obey (vs. 46ff).

*Seal the teaching among my disciples  
(Is. 8:16).*

## **9. Jesus Teaches in Parables (13:1-52)**

*An appeal to intuition.* Because the people took offense at His teaching, Jesus began to speak to them in the form of riddles and parables, making use of a literary device known as the *mashal*. A *mashal* presents a concrete situation to get at a general truth. The genius of the *mashal* lies in its appeal to intuition—and not in logical precision.

If a *mashal* is applied or analyzed in too literal a manner, mistakes are made. The point to remember is that a *mashal*, as a concrete and often cryptic formulation, does not come equipped with a list of exceptions. The *mashal* is intended to be a *radical* statement, a striking way of pointing to a general norm. It must never be read as a rule [38] formulated by a team of lawyers who took every remote possibility into account.

*The purpose of the parables.* Some people argue that the parables are the easiest part of the gospel to understand. But after Jesus told the parable of the sower to a crowd of people (as part of the "sermon on the sea" which He delivered from a fishing boat as His

pulpit), He made the *interpretation* of the parable known only to His disciples.

The purpose of the parables was to *harden the hearts* of those who did not bother to inquire further. Isaiah was commanded to speak in such a way that those who saw would not see and those who heard would not hear. Jesus was merely fulfilling what His predecessor had begun (13:14ff; Is. 6:9ff).

*Parables about the Kingdom.* What was the message of the parables in this third address, which is recorded in Matthew 13? They tell us that the Kingdom of God comes in a hidden way that offends the Jews. Yet, this hiddenness is part of the *character* and *nature* and *mode of operation* of the Kingdom.

The Word is like a seed. We all know how many dangers threaten a seed before it becomes a full-grown plant. But the forces of evil do not have the last word. Over against the three possibilities for failure stands the threefold fruit. The field is the world. (Note that the church is not identified as the field.) In the field grow tares that look so much like the wheat that it is impossible to separate them from the wheat by uprooting them. Those tares make it difficult for the wheat.

Christ was not using this parable to say that we can dispense with discipline in the church, but He was sketching the church's situation as seemingly hopeless. The wicked lead a carefree life. Yet, the time of harvest and sifting will come.

[39] Jesus was alerting His followers *not* to expect spectacular things from the breakthrough of God's Kingdom. The Kingdom is like a grain of mustard seed; it is like leaven, like a treasure hidden in a field, like a pearl of great value that one must search for patiently. The fisherman, too, is well aware that not everything he hauls in with his net is fit to eat.

## **10. Growing Alienation between the Messiah and Israel (13:53—17:27)**

*Opposition and isolation.* In the next section of Matthew we see the opposition gathering strength. Jesus still speaks to the crowds, but finally He withdraws with His disciples, who are in need of a great deal of instruction if they are to take the lead in the work assigned to the church of the new covenant. Thus this section leads naturally to the fourth address, which deals with order in the church.

Jesus' isolation becomes more obvious. The people in Nazareth refuse to believe (13:53ff; see also Luke 4:16ff). The execution of John the Baptist by Herod is a warning to Jesus: "In the same way the Son of Man is to suffer at their hands" (17:12 NEB). Hence Jesus withdraws to the loneliness of the wilderness to pray, but first, like Moses and Elisha (see II Kings 4:42-4), He feeds a crowd of more than 5000 people. After praying alone on the mountaintop, He walks across the waves to the disciples in their boat on the Sea of Galilee. This leads them to confess: "Truly you are the Son of God."

*Following in Elijah's footsteps.* A deputation of scribes and Pharisees from the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem watched what was going on. They wanted to bring accusations against Jesus [40] because He did not observe the ancient tradition regarding clean and unclean food. This gave Jesus a chance to make it clear what is unclean first and foremost, namely, the heart—and the words that proceed from man's mouth (15:1ff).

Preaching to the leaders of Israel seemed all but hopeless: they simply did not understand and believe. Therefore Jesus, like Elijah, went outside the boundaries of Israel and spent some time in the vicinity of Tyre and Sidon. "It shall be more tolerable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you" (11:22). There He was addressed by the Messianic title *Son of David*, and there He rewarded the faith He encountered in a daughter of Canaan (15:21ff). Would this make Israel jealous?

Next come some healings and another feeding of a large crowd, this time over 4000 people in Galilee. But these events did not convince Israel's leaders either. The impudent demand for a spectacular sign from heaven was made again.

*Pharisees and Sadducees.* By this point Jesus was opposed not only by the Pharisees, the

right-wing party emphasizing orthodoxy, but also by the Sadducees, the liberal, "high church" group associated with the top ranks of the priesthood. The latter group, which would today be called progressive or left-wing, was clearly in Herod's good graces (Mark 8:15).

The Pharisees and Sadducees refused to recognize the signs of the times. Jesus' warning to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees remains relevant to the New Testament church that always faces the anxious question why people who seem to be thoroughly grounded in the principles of the Christian faith can move to the left so quickly when they encounter obstacles on life's path.

At issue is the confession of the church. Anyone who joins the Pharisees in taking a position *above* the Word and making external matters primary is in essence assenting <sup>[41]</sup> wholeheartedly to the position of the enlightened free-thinking Sadducees.

*A new beginning.* In order to lead the disciples in the direction of a true confession, Jesus went with them to a lonely area north of Dan, near the source of the Jordan River. When we read the section of Matthew in which this is recorded, we get the impression that Jesus had tried repeatedly to get somewhere with the people but had failed. He was stuck.

The nation as a whole would not allow itself to be transformed into a new community of believers. Therefore Jesus decided to concentrate on His own disciples instead. Peter made his confession about the Son of man: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (16:16).

*The promise to Peter.* It was in the context of this confession about Himself that Jesus spoke of the "petra," the rock on which He would build His church. Peter, representing the disciples in this scene, was given the promise that he would be the bearer of the key, the chief marshal (Is 22:22), the steward of the Kingdom of God. To the extent that the church holds on to the Word, she also bears the keys to the Kingdom of heaven.

We should not think here of St. Peter standing at heaven's gate but of Peter in the *pulpit*. At the same time, the promise to Peter is a reiteration of the warning to stay away from the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees. *By Scripture alone!* The church also bears the key of David if she lives by the Word and nothing else (Zech. 3:7; Rev. 3:7ff). If she departs from the Word, she loses her authority.

That this controversial passage does not portray Peter as possessing any "inherent holiness" or as elevated above the others in virtue of some special office is apparent from what Peter did after making his declaration about Jesus' identity as the Messiah: he turned into a *satan*, an opponent, rejecting the idea that Jesus would have to suffer at Jerusalem. Jesus <sup>[42]</sup> found it necessary to rebuke him sharply: "Get behind me, Satan!" (16:23). The New Testament church would have to learn that its task was to bring the gospel of the cross—and not a gospel of self-sufficiency telling us that we must redeem ourselves. The church must proceed in the assurance that this way will lead to glory.

*The coming of the Son of man.* This section of Matthew contains another controversial text: "Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom" (16:28). We are to read this text as a reference to an event involving Jesus during the time of the apostles.

Because only "some" would live to see it, it is unlikely that Jesus was referring to His transfiguration or to the events of Pentecost. What He probably meant was the vindication of *he* church that would take place when the judgment on unrepentant Jerusalem was finally carried out. In the dark days when Matthew wrote, the believers possessed the comforting knowledge that during their time (even if the apostles would not all live to see it), Jesus would give a visible manifestation of His power as King.

*A foreshadowing of glory.* The transfiguration on the high mountain on which Jesus appeared in glory flanked by Moses and Elijah was a foreshadowing of what would take place after the cross (see also Rev. 1; II Pet. 1:16ff). In all He did, hadn't Jesus operated

within the sphere of these two prophets, and weren't His deeds directly reminiscent of theirs?

The voice that was heard at the time of Jesus' baptism was now heard again. Jesus was the one in whom the Father was well pleased (Is. 42:1), the faithful Servant of the Lord. He was also the Prophet who had come into "the world." The voice declared: "Listen to him" (17:5; see also Deut. 18:15; John 6:14; Acts 3:22ff).

[43] *No needless offense.* Because Jesus was more than Moses or Elijah, He would also have to suffer more than they did and be rejected by His people. Peter's foolish proposal that they stay on the Mount of Transfiguration where Jesus was glorified (17:4), together with the lack of faith Jesus continued to encounter (the stubborn refusal to accept *all* of God's promises), demonstrated the nature of the "faithless and perverse generation" of which He spoke (17:14ff). Yes, there would be suffering to come (vs. 22-3). All righteousness would have to be fulfilled (3:15). Therefore the free Son of the Father, the King of Israel, paid the half shekel temple tax for Himself and Peter, using a fish with a shekel in its mouth (17:24). This payment was made in the month before the Passover.

Bear in mind that in the time after Pentecost, the question whether to pay the temple tax became a lively issue for many. If one paid as a Christian Jew, others might well argue for consistency in such matters and insist that all the other customs and rules of the Sanhedrin be followed as well, and that Christians should not set themselves apart. If a believer chose *not* to pay the tax, he would be attacked as a disturber of national unity.

Matthew therefore records and passes on this story—it does not appear in the other three "gospels"—in order to cast some light on this question. Those who paid the tax in no way surrendered their rights as free men and heirs. They paid only because they did not want to offend people needlessly.

### **11. On Church Order (18:1-35)**

*Like children.* The young church was in constant danger of conforming to the world by applying methods that were really expressions of tyranny and the love of power for its [44] own sake. Therefore Jesus emphasized that the church must not rely on the power of might, like some earthly empire. Instead it must live by the law of self-denial.

Matthew, who emphasizes that the New Testament church would have to break with the synagogue, now gives us the fourth address of Jesus, which is of great importance for the church of all ages. The church must manifest a style of its own, the style of the One who came to *serve*. Therefore the believers must "become like children" (18:3).

*Stumbling blocks.* Being childlike has nothing to do with abridging the church's confession or advocating a simplified, naive Christianity or doing away with all "knowledge" of our faith. What it means instead is that we must think of ourselves in modest terms and live purely by grace. Then we will know how to take our "weaker" brothers and sisters into account and not put any stumbling blocks in their way (see Rom. 14-15).

Jesus foresaw the host of questions capable of devastating the life of the church, questions born of self-righteousness, pride and an obstinate clinging to rigid traditions. Think of all the haughty shepherds who have simply let go of the sheep! How loveless we often are when confronted with the sins of others in the church, refusing to lift a finger to save them or even help them! How cruel we often are to a brother, letting everyone know about his faults!

*Admonition.* That's why the rule recorded in Matthew 18 is so important. This rule applies not just to sins committed against someone personally but to sin in general. Contrary to what many translations suggest, the Greek text does not say: "If your brother sins *against you* ... ." The New English Bible renders this text correctly: "If your brother commits a sin, go and take the matter up with him."

[45] If someone sins, we must first admonish him privately and later, if need be, approach him in the presence of witnesses. Only after this has been done is the church, which is able to bind and loose in the name of the Lord, drawn into the matter. Throughout the entire process, the motive is to save the brother in question.

Even if the keys to the Kingdom of heaven finally have to be used, we must still be willing to forgive. The church's leaders should not regard themselves as a hierarchy of priests called to chastise people roughly. Let there be no song of Lamech in the church (18:22; Gen. 4:23-4). We must forgive people in our hearts (18:35).

## **12. Final Encounters with Israel in Judea and Jerusalem (19:1–23:39)**

*Marriage and divorce.* In the section that now follows, we see Jesus coming into contact with the people again. We notice something special about these contacts in this last week before the Passover: the oppositions and tensions grow even stronger. This brings out even more of the unique character of the Kingdom of heaven—a point of great importance for the church.

Jesus leaves Galilee to undertake a pilgrim's journey to Jerusalem by way of Jericho and the land on the other side of the Jordan. In Jerusalem He will celebrate the Passover. When He crosses the Jordan, we think of His baptism and also of the people of Israel crossing the Jordan under Joshua's command. Again there are Pharisees to tempt Him, this time with a question regarding divorce. By this question they hope to force Him to contradict Moses, who did permit divorce (19:1-12).

Through clever reasoning, the rabbis had so stretched [46] Moses' provision that a man was allowed to divorce his wife if he "found some indecency in her" (Deut. 24:1) that divorce was available at will. Jesus now combatted this elastic interpretation and placed Moses' provisions about divorce in the proper light by pointing back to Genesis: marriage is intended to be a firm bond that can only be broken by unchastity (5:32), which is truly an "indecency." This statement by Jesus need not drive anyone into needless asceticism. The birth of children was recognized by Jesus as a blessing on marriage, for He honored marriage as a creation ordinance of God. Moreover, the guileless ways of children can be an example to adults.

*Glory through service.* Matthew 19:12 is often wrongly interpreted in ascetic terms. This text is actually intended as a statement about the totality of what it means to follow Jesus; it gives rise to misunderstandings only because it is cast in the form of a *mashal*, a mysterious utterance (see p. 37 above and 5:29-30; compare 5:27-32 with 19:3-12).

Following Jesus must take priority over everything else (19:16-30). Neither wealth nor family may stand between Him and us. There is no reason to believe that we are justified on the basis of our deeds. (Think of the parable of the workers in the vineyard, recorded in 19:30—20:16.) Once more Jesus emphasizes that glory is to be sought by way of *service* (20:20ff).

*The Son of David.* Two blind men near Jericho cry out, "Son of David!" And when Jesus enters Jerusalem, the people shout, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" (*Hosanna* means *give us salvation*.) Children take up the chant, and Zechariah's prophecy is literally fulfilled (Zech. 9:9).

That Matthew, unlike the other gospel writers, speaks of both a colt and its mother in connection with the triumphal entry into Jerusalem is not to be interpreted as an effort to make the story agree with the Old Testament prophecy.

[47] It's simply an instance of accurate description, as anyone can quickly see when he bears in mind that the colt had never been ridden before (Mark 11:2). The mother's presence would surely calm the colt the first time it was ridden, thereby rendering it suitable for its task.

Jesus purified the temple as one possessing complete authority (21:12ff, 23). The children again cry, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" Even Jesus takes up this theme by

asking the Pharisees why David calls the Messiah his Son and Lord in Psalm 110 (22:41ff).

*Words of judgment.* The disputes typify the situation. The temple has become a den of robbers (21:13). The barren fig tree is used to symbolize Israel (vs. 18ff). The temple authorities do not recognize Jesus (vs. 23ff). The heir is to be put to death by the tenants (vs. 33ff). Those who are invited do not come to the marriage feast, thereby calling down judgment on their city. Others will precede them (22:1ff, 28ff). From one of the trick questions it becomes apparent that the Pharisees know neither the Scriptures nor God's resurrection power (vs. 23ff).

No one dares to question Jesus anymore. He is not challenged in the temple, which He turns into a forum to present His own teaching. But the opposition of Israel's leaders becomes completely clear. The rigid Pharisees and the flexible Sadducees cooperate in their opposition to Him. That's why Matthew concludes his description of the last public encounter between Jesus and the people by recording Jesus' sevenfold cry of woe directed at the scribes and Pharisees. (23:14 is not present in the most important manuscripts.)

Those who are called to interpret the Word have taken away the key to knowledge, Jesus charges. They have tied themselves down in external matters, but they are full of lawlessness inside (23:28; 24:12; II Thess. 2:3, 7). At the same time they ignore the warnings of the prophets and <sup>[48]</sup> turn Jerusalem into a city of blood. "Thus you witness against yourselves, that you are the *sons of those who murdered the prophets*" (23:31).

What Stephen was later to say to the Sanhedrin before he was stoned has already been said by his Savior (Acts 7:52; see also John 8:44). Jesus takes over the terminology of John the Baptist and speaks of His opponents as "serpents," as a "brood of vipers" (23:33; 3:7; Deut. 32:33; Gen. 3:14-15).

It is still the time of grace, but the seed of the serpent will surely face the *sevenfold wrath of the covenant* (Lev. 26: 18, 21, 24, 28). Isn't this the same theme emphasized so heavily in the last book of the Bible? All these things will come over "this generation" (Deut. 32:5, 20). Jerusalem, Jerusalem!

### **13. The Son of Man Comes (24:1—25:46)**

*The destruction of Jerusalem.* The last discourse Matthew records is addressed to the disciples only. It deals with Jesus' announcement that the beautiful temple of Herod will be totally destroyed. More specifically, Jesus talks about the times and signals heralding the approach of this event.

This last address is also a sermon on the mount—this time the Mount of Olives, which is the Lord's headquarters as He comes to Jerusalem, according to Zechariah 14:4. This address is generally referred to as the discourse on the *last things*.

Interpreters today often describe these two chapters as another example of the "theology of the church" coming to the fore. The early church, according to this view, lived in the expectation of Christ's imminent return.

<sup>[49]</sup> But when we look carefully at this address, we see that what it takes up in the first place is the destruction of Jerusalem. As we read Matthew 24 and 25, we must do our best to immerse ourselves in the thought and outlook of the first hearers. The covenant wrath announced by Jesus had made a deep impression on the disciples. Hence the question when this wrath would be manifested quickly came to the fore.

*An appeal for perseverance.* What the Lord Jesus said in response to this question also has implications for us, for all those who live *after* the time of the Messianic judgment on Israel. Yet, to understand Jesus' prophecy in His fifth address, we must think in terms of the situation of the original hearers, just as we do with any other prophecy.

Jesus, who *sat down* as teacher on this occasion (24:3; see also 5:1; 23:2), first warned against all the false messiahs that would come along. The disciples were not to draw any

premature conclusions from the so-called "signs of the times." Jesus told them that there was no way of determining in advance when He would return in judgment. Even if they heard about nation rising against nation and kingdom against kingdom (Jer. 51:46), they were not to assume that the time had come. The important thing was to persevere. The preaching of the gospel would continue until the very end.

*The desolating sacrilege.* The sign of Jesus' coming to judge Israel would be the desolating sacrilege in the holy place, i.e. the temple (24:15; see also Dan. 9:27; 12:11; Ezek. 8). This sacrilege referred to by Jesus was a degenerating situation in Jerusalem, a situation at the beginning of a Jewish rebellion in which Jews turn the temple into a bastion against the Romans and against other Jews who do not join in the rebellion.

In Luke 21:20, a parallel passage, we read not about a [50] "desolating sacrilege" but about Jerusalem being surrounded by *armies*. It's highly unlikely that this is a reference to *Roman* military forces; otherwise those *within* the city could not very well be advised to flee, as they are in the very next verse. After all, the Romans were always thorough in hermetically sealing off besieged cities and cutting off all escape routes.

If the Romans were the ones responsible for the "desolating sacrilege" in the temple, the advice to flee their armies would do no good. It would be too late. Moreover, once a city is *surrounded* by enemy armies, one can safely assume that the countryside has already been pillaged and stripped bare. Therefore we should think in terms of Jewish troops instead, rebels who take refuge in the temple with no fear of covenant judgment, believing themselves safe in their center of idolatry. God is with us! This is the Lord's temple! (Jer. 7:4; Is. 28:15).

When the church sees such a concentration of troops in the temple, she will know that the time has come for the *exodus* from Jerusalem (24:15ff).

Go out of the midst of her, my people!  
Let every man save his life  
from the fierce anger of the LORD!  
(Jer. 51:45; see also Rev. 18:4).

Jesus warns: "Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather" (24:28 NEB; Jer. 15:3; 19:7; Ezek. 39:17ff; Rev. 19:17ff). What the sign indicates, then, is that the time is near (24:32-3; see also Song of Songs 2:13). "This generation" will surely be struck with judgment, but the church in Jerusalem will be warned of the danger in time.

*The task of the church.* In the time before the alarm is given, the church must be watchful (24:36ff). Hence she must keep oil in her lamps and avoid the mistake of the [51] five foolish virgins (25:1ff). She must earn more with the talents entrusted to her and not let her love grow cold (vs. 14ff).

The Lord Jesus delivered a truly prophetic address here, an address that helped the church greatly in the perilous situation that arose not long afterward, just as He predicted. The church was instructed to continue preaching and appealing to Israel as long as possible. That's why the signs announcing the end were so important.

*A prophetic message for us.* But we live in the time *after* the destruction of Jerusalem. Is this prophecy outdated for us, then?

The answer to this question is that we must treat Jesus' prophecy in Matthew 24 just as we treat the Old Testament prophecies. First of all, we recognize that the prophecies have been fulfilled. What Article 5 of the Belgic Confession (in the 1566 revision) says is true: even the blind can see that the things foretold in the prophecies are fulfilled. On the other hand, prophecies often have more than one level of fulfillment: they also point ahead to events still farther in the future. For us the destruction of Nineveh and Babylon *guarantees* God's triumph over all enemy powers, and the destruction of Jerusalem guarantees the definitive, final coming of Jesus Christ. Jesus' words about the sign of the desolating sacrilege in the holy place should keep us away from any compromise (in the church or elsewhere) between light and darkness, Christ and Belial (II Cor. 6:11—7:1; II

Thess. 2:1—3:5; I John 2:18ff; 5:21).

Bearing this in mind, we should be able to resist the impulse to use the Bible as a chronology or a handbook to the future. No sign will be given to us beyond the "sign of Jonah," that is, the amazing gospel itself.

All the same, we may regard the coming of the sevenfold wrath on Jerusalem as a true "coming" of the Son of man, a coming that gives faith the assurance of His ultimate <sup>[52]</sup> return for the final justification and vindication of the church. At the same time, the exodus command remains in effect for us. We must be watchful and persevere.

*The end of the age.* What the disciples actually asked Jesus was: "What will be the sign of your coming (*parousia*) and the close of the age?" (24:3). They spoke not of the *world's* ending but of the end of the *age*, by which they meant the age that would come before the time of the Messiah's appearance. The Messiah would bring the "coming age," the last days.

After Pentecost, the Jewish worship in Jerusalem continued, of course. Thus it appeared that the two "ages" were overlapping. The apostles still went to the temple. But when Jerusalem was destroyed in the year 70, it was clear that the words of Jesus and the prophets about covenant wrath on Jerusalem had been fulfilled. A new age had begun, the "acceptable year of the Lord" (Luke 4:19), the day of salvation.

*Jews and Greeks alike.* Matthew 24 and 25 should not become a basis for speculation. Instead these chapters should make us press on to a joyful understanding of the time of salvation in which we live. We are privileged to be children of the new Messianic age; we are "latter day saints"!

Christ does not give us binoculars to look through; what He gives us is a prophetic Word as solid as a rock. He also teaches us how to read the prophets. (Hence it would be worthwhile to look up the text references I have given and to read other related passages as well.)

Paul declares: "Behold, now is the day of salvation" (II Cor. 6:2; Is. 49:8). In another letter of Paul we read: "God's wrath has come upon them [the Israelites] *at last*" (I Thess. 2:16; Matt. 23:32). These are the things that the book of Matthew, the "Genesis" of the New Testament, <sup>[53]</sup> shows us. But Matthew also tells us that the grace of the covenant is now open to Jews and Greeks alike—as long as they are willing to listen to God's voice.

#### **14. The Just and Lawful Shepherd (26:1—28:20)**

*More prophecy fulfilled.* Even though the chief priests and elders tried to avoid executing Jesus during the time of the Passover, the Son of man was put to death during this feast just as the prophets said (26:24, 2). The anointing of Jesus in the house of Simon the leper, the Passover meal at which the Lord's supper was instituted, and the struggle in Gethsemane were all preparations for the great sacrifice according to the Scriptures.

Zechariah, you will recall, spoke of the great prophet-shepherd whose value was estimated by the covenant people at the slave's price of 30 pieces of silver (Zech. 11:12). Jesus' disciple Judas Iscariot was prepared to deliver his master to the Sanhedrin for that amount (26:15-16), with the result that Scripture was fulfilled (27:9). Zechariah also prophesied: "Strike the shepherd, that the sheep may be scattered" (Zech. 13:7). When the disciples fled from Gethsemane, this was fulfilled; they all acted ashamed of Jesus (26:31, 56). Jesus, the Good Shepherd, puts His life on the line for His sheep.

*The suffering of Jesus.* It comes out clearly that Jesus is righteous. The complaints before the Sanhedrin turn out to be false. Even the statement about breaking down the temple is presented incorrectly at the trial (26:61; see also John 2:19).

Now Jesus admits openly that He is the Son of man mentioned in Daniel 7, the King-

Priest of Psalm 110, the <sup>[54]</sup> Son of God, the one who will come to judge Jerusalem. In time the Sanhedrin will see His vindication in the destruction of the city and the temple (26:64).

Pilate's wife characterizes Jesus as a "righteous man" (27:19). Pilate agrees and declares that he can find no guilt in Him. But Jesus, the Son of David, must now suffer as the righteous one, the one mentioned in David's psalms.

This King of the Jews is mocked in a hellish way. The words of Psalm 22:1 finally become His own. Why has God forsaken Him? As He is crucified, He is also tormented with the words of verse 8 of this psalm: "Where is your God?" (compare 27:43 with Ps. 42:10, and 26:38 with Ps. 42:11). His hands and feet are pierced, and He is tormented with thirst. The leader of the soldiers at the cross is finally driven to confess simply, "Truly this was the Son of God!" (27:54; see also vs. 40,43).

*Vindication at last.* With the crucifixion begins Jesus' vindication. His death tears the curtain of the temple from top to bottom. Rocks split and graves are opened. The one who was regarded as a criminal joins the rich in death: He is buried in a splendid tomb.

Later comes the great vindication of the resurrection, again sealed with an earthquake. The soldiers assigned to guard the tomb flee. An angel rolls away the rock in front of the tomb and announces to the fearful women that Jesus has arisen. God has demonstrated that *Jesus was right!*

The women are told to bring a message to the disciples: "Behold, he is going before you to Galilee." This "going before" means that Christ is taking up His shepherd's staff again. At the beginning of Matthew's book we already found a reference to Micah's prophecy about the ruler of Israel who would be a shepherd to His people (Micah 5:2ff; II Sam. 5:2). This prophecy is now fulfilled (28:7; 26:32).

<sup>[55]</sup> *The new Israel.* Listen to what Jesus Himself says about the disciples: He calls them His *brothers* (28:10; John 20:17). We may read this statement as an echo of Psalm 22. The first part of this psalm speaks about the suffering of the righteous one, while the second part, which deals with his elevation, begins with the words: "I will tell of thy name to my *brethren*" (vs. 22; Matt. 28:10; Heb. 2:12).

The Sanhedrin tries to engage in psychological warfare by means of bribes to soldiers told to declare that the disciples stole Jesus' body. The Good Shepherd, meanwhile, proceeds to organize His new Israel. In the place where the gathering of the flock *began* (i.e. Galilee, a Gentile territory), He now draws His own together as the authorized Son of man (28:18). He makes them His ambassadors and tells them to preach, baptize, give instruction in the faith, build, and preserve.

If Israel refuses to listen, the gospel will be presented to the rest of the world, and many who were last will be first. The book that began with the name *Immanuel* ends with Jesus' sure promise: "I am with you always, to the close of the age," this wicked time dominated by satan.

## [56] Mark

*He is very useful in serving me  
(II Tim. 4:11).*

### 1. The Author of the Second Gospel

*Mark's identity.* The Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius maintained that the John Mark mentioned in Acts is not the same man who wrote the Gospel according to Mark. Few scholars have followed his lead on this point. It is generally accepted that the John Mark of Acts is also the Mark mentioned in the letters of Paul and Peter, the Mark who was known as the author of the second "gospel."

The New Testament gives us a fair amount of information about Mark's background. His mother Mary owned a large house in Jerusalem where the church sometimes met (Acts 12:12). Peter went to this house after he was freed from prison; Rhoda, the maid, was so excited about his release that she forgot to open the door for him.

Some scholars have speculated that Mary's house was the location of Jesus' last supper with His disciples. Mark is <sup>[57]</sup> then identified as the man carrying the jug of water (14:13) or the young man in Gethsemane who fled naked after breaking free of the soldiers who tried to seize him (vs. 51-2). We have no way of determining whether one of these figures was actually Mark, however attractive the idea might seem. But we do know that Mark grew up in a family where Peter visited often, which enabled him to pick up a lot of information about Christ's ministry on earth.

*Mark and Paul.* Mark was apparently a young man who could be trusted with an errand. When Paul and Barnabas were in Jerusalem to bring some material assistance offered by the church in Antioch, Mark caught their eye as a potential helper, so they decided to take him to Antioch with them. When Paul set out with Barnabas on the first of his great journeys, John Mark accompanied them to "assist" them (Acts 12:25; 13:5). That he was a first cousin of Barnabas, who was a Levite, probably played a role in this decision.

Perhaps Mark's assistance consisted of making arrangements for the journey, seeking lodgings, setting up appointments, and things of that nature. However, he may also have been used in proclaiming the gospel message, for he knew a great deal about Jesus and was adept at telling a story.

On this first journey there was some sort of unpleasant incident. After the three men passed through the familiar territory in which Barnabas had grown up (i.e. Cyprus) and started out for Asia Minor with its unknown dangers, Mark turned back. Because of this, Paul refused to take him along on a later journey. Blood ties were a factor in this situation: Barnabas stood up for his cousin and therefore parted company with Paul as well. On the second of his great journeys, Paul was accompanied by Silas, while Barnabas made a journey to Cyprus with Mark.

Later Paul and Mark were completely reconciled. When <sup>[58]</sup> Paul wrote to the church at Colossae, he sent greetings from "Mark the cousin of Barnabas," among others, and added that Mark and some others had been a "comfort" to him (Col. 4:10-11; see also vs. of Philemon). During his imprisonment in Rome, Paul appealed to Timothy to be sure to pick up Mark (who was at work somewhere in Asia Minor) and take him along to Rome, for Mark could be of great use to him (II Tim. 4:11).

Doesn't it sound as though Mark was much more than a mere "social secretary" to Paul? Since he had grown up in a home that played a central role in the original congregation at Jerusalem, he was able to tell Paul all sorts of things about Christ's activities and the struggles of the church after Pentecost. Paul had to gain his knowledge of these things through others. And he, too, needed the comfort of the gospel, especially at the end of his life.

*Mark and Peter.* At the conclusion of Peter's first letter, which was dictated to Silas (Silvanus), we read: "She who is at Babylon, who is likewise chosen, sends you

greetings; and so does my son Mark." Thus *Peter* regarded Mark as his spiritual son, and Mark did indeed maintain close relations with him.

In writings dating from the second century, we find Mark referred to as *Peter's spokesman* and his "gospel" as Peter's memoirs. Because Peter played a leading role in the proclamation of the testimony about Christ, it seems obvious that Mark would rely heavily on his preaching when he undertook to write about Christ. His book represents some of the fruit of the church's instruction in the faith (catechism), which had already assumed a regular form in the mother church in Jerusalem.

## [59] 2. Synopsis of the Apostle's Testimony

*The recipients of Mark's gospel.* For whom did Mark write? The fact that Peter sent greetings from "Babylon" in the name of Mark and others has led some interpreters to conclude that Mark was in Rome when he wrote. This view has taken on the status of a tradition, for "Babylon" is often equated with Rome.

We should not accept this view too quickly. The name *Babylon* could also be a reference to Jerusalem. Moreover, it could conceivably refer to the area known on the map as Babylon. Bear in mind that Peter was writing to the churches of Asia Minor, where Mark was apparently known.

*Mark's style and emphasis.* It may be that one of the goals Mark had in mind when he wrote his "gospel" was to help the churches in their catechism program. In his account of the gospel we sometimes read Aramaic words, to which he then adds the translation for those who know only Greek: "Talitha cumi" ("Little girl, I say to you, arise," 5:41), and "Ephphatha" ("Be opened," 7:34). In those days there were a lot of Jews who spoke Greek. Mark, who had grown up in the city, was no doubt bilingual.

Mark's "gospel," which is the second book in the New Testament, is not long. It lays heavy emphasis on the *deeds* of Jesus. Some scholars argue that Mark wrote it that way because he was addressing the Romans, who were *doers* and knew how to express themselves succinctly. (Think of Pilate's words in John 19:22: "What I have written I have written.")

It seems to me that we can better account for Mark's style by pointing to the chief source behind the book—the hasty and spontaneous Peter. After all, Mark gives us *Peter's* recollections. Thus we should view his "gospel" as a synopsis of the apostle's testimony regarding the Christ.

[60] It was not Mark's intention to write a complete biography of Jesus. He made no effort to arrange the events he reported in chronological order. Within the framework that begins with the baptism in the Jordan and ends with the crucifixion and resurrection, he relates various facts and events that bear on the gospel.

He writes with a precision that we normally expect only in etchings. His precision becomes obvious especially when we take the trouble to compare a few passages in Mark with parallel passages in Matthew and Luke.

<b>Matthew</b>	<b>Mark</b>	<b>Luke</b>
4:21-2 And he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.	1:20 And <i>immediately</i> he called them; and they left their father <i>Zebedee</i> in the boat <i>with the hired servants</i> , and followed him.	5:11 And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him.
8:4 And Jesus said to Him ...	1:43-4 And he <i>sternly charged</i> him, and sent him away at once, and said to him....	5:14 And he charged him...
8:23 And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him.	4:35-6 On that day, <i>when evening had come</i> , he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." And <i>leaving the crowd</i> , they <i>took him with them</i> in the boat, just as he was (4:1). And <i>other boats</i> were with him.	8:22 One day he got into a boat with his disciples, and he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side of the lake." So they set out.

[61] You see how Mark takes the trouble to include all sorts of details. True, all of Mark except for about 80 verses appears in some form in Luke or Matthew, but the other two gospel writers did not just copy Mark's words. Each shaped his material and decided what to include on the basis of his own major emphases and the circle of readers he intended to reach. Perhaps you can find more examples like the ones given above, showing how the different gospel writers present the same material in entirely different words. The animation and vividness of Mark's presentation will strike you again and again.

Mark repeatedly reports that this or that happened "immediately" or "at once." There are more than 70 such instances to be found in his short book. Is Peter, who was famous for being eager and hasty, responsible for this? In any event, there is a lot of movement in Mark's "gospel."

*Priestly service.* The first part of Mark deals with Jesus' activities in Galilee and with some trips He made outside that area. But after Jesus' glorification on the Mount of Transfiguration, there comes a change. Opposition was already evident earlier, but Jesus now tells His disciples clearly that He will have to suffer. The announcement is made three times (8:31ff; 9:30ff; 10:32ff).

In this context we cannot help noticing that Mark, who was a cousin of the Levite Barnabas and therefore may well have been of Levite descent himself, repeatedly reports words of Jesus that have to do with the *priestly* service of believers. Jesus' cross is of great importance for the church; the church should not be repelled by what He had to suffer. Therefore we should not be afraid to suffer for Him, for we are all servants! Think again of Peter: after his "conversion" from a rejection of the notion that Jesus would have to suffer, he was called to strengthen the brothers in their faith—a faith that *accepts* suffering (Luke 22:32; Mark 8:32ff; I Pet. 3:14; 4:12ff).

[62] *On to Jerusalem.* After a trip to Caesarea Philippi, Jesus went on to Jerusalem. He was finally "on the way." Mark writes: "And they were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; and they were amazed, and those

who followed were afraid" (10:32).

At this point the rapid flow of Mark's "gospel" is suddenly halted. Now the days of the Passover week are dealt with one by one, as Mark pays careful attention to the calendar. Matthew gives us a non-chronological summary of the events after the entry into Jerusalem (Matt. 21:1ff), but Mark deals with them day by day.

We must not play off Mark's account against Matthew's in an effort to cast doubt on the reliability of the Biblical record, for it is not Matthew's intention to present everything in diary style. But Mark does keep the days separate in his account.

Day 1: Entry into Jerusalem and inspection of the temple (11:1ff).

Day 2: Cursing of the fig tree and purification of the temple (11:12ff).

Day 3: The fig tree is found to be barren. Debates in the temple (11:20ff). Jesus leaves the temple and prophesies that it will be destroyed.

Day 4: Betrayal by Judas (14:1, 10ff).

Day 5: The last supper, in celebration of the Passover (14:12ff). Jesus is arrested and brought before the authorities.

Day 6: Trial, crucifixion, burial.

Day 8: Resurrection (16:1ff).

Mark dedicates one third of his book to showing that the Son of God who was baptized in the Jordan is the same Son of God who died on the cross and rose from the <sup>[63]</sup> grave. He deliberately deals with the suffering and death of Christ at great length.

*An abrupt conclusion.* Mark reports on the resurrection in a surprisingly brief way. After informing us in 16:7 that the angel told the women that Jesus was on His way to Galilee to meet His disciples—Galilee was also where Jesus started His ministry—he says only that the women "went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to any one, for they were afraid."

In and of itself, this abrupt conclusion to the Gospel according to Mark need not be read as a false note to end on. On the contrary, it points ahead to the spreading of the gospel - a bold proclamation not restrained by any command to tell no one about the amazing things that had taken place.

Someone else added to Mark's "gospel" by summarizing the events that came after the resurrection. Because there are some important manuscripts that do not include this conclusion to the book, the Revised Standard Version of the Bible relegated it to the footnotes. However, when the second edition of the RSV translation of the New Testament appeared in 1971, these verses in Mark were included in the text again (just as they are in the King James Bible), with their status explained in a note.

From earliest times the church has accepted these verses as canonical. As far as their form is concerned, they fit the framework of Mark's writing. Fortunately, the trembling of the women at the news of Christ's resurrection is not the last word.

### <sup>[64]</sup> 3. The Beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ

*A messenger preparing the way.* Mark's book opens as follows: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, 'Behold, I send my messenger before thy face . . .'" Some translations leave out the words *Son of God*, even though they are found in most manuscripts. In any event, this title fits in very well with the content of the book (1:11; 3:11; 5:7; 14:61; 15:39).

Mark reminds us of Genesis with his talk of "the beguiling." The question I raised in connection with the opening of Matthew can also be raised here: Does the superscription cover the entire book or only the material that immediately follows it? (In the case of Mark, the first subject that arises is the work of John the Baptist.)

It cannot be denied that Mark shows us how the *gospel* made its way into the world. After all, John was not bringing a gospel pointing to himself as Messiah, as some of his disciples believed. No, he was a messenger preparing the way, a voice pointing to someone stronger, someone who would baptize with *the Spirit*. John's work formed the beginning of what Mark wanted to sketch, namely, the growth of the gospel of God's Son.

*Preaching in the synagogues.* Mark immediately tells his readers how the one who would one day baptize with the Spirit was first baptized Himself and anointed with the Spirit, while God called Him by name. "You are my son" (Ps. 2:7). God called Jesus "my chosen, in whom my soul delights" (Is. 42:1). After briefly recounting the temptation in the wilderness, Mark reports that Jesus went to Galilee after John's arrest and began preaching the gospel.

After the calling of the first disciples, we see Jesus at work in Capernaum. He also visits other places to preach in the synagogues. "That is why I came out," He explains (1:38). What is the content of the gospel He preaches? The <sup>[65]</sup>critical hour has come, "and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel" (1:15). This proclamation is accompanied by many wonders.

#### **4. The Son of God as Hidden Messiah**

*A cautious beginning.* Jesus was busy preaching the gospel. But how is this to be reconciled with the fact that He repeatedly *forbade* people to make propaganda on His behalf? Mark records a number of healings of possessed men. Jesus is the one who binds powerful satan and plunders his house. Beelzebul (whose name means *lord of the house*) is forced to surrender his victims (3:27; 1:26,34, 39; 3:11). The possessed cry out that He is the Son of God (3:11; 5:7; 1:24, 34); they "know" Him (1:34). Yet Jesus repeatedly tells the demons to keep silent about Him.

Now, we could conceivably argue that Jesus doesn't want any help from demons (see Acts 16:16ff). But what are we then to make of His repeated command to *bystanders* not to tell others of His healing miracles? (1:44; 7:36; 8:26). Doesn't the gospel have Jesus as its content?

As we ponder this problem, we must bear in mind that there are sometimes moments when the whole truth cannot be expressed aloud. If Jesus were to reveal Himself at the very outset as the Messiah and Son of God, that knowledge would be open to misunderstanding and misuse. Jesus did not want the people to regard Him as a miraculous healer or a national hero or a freedom fighter. In His state of humiliation, the Son of God came in a concealed way and preached through words and deeds that the new Messianic era had come.

Later He was to speak to His own disciples more openly about His identity, after they had expressed themselves <sup>[66]</sup>about Him and recognized Him as the Messiah (8:29). But at this point the crowds are still excluded from this knowledge. Not until He is tried by Caiaphas does Jesus admit openly that He is the Son of God and the Son of man (14:61ff).

*Preachers of repentance.* But weren't the disciples sent out to preach long before Jesus made His identity known? Didn't the echo of their preaching resound in the palace of Herod, the murderer of John the Baptist? (6:6ff). How is this to be reconciled with the command to remain silent?

We must remember that the disciples went out as preachers of *repentance*, calling upon the people to mend their ways (6:12). People generally interpreted this preaching on the part of Jesus' disciples to mean that Jesus was one of the prophets (vs. 14-15). For the moment, the *message* was central: "Take heed what you hear" (4:24). And that message was like a hidden seed (vs. 1ff). Yet, the ground brings forth fruit by itself—that's what the text really says—without the sower knowing how it all comes to pass (4:27-8). It will be the same with the gospel of the cross, which is an offense to the Jews

and foolishness to the Greeks.

*The Kingdom's advance.* The work of the Teacher who was rejected and misunderstood, the hidden Messiah and Son of God, will ripen to a great harvest, regardless of how many there are who do not believe. Over against Satan's "immediately" (4:15-17) stands the "at once" of the lashing sickle and the ripening grain (vs. 29). Mark's repeated use of the words *immediately* and *at once* may be irritating to readers who dislike repetition, but it shows us something of the *movement* of the Kingdom of God (1:21, 23, 29, 30, 43, and so forth).

How clearly the powerful, invincible gospel resounds in Mark's book! It is a gospel of forgiveness through the Son <sup>[67]</sup> of man, who possesses full authority to forgive sins (2:10; Dan. 7:14). It is a gospel for sinners (2:17) and Gentiles (7:24ff).

Consider how the healing of the deaf-mute in the Decapolis area is described by Mark (7:31ff). This vivid story is recorded *only* in his "gospel." What a loving, friendly spirit the Lord manifested as He healed and taught the deaf-mute! Because the man was deaf, Jesus could not address him normally. Instead He took the fearful man outside and spelled out the word *Ephphatha* for him by means of four symbols: He put fingers in both of the man's ears, spittle on his tongue, and then sighed and looked up to heaven. The deaf-mute got the message: his eyes and ears were opened, and he was healed (see Is. 35:5).

Couldn't the word *Ephphatha* be used to characterize all of Jesus' dealings? Through the Word, something of Paradise is regained. These wondrous signs showed clearly that the time of salvation was near!

## **5. The Son of God as Rejected Messiah**

*Rejected by the Jewish leaders.* Early in the book of Mark (starting at 2:1), we read of five conflicts between Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees. Near the end, after the story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and the withering of the fig tree, we are told of five more clashes with the Jewish leaders. In the second set of clashes, the Herodians and Sadducees are mentioned as well (12:13, 18).

The time between was no idyllic period either, for it also included disputes. Think of the rejection at Nazareth (6:1ff), Jesus' denunciation of the Pharisees for their hypocrisy (7:1ff), the refusal to give "this generation" a <sup>[68]</sup> sign (8:11ff), and the warning about the leaven of the Pharisees and of Herod (8:14ff).

*Opposition from His own disciples.* Do you know what is especially beautiful about Mark's "gospel"? On the one hand Mark gives us the recollections of Peter, while on the other hand he shows us that Peter did not seek to elevate himself in his preaching. Peter reported clearly that he had been a Satan, an opponent standing in the way of Jesus' suffering. In Mark's account of this event, we read that Jesus looked at the other disciples as He rebuked Peter (a detail not found in the other "gospels"). But the Savior's words of praise for Peter are also recorded, as well as Peter's walking on the water.

Mark likewise records Jesus' prediction that Peter would deny Him before the cock crowed *twice*. This shows us how serious Peter's denial was. *One* warning would not be enough—that's how far the leader of the disciples had fallen!

Mark does not record Jesus' words to Peter about the keys to the Kingdom, nor does he inform us that Peter and John were together entrusted with the task of finding a room for the Passover supper. But he does make it clear that the leader among the disciples, the man who bore the strong name *Peter*, was also a leader when it came to forsaking Jesus. "O faithless generation!" (9:19). If only the church of Rome, which likes to claim Peter as its first pope, had opened its eyes to the fact that Peter does not present himself as a hero in "his own gospel"!

Just as Moses and Elijah, who appeared on the Mount of Transfiguration, were opposed by their own people, a "faithless generation" that made it virtually impossible for them to

discharge their respective offices (Num. 14:27; Deut. 32:5; I Kings 19:4), so Jesus had to "fulfill" their work by encountering opposition and misunderstanding among even His own disciples. But just as Moses and <sup>[69]</sup> Elijah saw the glory of God (Ex. 24:1; I Kings 19), the path followed by the rejected Son of God would also lead from suffering to glory (8:31; 9:2,31). "For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake *and the gospel's* will save it" (8:35; 10:28ff, 43ff).

*The very stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner (I Pet. 2:7).*

## 6. Death and Resurrection

*The hour of suffering.* The description of the journey to Jerusalem begins with 10:1, and especially with verse 32. Mark gives us the name of the blind man who hailed Jesus as the Son of David—Bartimaeus. Jesus takes Bartimaeus along to the City of David, which He enters in triumph.

At this point, Mark, who has been so quick to assure us that the events described took place "immediately" or "at once," slows down and starts attaching dates and times to the events: "on the following day" (11:12); "in the morning" (vs. 20); "two days before the Passover" (14:1); "on the first day of Unleavened Bread" (vs. 12); "as soon as it was morning" (15:1); "when the sabbath was past" (16:1); "on the first day of the week" (vs. 2). All of these temporal givens, however, must be placed within the framework of the time Jesus spoke of in the garden of Gethsemane: "The *hour* has come; the Son of man is betrayed into the hands of sinners" (14:41).

Jesus' suffering was not a matter of fate or some misfortune that was bound to happen. God's plan as revealed in Scripture was being worked out. "For the Son of man goes <sup>[70]</sup> as it is written of him" (14:21). The Father reckons His Son as one of the sinners (Is. 53).

In addition to this hour of suffering (13:32), there is talk of another decisive hour. There will come a time when there is a desolating sacrilege in the holy place; it will be set up *where it ought not to be* (vs. 14). Judgment will then be executed on the covenant people who rejected their own Messiah. "Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away before all these things take place" (vs. 30). Therefore we must be watchful (vs. 36,14,37).

*The ultimate curse.* From this point of view, the description of Jesus' betrayal by Judas is powerful and moving. Which "hour" is chosen? We see the Jewish people choosing for the sword as they clamor for the release of the Jewish revolutionary Barabbas (15:6ff). The *Passover* feast is celebrated under the banner of *self-deliverance!* The people chose against Jesus and reject the Cornerstone. The cry "Crucify him!" (15:13-14) fills the courtyard outside the building where Jesus is being judged, with the leaders of the priests egging the people on.

Jesus will have to suffer the ultimate curse. His claim to the title *Messiah* will be proven invalid once and for all. A dishonored messiah won't mean anything to the Jews anymore.

The beast called the Sanhedrin throws itself at the Son of man. Egyptian darkness covers Jerusalem (see Is. 13:10; 24:23; 50:3; Jer. 15:9; Ezek. 32:7-8; Amos 8:9; Joel 2:2, 10, 31; 3:15). Didn't Jerusalem become an "Egypt" when it crucified Jesus? (see Rev. 11:8; 6:12; 16:10). The curtain of the temple is no longer needed and is therefore ripped in two. Jerusalem has chosen for the hour *of judgment*.

*Resurrection hope.* The gospel presses us to make a choice before it's too late. The message that resounds in Peter's Pentecost sermon comes through here as well:

[71] "Save yourselves from this crooked generation" (Acts 2:40; see also Joel 2:32). By accepting the hour of *suffering* as the hour of *deliverance*, we can escape the hour of *judgment!* God has chosen the stone rejected by the builders and made it the Cornerstone (I Peter 2:4ff; Ps. 118:22).

Jesus of Nazareth has risen from the dead (16:6). The disciples and Peter—Peter is mentioned separately—must be informed of this. Forgiveness is extended to those who have rejected and denied Christ. Fear not.

"The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." These are the very first words in Mark's "gospel." From this sudden beginning, Mark moves on rapidly to a sudden ending: immediately after the death on the cross comes the resurrection. Mark's gospel is not a biography written to entertain us but a *testimony*, an appeal to accept the gospel. Is it marvelous in our eyes? (Ps. 118:23).

## [72] Luke

### 1. The Beloved Physician Luke

*Paul's fellow worker.* The third and fifth books of the New Testament were written by Luke, a figure whose name comes up in Paul's letters. When he ends the Letter to the Colossians with greetings from various people, Paul mentions Mark (the cousin of Barnabas), Aristarchus, and Jesus (also called Justus) as the only Jewish helpers he had with him at the time. Then follows a message from Epaphras (Epaphroditus), who was apparently a Gentile. Finally, "Luke the beloved physician and Demas greet you."

In the Letter to Philemon of Colossae, which was written at about the same time, Paul mentions roughly the same group of fellow workers. We know from II Timothy 4 that Paul wanted Timothy to take Mark along with him to Rome. Paul writes: "Demas, in love with the present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica; Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. *Luke alone* is with me" (vs. 10-11).

This short sentence about Luke speaks volumes. The [73] physician Luke, highly regarded by Paul, stayed with him as a fellow worker till the very end. Luke was a Gentile. Since Mark, the author of the second book of the New Testament, was another of Paul's helpers, Luke also knew him very well.

*Paul's companion.* From the book of Acts, which was intended as a sequel to the Gospel according to Luke (Acts 1:1), we learn that Luke was not only a fellow worker of Paul's but also made many journeys with him. Read Acts 16 starting at verse 6. At first the pronoun *they* is used repeatedly: "They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia . . . they attempted to go into Bithynia . . . they went down to Troas." But at verse 10 things change: Paul saw the vision, and "immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called *us* to preach the gospel to them." The *we* continues until Philippi, where Luke switches back to *they*. In chapter 20, starting at verse 5, the pronoun *we* is used again: "We sailed away from Philippi." Throughout the rest of the book, Luke uses *we* regularly. "The natives showed us unusual kindness" (28:2).

When we consider this use of the first person pronoun in Acts in the light of the references to Luke in the letters of Paul, we are driven to conclude that Luke means that he *accompanied* Paul on his journeys. Thus Luke himself went with Paul from Troas to Philippi, where he stayed behind. Later he joined Paul on his last journey to Jerusalem, where Paul was arrested, and traveled with him to Rome, where he remained as Paul's companion.

Thus the author of the Gospel according to Luke was one of Paul's fellow workers and knew him intimately. Because he was an eyewitness to the spreading of the gospel and its reception throughout the Mediterranean world, Luke was able to write a vivid factual account of the apostolic era in the book of Acts.

[74] *Gathering the material.* As a member of Paul's staff, Luke was in a good position to gather information about Christ's ministry on earth, even though he had not known Jesus personally. He was well acquainted with what Mark wrote. Moreover, his stay in Palestine afforded him a fine opportunity to gather material for his account of the gospel.

With Paul, he stayed at the home of the deacon and evangelist Philip (Acts 21:8) and also at the house of Mnason, one of the first disciples (vs. 16). While in Jerusalem, he was present at a meeting between Paul and James, the brother of the Lord (vs. 18). During Paul's imprisonment in Jerusalem and Caesarea, which lasted about two years, Luke had lots of time to assemble materials for his history of the gospel in two volumes. No doubt many who had witnessed the events and heard Jesus speak were still alive; Luke would have been able to question them. It may be that Mary, the mother of the Lord, the woman who had stored "all these things" in her heart, was also available for an interview.

Clearly Luke made good use of the time he was forced to spend in the "holy land." What he writes about the shipwreck in Acts 27 also reads like a firsthand account. Could it be that Luke had already finished his first book in Palestine, the territory where Jesus had operated, and that he started his second book there and all but completed it during the sea journey to Rome?

*In harmony with Matthew and Mark.* In his account of Jesus' discourse about the destruction of the temple, Luke speaks of troops surrounding Jerusalem rather than of the "desolating sacrilege." Some scholars use this fact as an argument against the thesis that Luke finished his gospel before the destruction of the temple in the year 70.

According to this view, the original expectation of the speedy return of Christ was set aside once it became [75] apparent that Jesus did not plan to come back immediately. People began to think in terms of a considerable delay before He appeared again. This is then alleged to be the reason why Luke ties Jesus' threatening words to the destruction of Jerusalem rather than to the second coming, which is thereby made much more remote. We are assured that this new perspective on the future creates more room for the establishment of the church on earth: it is no longer necessary for Christians to distantiate themselves quite so much from the mainstream of life. According to this view, Luke is guilty of altering and bastardizing the original "eschatological" gospel.

This accusation is completely false, for Luke gives us just what Matthew and Mark give us (see Matt. 24:10ff; Mark 13:1ff). In our examination of the book of Matthew, we saw that what Luke writes about this matter is really no more than a paraphrase or description of what is meant by the "desolating sacrilege" (21:20; see also Matt. 24:15). It's simply not true that Luke changed a prediction of Jesus that allegedly failed to come true into a statement about *Roman* legions surrounding Jerusalem.

Luke does not write that Jesus appealed to those who were *in* the city to flee once the enemy succeeded in throwing an iron curtain around the city. All he does is to pass on Jesus' prophecy to his readers—in such a way that it will be easily comprehended. Remember that a good part of the city wall also served as the wall of the temple. When *Jewish* soldiers took up their positions on the walls of the city and the temple, Jesus was saying, the Christians were to take this as an alarm signal.

Thus there is no good reason to date Luke's book *after* the year 70. In time the first readers could see for themselves that what Luke presented as prophecy had indeed come true. Neither is there any reason to accuse Luke of having changed the original gospel, for such an "eschatological" gospel exists only in the minds of certain [76] scholars. The New Testament does indeed teach us something about an expectation concerning the immediate future—the expectation Jesus spoke of when He foresaw the covenant wrath and judgment that was to descend on the city and the temple before long.

## **2. Luke's Purpose in Writing**

*Commissioned by a Roman official.* When we read the introductions to Luke and Acts, which are written in beautiful literary Greek, we learn something about Luke's purpose in writing. First of all, Luke dedicates his two-volume work to the "most excellent" Theophilus. Since Luke also uses the phrase *most excellent* when governors like Felix and Festus are addressed (Acts 23:26; 24:2; 26:25), we get the impression that Theophilus must be a highly placed Roman official.

It appears that this man already possessed some knowledge of the gospel. Luke likewise presupposes some knowledge of Jewish customs in what he writes. At that time there were many Gentiles who had not become proselytes to the extent of undergoing circumcision but attended the synagogue nevertheless. They were called the "God-fearing."

Theophilus was probably one of those Gentiles who knew the Old Testament via the synagogue and was acquainted with the gospel in part through contact with Luke.

Theophilus then commissioned Luke to look into the gospel events carefully and report on them. Luke's stay in Palestine helped him in carrying out his assignment.

Since Luke's books were dedicated to Theophilus, we can safely assume that the latter saw to it that they were reproduced and distributed somehow. In those days, of [77] course, there were no printing presses. Books had to be copied out by hand, a process that sometimes went fairly quickly, for one man could read aloud while as many as ten wrote.

Think about the situation for a moment. A Roman government official (perhaps in Miletus or Philippi) commissions Luke, who was about to go to Jerusalem with Paul, to look into all the events preached about by the Christians, promising to help with the publication of the results of his investigation. Thus Luke's book represents a "gospel tract" prepared for and through the higher classes.

*The question of the temple.* A man like Theophilus must have had his questions. No doubt one of the first questions to arise in his mind was why it was necessary to go to a "different church" now. What was wrong with the Jewish religion? Shouldn't the temple services at Jerusalem, where the true God was worshiped, be maintained?

Luke therefore *begins* by speaking of the temple—Zechariah, Simeon, Anna, Jesus in the temple at the age of twelve, Jesus tempted on the pinnacle of the temple, Jesus teaching in the temple, and so forth. But Luke also points out that Jesus found it necessary to *purify* the temple, to foretell the *destruction* of the temple, and to *forsake* the temple. He makes it clear that Jesus was taken prisoner by the temple authorities, who then mocked Him and condemned Him. At the beginning of the book, Luke shows us a priest who could not give a blessing in the temple, and at the end he shows us a Priest-King who blesses His own outside Jerusalem just before He ascends to heaven, after which His disciples "were continually in the temple blessing God."

When you read the book of Acts, you see that Luke continues there in the same vein, making the point that Christianity is *not* a revolutionary movement that rejects the temple: rather, it is the temple that rejects the gospel.

[78] We read numerous stories of arrests, as the synagogues throughout the Mediterranean world all the way to Rome reject the Christ. Because the "temple" will not listen, judgment will strike. Yet the gospel continues to advance through the world unhindered, O most excellent Theophilus!

*The gospel in two volumes.* As we read Luke's works, we must not lose sight of the fact that they are addressed first of all to Theophilus. What an answer Luke gave in all the material he presented in his two books! At the beginning of Acts he explains: "In the first book [*logos*, which actually means *word*], O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus *began* to do and to teach, until the day when he was taken up." Thus Luke's first book sketches the *beginning*, while the second shows how the work was *continued*. Mark also started out by speaking of the beginning—the beginning of the gospel.

Luke takes his place right next to those who were eyewitnesses and servants of the Word. He regards it as necessary to deal once more with the *beginning* of Jesus' activities and to tie in this beginning with an account of the *continuation* of Jesus' work (the Acts of the Apostles).

*A physician's touch.* In his writings Luke shows repeatedly how merciful Jesus was, that He was much more than a rigid, unfeeling rabbi or teacher. As a physician Luke had been exposed to a great deal of physical suffering and social misery and was sensitive to the special problems many women had to cope with. And as a Christian he was acquainted with the power of the Holy Spirit and the power of prayer.

It should not surprise us, therefore, that it is Luke who shows us how Jesus pitied those who suffered and promised the Holy Spirit to the "poor," to those who prayed constantly and wanted to live by grace alone. Luke [79] knew that these sides of Jesus would appeal to a man of importance like Theophilus.

*A gospel of grace.* This point deserves special emphasis in our time. When Luke talks about the "poor" and tells us that Christ came to proclaim liberty to the captives, we are not to think in terms of a "theology of liberation" or a "theology of revolution." The "poor" are the poor and afflicted of the Psalms, those who wish to live by grace alone. They are not to be equated with those whose incomes fall below some statistician's "poverty line."

The gospel is a gospel of grace—not a social gospel. The message Christ proclaimed in Nazareth was not a social or political program. (That was what His hearers would have welcomed, of course.) The gospel does have social and political consequences, but it must be seen first and foremost as a proclamation of grace, of deliverance from sin.

### **3. Chaos or Order?**

*An artist with the pen.* In his introduction and dedication, Luke says that he will present his report on the matters he investigated for Theophilus in the form of an "orderly account." All the same, Luke has been subjected to heavy criticism by certain scholars who argue that he used all sorts of sources and printed both versions of any story that was circulating in conflicting accounts. That's why there are two addresses against the Pharisees and two occasions when the disciples are sent out to preach (11:37ff; vs. 45ff; 9:1ff; 10:1ff). Jesus' appearance at Nazareth does not come in the proper place, we are told, for by then Jesus had already made an appearance in <sup>[80]</sup> Capernaum, which Luke only gets around to later. More such charges are made.

While Luke's "Volume 1" is criticized for using all sorts of sources uncritically, the complaint about "Volume 2" (i.e. Acts) is that he edited his sources too heavily. Luke took too many unjustified liberties, with the result that his second book is not very reliable historically, according to the critics.

Perhaps you know the story of Rembrandt's famous "Night Watch." When Rembrandt was commissioned to paint the corporal's guard, he was expected to produce something along the lines of the traditional family portrait, with the children lined up neatly and the parents at the center—or perhaps a company of soldiers, with the officers seated in the front row. But what the 33-year-old Rembrandt came up with was entirely different from what his bourgeois customers had in mind. He painted his subjects in action, injecting life and natural movement into the scene; in other words, he chose to depict the corporal's guard in an informal setting. He even gave a prominent place in the painting to a girl and a dog who had nothing to do with the corporal's guard and had not paid for the privilege of being included. The result was a world-famous painting that wound up in storage: the people who commissioned it did not want it displayed.

There is a bit of Rembrandt in Luke. A later legend has it that Luke was a painter himself: a Byzantine king is supposed to have acquired a painting of Mary made by Luke. Whatever the truth of the matter, Luke did become the patron saint of painters.

What is certain is that Luke was an artist with the pen. Skillfully he wielded the pen to paint beautiful word-pictures. The result is an astonishingly animated portrayal of Jesus in action—all based on the sources he consulted.

<sup>[81]</sup> *Thematic primacy.* When you read that Luke proposes to write an "orderly account", a "connected narrative" (1:3 NEB), you should not assume that he means to follow a chronological order. Luke composed his account of the gospel with the greatest care—carefully working out the narrative sequence, bringing certain incidents to the fore, leaving others out, throwing in comments about details that struck him as significant, and putting events in their context. Luke did not tinker with his text by way of a crude scissors-and-paste rearrangement; no, he presented the story of the beginning of Jesus' work in a vivid, carefully thought-out way, often relying on strong contrasts to make his point.

This can easily be shown through specific examples. One that quickly comes to mind is his placement of Jesus' rejection at Nazareth at the very beginning of the account of

Jesus' ministry—right after the story of the temptation in the wilderness. Luke's point is not that the events in Nazareth were the first to occur: their primacy is *thematic*. Jesus' hostile reception in His home town sets the tone for the response of the covenant people.

But we should not restrict ourselves to examining the artistic elements in Luke's composition of his account of the gospel. The book is indeed beautifully done, but the message is our basic concern.

#### 4. Lord and Servant (1:5—4:13)

*Jesus' forerunner.* Theophilus may well have heard of John the Baptist, for his disciples were to be found as far away as Ephesus (Acts 19:1ff). That may be why Luke begins by comparing Jesus and John, letting his readers see where they were similar and where they differed. Here the <sup>[82]</sup> form determined the "orderly account" Luke presents. First we hear John's birth announced, then Jesus' birth. Luke goes on to deal with the ministry of each, often using parallel language.

John the Baptist	Jesus
And there appeared to him [Zechariah] an angel of the Lord" (1:11).	The angel Gabriel was sent to Mary (1:26-7).
"Zechariah was troubled. But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah'" (1:12, 15).	"But she was greatly troubled. And the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary'" (1:29, 30).
"He will be great before the Lord" (1:15).	"He will be great" (1:32).
"How shall I know this?" (1:18). A sign is given.	"How shall this be?" (1:34). A sign is given—Elizabeth's pregnancy.
Circumcision and naming of John (1:59ff).	Circumcision and naming of Jesus (2:21).
"And the child grew and became strong in spirit" (1:80).	"And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him" (2:40).
"And he went into all the region about the Jordan, reaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (3:3).	"And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all" (4:15).

At first Luke talks at length about John the Baptist. However, once the paths of the forerunner and the King (who has just arrived on the scene) cross at Jesus' baptism, the emphasis falls on Jesus, the Priest-King who fulfills the ancient promises to David's house.

<sup>[83]</sup> No one may keep his gaze fixed exclusively on John the Baptist, whose light flickered and died. Jesus, the Son of David, has come as a light for revelation to the Gentiles. Even the temple resounded with His praises (2:29ff; see also Is. 40:5; 52:10; 42:6; 49:6,9; 25:7; 46:13).

*The throne of David.* Theophilus must have known something about the ancient prophecies concerning the comfort and deliverance promised to Israel (2:25, 38; Is. 52:9). The repeated mention of "the throne of his father David" (1:32) and the city, house and lineage of David (2:4, 11ff) must have been intended to awaken memories of

ancient prophecies.

Luke places both the birth of Jesus and the work of His forerunner in a historical framework that takes its dates from the rule of the Roman emperors (2:1; 3:1). Our age is a great time, Your Excellency! The events of our time draw in the Jewish temple and the entire Roman empire.

The Son of Adam, the Christ, the bearer of the Holy Spirit, the Son in whom God is well pleased—this long-awaited figure has been announced and has actually come. A forerunner was sent to herald His coming. Jesus, the last Adam, rejected satan once and for all. Then He began His work on earth (4:11ff). In the light of the grace now offered, no one can be neutral toward the Christ.

## **5. The Inauguration of the Year of Jubilee (4:14-9:50)**

*The Anointed One.* Early in his account of the gospel, Luke deals with Jesus' rejection in Nazareth, thereby giving priority to an event that actually happened somewhat later in time (compare 4:23 with vs. 31ff). This is <sup>[84]</sup> not sloppiness on his part: he had solid reasons for making this decision.

In Nazareth's synagogue, Jesus read the beginning of Isaiah 61, where it is written that the Anointed One (the Christ) brings the gospel to the poor and proclaims the acceptable year of the Lord, that is, the year of Jubilee with its amnesty and cancellation of debts. "And he closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down [as teacher]; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing'" (4:20-1).

This is the theme we must bear in mind as we read the rest of the book of Luke. Jesus is the Christ, the Anointed One; it is in this role that He appears among the people. He is not a miracle-worker, and He does not come armed with military power. But His words and deeds indicate that the *year of Jubilee* (Lev. 25) has come, the "today" of grace (Heb. 3:13), the day of salvation (II Cor. 6:2).

*Glad tidings for the "poor."* The wonderful thing is that the glad tidings are proclaimed to the "poor." We are not to think here in terms of those who are poor in economic terms: the "poor" Luke refers to are those who await comfort for Israel. All the same, it's not likely that this group included many of the rich and the nobility. Let powerful Theophilus be aware that "God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong" (I Cor. 1:27).

Although Luke himself belonged to the intelligentsia and the economic elite, he warned: "Woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort" (6:24 NIV). He also recorded the parable of poor Lazarus and the rich man (16:19ff), as well as the parable of the rich fool who built bigger barns (12:13ff)-

At the same time, he was not opposed to wealth as such; in fact, he even recorded the names of the women who contributed to Jesus' support from their own money, one <sup>[85]</sup> of them the wife of Herod's steward (8:2-3). No, Luke was not against wealth, but he definitely opposed its abuse. Before God even the rich man must count himself as one of the needy and afflicted mentioned so often in the Psalms.

*Political interpretations.* It is striking that the opening chapters of Luke make much of the covenant (1:55, 72-3). The rest of the book, of course, also emphasizes the covenant: "Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of man came to seek and save the lost" (19:9; see also 13:16).

Sometimes certain phrases in the song of Zechariah are interpreted in political terms: "that we should be saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all who hate us" (1:17). These enemies are identified as the Romans, and deliverance then means casting off the Roman yoke.

Any such interpretation must be rejected. The song of Zechariah should be read against the background of the covenant, for it speaks the language of the Psalms. The "enemies" referred to by Zechariah are unfaithful members of the covenant people; they are

oppressors of the "poor," of those who look to the Lord.

Zechariah is not trying to recruit political zealots for a program of revolution. On the contrary, he is testifying to God's faithfulness and primacy in the deliverance of His people. As for the opposition, it comes from leaders within the covenant community.

Throughout his book, Luke shows how Jesus opposes the leaders of Israel. His death and resurrection are part of His program of gathering and building His church as He fulfills the covenant promises (24:46-7).

*The joyful message rejected.* Jesus was anointed with the Spirit. Luke, who was later to describe the events of Pentecost, never gets tired of talking about the Spirit. Christ [86] bears the Spirit so that *the Word* will go out. Here is another important theme in Luke, a theme he keeps in mind constantly and also emphasizes in Acts. Jesus acts by means of the gospel. Furthermore, it is a joyful message that He brings. Time and again the joy motif comes through in Luke.

Unfortunately, the people of Nazareth wanted more than the Word: they hoped for some amazing miracle from this sorcerer, this famous man who had grown up among them. They expected more than just a prophet speaking to them. As Luke shows clearly, Nazareth's rejection of the preaching of the Servant of the Lord was typical of Israel as a whole.

*The problem of Israel's fall.* Therefore—and here comes another important theme—the law of substitution goes into effect. Just as Elijah and Elisha passed by Israel and reached out to help the widow of Sidon and Naaman the Syrian, so Israel's fall will lead to the saving of the Gentiles. From the Nazareth that wants to destroy Jesus to the Gentiles that later accept Him runs an unbroken line. Theophilus may have wrestled with the problem of Israel's fall, but Luke, a disciple of the apostle who wrote Romans 9-11, shows him clearly that the continual hardening of Israel prepared the way for the fulfillment of the prophecy: the servant of the Lord will be a light to the nations! (Is. 42:1ff; Luke 2:32; Acts 13:47; 26:18).

Neither Jewish descent nor good works are decisive. The angels did not sing, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men," as the King James Bible has it in 2:14. A more accurate translation is given in the New International Version: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." The true peace of the year of Jubilee is only for those on whom God's favor rests!

[87] *The gospel at work in Galilee.* Up to 9:51 Luke gives a vivid picture of the Savior's work in Galilee. In the process, the themes mentioned earlier are worked out further. Although much of this material is already familiar from Matthew and Mark, Luke gives it his own flavor in his arrangement and presentation of it. He does not merely copy what Mark had written, filling it out here and there with words borrowed from Matthew.

Christ's mercy on sinners comes to the fore in the stories about healings as well as in the story of the sinful woman who anointed Jesus (7:36ff). Jesus also came to make despised *women* full members of His church.

One of the disciples was Levi, the tax-collector. In his joy at encountering Jesus, he invited his colleagues as well as Jesus and His disciples to dinner. This is another example of the joy motif in Luke. Jesus declared, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (5:32).

*The cross on the horizon.* But the Pharisees, the rabbis—types that Theophilus no doubt recognized from his knowledge of the Jews of the Diaspora—don't want anything to do with forgiveness (5:21ff; 7:39ff) or joy at the coming of the Bridegroom (5:33ff; 7:32, 34). From the time of John the Baptist on, they have rejected God's purposes (7:30). Eventually they will go further.

The Son of man will be put to death by the elders and chief priests and scribes, declared Jesus when He was alone with the disciples to pray (9:18ff). Therefore an exodus

awaited Him: the Son of man must go to Jerusalem (9:31). "The Son of man is to be delivered into the hands of men" (vs. 44). From this point on, we never lose sight of the cross on the horizon.

### **[88] 6. Jesus' Final Journey to Jerusalem (9:51—19:27)**

*A preacher of salvation.* At 9:51 a new section of Luke begins, a section that covers the story of the journey to Jerusalem. Repeatedly we are told that Jesus is on His way to Jerusalem (9:51-2; 10:1, 38; 13:22, 33; 14:25; 17:11).

This section includes a number of Jesus' sayings not found in the other "gospels." And when an event is described, it generally serves as an introduction to something Jesus said. Whereas Luke sketches Jesus in the first part of his book as a *worker* of salvation, in this section he presents Him as a *preacher* of salvation.

*A prophetic mission in Jerusalem.* Everything recorded by Luke in this section is part of Jesus' deliberate movement in the direction of Jerusalem, where His exodus was to take place. "The Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised" (9:22).

We read that when the time drew near, "he set his face to go to Jerusalem" (9:51; see also Matt. 20:17; Mark 10:30). Here Luke uses an expression also found in the prophets, who talked about the Lord turning His face or some prophet turning his face—against Jerusalem or Israel (see Jer. 21:10; Ezek. 4:3,7; 6:2; 13:17; 14:8; 15:7).

The course was set. Jesus would carry out His prophetic mission in the city of God. Divine necessity was at work here, as we see from Jesus' answer to Herod, who tried to scare Him and advised Him to flee:

Go and tell that fox,  
"Behold, I cast out demons  
and perform cures today and tomorrow,  
and the third day I finish my course.  
Nevertheless I must go on my way  
[89] today and tomorrow and the day following;  
for it cannot be  
that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem."  
O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets  
and stoning those who are sent to you!  
How often would I have gathered your children together  
as a hen gathers her brood under her wings,  
and you would not!  
Behold, your house is forsaken [see Jer. 12:7; 22:5].  
And I tell you,  
you will not see me until you say,  
"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" (13:32-5).

Luke knew what Jesus' program was and showed how He carried out His fixed plan. Near the end of this section he records one more statement made by Jesus, a statement about what He would suffer: "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written of the Son of man by the prophets will be accomplished" (18:31; compare vs. 32 with Is. 50:6 and 53:1ff).

*The Savior of sinners.* When we take a closer look at this section, we find all sorts of motifs that were present earlier in the book of Luke. Jesus is portrayed as the Savior of sinners, for example. It is Luke who gives us the three parables about things lost—the lost sheep, the lost coin (which may have been part of a special hat given to the woman by her husband when they got married), and the lost son (see ch. 15). The last of the three, the story of the prodigal son, is clearly the climax.

In 19:10 Luke records Jesus' statement that the Son of man came to seek and save the lost. The sending out of the 70 disciples had salvation as its goal: an appeal was to be

made to the children (10:16,21ff).

*The Pharisees.* The reason Jesus showed such contempt for the actions of the Pharisees is that they did not <sup>[90]</sup> recognize the signs of the times. They did not know how to "work with" prophecies, and they imposed burdens on the people, burdens that were too heavy for them to bear (11:14ff, 37ff).

The Pharisees were trapped in laws of their own making and used measures of their own devising as standards of evaluation (11:29ff; 12:54ff). Thereby they enslaved the poor— Luke wanted to make sure that Theophilus understood this. Watch out for their tricks, their leaven, their hypocrisy! (11:54; 12:1). Those Pharisees make it all sound so Scriptural!

*Stewardship and mercy.* The motif of poverty and wealth comes to the fore. Why were many of the disciples and apostles so unconcerned about something as important as money? Because the Master had given them glorious promises on this score (12:22ff).

This does not mean that the disciples were to be careless about money: they were called to be *stewards* (12:35ff). The mandate of stewardship does not apply to "spiritual" wealth only. Jesus' disciples were instructed to deal prudently with "unrighteous mammon," i.e. money (16:9), which is the cause of so much evil. This applies to small sums of money as well as large ones: "He who is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much" (vs. 10). How can someone who is careless with the money entrusted to him by God be given an eternal inheritance?

The mandate of stewardship involves deeds of mercy. Luke's "gospel" is the only one that includes the parable of the good Samaritan (10:25ff) and the parable of the rich man and poor Lazarus (16:19ff). Luke is not afraid to tell powerful Theophilus what Jesus said about seating guests at a marriage feast (14:4ff). In Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth, the same question is dealt with: even in Corinth, the tendency to form groups had led the rich to <sup>[91]</sup> form a circle of their own, a circle that excluded those who were not rich (I Cor. 11:17ff).

Jesus breaks through the caste mentality by making the church a community of saints. Blessed is the man who invites the poor to a feast, for the poor have no way of repaying him. He will be repaid at the "first resurrection" (Rev. 20:6), the "resurrection of the just" (14:12-14).

*The promise of the Holy Spirit.* Luke also tells us what Jesus said about prayer (11:1ff). In this context, the Holy Spirit is mentioned. The Father will give the Spirit to those who ask Him (11:13). At critical moments the Spirit will teach the disciples what they are to say to their persecutors (12:12).

In Acts, Luke gives examples of the Spirit's support by recording various addresses of the apostles. If you read those addresses carefully, you will be spared the mistake of thinking that Jesus' promise means that there is no longer any need to search the Scriptures. The preaching of the apostles is full of quotations from the Old Testament. Jesus promises the assistance of the Spirit to those who are willing to live out of the Word.

*The Word addressed to women.* It is typical of Luke that he also shows how women are called to listen to the Word. In the synagogue, the women were forced into the background. There are still eastern European synagogues in Mea-Shearim, an orthodox district in the Jewish section of Jerusalem, which women are not allowed to enter.

Jesus reproached Martha for not seeing what is central, as Mary did: after Mary had done her duty, she did not look for other household chores but abandoned her sister—that's literally what the text says—and sat down at Jesus' feet! (10:38-42). "One thing is needful," declared Jesus. Now, this story has nothing to do with women's liberation. Jesus did not come to uproot people but to point <sup>[92]</sup> out to them what is central, what they must put first as they carry out their divine calling.

*The day of salvation.* The healings of which we read so much in this section point to the arrival of the year of Jubilee, even though Israel's leaders refused to recognize it. Because of their refusal, they are compared to a barren fig tree (13:6ff) and a dead body around which vultures gather (17:37).

Despite this refusal, Jesus continues to speak of grace: repeatedly He sketches salvation in vivid terms. When He approaches the city of Jericho, which is so well-known in redemptive history, He accepts the praise due the Messiah when a blind man hails Him as the "Son of David" and is

healed (18:35ff).

Even the despised tax-collector Zacchaeus, who was a superintendent of customs for the Jericho area, is allowed to have Jesus as a guest at his house. The prostitute Rahab, who was spared by Joshua, here finds a counterpart. The new Joshua says to Zacchaeus, "Today salvation has come to this house" (19:9).

*If only you had known, on this great day, the way that leads to peace! (19:42 NEB).*

## **7. The Messiah Rejected by the City of Peace (19:28—23:49)**

*Jerusalem's hour of decision.* The time of the culmination was nearing—for Jesus and for Jerusalem. Soon it would become apparent that the people did not want Jesus as their King (19:27). It would also become clear that His death was no accident. "And when he had <sup>[93]</sup> said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem" (19:28).

The city was *forced* to make a decision about Him. But Jerusalem, the city of peace, was not interested in the peace brought by Jesus (vs. 42; see also 2:14). Therefore peace would be taken away from the land (19:43-4; see also 2:14; Rev. 6:4; Lev. 26:6). No attention was paid to the time of day dawning from on high, the time about which Zechariah had been so jubilant (1:78; see also the KJV rendering and 19:44).

*The destruction of the temple.* Is it strange that the temple motif should come up again? The purification of the temple was at the same time its annexation for the purpose of preaching the gospel (19:45ff). The temple authorities and the scribes were soon at work figuring out what to do about Jesus (vs. 47). They did not want to see Psalm 118, that song of the temple intended for use at the time of the great feast, become applicable to Him (19:39,38; 20:17).

The rejection of the Cornerstone (see Ps. 118:22) would lead to their own collapse (20:18; I Pet. 2:4, 7ff). The worship of the temple would become the liturgy of judgment. The time of recompense (Hos. 9:7) and covenant wrath (Jer. 5:29; Deut. 32:35), the time in which everything that was written would be fulfilled, was approaching (21:22). The coming kingship of God would not leave one stone standing on another when it destroyed the house that rejected the Son.

Thus Theophilus was not to think that the coming destruction of that glorious temple represented some sort of defeat for the Lord. On the contrary, the destruction of the temple would be part of the coming of the Kingdom. The *rejection* of Israel would form the background to the *election* of the Gentiles.

<sup>[94]</sup> *Condemned by the Jews.* Displaying an impressive knowledge of the facts, Luke describes Jesus' arrest as well as His hearings before the Sanhedrin, the vassal king Herod, and the governor Pilate. Now that the power of the Roman empire enters the picture, Luke satisfies Theophilus' natural curiosity by making it clear that Jesus was condemned by the *Sanhedrin*.

Jesus was condemned on the grounds that He had called Himself the Son of God. Yet the same Jews accused Him before Pilate of being a rebel, a political agitator (23:2; see also

20:20-6). Pilate found no guilt in Jesus, but he gave in to the demands of the Jews anyway—by releasing Barabbas, a captive rebel, and allowing them to put Jesus to death (23:25). Thus Jesus was crucified as King of the Jews between two rebels sharing the mentality of Barabbas.

It is in Luke's "gospel" that we read that one of these criminals—actually they were political malefactors, terrorists—spoke up for Jesus and recognized Him as long. When Jesus died, the Roman centurion recognized Him too (23:39ff). Israel, however, had rejected the just King and chosen the rebel Barabbas in His place.

*A prayer for Israel.* The women who followed Jesus to Golgotha and lamented Him were told: "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children" (23:28). Jesus was bent over not because of the weight of the cross but because of the judgment that was about to strike the city of God (Hos. 10:8; Rev. 6:16-17). When He said, "Father, forgive them," He was not just talking about the soldiers who nailed Him to the cross. He also had the coming judgment of Israel in mind. Jesus was praying for a period of grace after Pentecost, so that the Jews of Jerusalem would have an opportunity to realize just what they had done.

The entry into Paradise promised to the man crucified next to Jesus was at the same time an appeal to Israel's <sup>[95]</sup> zealots to stop seeking Paradise by means of the sword and to recognize the real Messiah before it was too late. How Jesus struggles for His people, O Theophilus, even when He was on the cross! Those who argue today that Jesus was actually a political revolutionary are denying the gospel!

### **8. The Victory Begins with Jerusalem (23:50—24:53)**

*A catechism lesson.* The road leading to glory begins with Jesus' burial. A member of the Sanhedrin asked Pilate for permission to take down the body of Jesus and bury it. The women of Galilee also came (23:55; 8:2-3); apparently Jesus' following had not disintegrated completely.

Then, once the sabbath was over, Jesus arose from His grave. The striking thing about Luke's resurrection account is that many references are made to the Old Testament and also to what Jesus Himself had said (24:6-8, 25-7, 44-7). Thus, Easter begins with a catechism lesson. What Theophilus learns in this lesson is nothing more or less than the testimony given by Jesus and the angels.

It was not necessary for Theophilus to have been present personally. What the women, the two men walking to Emmaus, and the eleven disciples saw and heard is still gospel for us, and it still burns in our hearts (24:32; Jer. 20:9).

*A bridgehead for the church.* Deliberately and programmatically, Luke places the Word of the risen Christ at the end of his first book:

Thus it is written,

that the Christ should suffer and on the third day  
<sup>[96]</sup> rise from the dead,  
and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should  
be preached in his name  
to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.  
You are witnesses of these things [see also Is. 43:10ff

and 44:8]. And behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city, until you are clothed with power from on high (24:46-8).

Thus the Christ was victorious. The Spirit was to be poured out in that same temple city that was condemned to death. Jerusalem became a bridgehead for the church as it began establishing itself among the nations.

Jerusalem itself does not listen. Therefore others appear in its streets and lanes to accept the invitation to the feast (see 14:21).

Volume 2 (i.e. Acts) shows how the testimony soon resounded throughout the world. Theophilus, God is carrying out His plans for Jerusalem. A High Priest with His hands outstretched in blessing ascended on high.

Volume 1 does not end the same way it began (compare 24:50 with 1:22). But the *temple*, the lion's den, resounds with the praises of the disciples. In this respect, at least, there is continuity with the beginning (compare 24:53 with 2:28-38).

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