

Mark



Day 46

“Let’s Move - Intro to Mark’s Gospel”

February 15 - Intro to Mark’s Gospel

There is no doubt that the reasons for doing something are as varied as the people doing it. I have always thought that guilt was the very worst motivator. When folks are spurred on by guilt they tend to work with a great deal of frustration. Another very weak motivator is acceptance. If you’re trying to win the approval of another, you can work yourself to the bone but end up hurt that you were unable to receive the applause of your audience. Some are driven by money. If they have enough money, they reason, then they will find the freedom and independence they crave. This is the battle cry of every Get Rich Quick scheme.

If Matthew’s gospel was the presentation of the King, then Mark’s Gospel emphasizes the servant nature of the Son of Man. In Matthew, Jesus is the Hope of Israel and of all men. He is highlighted as the One who has majesty and authority over all. Even in His trial He accepts the title of King. But here in Mark we see Jesus serving. He is a King with a servant’s heart. We ought to all hail King Jesus and simultaneously behold Him as the suffering servant. That is not to say that Matthew did not have this same element, because you can find it there — Matthew 20:28 for example.

Mark is a fast-moving gospel. You will see the word “immediately” on a regular basis. Jesus is going here and going there teaching and preaching and healing. He is doing for the kingdom. He is getting His word out so that everyone can hear and pass on the word. Jesus was a busy man, but you don’t get the feeling that He is hurried or worried or harried. He moves with purpose. This is a practice that contrasts

Him with most men today who are busy. Show me a man with a purpose and I’ll show you a focused individual who is getting it done. Jesus was like that. He knew who He was and He knew what He wanted to accomplish.

Love for God is the greatest motivation to serve God. The more a person gets to know God and appreciate His Person, the more energy he’ll have to go out and make a difference for God. If my life is focused on God I will naturally want to do what God wants me to do. If my life is focused on myself then I will be self-conscious about serving God because I will always be concerned about what is in it for me. If I’m concerned about what others will think of me if I talk about Jesus or the Bible then I will quickly lose the energy for doing what God wants me to do. There is a verse in Daniel that reads in the old King James: “...but the people that do know their God shall be strong and do exploits” (11:32). Strength comes when we know God in Truth and do not minimize the Person and works of the Lord.

How many times have you felt inadequate to stand up for the Lord and say or do the right thing? I feel that way more times than not. If we let that feeling of inadequacy paralyze us, how much will we get done? Not much. It is better to step out and do what you can in the strength you have than to sit on your hands and wait for a better time. The gospel of Mark is a reminder that serving God can be difficult, but it is worth it and we need to take that motivation and go with it. Let’s step out and be like Jesus—tools in the Master’s hand to be used in any way He so choos-

es. Jesus said, "You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that you should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatsoever you shall ask in my name, he may give it to you" (John 15:16).

There you have it; our relationship with Jesus is meant for production of good fruit and answers to prayer. So in Mark Chapter 1 we see Jesus going out early in the morning for prayer. He needed and wanted to spend time with His Father because that time would provide the impetus for fruitfulness. That daily experience would be the catalyst for a life well lived and a life full of good works. Prayer is a great motivator. Do you lack energy and oomph right now? Spend some time in prayer and talk to God about it. You will be renewed and refreshed so that you can go out and do what God has called you to do.

When Caleb—you know, the Caleb who conquered the land of Canaan with Joshua—was 80 years old he still felt like a kid because he was wholly

devoted to the Lord. God had strengthened him all of those years because his heart was right with the Lord. He was motivated to action by his love and respect for God. He wasn't a man-pleaser. He wasn't interested in seeing his picture in the Jerusalem Gazette. He was jazzed about serving the living God, because of this God strengthened him all the way into his old age.

As we begin the gospel of Mark, let it motivate you to service. Allow it to get into your head and compel you to do some things that you normally would be a bit afraid to do. Step out. Move forward. Don't hold back. Take a leap. With God behind you there is no limit to the kinds of works you could do for Him. And as we meditate on Mark, let the actions and words of Christ be a great motivator for you. You can be like Jesus; if you believe in Him, then He is in you. Now watch Him work through you—He will!!

God's blessings spur us on,
Pastor Steve



"He Did What?!"

February 16 - Mark 1:29 - 2:17

I went to school with a guy named Mike Scott. I'll bet that name makes no difference to you whatsoever. Mike was a senior when I was a "wise fool" (sophomore). He walked at a snail's pace around campus, his wavy blonde hair bouncing up and down. He was the star basketball player, I was a star golfer. Guess who got the headlines? I did — I was also the assistant editor of the school newspaper. I really didn't think much of Mike except for the fact that his girlfriend was beautiful and I had a major crush on her.

Years later, long after high school, I was reading an autobiography by Nolan Ryan — do you know that name? He is major league baseball's all time strike-out leader. In this book Ryan starts to talk about his

relationship with none other than with Mike Scott, my high school classmate. He is highlighting the fact that Mike Scott was an out of shape, lazy glutton, while Ryan was known for his exercise regimen; he'd pitch nine innings and then ride an exercise bike afterwards to warm down for an hour. Ryan described how Scott was just the opposite. He talked about his poor eating habits and sleeping habits and so on and so on. I thought to myself that this guy never changed. He was that way in high school and he was that way when he played in big league baseball.

Now the irony in all of this is that Mike made it to the majors. When I turned the channel and saw this guy pitching I was blown away. "Hey, that's the same

guy I hung around with in high school," I thought. What had happened is he ran into a pitching coach in college who taught him to throw a special pitch (for you baseball aficionados it was a split-fingered fastball). This pitch looks like it is coming over the plate about belt high, then right at the last second it drops in the dirt. It is practically impossible to hit when thrown properly. Mike had learned to throw it well and he ended up leading the Houston Astros to the playoffs one year.

I think some of the people in Jesus' day thought about Him the way I viewed Mike Scott. He was just a local boy—we sure didn't expect Him to be doing the things that he did. We were a bit unbelieving when we first saw him on the mound or doing an interview with someone on TV. Could you imagine people who had grown up with Jesus around Nazareth? Here the Lord is in Capernaum and He's doing things and making claims that just seem too out there to be real. And from the standpoint of the religious know-it-alls, Jesus was making claims that were just downright impossible to swallow. But there he was before my eyes. I couldn't deny it and I couldn't contradict what he was saying because he backed it up with action.

And so we come to one of the most important chapters in the New Testament. The setting is in a house on the seacoast of Capernaum. This is the place where Peter's family is from. The crowds are pushing in to hear Jesus. Imagine the stir. Think about the buzz in the air. While Jesus is teaching, pieces of plaster or dirt begin to fall from the ceiling where He is seated. Then a hole, then a gap, then a space large enough to lower a paralyzed man through. That's what the men are doing; they are lowering this disabled man before Jesus. The interruption is apparently welcomed by Jesus who immediately sees the faith of the friends whose arms are straining as they guide the cot to the ground. Jesus doesn't seem irritated or upset but sees the situation as an opportunity to teach a bit more about Himself. Every lesson in the New Testament points to Jesus. Chapter 1 of the first book is about Him and the last chapter of the last book is about Him. He is all in all.

Jesus immediately forgives the man's sins. "Now wait a minute, who is this guy to think that He is in God's place and can forgive sins?" the religious leaders

in attendance point out. They rightly state that only God can forgive sins. It would be one thing to forgive a sin that the man had committed against Jesus, but that is not what Jesus does; He forgives the man's sins in general, sins that he has committed against others as well. To the Pharisees this was blasphemy. Can you imagine what the long-time friends of Jesus must have been thinking when they heard Him talk like this? They must have thought that Jesus had a screw loose. They may have bought the idea that He was a prophet doing things in the name of God, but to take the position of God and forgive sins was unthinkable.

The "what is easier to say" question that Jesus poses is striking. Of course it's easier to say that your sins are forgiven—anyone can say that—but to back up your deity by healing the man would be a different story. Jesus backs up His claim to deity by letting the crowd know that He was about to prove His identity.

Do you remember the show "To Tell The Truth?" There were three panelists: two were impostors and one was telling the truth. The contestant could ask the panelists questions to try and determine who was telling the truth. Could you imagine if God was one of the panelists? "Panelists number one: Are you God?" "Yes, I can forgive your sins!" "Panelist number two: Are you God?" "Yes, I can forgive your sins!" "Panelist number three: Are you God?" "Yes, I can forgive your sins and to prove it I'm going to heal that broken arm of yours." If the man's arm is verifiably healed, who do you think will receive the nod? Some things are self-evident. In the case of Jesus, the very identity of God begs the question.

What could they say when the man got up and walked out? Surely a miracle had happened right before their eyes. It's the nature of a miracle is to take us off guard. Something has just happened that defies everything we have known in our lives. That's why we are so amazed at magicians—they can do things that make our senses react in non-traditional ways. When he pulls the blanket off the lady we expect to see the lady, and when she's gone our senses say, "No way, how'd he do that?" "That's not normal." For me, when I hear of a reported miracle, I doubt. Sorry, but that's my nature. I can understand why people saw many miracles, let's say during the time of the Exodus in the Old Testament, and still did not believe. People are

skeptics. Why? Because of pride. It's tough for a proud person to admit that he is not a god himself. So in the face of miracles, miracles that the skeptic cannot replicate himself, he dismisses the miracle for personal reasons.

Remember the magicians of Egypt? When they were up against the God of Moses, they too could produce some wonders like turning the water to blood or making the frogs come up on the land or turning a staff into a serpent, but eventually they were frustrated when Aaron, Moses' brother, struck the ground with the rod and the dust became lice throughout the land. "Then the magicians said to Pharaoh, 'This is the finger of God' (Ex. 8:18). You reach a point where you

either have to deny the miracle or admit that God is God and He is bigger and stronger than you. In Jesus' case the evidence was before the crowd at the house. Obviously, if you followed Jesus you'd be in for the ride of your life.

Don't forget that Jesus has forgiven your sins — all of them.

Don't forget that Jesus works miracles — you can hold on to Him even if you can't walk.

Don't forget that Jesus proved who He was over and over — your faith will grow if you ponder this.

God's blessings are with the forgiven ones,
Pastor Steve

later. You've heard the expression: "They are set in their ways." When people are set in their ways, their one goal is to convince others that their way is the right way.

The Pharisees saw Jesus as a threat because He did not fit their mold in many ways. Remember though, back in Matthew 23, Jesus said basically that we ought to do what they teach on some things but, at the same time, not use them as our examples. Jesus taught that true spirituality was about service, while the Pharisees saw true spirituality as a way to acquire religious prestige. No wonder the Pharisees envied Him; He backed up what He said with actions. This was something very foreign in their culture. And no wonder that James, the half-brother of Jesus, wrote to the believers later that they should be doers of the Word and not merely hearers.

The best question to ask yourself is what would be on your wanted poster?

How do people see you celebrating your faith?

Do you do good works for others on most days and even on Sunday?

Do you continue to follow Jesus even when your family thinks you are nuts?

Do you take a stand against demonic things in your culture and pray for those who are in the enemy's grasp?

If so, to whatever degree, may you not try to fit Jesus into traditional molds. Take the new wine and drink it. Do not put it back into the old wineskin; rather, put it in the new skin of Jesus' teachings and ways.

God's blessings are wrapped up in a controversial Man,
Pastor Steve



Day 48

"Dead Or Dead"

February 17 - Mark 2:18 - 3:30

Welcome To The Jungle:
Wanted Dead or Dead
Jesus of Nazareth

for:

Acting in opposition to the Jewish traditions of fasting.

Breaking the Sabbath by:

* Picking wheat with His followers

* Claiming to be the master of the Sabbath

* Doing the work of healing a man

Bringing disgrace to His family by His actions.

Being possessed by the devil.

Jesus should be considered dangerous because He is out to dismantle our traditions and replace them with ideas that are opposed by the Elders. The fact that He heals the sick and casts out demons is only by the power of the devil working in Him. Stay away from this Man and keep yourself from the devil.

By the way, Jesus answers every one of these

charges directly:

1. Now is a time for celebration; fasting will come later, when I'm gone.

2. On the Sabbath we should show love; I'm in charge of the Sabbath.

3. My family are those who do the will of God.

4. Would Satan cast out Satan? No, dumb argument! You blaspheme!

A note on tradition: When people believe that they are right, they will defend their point of view to the death. At that point they are not open to opposing points of view. They surround themselves with others who hold their positions, and this strengthens their conviction that their way of thinking is the right way of thinking. They see someone with a different opinion as a potential candidate for their camp; they do not even begin to think that they could be wrong or in need of correction. If they grew up believing a certain way it is very unlikely that they will change their mind



Day 49

"You're Family"

February 18 - Mark 3:31- 4:29

It's A Great Day For A Race—The Human Race,
Are you a hypocrite? I apologize for even asking such a question, but I'm curious about what you think. I guess if you narrowed the question down it would be more palatable. Do you sometimes act like a hypocrite? Do you sometimes say you believe and value some behavior or creed and then turn around and do the opposite? To this question I'd say, "Who doesn't?" When we get a bit further into the Word we'll see that even the Bible says that the nature of man is to act in a hypocritical way. On the other hand, the person who can be called a hypocrite, the person who puts on a mask when he gets up every morning, including Sunday morning, is the person who lives a double life and knows it and does nothing about it. Most likely, Judas Iscariot would fit into this category.

Probably the number one criticism of the church

is that it is full of hypocrites. Have you ever heard someone level that criticism about your church? It is a smoke screen! The reason people brings this accusation is that they do not want to face the real people they are. They are too good for "those church people."

Josh McDowell, the Christian writer and apologist, once said that the three reasons a person will not come to Christ are in this order: pride, a moral problem, or an intellectual problem. I may use the argument that I will not go to a church because there are hypocrites there, but the reality is that I am too proud to admit my need for God even though I myself have been hypocritical.

I have heard people say that they have some non-Christian friends who have better moral behavior than some who call themselves Christian. My question to them is always: how do you know? Do you know

their secret life? Maybe they wear a mask in public and in private they are deviant. Next time you hear on the news of a person being brought to justice, listen carefully to the ones interviewed who “knew” the person. More often than not their opinion of the person contradicts the crime they have been charged with. Beware! There are more hypocrites out there than first meets the eye.

In my lifetime, I have found the most genuine, the most loving, the most authentic, the most caring, the most generous, the most personable, the most considerate, the most fun to be with, the most welcoming, the most influential, the most enjoyable to be around folks, in church. That doesn't mean that I think the ones outside of church aren't some of those things, but I really don't like to venture too far outside of the church because the world is full of hypocrites (just kidding, sort of). If someone uses the hypocrite argument, if he were honest, he'd have to go out of the world to find a hypocrite-free zone.

Another place I've found love in my life was with my family

I loved my family growing up. We lived within a few miles of my mom's folks and about 10 miles from my dad's mom and aunt and uncle. We had a lot of family gatherings and dinners that would make you cheer. One of my favorite memories is the after Thanksgiving dinner scene. After we had gorged ourselves on all of the delightful food, you could witness bodies strewn all over the house, on every bed, couch and open space. It looked kind of like a morgue. It must have been that chemical in the turkey, but the look of it was always a comical scene to me. My immediate family, my dad and mom and sister, had a multitude of wonderful memories. We went on a family vacation every year, and my folks tried to get to most of my games, and we usually always ate dinner together. One of my dad's mottos was that family should stick by each other. I grew up with that idea and I believe it still. Families need to be as strong as they possibly can be.

We don't know a great deal about Jesus' family. Joseph is not mentioned after the birth accounts of the Lord. Mary is there all along and is still active in the church; she is there on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2.

Jesus also had half-brothers: James (the writer of the Bible book by his name); Joseph (after dear old dad); Simon; and Judas (called Jude and writer of the Bible book by that name). It's interesting that the half brothers did not believe in Jesus' identity until later, probably after the resurrection. In John Chapter 7 the Bible says specifically: “For not even his brothers believed in Him.” In Acts 2 it says that “His brothers” were among the ones waiting for the gift of the Holy Spirit. Whether that means all of His brothers or some of them isn't quite clear, but a least some of them were believing.

When Jesus' family members came to see Him and couldn't make it close because of the crowd, the Lord put them off and emphasized that all of those who believed in Him were his brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers. There was a new spiritual family that superseded His earthly family. When you come to Jesus and He becomes the Leader of your life, then you too become part of the family of God. That's why you can meet a fellow believer in Jesus and feel so close to him right away. You are family!

Church is a family. We are not an organization. We do not exist to build buildings or raise money for ourselves. We exist as a family to honor and praise the head of the family, the Lord Jesus Christ. Interestingly enough, in Hebrews it says that Jesus even calls us “brothers.” I don't know about you, but I do not feel worthy of that. What I do know is that when I'm close to my brothers and sisters in Christ, I feel close to Christ.

In what ways has the church made a difference in your life?

Do you relate to God as His child and a brother of the Lord Jesus? Do you feel like you are accepted as a family member in the Body of Christ?

What can you do this week to build up the family of God?

Would you reach out to a weaker brother or sister this week and let them know that they are a special part of the church? Take a look at what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12 about honoring the weaker members of the church.

God's blessings are on His family,
Steve



“A Mean Spirit”

February 19 - Mark 5: 1-20

I went to my share of parties when I was in high school. One particular party stands out above the rest. My friend Rusty's parents weren't going to be home that weekend so his house was a good as any to invite a few friends over and celebrate. It didn't matter what we were celebrating, we just celebrated. What I remember most about Rusty is that he had a foul mouth. I'm not saying that I was much better, but Rusty could really cuss. He said the “F” word about every other sentence. It didn't bug me then but I'm sure that when we were having a conversation it must have sounded pretty juvenile.

Anyway, back to the night mentioned above. We were having a good time and others were showing up. Some of them we did not know, but if they were cool we were cool about them being there. You know how it goes—we really believed in diversity and inclusion in those days. No we didn't; we believed in self-gratification and narcissism. Back to that night. There was this guy there who was acting really weird. None of us knew him, so Rusty was keeping a blurry eye on him. Pretty soon, he punches a hole in Rusty's folks' screen door. When Rusty confronts him he goes postal. I mean, he was out of control. Interestingly enough, he was kind of a little guy. Rusty immediately called on the football player types to help him subdue the fellow. By the time I got involved there were six or seven bigger guys on top of this guy and still they were having trouble maintaining him. He was writhing back and forth and spitting and it looked to me like his eyes were going to bug out. I jumped into the fray. We had him pinned in the back of a pickup and off we went to drop him off somewhere. We found a grandparent's home and kept him surrounded all the way up to the door. Thinking that he was secure behind the door, we scrambled to the truck to make a quick getaway. As we are driving off we could hear the shattering of glass. The boy had dived through the front plate

glass window onto the front yard. I have no clue what happened next.

That is about as close to a demon possession as I have ever gotten. He was probably on angel dust, a drug that releases adrenaline. I don't know for sure. I can remember, though, that it seemed so unusual that this little guy possessed such great strength compared to all of the muscle on top of him.

The man in the account at Gerasene was like that. He was wild. He had a reputation. He was feared. I'm sure people were telling their family and friends to stay away from the region lest you were confronted by the devil-man. He was out of control. He was unpredictable for sure. You couldn't have a normal relationship with him. Could you imagine someone befriending him and taking him out to eat?

Jesus confronted him by doing battle with the devils in him. There was a whole boatload of demons living in that one guy. We are not told how they got there or why. Maybe he played Dungeons and Dragons as a kid. Why he was so vulnerable or targeted by the devils is a mystery, but the reality was that his life was not his own—there were others renting space in him. And they were not friendly tenants.

I am struck—aren't you?—that immediately the devils were submissive to Jesus. They knew His authority and were afraid of Him. Compare this with the Pharisees and you have an odd comparison. The Pharisees did not know Jesus and the demons did. The Pharisees were so proud and stuck on themselves that they could not recognize the authority of the Lord. They even blamed His good deeds on demons. Whereas, the demons were so intimidated by Him that they would do anything He said.

Jesus sends them into a herd of pigs, two thousand of them, and over the cliff they go into the sea. The demon-possessed man is free and the pig farmers are furious. Later the townspeople want Jesus out

because of what this might mean to their business. It is a thought that if this was a Jewish business then it was a group of Jews who were disobeying the law by dealing in pork; pork was a forbidden animal in Israel. So Jesus kills two birds with one stone —the demons are gone and the man is free, and the pigs are gone and the land is cleansed of an unclean animal.

The Bible is clear that before a person comes to Jesus he is under the influence of the devil. He is led along by him to do his will. Why this is more obvious for some than others I am not really sure. However, if a person dabbles in the occult then he can expect to be taken captive by it in one way or another. A person does not sell his soul to the devil and come out of the

bargain unscathed.

How does Christ's authority touch your life? How aware are you of His protection from spiritual enemies?

Paul would later say: "If God is for you, who can be against you?" Let's enjoy and be excited about Jesus' authority over all that is evil. He is able to keep you from the evil one. Today let's appreciate His authority and apply it to our own lives and homes and jobs. Jesus is Master of all.

God's blessings include authority over demonic powers,

Pastor Steve



"Recollections"

February 20 - Mark 5: 21-43

"I'd like to explain to you what God did in my life long ago; your grandmother has had experiences in her childhood that you need to know about," the matronly woman said as the three young kids sat under her wings.

"I was a little older than you, Esther, when something very remarkable happened to me. I got so sick and was burning up with such a hot fever that Papa was panicked that I might die. I couldn't even get out of bed; I was so paralyzed with sickness.

"I had asked Mama where Papa was going but her words were dim to me because I was going in and out of consciousness. Finally I think I blacked out or something because I didn't remember any more until I heard the Voice.

"The word had spread that I was gravely ill and might die. Friends were already gathering at the house to help your great-grandparents deal with the situation. Finally the word came to them that I had died, yes, I had really died. That set off a chain reac-

tion of weeping and wailing. As others heard the noise they gathered around to see what was happening.

"The Voice was gentle but firm. I had been roused from sleep many mornings by Papa's deep-sounding vocal alarm, more effective than old Willie the rooster. But the Voice I heard that day was sweeter and kinder than any I had ever imagined. Words and rumors about the carpenter from Galilee had been spreading everywhere, but my life at that time was full of play and chores and learning the ways of our people. I had had no contact with Jesus. Papa had spoken mysteriously about Him many nights at supper; he had said that He could touch the unfortunate ones and make them well.

"Now it was my turn. The Voice simply called me to get up. 'Arise, little girl,' He said. And like the first cries of a newborn baby I was alive again—fully alive—no longer sick; full of hope, full of wonder. As I came to my senses, I saw Mama and a handful of men standing around me. Gratitude flowed in the dimly-lit

little room, believe me, as if we were all swimming in a pool of refreshing water.

"Papa hugged Mama and they hugged me, and they cried. Those were tears of joy that day. What was going to be the saddest day of their lives became a day of celebration. I must have looked quite skinny and in need of some nutrition because the Lord, my Lord Jesus, asked to bring out some food and drink. A neighbor had already dropped by some rolls and a fish soup in anticipation of the mourning time. We all ate. I ate across the table from Jesus. He was...what can I say?

"When Jesus hugged me I felt so loved. He had brought me back from the grave and then He shared His love with me. His hug wasn't much different than Papa's; it was like I had two dads now. I was well taken care of and I knew it. From that day on we all began to live with that love. Not just the memory of it, no, it also somehow lived with us and has lived in us each day since. I guess it was so rich and so deep that its impact on us was life changing.

"Peter, James and John were there too. They acted like the big brothers I never had. Papa especially liked Peter. They seemed to really hit it off. I knew they had all been fisherman before leaving their nets to follow Jesus full time; that was something we had heard before we ever met them. They didn't act like fishermen, though. They were gracious, like Jesus, and kind, and they kept asking if there was anything they could do. James and John at one point went out to quiet the crowd, who were still carrying on as if I were dead. They weren't being rude or anything; when a child died there was always an outpouring of sympathy and support. The brothers went out to let them know that things were all right. Can you imagine how they must have felt about the Teacher after having been so close to so many miracles?

"Esther, Hannah, Sarah, I love you all so much.

Times are difficult. It feels like we are disliked by so many. The Romans want us to give all of our devotion to Caesar and the Jewish leaders want us to renounce Jesus. But can you see why I must always stay true to the Voice. Jesus raised me and gave me the gift of life. Then He was taken and crucified, but that wasn't the end. He raised Himself from the grave too. Listen! I saw Him again. It was a crowded assembly of followers of the Way who had gathered to meet with a few of the Apostles who said Jesus had been seen alive. While we were gathered, suddenly, there He was with us. He knew me. My heart pounded out of my chest. He had made me alive and by that same power He too was raised. I believed. I believed with all of my heart. "And so today we follow Him. He is the Lord. He will give us strength to go through whatever may come our way."

Esther, the oldest, said, "Granny, we love Jesus too and will follow Him. Great Papa has told me of the same day when he used to bounce me on his knee. He said that he would always be thankful for what Lord Jesus did that day. He'd say, 'Esther, my darling, I can still hear the crowd and your great granny moaning and can feel the sense of panic that moved us to find Jesus. He came and things were well. Esther, that is why you are here and you also can follow Him.' I will Granny, I love Jesus so much!"

So often I wonder how things turned out with those who had been touched so personally by Jesus. Has Jesus touched your life? If so, your story will play out in much the same way. I'm sure your story will have an impact on generations to come. Your story is the legacy that will enable future generations to love Jesus and follow Him too.

God's blessings are worth retelling,
Pastor Steve

**“John’s Demise”**

February 21 - Mark 6: 6b-29

Today Is A Good Day To Be Alive, This is especially true when the subject is the death of the Baptist.

Jesus was exceptionally close to John. Remember, John had reluctantly baptized the Lord because he realized that the Lord deserved utmost respect. John treated Jesus like God. By the way, that’s a good thing for all of us to consider. Anyway, their relationship was a close one even though it appears that after Jesus left the Jordan for the more northern parts of Israel, they didn’t have as much physical contact. Also, John had been thrown in prison for speaking the moral truth about Herod’s adulterous relationship with a woman in his own family.

I have had a few friends over the years whom I could rely on to be there for me even when we hadn’t talked in quite some time. Do you have a friend like that, whom you could call, not having talked for several months, and still feel like you could pick up right where you left off? There is never any of the awkward guilt where you feel like the person is put out with you because you hadn’t called in a while. It was right into: “How are you doing?” and “What’s new?” and “Is there anything I can be praying for you about?”

Life can take some pretty peculiar twists. The truth is, sometimes things turn out contrary to the way we would like them to be. My friend Carl, whom I have already written about, was only 28 when he succumbed to cancer. He battled and battled for three years. Just when he had reached remission, another disease took advantage of his weakness and he died. He was so young. I can remember turning 30 and thinking about living longer than Carl. It didn’t seem fair that God had given me more years than him. I had felt he was always more God-honoring than I had ever been.

Job, that infamous Old Testament personality, has a lot to say about the unfairness of suffering.

If you haven’t read Job in a while, or never at all, I really don’t blame you. Most of us do not want to be reminded that Job could be us. And so the book of Job sits at the pinnacle of human avoidance. No one wants what Job got. This is probably because they have not read the end of the story. Most likely they got bogged down in the argument and debate between Job and his “miserable counselors.” But the end is better than the beginning in Job’s case, because in the end he got a spirit full of the knowledge of the Lord. And in so doing Job once again rejoiced in God and humbled himself before God. He received more than he ever had before, not the least of which was a new found appreciation for the sovereignty of God.

What does the sovereignty of God have to do with suffering? Well, that’s a deep question for a shallow mind like mine, but since you brought it up let me just say this: God tells Job, after he had lost his 10 kids, and his health, and much of his wealth, that He was still in control and that His will was over all, including the devil’s will or any man’s will. The boundaries of Job’s suffering were ordered by God. The devil was asking for the opportunity to do him in and God gave permission up to a point, but forbade him from taking Job’s life. So when we see Job in a state of grief, picking at the sores which raked his body, we are moved to pity or—as Job found out from his three counselors—to condemnation depending on the way you viewed God. Job’s so-called friends were quick to judge his faith in God when things started to go array.

God was motivated by love and by the development of Job’s spiritual maturity. In the end God shows Job, through a variety of illustrations, that He is in perfect control of His creation and is therefore able to work in the same kind of detailed way in the lives of His own. As God controls the boundaries of the seas and the constellations in the sky and the ways of the animal kingdom, he controls the events in our lives

that otherwise seem out of control. Nothing is out of the scope of His rule and wisdom.

John the Baptist was the greatest man born, according to Jesus. Jesus spoke only glowingly of him. It was more than the fact that he was a relative. It was more than the fact that the old prophets, Isaiah and Malachi, had predicted that John would be Christ’s forerunner. I think Jesus liked John and believed in him. If you have ever known someone who really believed in you, then you have touched the heart of love. Love believes all things, according to Paul’s list of love qualities. Jesus loved and believed in John.

Maybe Jesus appreciated that John spoke the truth in the face of rejection. John was more interested in pleasing God than man.

Well, John’s truth-telling got him murdered. He had offended the king by telling him that the woman he was with was not kosher. It was adultery and John called a spade a spade. Herod had him thrown in prison. He hadn’t killed him already because of John’s esteem among the people. Jesus too was killed because of His truth-telling. The difference between the two was that John got in trouble for telling the truth about someone else, while Jesus was crucified for declaring who He was.

John’s death was brutal. I find the description at the end of the account pathetic. John’s disciples came

and took his body and buried him. The end of an era was over. John was dead. Another gospel records that when Jesus heard about His friend’s death, He went away for awhile with His disciples. It was a sad time for the Lord. Jesus loved John. It’s hard to say goodbye to someone you love. “Goodbye John, you were the greatest among men; now you are in a place of honor in my kingdom.”

God is sovereign over life and death. Revelation says that he holds the keys of both. John’s death was no surprise to God and it happened within the scope of his rule. Though John lost his head, he gained his soul. In death, he was alive in God. The world was not worthy.

I wonder how many people he pointed to Jesus. One of his mottos was “He must increase, but I must decrease.” John was just a voice, the voice of one crying in the wilderness. Maybe his voice was hoarse. Maybe he had finished his job and he was ready to go. Actually, I think that’s certain. John served the Lord in life and in death. They served his head on a platter. Some felt like they had shut him up, but his message lived on and the person he worshipped was on His way to His own death, even the death of the cross.

God’s blessings come to those who recognize God’s sovereignty,
Pastor Steve

**“He Taught Them Many Things”**

February 22 - Mark 6: 30 - 56

Bonjour,
That’s about as much French as I remember from three intense years of it in high school. I had my mind on other things in those days.

Okay, you all know that you can lead a horse to water but you can’t make him drink. But if the horse is thirsty, it probably won’t be hard to get his snout in

the water. Aren’t people the same? If we have experienced something amazing in our life, isn’t it a greater joy to bring others to the same well so that they too can drink? The interesting thing is that novices may not understand at first what they need in order to experience the same pleasures as the person who has been at it for some time. Most of us live day to

day, content to fulfill our bodily needs without much thought about living life to the fullest for the Lord.

Jesus saw the crowds as sheep without a shepherd. They were aimless followers, sometimes lost, sometimes caught in a thicket, sometimes on their back and unable to get up. They were easy game for a pack of hungry wolves. Sheep, to my knowledge, are pretty dimwitted. They go with the crowd for the most part, but can also stray out on their own and find themselves all alone, lost in no man's land. Helpless is a good way to describe them. Without a strong shepherd they will have very little protection from an enemy or from themselves. Isaiah the prophet declared, "All we like sheep have gone astray..."

The world is like a great big hillside. The masses, billions of people, are like sheep out there wandering, looking, eating whatever sprouts of grass they can find. Some are sick, some are making others sick; there are a great number of dead sheep. There seem to be more wolves than sheep. Some are lucky and have made it thus far, but there is always the fear they may hear the snarl today. Some are so lost they don't realize that they will probably be consumed by the elements.

When Jesus saw the crowd in this helpless condition he didn't leave them alone in their dilemma. He sat down in a convenient spot and began to teach them many things. I'm sure that some of these things are recorded in the gospels, but which things they were at that time Mark does not tell us. We do know that Christ's teaching is the antidote for a wandering heart. When the truth about God is made clear, great things happen. How can you not be taken aback by the love that flows from the heart of Jesus? I can

remember when I first really heard the words of Jesus and how spellbound I was that these words were for me. I was loved and God was at work in my life. It was an amazing thing to me. In some New Testaments the words of Christ are in red ink. Even so, we may not be at a place in our lives where we are listening to those words. Life tends to pull us away from those red letters and we are tempted to trust the words of others over against the words of the Lord.

Have you been soaking in the Words of Jesus lately?

All sheep need to be fed under the watchful eye of the Good Shepherd. When we get to John 10, we'll see in a more detailed way what it is that Jesus does for us as a shepherd.

The more teaching you take in from His Word, the healthier and stronger you will become in your discipleship. Reminding ourselves of spiritual things is one of the most important things we can do in our daily lives. All of us need spiritual alarm clocks built in to our lives so that we can run on God's good teaching rather than the teaching of the culture. Our society is self-centered and egotistical, whereas God's teaching is Christ-centered and spiritually fruitful.

Sit at the feet of Jesus while you read the Bible today and let Him instruct you in the way you should go. Psalms says that the Lord will instruct you with His eye upon you. Put your trust in that. I can hear a howl in the distance, can you? The bones of ransacked sheep are strewn across the landscape. We need His rod and staff to protect us. Without Him we are just too vulnerable.

God's blessings make us spiritually healthy,
Pastor Steve



"Get A Grip"

February 23 - Mark 7: 1-30

Odds are if you've been at your present place of employment for more than a year then you probably have a pretty good handle on the rules and regulations of the company. If you are a hockey fan, (and I can only hope you are!) you are probably acquainted with a poke check, icing, and slashing. If you are a bargain hunter then you have certain stores on your list of good stops. If you are patriotic then I imagine you can stand with your hand over your heart and belt out the Star Spangled Banner at an American sporting event.

Depending on our interest in something we value we will have a pretty firm grip on that thing. Those of us who are married men ought to have a firm grip on our spouse. We should know her inside and out. We should read her like a book, a well-worn and well-read book that is dog eared, missing some pages and held together with duct tape. Once we begin to ignore our spouse we will also lose our grip on the kind of relationship that we dreamed of before we married. Sometimes a husband will exchange his grip on his marriage to grip someone else. With this exchange he loses his grip on some very important items: morality, commitment, manhood, responsibility, and a vow before God.

Sometimes people get a grip on something that is really good for them, but for one reason or another they lose their grip. It is not always easy to maintain our grip, even when the thing we are holding on to is profitable. Exercise is a good example, isn't it? I cannot tell you how many people I have heard over the years who have been excited about one piece of exercise equipment or another, who were all jazzed about their new found ritual. They stay with it for awhile, lose those unwanted pounds, and remind you when you chat about what a good time they are having with it.

Most of those people, when you meet up with

them years later, have put on the old weight and are no longer excited about their exercise hobby. They had lost a grip on the very thing that they were once so charged about. Why is that? If this is your story, would you answer that question? Why is it that I was so hot on my jogging routine and now I would not even consider doing it? It seems unrealistic to me now, whereas before it was my sole focus. Then I was hands-on, but now I am hands-off.

I think part of an honest answer is that it isn't convenient for me anymore. I have other priorities now and exercise just doesn't fit into my routine. It is more convenient to let myself go, do what is easiest and not worry about my health or energy level. Let's be honest—most of our decisions are based on our current circumstances and the convenience of doing whatever will be of most pleasure to us. We may have believed at one point that we ought to maintain an exercise regimen, but now we are distracted by more immediate needs.

Jesus said that this is what happens in some people's lives when it comes to truth. People worship God at their own convenience. Worship centers are more like convenience stores than places to meet God for spiritual edification from the heart. Jesus told the Pharisees that their lips were moving but their heart was far from God. They were into the routine and keeping the rules to justify themselves, but a heart-felt relationship with God was not in their M.O. (method of operation).

Man is constantly making up his own rules in order to justify himself. Even those who do not believe in God have certain standards that they try to live by. Those with obsessive and compulsive tendencies would tell you that they just have to do this or that. They cannot help it; they are driven to meet whatever standard they have set for themselves.

The human being is in need of acceptance and

affirmation. This is a universal need. So if a man does not feel like someone else's rules fit him, he will create his own in order to have some measure of acceptability. Most people would say of themselves: I am a good person. Then they would draw the line of acceptability right behind themselves.

The religious leaders had done this very thing in Jesus' day. They had created their own rules which had been edging out the Word of God. They had even found a loophole in order not to have to love their parents. If they dedicated their money to God then they wouldn't have to use it to support their loved ones. Funny, isn't it? Their loved ones became the unloved ones. Then they attached a spiritual meaning to their actions.

Jesus said that this kind of behavior would not cut the mustard because God knew their hearts. God knows whether my heart is His or not. He knows if I am willing to do what He wants of me or not. He knows. So in our praying let's be frank with the Lord and talk to him about our motives, or at least talk with Him about the confusion we feel in our motives. Sometimes we are so confused we don't know what our own motives really are.

Jesus bluntly said, "You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of

men." Your grip has slipped. You have opened your fingers and have let go of the truth. Remember when the truth was important to you? Don't turn a deaf ear to the Word of the Lord. Instead, open your heart and receive the pure milk of the Word. Let it feed your soul and motivate you to love in God's name.

Try doing anything constructive without your fingers wrapped around it and see what happens. Could a carpenter swing a hammer without his fingers wrapped around the handle of the hammer? Could a baseball player swing a bat without his fingers? Could you cook that way? How about driving? How would you read a book without being able to turn the pages? We need a firm grip on the truth in order for the truth to take hold of us.

As you make your way through the New Testament make sure to develop a firm grip on the Word. Take hold of different verses by underlining them or highlighting them with a marker. Think of them through the day and talk to God about them. They will become the catalyst for spiritual fruitfulness. "Let the Word of Christ dwell deeply in you."

God's blessings come to those who hold tightly to His Word,

Pastor Steve



"Jesus' Itinerary"

February 24 - Mark 7:31 - 8:13

Do you live your life on a schedule? Some people love schedules and others can't stand them. I wonder what kind of a schedule Jesus kept. Have you ever thought about that before? I have heard people debate what kind of car Jesus would drive if he was walking in our day and age. A VW, of course. But would Jesus carry a PDA or have a wireless laptop? Would His car have OnStar? Who knows?

Let's create a possible itinerary for Jesus, keeping in mind the times in which he lived. Jesus even said at one point that there were twelve hours in the day. Why was that? No electricity. So from approximately six in the morning until six in the evening you'd have light. That was the time to work.

5 a.m.: Jesus rises, rolls up his bed and goes to a quiet place to pray.

6 a.m.: Most of the apostles are up; Peter's mother-in-law cooks breakfast (fish and eggs with fresh-baked bread).

7 a.m.: Andrew and Philip are late for breakfast so they hold up the rest. Jesus walks ahead along the Sea of Galilee.

8 a.m.: Jesus meets with the Twelve, talking to them about the kingdom of God.

9 a.m.: A 12-mile walk and hike to the south shore.

10:30 a.m.: The crowds press in on Jesus as He makes His way through a small seaside town. He is pushed off shore in a small boat and addresses the crowd. The on shore waves cause Him to weave back and forth as He relates to the crowd in parables.

11:30 a.m.: Many have brought their sick and lame for Jesus to touch and heal. The crowd buzzes with amazement. Others run to round up friends to see what's happening. It's hot and muggy today. The disciples are getting hungry. A feeling of Messianic invincibility is growing. The disciples begin to speculate about what this new kingdom will look like when Jesus reigns in Jerusalem.

12:30 p.m.: The disciples attempt to pull Jesus away from the crowds so they can go out to eat. John mentioned that he'd like to eat at the deli. Judas makes some off-handed comment about the lack of funds in the bag. The women who normally accompanied the group stayed back in Capernaum to help with clean up there and to assist Peter's wife with the kids.

1 p.m.: They finally agree on a roadside vendor and wait as their bread and fish lunch is served. Judas pays the bill with a smirk. The money is running low. Jesus says not to worry about it, that God would take care of all of their needs.

2 p.m.: Head out to reach Nazareth by dark. Jesus stops along the way to reach out to individuals. He also uses the scenery of the landscape to teach, telling stories about mountains, trees, birds, farmers and

fields. Many lives were changed today when Jesus touched lepers, healed sick people and taught strangers the importance of following His teachings. He offered hurting people hope by saying they could be free through his instruction. It's a long difficult walk. There are many ridges and rocky, tough terrain.

5 p.m.: Arrive in Nazareth. Relationships seemed a bit strained. Jesus' brothers are skeptical about his new-found fame. Mary is quieter, and receives the group with open arms. She would love to have a question and answer time with her Son but is willing to accept God's will in the matter.

5:30 p.m.: Darkness will soon fall. A few of the disciples make a fire and prepare for the evening meal. Philip and Thomas are cranky and getting one another's nerves. Thomas decides to go into town and catch up on any news he hasn't yet gathered. Mary and the boys have chicken, bread and some good wine they have been saving in old wineskins from the miracle wedding feast the first time Jesus surprised them with his power.

6:30 p.m.: The men roll out their mats on the veranda. Mary and Jesus are having a private conversation inside the modest home he had grown up in. James and Simon (zealous Simon) tell stories and entertain the others as they prepare to sleep before another demanding day. Some wonder when it will be their turn to do the work. They are getting tired of only assisting Jesus.

7 p.m.: The one small lamp is snuffed and before you know it Peter is snoring. The others make comments about putting Peter out in the barn but they too soon drift off to sleep. Jesus is still awake. There are just so many memories here. It's good to come home even though He was not as welcomed as He had wished.

What does your itinerary look like for the day? Let's all add a bit of love for others and God to the mix.

God's blessings are on schedule,
Pastor Steve

**“Don’t Tell Anyone”**

February 25 - Mark 8: 14 – 9:1

Good Day Friends,
Timing is everything. More than likely the best jokes you have ever heard were not read out of a joke book. You likely were somewhere when something funny happened on the spur of the moment that was absolutely hilarious. Timing makes all the difference in the world. That’s why different people have varying reactions to events. One person could take it one way and another person could take it in just the opposite way. What may tickle your funny bone will not always reach the guy next to you.

Timing is everything. Sometimes the timing of things really catches us unaware. Can you imagine how my grandma felt when right after I was born her mom died? It was a bittersweet time in her life. It was a world of mixed emotions. She had gained and lost all at the same time. I hope that my presence was a comfort to her. I lived the first several months of my life in her home with my mom because my dad was in the army serving in Korea. Maybe having me there was a reminder that life sometimes ends and begins at the same time.

Timing is everything. A few decades ago my life seemed to be in the pits. It was hard for me to even tie my shoes in the morning. I felt like the last man on earth. During that time when I was in the throes of despair, my friend Joe would show up. He was a life-saver. When my thoughts were taking me to places I shouldn’t go, there would be a knock on the door and Joe’s pleasant demeanor would enter the room and cheer me up. His timing was always amazing. He was there for me when I needed a friend to help me up.

Timing is everything. When did Jesus Christ come into your life? Were you a child? Did you recognize from an early age that Jesus loved you and had a plan for your life, and so you committed your life to Him? Was it in your teen years at a youth rally of some sort? Were you already experiencing the futility of what the

world had to offer for happiness and finding it empty? Did a friend invite you to hear the good news when you responded to the invitation and gave your life to Christ? Or were you an adult who finally yielded after years of living life your own way? Whenever it was, I’m sure you’d say now that Christ came into your life at the right time. He saved you from your sin at the point in your life when you knew you needed Him. God’s timing is always perfect.

Timing is everything. Ecclesiastes says, “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill and a time to heal; a time to break down and a time to build up; a time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance; a time to cast away stones and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to seek and a time to lose; a time to keep and a time to cast away; a time to tear and a time to sew; a time to keep silence and a time to speak; a time to love and a time to hate; a time for war and a time for peace” (3:1-8). What period of time are you in in your life right now? Is it a good time or a time of trouble? Does it feel like a constructive time or a time when you are being torn down? Whatever time it is, remember that there is a time for every matter under heaven.

Timing is everything. Jesus knew His own timing. What I mean is that He was well aware and in control of the events that eventually would lead to His crucifixion and resurrection. In the year or so of His growing popularity Jesus avoided the chance of a crowd taking Him and making Him a king. That was not His mission as he walked the streets of Jerusalem. He was a king, that’s for sure, but His kingdom was not of this world. That is why He avoided the notoriety that His miracles produced. The people around Him

might want to take Him and make Him a king before His time. In our reading today Jesus heals a blind man. At first the man could only see the shapes of people, but when Jesus laid His hands on him again his sight was perfectly restored. Jesus then tells the man not to go into the village. This is another reference to Jesus desiring to be incognito so that He would not draw too much attention to Himself.

When you read and study the lives of the people in the Bible you realize that God’s timing is perfect. When a child of God had the promises of God he or she could count on those promises no matter what the circumstances. Often promises from God were met with challenges and temptations and detours which were all meant to test and inspire the person those promises were given to. If you grew up with a dad who made promises and kept them, then you also remember that the promises were not always fulfilled in the exact way you imagined they would be. The important thing was that dad came through in the end and you saw the completion of what was promised to you.

God’s timing is perfect in our lives, so don’t worry. You can count on the promises of God for all of your life. You do not have to worry whether God will come through for you or not. He will. Our job is to cling to His promises and the hope that is attached to them.

God will come through, though it may not happen quite the way that you planned. You never expected someone to die, or a divorce to happen, or a car to break down, or a job to be lost, or a friend to betray you. Still, God’s promise to be with you and complete the work He began in you long ago will not be in vain.

Remember Daniel in the lions’ den? I can imagine at first that Daniel was a bit edgy about the beasts. Soon enough he must have realized what was true all along—that God was with him and could shut the mouths of the lions. God had more to do with Daniel. It was not his time to die. If it had been that would not have been a bad thing because Daniel would have had peace in death. Either way, he won and God’s will was carried out in his life.

Timing may be everything, but God’s timing always supersedes our own timing. It just so happened that Jesus could control His timing because of who He is. Don’t you think that as He sits on the throne of our lives, that we too will experience the joy of divine guidance and divine appointments according to God’s day timer? Look today for God’s timing in the events you experience. You may begin to see the risen Jesus in events that are much more than coincidence.

God’s blessings parallel God’s timing,
Pastor Steve

**“A Voice”**

February 26 - Mark 9: 2-32

Isn’t it frustrating when someone calls and they start talking away like you should know them, but for the life of you, you’re not registering who they are? I finally have to break down, stop pretending that I know them, and ask who’s on the other end. Then when I find out who it is, I’m usually shocked that I hadn’t been able to identify the caller.

Think for a moment of all the voices that are in our lives. I liked the news anchor, Peter Jennings’s, voice. It was soft but clear, steady and friendly in some way. He had a way of pulling you in and making it easy to listen to him. Growing up, there were a couple of sports announcers in my area whom I just loved. Chick Hearn, the voice of the L.A. Lakers for

decades, brought a lot of fun and excitement into my room as I did homework and listened to him call the games. Then there was Vin Scully, the voice of the L.A. Dodgers. To this day when I hear his voice I feel like a comforting presence has entered the room. To listen to him was much more than baseball; he could create all sorts of images as he painted pictures with his voice.

Isn't it amazing that no two voices are the same? We hear so many different voices during the day that we probably couldn't think of them all. Some are pleasant and some are annoying. Usually though, a voice will elicit a response of some kind. Some voices make us angry, others sad, others glad. Is your voice rough or smooth, loud or soft, comical or serious, repelling or appealing? Take out a tape recorder and talk into it for awhile and see what your voice sounds like. Some voices are special to us: a parent's, a spouse's, or a child's. Others really make no difference to us: the gal behind the register at the market, the guy pumping our gas, or the guy reading the news on the radio. Unless it was Paul Harvey — now there was a distinct voice!

I'm sure the disciples were being constantly guided by Jesus' voice. One of the things about His words that I am looking forward to hearing someday is the inflection in His voice. How did He sound? I can imagine that because of the great amount of love in Christ that his voice is very caring and reassuring. I'm sure it draws you in and wraps its vocal arms around you and fulfills you. What would the voice of God sound like?

Peter heard it. So did James and John. They heard the voice of God. They were up on a high mountain and they had an encounter with God that they would never forget. That is true of encounters with God generally. When you have had one, it becomes memorable and for some people, it will define their lives from there on out. Most find this experience in the Word of God. God uses His Word to speak directly to people's situations. When they recognize it as such, they become thankful that God would have anything to do

with them, let alone speak to them through His Word.

Peter was particularly impacted by his experience on the mountain. He would later write: "We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory saying, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.' We Ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain" (2 Peter 1: 16-18).

The expansion in Mark of "listen to Him" gives us the application of the experience. The Father loves the Son and both the Father and the Son delight in those who listen to Him. John would later write: "... everyone who loves the Father loves his child as well. This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world" (1 John 5: 1-4). Mark's gospel, by the way, is primarily the mind and work of Peter. We know this from church history. Peter leaves the admonition out in his little epistle because it is not the point he is making there. But here in the gospel he includes the word about listening so that the apostles (and us) would correlate the Words of Jesus along the same line as the words of Moses and Elijah. In Moses we have the law of God, in Elijah we have the prophets and in Jesus grace and truth. Again in John's gospel we read: "For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (1:17).

Are you listening to the Word today?

What is God speaking to you from His Word?

Let's open our hearts to His Word and take in the messages God speaks to us from the Bible.

Let's, like the apostles, acknowledge the superiority of Christ and take His words with the utmost respect.

God's blessings come to those who listen to Him,
Pastor Steve

"What Did Jesus Say About Hell, And What Should We?"

February 27 - Mark 9: 33 - 10:12

Good Day To You,
I actually don't mind talking about hell because sooner or later the discussion will turn to the cross, that wicked and glorious place where death and sin and hell were conquered. It is a bit easier to swallow a difficult subject if you can also talk about the solution to the problem. If you end up focusing on the problem and dwell on the realities of it then you will be much more apt to despair.

Let's face it, many people would see the subject of hell as outdated and irrelevant. These skeptics might say that it was invented to scare people into church so that you would stick with religion out of fear. Others have trivialized the subject by making it cartoon-like. Some would say it isn't a real place but is a teaching tool to emphasize that if you are bad then bad things will happen to you. Still others believe that hell is a temporary place where you will pay for your sins for a period of time, but then you will become extinct.

What has your impression of hell been? I can remember as a kid having periodic dreams of what looked like a hellish place where people were suffering the torment of fire and brimstone. I can remember in those dreams seeing the tormented faces of the sufferers. I'm pretty sure my vision of hell was pretty distorted, but one thing probably was true. The people I saw were horribly isolated. People were all alone, with no connection to anyone else. I thought how lonely and hellish that would be. Of course, most picture hell as a party place for those who party with Satan. To them it will be a place to continue to "raise hell." This is far from Jesus' picture of the place.

When Jesus discusses hell it is in the context of judgment. The connection is pretty obvious. For example, in our reading today those who stumble or mistreat kids will be judged. Jesus says it would be better for them if they were buried at sea than engage in behavior where kids were brought down or taught

to sin. This is why generational sins are emphasized in the Bible. So often the sins of the fathers are passed down to the kids. The aftermath of the hippie movement in the sixties, in a multitude of cases, resulted in an amoral attitude in the later generations. This led to a morality that brought a deluge of physical, emotional, and mental problems for families and for society in general.

So what about judgment; will anyone escape the scrutinizing judgment of God? The answer to this question is both simple and complex. It's simple because the quick and easy answer is that no one will escape the judgment of God. The issue becomes more complex when we see ourselves as "good" or "better than others" or "very religious." People who do this often believe that they will be exempt from the judgment of God. The problem is that the Bible says there is none righteous enough to stand before God's glorious presence. Our sins have separated us from God. So we have Bible verses like: "All have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3: 23) and "now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God" (Romans 3: 19). The all-seeing, all-knowing, all-encompassing God of the universe will bring every detail of a person's life into judgment. If there is a person out there who can stand under that judgment then he would be a perfect man who had never once broken the law of God, for the Bible also says, "For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it" (James 2: 10).

Jesus says that if your hands or feet or eyes cause you to sin then remove them. He says it is better to be maimed than to be caught in sins that lead to hell. Do you think Jesus is talking literally about removing body parts? If he was then we'd be the church of the



stumps. All of us sin. All of us have misused our feet and hands and eyes. So what is Jesus saying? First, I think He is using a simple teaching tool to capture the disciples' attention. I'm sure it worked. Can you imagine if one or two of them were daydreaming and heard this? Now He has my attention. Secondly, now that Jesus has my attention, I need to think seriously about what He is talking about. This is no laughing matter. Jesus paints judgment in the most sober terms. The point is to take sin seriously. Your eternal destiny hinges on this issue. If you walk haphazardly though life and downplay whatever sin issues you have picked up from your parents or grandparents, then you will be disappointed in the end when the judgment comes.

Someone once said that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. Maybe one man wasn't as great a sinner as another, but he never dealt with his own sin. He took it lightly. He hoped that things would work out or that his "good works" would outweigh the bad. He never dealt with the heart of the matter and found God's way of deliverance from sin and hell. Maybe he intended to do differently. Maybe he once thought that he should read the Bible or look into being baptized or go to church, but he never did. It didn't seem that important. That's why Jesus puts it the way He did. He says that this is so important that it's like the removal of a body part. It's much more than taking a Tylenol, it's like major surgery. Don't let your sin fool you—it is much more serious than you think.

Some have tried to suggest that Jesus' picture of hell somehow represents an unreal place. How they can come to that conclusion beats me. It doesn't follow that just because He speaks in exaggerated terms about dealing with sin (in order to get us to think seriously about sin) that in some way He is saying that hell is not real. Do you see the illogical thinking there? Actually, the opposite is the case. He gets our attention about sin in an exaggerated way in order to save us from a horrible eternity. The images of eternal flames and worms and being salted with fire, maybe like a fire storm image, are not meant to make us think hell does not exist. If that was His objective,

then His images are meaningless. No, the images are meant to warn us of the horrible reality of separation from God for eternity. In other gospels weeping and the gnashing of teeth is used to describe the torment of the lost.

How severe is hell? Let me answer a good question with another good question: How severe were the sufferings of Christ?

The solution has to match the problem. The punishment has to fit the crime. If it took the blood of the spotless Jesus suffering at the hands of men and the cross where He died, then just how immense was the sin problem? Hebrews says somewhere that Christ is the source of eternal salvation and eternal redemption, and in the same book it talks about eternal judgment. Therefore, if Christ's death is the solution to the problem then that problem is obviously an eternal one, not a temporary one. No wonder Jesus used such strong language to get their attention that day. Wouldn't it be better to be maimed in life than to be in hell? Absolutely!

What would the point be if Jesus was warning them to beware of an imaginary place? There would be no point. Jesus was getting their attention so that they would consider their need for His forgiveness and prepare them for the gift of eternal life.

So then, what should my attitude be about hell and how should I convey these ideas to friends who haven't heard about the Lord and probably think hell is a mythical place? First, I need to pray that God would remove the blinders from their eyes so that they too would take the threat of judgment seriously. Secondly, I need to look for opportunities to talk about the cross of Jesus and His resurrection so that they can have the opportunity to accept Jesus as I have. Thirdly, I need to be careful not to downplay hell. It is the devil's method to get us to think lightly about hell.

God's blessings of eternal life come to those who accept the free gift of God in Christ. Thank you Jesus for saving us from eternal torment.

Pastor Steve

"A Look Into Jesus' Emotional Makeup"

February 28 - Mark 10: 13 - 31

How do you gauge your emotions? How do you know if you are emotionally healthy or if you are bit off balance? Our emotions respond to so much varied stimulation from day to day that it is oftentimes hard to lay hold of our emotional equilibrium. On the other hand, don't you think that, by design, some people are more emotional than others? We will say that so-and-so really wears her feelings on her sleeve to describe someone who may cry a lot or go from 0-60 on the emotional scale in a short period of time. I believe God made some of us more or less emotional than others. Wouldn't it be beneficial then to dial it down somewhat if you are constantly on the high side, and rev it up if you are on the low side too much?

Many people let their emotions gauge them. They live by their feelings. They are constantly on a mission to up their emotional energy. These folks can be adrenaline junkies. They are forever looking for stimulation to make them feel high. They don't like to slow down and relax; they must constantly be on the go and they feel unproductive when they stop. They are the ones who are very impatient behind a few cars at a stop sign. If they slow down, they believe, they might wither up and die.

Then there are the emotional zombies. For them to crack a smile is a monumental feat. They just don't seem to feel much. Others will misinterpret their lack of expression to conclude that they don't care because their reactions are so flat. Sometimes these people have quite a bit going on in the control center of their mind and heart, they just don't know how to express what is going on inside. This person is not as excitable about doing something risky and on the edge. He has been misunderstood often enough that he would rather avoid places where the expectation for emotional energy is high.

What is your emotional makeup? Do you feel like

you experience a balance of emotions? When there is a major event in your life, such as the death of a family member, mistreatment by a fellow worker, or a car accident, do you give yourself time to feel sad, angry, or grieved? Do you process those emotions by not internalizing them, but rather respond through more constructive means? In any given day without major emotional waves, do you experience life as it comes and roll with the ups and downs, or do you panic when you feel a bit depressed or overly excited or flat or disappointed?

Jesus experienced all of the human emotions, as we all do. The difference with Him was that His emotional tank was not affected by sin. So when we look at Jesus' emotional identity we will get a glimpse into the way God originally intended us to experience feelings before the fall brought us all down. Jesus felt sadness, grief, anger, joy, exuberance, and a host of other real human emotions that we can all relate to. Jesus is God but He also became a one-hundred-percent-real man so that He could identify with us.

As Jesus talks to the rich young man, He is straight with him. Yet also, in some knowing way, He loves the man. Mark says that as the Lord looked at him He loved him. Think about that for a moment. I know some are thinking love is more than an emotion; what was it in His eyes that conveyed love? I get the feeling that the disciples recognized that the Lord really had a heart for the man. When our emotions are driven by love of others, it helps us to plow through the world with a compassion that will, I think, balance us emotionally. We often get into trouble emotionally when our focus is on ourselves: how we feel and where we are at. This leads us to exclude others. Jesus was full of love.

Another telling thing in this passage of Scripture is that Jesus calls His disciples "children." If the Lord was older than they were, it wasn't by much. Chances

are that some of the disciples were older than He was. And yet He calls them "children." Again He is focused on them and not on His own emotional needs. Today the tenor of psychology and humanism in general is to put the emphasis on self-fulfillment. When a person does this, then the gauge of his well-being is himself rather than the care of others. Jesus called His disciples children because He was into taking care of them like a good father takes care of his kids.

Two more points on this subject: He uses the hyperbole of a camel going through the eye of the needle, I believe, to lighten the mood while at the same time teaching a lesson. I can imagine a wry smile or two by the disciples when they heard this comparison between something ridiculous, the camel squeezing through the eye of a needle, and the difficulty of giving up riches for the kingdom of God's sake. Humor is a good indication of emotional well-being. Proverbs says that a merry heart does good like medicine.

Laughter is sometimes the best medicine.

Lastly, faith is absolutely vital for emotional health. Otherwise, where will we turn when the heat gets turned up? Jesus told them that all things are possible with God. We need to hear that, don't we? We need to believe it too! When we are going through the sometimes confusing rain of emotions, we need to know that God is for us and that He has a plan for us and that we are His children. Jesus demonstrates this for us in His own relationship with the Father. He trusts the Father. He knows the Father will never leave Him. He knows He can express all of His emotions to the Father and the Father will listen and take care of Him.

Let's do likewise.

Let's not let our emotions get the best of us.

God's blessings come to those who put others first,

Pastor Steve



"What Do You Need?"

March 1 - Mark 10: 32-52

Are you a doctor? What I really wanted to ask was whether you play doctor, but I didn't think that would be an appropriate way to begin. What I mean is, do you tend to give a self-diagnosis when something is ailing you? Most of us tend to be self-proclaimed experts on ourselves when we have a problem. In other words, we think we know what we need.

Have you ever been at a point though when you were stumped? For the life of you, nothing over the counter was working to appease your ailment. So you broke down and went to the doctor, and he poked and prodded and listened with that cold metal gadget and gave several "ums," until he stopped and put his finger to his chin and told you what he thought you'd

need to get better. Lo and behold, it was something that you hadn't even suspected. So you did what the doc proscribed and in no time at all you were better. Sometimes we honestly do not know what we need.

What is the greatest need in your life right now? Have you prayed about it sufficiently yet? Have you sought counsel about it? What is your opinion about what your part is in acquiring what you need? Is it a material thing like a new car or something for the house, or is it something relational, like better communication or the ability to forgive another? Our greatest need is that thing in our life that is on our minds every day and drives us to try and find an answer. You may try to avoid it, but typically it is screaming to be heard, isn't it?

Bartimaeus must have heard about the Man from Nazareth. Word had been spreading that Jesus could heal the afflictions people lived with. "What if Jesus could heal me?" he must have been thinking. When you've been dreaming for a long time about being able to see, it would be worth a shot to ask Jesus to meet the need.

And so he was determined to meet up with the miracle Man. He knew that Jesus was in the vicinity; the buzz of the crowd and the excited exclamations of the people around him made it clear that Jesus was somewhere close. So he began to yell out for Jesus. He was calling on the Lord. He needed Jesus. If the crowd was too loud maybe the Master wouldn't hear him and he'd be left in his current condition, so he hollered. There were people near him who thought he was being rude and tried to get him to quiet down. They didn't understand his need. They had not lived in his shoes. Maybe he was interrupting Jesus, but that didn't matter now, now in the hour of his desire to be made well.

In his cry, Bartimaeus was acknowledging his belief in Jesus. He calls Him "the son of David." This was a clear acknowledgment of Jesus' Messiah identity. The coming Messiah would be considered the son of David because he would rule as king in the lineage of King David, the first great king of Israel. Saul was the first king of Israel, but it was David who brought the kingdom into its greatness. Bartimaeus was recognizing Jesus for who He truly was, the King of kings and the Lord of lords. Secondly, he cries out for mercy. This is a recognition of his own unworthiness to be considered by Jesus for healing. He knew that if he was going to receive his healing that it would not be because he deserved it but by the goodness of the

Lord. His faith was planted firmly in the reputation of Jesus and not on his own righteousness. It wasn't about him, it was all about Jesus and whether He would extend mercy to him. Can you hear him calling out? It may have been the heart of the day but this man's world was dark. Jesus would be his only hope to come into the light. The irony, of course, is that Jesus is the light (John 8:10). He was about to see, probably in more ways than one.

I find it a bit funny that Jesus even asks him what his need is. Isn't it obvious what it is? Maybe the Lord wanted the man to state what his need was. Jesus credits the faith of Bartimaeus for the healing. So what was his greatest need?

Was it that he was blind? Or, was it that he needed Jesus? If it was his faith that opened his eyes, then why did he need Jesus at all? This will help us to get a grip on what faith is. If it was "his faith" that did the job, why did it take Jesus coming through town before he was healed? Because it was that his faith was simply in Jesus. Jesus was the source of that faith. Then the man was healed.

Our greatest need is to always come to Jesus.

We may not be blind, but we have anxiety...come to Jesus.

We may not be blind, but we aren't sure how the rent will be paid this month...come to Jesus.

We may not be blind, but we are concerned for one of our kids...come to Jesus.

We may not be blind, but we feel nervous about a test in school...come to Jesus.

We may not be blind, but we _____... come to Jesus.

God's blessings come to those who come to Jesus,
Pastor Steve

**“Prayer and Commercialism”**

March 2 - Mark 11: 1 - 25

Don't we all long for richness? We want our lives to be full and rich. We love to enjoy the “good things” in life. When I was a kid we used to eat steak quite often. I think my folks would buy a side of beef and stock the freezer. Every now and then we'd do fondue. Have you heard of that? In the middle of the table was a flame-heated, bowl-shaped skillet full of some kind of oil. The steak was skewered by long metal prongs and we'd dip it in the hot oil. You'd eat that freshly-cooked steak and feel like you'd died and gone to heaven. At least I remember it that way. Maybe I was easily pleased.

What are the things that make life feel rich to you? Are they mainly material things or non-material things? I will never forget the day I got my driver's license. Let freedom ring, man. I was on cloud nine. I drove down the street by myself in my used Ford Maverick with Neil Diamond playing on my new 8-track player. Life couldn't be any better!

I think for me life has been made rich, not by stuff, but by the people I have known and know now. Rich people make life rich. However, the ones who are only rich in dollars make life very poor. I love to be around truly rich people. I'll never forget the peanut salesman at Dodger Stadium. Now that was a rich man! He had so much fun selling peanuts and the fans got such a kick out of him. He had a tennis ball with a slit in it, and he'd throw the peanuts across the aisles, then toss the ball to retrieve the money for the nuts. Some fans got more out of the peanut guy than they did from the game. If a peanut man can be rich, so can you and I.

People who pray are rich. Prayer is helplessness. Prayer is dependence. Prayer is the acknowledgment that God must be our source. Not money or investments or IRAs or “location, location, location” or stocks and bonds, but reliance on God. Prayer is faith in God. It says that I need God. It means that I cannot navigate

life apart from God's guidance and wisdom and help.

Prayer acknowledges that God is like my Shepherd. I am a dumb sheep. I tend to stray. I want to do things my own way and not read the instruction manual, and so I go my own way and find myself, again, in a mess. Then I pray and look to God for help. The positive side of this is that when the Lord is my Shepherd I will have everything I need, guaranteed. “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.” Why? The Shepherd meets all of my needs.

The next time you go shopping for stuff, just looking around for something else to make your life rich, try this attitude on for size: “I don't need any of this stuff because the Lord is my Shepherd. Because that is the case I have everything I need already.” Try that idea on for size and see how it feels. It really is true. When you have Jesus you have it all. Nothing, and I truly mean nothing will add one ounce of happiness to the “sheep” who has the Good Shepherd looking after his every need. Anyway, so much of our buying is to keep up with the proverbial Jones's or to try and create a safe feeling, kind of like a security blanket. The rich man says to himself that he has it all, and so he sets out to build bigger and better buildings to satisfy his commercial longings. He doesn't know how foolish he really is because, sooner or later, his soul will be brought into judgment. Then he will be caught with his pants down and nothing to show for his spiritual and moral poverty. We brought nothing into this world and we will go out the same way.

In our reading today Jesus cleanses the temple again. The temple workers were making merchandise of the animals being sold for offerings. The temple had become like a tourist trap. People were forced to buy at exorbitant prices so that they could make their sacrifices. Jesus said that this was robbing the true purpose of God's house, which was prayer. Rather than use their religion for advantage, they were to

use it for worship. Jesus, meek and mild Jesus, didn't take too kindly to this abuse and took action to rectify the situation. “He would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts.” Jesus took a stand.

Is worship happening? Is church a place of worship? Do we go there to worship God? What other reason would there be to enter? To find business contacts? To put on a good face for others? To look respectable? I hope not.

Jesus teaches the disciples the power of prayer by cursing the fig tree. He says to believe that your prayers will be answered and they will. Don't doubt, but believe that God is able to do anything; let me add, within the scope of His will. Jesus also says that we need to be careful when we pray not to be harboring bitterness towards another. We ought to forgive

them first so that our own sins may be forgiven. Maybe He had in mind that we shouldn't compare ourselves with the temple merchandisers, thinking we would be heard because we were better than them, but rather we ought to be humble in prayer reflecting back to God our dependence on Him.

Will you have a special time in prayer today?

I encourage you to talk to God like He is your Shepherd. You know that new car that you are desiring that you think will bring you happiness? Put it on hold for today and talk to God about the happiness that He has brought into your life.

Pray sincerely.

Pray with faith in God.

Pray always.

God's blessings come in prayer,
Pastor Steve

**“Who Are You Talking About?”**

March 3 - Mark 11: 27 - 12:12

Greetings in Jesus Christ,

What is the best, most surprising news you have ever received? When you heard it, at first, you could not believe that they were talking about you. For a moment you felt like you were in shock or in a daze. You had to do a double-take in order to fathom the intensity of what you were hearing.

“Are you sitting down?” the voice on the other end of the phone said. “You have won third prize in a state-wide drawing which means you will be able to draw as much money as you can from an ATM machine in five minutes and you also have a week for two at a dude ranch in Arizona.” I'd practice beforehand, withdrawing money from my ATM, making sure I could do it quick and nimbly. When it was over I had won more than anyone in the state, \$2,600 (you could only withdraw the money in \$200 increments). (Did

that really happen to you? Wow.)

On the other hand, have you ever gotten called into the office when you didn't know exactly why? Sure, you were in a scuffle with someone at recess, but you were just sticking up for someone or something you believed in. But the messenger has dispatched you to visit with the man in the suit...pretty intimidating! I was just minding my business one lazy afternoon when I heard the fateful summons. I knew I was innocent so I went feeling more curious than anything else. I was in the seventh grade and sometime that day I had called a bothersome girl a “horror” (note the spelling). To me a “horror” was a monster along the lines of Dracula or Frankenstein or the Mummy. The homophone of this word was not a concept I had come across at that young age. The teacher and the principal didn't know that and so I went



“Got Ya”

March 4 - Mark 12: 13-27

through the prosecution. By the way, even though I had a pretty clean record, they didn't believe my story. I'm sure my little story was the topic of conversation in the teachers' lounge that afternoon.

Jesus' parable of the tenants was about the Pharisees, no doubt about it. They knew it and it outraged them. So they continued to pursue a way to have Him eliminated. Jesus even quoted from their own Scriptures to show that He would be rejected but one day rise to prominence. All of these thoughts were rubbing the religious brass the wrong way. They were in no position to receive Christ's words. They were against Him. They knew what He was saying was not in their favor but they also were unable to hear the positive message Jesus came to deliver. One of their number, Nicodemus, approached Jesus at night (probably so that he wouldn't be seen) and questioned Him about His teaching. When Jesus declared to him that he needed a complete life change, he was unable to make heads or tails out of what the Lord was saying. Even when Jesus eluded to the Old Testament Scriptures he couldn't see how they applied to Jesus' words.

The same reality holds true today. People have an idea of what Jesus is saying but have no clue how it relates to them. They do not get the message of Jesus. They may even feel like a Pharisee, even if they have no religious background, in the sense that they think Jesus is condemning them and making it hard for them to be accepted with God. In that way Jesus is confusing to them. That's why so many people will say things about Jesus or His teachings that are so off base. I have heard people say things like, "Jesus is a great role model of how we should love others," or, "Jesus is a good example to me and I am trying to fol-

low His example so that I am good enough to make it to heaven someday." Have you ever heard something like this?

The Bible says that we are born spiritually blind. Because of this we cannot truly hear the Words of God. I don't mean that we cannot read them, certainly we could do that, but we cannot understand them and how they would matter to us. In 1 Corinthians Chapter 1 Paul talks about the need for spiritual understanding in order for spiritual things like the Bible to be made alive to us. In other words, we need to be made spiritually alive before the Bible will become alive to us. Let me be perfectly clear what this means. The last thing I want to do is muddy the waters when it comes to understanding spiritual things.

Jesus said that to be born anew we need to be "born of the Spirit." When people realize their need for Jesus and understand that they cannot adequately pay for their own sins, they are prompted by the Spirit to trust the work at the cross by Jesus as the payment for spiritual rescue. As soon as a person sincerely asks God to forgive his sin and be the Master of his ship (so to speak) he is born of the Spirit. The Spirit enters the person and begins the life-long process of making him like Jesus. With the Spirit inside, like a lamp, he is then able to read the Bible with Spiritual illumination.

Jesus is speaking to you today. Take a moment to listen. Take the time to read His Word. Like a good Father God is loving you and working in your life. When I first "heard" God talking to me, it was not with words of condemnation, it was with words of love and encouragement.

"If God be for us who can be against us..."

God's sincere blessings and good news to you,
Pastor Steve

It's a Good Day to Give Thanks, In Jesus' day teachers of the law, who were called "Rabbi," spent a great deal of time communicating God's Word and the writings of other rabbis to the people. People would have questions about different parts of the Bible and how they should be applied, and so they would bring their inquiries to these learned teachers. The rabbis loved to sit in the place of God and disseminate the truth. As we read recently though, they were quite regularly exchanging the words of God for the traditions or teachings of men and thereby were diluting the Word of God.

I have a great deal of respect for teachers. First of all, they are usually smart and have reached a high degree of intellectual achievement. That doesn't mean that they are perfect. I have seen teachers make some of the most boneheaded errors you can imagine. But also, teachers are giving. They have to spend a great deal of time with a group of people, be they young or old, who usually do not appreciate all of the time and energy they invest in teaching. How would you like to be an English teacher who has to stay up very often to grade 60-90 essays at a time? Some grade school teachers have a tremendous amount of homework themselves. They have to teach a variety of subjects, and grade papers in each of those subjects. It's quite a job. Add on to all of that lesson planning and classroom decoration and grading at the end of the term and you can see that the job of a teacher is probably misunderstood by most.

On the other hand, there is an occupational hazard that can really bring a teacher down. Teachers are very susceptible to pride. When you are smarter than your students and you have the answers to their questions, they will lean on you, sometimes so hard, that you begin to believe that you just might rule the world. This is especially true in the younger grades. Most little kids worship their teacher. They

really do put their teacher in the God role. What their teacher says is gospel, no question, that's the way it is. As students get older and start to question the things their teachers are saying, then it is harder for a teacher to feel invincible. If you misspell a word on the board in front of the class and a student points it out in front of God and everybody, you will quickly fall from your pedestal. I have known some teachers who are so conscientious about their lessons that they will go over and over them, double-checking every little thing so that they will never be embarrassed in front of their class. Sooner or later they will slip. Everyone does.

Once a teacher thinks he is invincible then he begins to protect his territory, his status, and will expect that not only his students but the faculty and parents as well treat him as a fountain of wisdom and truth. He covers up weaknesses and blemishes and begins to try and live as if he isn't human. That's why it's pretty hard for some teachers to get along. You'd think that teachers would enjoy sharing with one another and learning from one another, but all too often they do not want their colleagues to know that they don't know something or haven't read some book or that they got a poor grade in a certain subject in college. No one teacher knows it all. Some would like to think they do, but they do not.

In the rabbinical system there was a great deal of one-upsmanship. As we have said before, the teachers of the law were on a ladder of success. The more you knew and the more you were respected, the more status and authority you carried. Can you imagine how the Pharisees must have felt about Jesus' authority to teach the law? He hadn't had any formal training, for one thing. And He was claiming Messianic authority by asserting that He was the unique Son of God. He was also talking about God in personal terms, a privilege the Pharisees did not enjoy. And on top of all

that, the people were flocking to Him to hear Him. His reviews were stellar. To the run-of-the-mill Pharisee this meant competition. "By what authority do you do these things, Jesus?"

Mark says that Jesus knew their hypocrisy. What hypocrisy do you see in the section? Could it be the flattery before the "tricky" question? They were feeding Jesus a bill of goods to try and soften Him up for the blow when they would give Him a question that would embarrass Him in front of the audience. All the flattery about being full of integrity and speaking God's Word in truth and not being swayed by men, though all true statements, was only spoken so that they might trick Jesus into a fall.

Flattery is one of the worse forms of hypocrisy, because it is meant to harm. Behind Jesus' back they were planning on killing Him. They knew they couldn't carry the crime out until they had the people on their side; many people, who were possibly not even disciples yet, believed that Jesus was at least a prophet. So it meant a great deal for the Pharisees to make Jesus look bad.

Why the question about taxes? They were more than likely trying to make Jesus appear a Roman sympathizer, which would not go over well with much of the Jewish population. Even those who paid taxes saw allegiance to Rome as a crime. Some did not pay out of principle. They believed paying would be a concession that Caesar deserved allegiance at God's level. If they could get Jesus to take a position, then

the anti-Rome crowd might help them in their goal to have Jesus killed.

Envy and flattery and murder are ingredients for a confrontation. Even today when these elements are seen in relationships the outcomes are usually very volatile. The Pharisees saw their own importance and authority as more god-like than Jesus'. To them, He was a threat; a threat that needed to be removed. Not long from now in Mark's gospel we will get to the passion of the Christ once more.

That the Pharisees could catch Jesus in His words would be like me being able to play chess with Bobby Fischer. When Jesus asked His questions, first about the coin and then an acknowledgment of whose inscription was on it, the only thing those around could do was marvel. Checkmate, game over.

Let's make a few applications.

If you are a teacher please examine yourself in the light of God's knowledge. James says that you need to take teaching very seriously because teachers will incur the stricter judgment.

Let's pray for wisdom to be able to answer those who challenge us. Try Jesus' approach on for size and answer a question with a question. For example: "How do you know there is a God?" Answer: "How do you know there isn't a God?" "If there was a God, there wouldn't be as much suffering in the world?" Answer: "How do you know that God has caused the suffering?"

God's blessings teach us, Pastor Steve

ence to capture your attention. Maybe it didn't matter much to you what the teacher was saying as long as you could reiterate the information on an exam.

Most of my life I have been the latter case. I have lived for the next encounter, the next thrill, the next opportunity, the next invitation. Where I grew up that was kind of the prevailing attitude. Being lackadaisical, kicked back and chilled out was the banner of the time. I grew up in a town not far from the beach, so my friends and I spent a lot of spare time hanging out at the ocean. The pound of the surf, the constant traffic on the strand of joggers and bicyclists, the smell of suntan oil, calloused feet from walking on hot pavement and sand, sunburns, riptides, and being stung by jellyfish were all essential aspects of the culture I grew up in.

All of us are affected by the culture of our times, aren't we? Most of us can say that to a greater or lesser degree we have been shaped by our culture. It was the comfortable thing for us. We adapted to the changing times by associating with the people we felt the most affinity with and spent the most time with. These people were our friends. The memories we made with them probably impact our lives today.

In what positive ways did your friends affect you?

In what detrimental ways did your friends affect you?

In Jesus' day, if you were a teacher of the law, the odds were that you had been surrounded with Scripture talk for most of your life. From the time a Jewish boy is very young he is absorbed in the study of the Torah, the books of Moses. The word Torah can also be used to refer to all the Old Testament books as well as Jewish tradition. It was a top priority for Jewish fathers to have sons who were literate in the Scriptures. Oftentimes, the sons of the teachers were candidates to become teachers of the law themselves. Therefore, they were around and in and surrounded by discussion of the Scriptures. More than likely the teacher of the law who addresses Jesus in our reading today was a person who had a long-standing background in the Bible of the Jews, our Old Testament.

Even though we are trekking through the New Testament this year, my goal is for you to try the Old on for size; maybe next year. If you want you can give it a go even now. At least the Psalms or Proverbs at

the end of the reading would be a good dessert to the main reading for the day. The Old Testament is rich in spiritual background for the New Testament. Jesus' footprints are on each and every chapter in the Old Testament. As a matter of fact, Jesus tells the disciples after His resurrection that the Old Testament Scriptures are pointing to Him. Jesus is the subject of the Bible from beginning to end.

It seems like the man in the account is respectful of Jesus. His question is not meant to undo the Lord but is a sincere inquiry. The greatest commandment, the granddaddy of them all, the one that defines all of the others, the pinnacle of Biblical knowledge, the thing that matters most to Jesus is that we love the one true God and love others. To Jesus this truth sums up all of Scripture.

Most of culture is about self-promotion. In our Darwinian-dominated culture the philosophy is centered around the survival of the fittest. How can love be the main thing when self-preservation and survival is the name of the game? It isn't. In our self-gratifying and narcissistic culture there is really no room for love. Love gives, humanism consumes. I apologize for all of the varied terminology, but I wanted to drive home the point that it is hard to love in a culture that says, "Look out for Number One."

When the teacher reflected back to Jesus the truth He had just spoken, indicating that he had been listening, Jesus said that he is not far from the kingdom of God. There is no shame in that. This guy was open to hearing the Word of Jesus. The Bible doesn't say how the others responded to this dialogue. It simply says that no one else was courageous enough to ask another question. They were silenced. How awesome it would have been to have been in the crowd that day.

The teacher wasn't far from the kingdom of God. He wasn't there yet, but he didn't have far to go. He was a lover of truth, no doubt, and was interested in listening to the Words of the Man of Truth. Jesus would say, as John recorded, that He was the way, the truth, and the life. The man would now have to acknowledge that Jesus was the truth in order to enter the narrow gate and enter into life, eternal life. Jesus would quite often tell people to believe in Him if they wanted eternal life. I wonder if maybe this fellow became one of the early believers who were saved on



"Not Far Out"

March 5 - Mark 12: 28-44

Has Truth mattered to you for most of your life? Were you regularly raising your hand in class to ask for an explanation on some topic? Did you seek out things on your own, not willing to take

what you were hearing as the "for sure" truth? Or, have you been a "go with the crowd" kind of person? Maybe you didn't care much about what was true, but just skated through life waiting for the next experi-

the day of Pentecost in Acts Chapter 2. That day 3,000 were baptized into Christ. If he was one of the crowd that day can you imagine how he must have felt when he remembered his interaction with Jesus.

How can we become more interested in Truth? I think the more you hear about the truth and think about it for yourself the more likely you are to be captured by it. Maybe you are at a point where, like the teacher of the law, you are near the kingdom but have not entered through the gate yet. Jesus says that He is the gate in John Chapter 10. If you enter through Him you can find the kind of pasture that a well-fed sheep needs to not only survive but thrive. Jesus came not to help us in the survival of the fittest but to give us an abundant life, a life of service for Him.

On a scale of one to ten, ten being extremely motivated, how charged have you been lately about

walking in the truth?

If you are a seeker like the man in our reading, are you ready to cross the line of faith and enter through Him into eternal life? You can pray with me right now and receive the gift of eternal life which was purchased on the cross where Jesus died. "My Leader, Jesus, I pray you would forgive my sins and come into my life. Thank you Jesus for dying on the cross for me and rising from the dead so I can know you. I pray in Jesus' Name, Amen." If you prayed that prayer sincerely then you have just entered in at the narrow gate and enjoy the benefits of eternal life. Welcome into the kingdom!

God's blessings come to those in the kingdom of God,

Pastor Steve



"Pass Away"

March 6 - Mark 13: 1-31

A while ago a friend came to me and with despairing eyes told me that his dad had passed away. My heart really went out to him. I couldn't help thinking about my own dad who had also died some time ago. My friend was experiencing the loss and he was heartbroken. I prayed for him, but when we parted I still felt the emptiness that loss creates.

As a kid I could spin my mind by thinking very theoretically. I would reason: what if there were nothing? No people, no earth, no universe, no infinity, no nothing. What would be? Nothing? Well, the fact that we can reason like that tells us that there would have to be something. In those days I could also think about my parents passing away and would work myself into a pretty good depression. Loss is tough.

Interestingly enough, loss for a follower of Jesus

is actually gain. What we give up for the sake of Christ and His Word will come back as gain sooner or later. At some point in the disciples' travels with Jesus, Peter points out that they (the disciples) had left their comforts of home to walk with the Master. Jesus' response to him is that the sacrifice they were making would come back to them in a multitude of divine blessings both in the world and in the after-world. The apostle Paul saw his life in much the same way. He counted all "things" loss for the sake of knowing Christ. The "things" he refers to are all of the things that made him such a big shot in his pre-Christ years. He was more than willing to give them up because for him it meant intimacy with the Lord. Paul's attitude to those things: Good riddance!

One of the many meaningless pursuits of life on this planet is the pursuit of immortality. We live much

longer than we ever have. I know a few, just a small percentage, of people who are living into their 90s, but I have never had a meaningful conversation with someone in their 100s. Life for every single one of us will eventually pass away. Yet, so much of our time is spent pursuing the fountain of youth. We diet and exercise and take vitamins and read the latest research on maintaining our youthfulness, but the problem is the principle of entropy. It applies in the second law of thermodynamics and it applies to you and me—everything is winding down. Another way to look at it is everything is losing energy. Things are not evolving into higher and higher forms; actually, we are moving the other way.

Technology creates the illusion that we are progressing. But are we? It seems to me that the more technological we become the more harried we become. I have noticed this when it comes to cell phones. What do you do when you are having a face-to-face conversation with someone and your cell phone goes off? Let's say you are at lunch with a friend when the tones of interruption sound. How do you think your friend feels when you begin to carry on a conversation with someone who has just interrupted your meal together? I admit that I, like Pavlov's dog, have been guilty of this. Why I'm so tied to my phone I don't know. All I know is that I am not giving my friend the proper attention he deserves when I interrupt him to talk to someone about what are usually mundane matters.

Jesus says that the only thing remaining in the end will be His Words. Huh? Now that's an arrogant assertion. Do you mean that all of the wisdom of humanity from Plato to Dr. Phil will one day be superseded by the Words of Jesus? The heavens, and I take that

to mean all that is in them: the planets and stars and our atmosphere and comets and asteroids and black holes and everything else will one day be no more. The earth, and all that is associated with it: mankind, animal-kind, the wisdom of men, the "wonders" of man's ability to create architecture and technology, sexual relations and our mobile society; all will disappear. Along with all of that, there will be no more war or dominance or hatred; it will all be swallowed up when God clears the stage at the final act.

Peter talks about the final act in his last little epistle. He says that everything will be burned up. There will be a total annihilation of the current heavens and earth. In the light of this upcoming cataclysm Peter poses a moral question to the church: He says since all these things are going to come we need to think about what kind of persons we ought to be—spiritual and careful to be doing the will of God.

In John's gospel Jesus is called "the Word." Who He is gives us the full picture of who God is. His words are the Words of God. In the end all that will remain is the Word of God. Obviously too, those who do God's Word will remain as well and John says this in his first epistle: "...and the world passes away but he who does the will of God remains forever." So do you see how God's Word is such an important focal point for our lives? We need to see ourselves as in God's Word. Let's let the words of Christ dwell deeply in us. Let's treasure His words more than our daily bread. His Word and its contents will remain; all else will be blown away.

Three cheers for God's Word!!!

God's blessings in His Word will be eternal,
Pastor Steve



“Radical Worship”

March 7 - Mark 13:32 - 14:16

You can easily gauge how much you love something or somebody by the amount of time, treasure and energy you give. If you love golf, for example, you’ll probably spend quite a bit of money on clubs, memberships and/or green fees, other equipment like a good bag, club covers, waterproof shoes, rain gear, tees, and a host of other necessities. Golf also takes a great deal of time and energy. On a busy day on the course you could spend up to five hours to finish a round. If you walk the course, which is the best way to get some good exercise, you will be pretty beat by the end of the day. It would also be a good idea to get lessons from a professional, which will also cost you time, money and energy. You’ll have to hit countless numbers of range balls (practice balls) before you will see some steady improvement in your game. I think you get the picture.

I’m sure you have met up with someone who was gung-ho about some new hobby he had discovered. By the time you were done talking with him you’d have thought he believed his new adventure was the greatest thing since sliced bread. It’s all he can talk about. Someone was telling me recently about how goo-goo, ga-ga her daughter was about a new boyfriend. She giggled and acted undone when she described how taken she was with her new man. Any other subject was really meaningless. All she wanted to discuss was how nice he was and how handsome and how, well, you name it, it didn’t matter, this new dude ruled the world as far as she was concerned. She was obsessed.

I grew up in the era of discovery. We were encouraged to try new things and get involved in many pursuits. Some things were good, like scouts and sports and chess; and some things were detrimental like drinking and smoking and other stuff. It was “in” to explore. Constantly, and I mean constantly, someone was coming up with some new thing to tantalize

the rest of us until we joined in and discovered it too. It usually lasted for a short while and off we went into the next pursuit. We were on a constant watch for the best thing or coolest way or most fulfilling experience. And once we found “it,” “it” was all we talked about until the next thing came along. Truly, the heart of man is restless and is turned one way and then another like the waves of the sea. The only problem is that it is difficult to live that way when the things you give yourself to are shallow and ultimately unfulfilling.

When Jesus found me I couldn’t believe what I was getting into. My parents said that it was only a phase. My cousin, who was from a religious background, said she was once excited about it too but then she grew up. My sister and some friends said it sounded cool but it wasn’t for them. I really didn’t care and wasn’t swayed by the nay-sayers. I was into Jesus and He came into my life the night I surrendered to Him. You’ve probably gathered from reading my thoughts on the Bible that I love Jesus more than ever. I do. He is even more real to me now than He was back when I first was introduced to Him. Jesus died for me. How can I not raise my voice and say THANK YOU? There is no one like Jesus and no hobby, career, pursuit, goal, or any achievement that could even come close to the love of Jesus Christ. Did you know that the Bible says that God’s thoughts toward us, his meditations about each one of us, are more numera-ble than the sand on the seashore. God is awesome!!

When you love someone that much you’d do anything for Him. I think that is what motivated the woman at Simon’s house to pour a very expensive container of perfume on the Lord’s head. Picture it. The disciples are soaking up the accommodations and enjoying the hospitality of Simon, a leper whom Jesus had healed, when this woman breaks open the fragrant perfume. How could you not be taken aback by the act? Wouldn’t you be thinking, “What are you do-

ing?” But she is so caught up in worship that it doesn’t even occur to her that there would be any better use of the valuable substance. She was expressing just how much she valued Jesus.

Others’ reactions missed the point. You know how groups go, though. Someone—could it have been Judas?—probably led the rallying cry that the woman was a “waster.” That sounded like a logical explanation for what was happening. They forget who the Lord is for the moment and focus their rebuke on the woman. I wonder what the expression on her face looked like? Did she wince? Was she oblivious? Did she suddenly feel like she had made a mistake? Really, think about it, did it matter at that point? The deed was already done. She had already “wasted” the precious ointment and had filled the room with its odor.

Jesus immediately comes to her defense. He tells them to leave the woman alone. He accepts the act as worship and says that it is an anointing for His burial. His impending death was right around the corner, literally. Bethany was just a few miles from the Mount of Olives and the descent and hike back up to Jerusalem. Jesus’ sad words about His impending doom fell on deaf ears. The disciples didn’t recall these things until after the resurrection, and even then there were doubters.

The love of the woman would be memorialized from then on so that wherever the Word of the gospel was preached, what she had done would be mentioned. Think about what a privilege it must have been for her to be thought of in this way. Just a moment earlier she was possibly feeling shot down, and now she is sky high. Jesus will make you feel that way. Jesus believes in you and receives your worship when you do what you can. This same lesson is highlighted when the disciples and Jesus are watching people pay

their temple offering. Many were giving from their wealth, but the poor widow put in her two cents and that was all she had. Jesus said that she put in more than them all. She gave out of love until it hurt.

What do you love most? Rank the following options in order from one to ten of the things you love the most.

- ___ your car
- ___ your education
- ___ your home
- ___ your relationship with Christ
- ___ your friends
- ___ your ministry for Christ
- ___ your spouse
- ___ your favorite hobby
- ___ your kids
- ___ your _____

Does the way you marked the survey reflect your true priorities? Does it reflect where you put your time, money and energy?

I’ve got to go, I’m late for a tee time.

God’s blessings come to those whose priorities are for real,
Pastor Steve

**“What Does God Care?”**-----
March 8 - Mark 14: 17-42

There have been times in my life when I didn't think anyone cared. Have you ever been at that point? Are you feeling that way today? This can be especially pointed when we have recently been rejected by someone. Maybe we thought that something was developing between us and we found out that they really weren't interested. "Nobody loves me, everybody hates me, I guess I'll eat some worms." I'm not sure where that saying came from but it feels true every now and then.

How do you think Jesus felt after the Garden of Gethsemane experience when He saw the mob coming to arrest him, Judas in the forefront? Jesus arouses the disciples from their slumber to tell them that "His betrayer was at hand." He was about to feel the sting of betrayal. Not long before this He tells the disciples that they would all fall away as the prophet predicted. This would be a time of intense aloneness for the Lord.

Who hasn't felt the searing ache and pain of betrayal? I had a girlfriend in high school. "Bonnie" (that was her name) was someone I had longed to be in a relationship with even though I was aware that her mom was a psycho. When she broke up with her older, out of school, boyfriend I swooped down opportunistically. Bonnie said all the right things and I said all the right things and before you knew it we were holding hands down the hallways of Hawthorne High School. I was diggin' it. She seemed happy and all was right with the world.

Then it happened. The betrayal. I was down at the beach, Manhattan Beach, soaking in the rays and walking along the strand with a friend. We thought we'd go to Zippy's Pizza for a slice and a Coke. There she was, arm in arm, with him — the old guy! The adrenaline starting pumping and I threw over three tables of pizza and plates to get to him. I pulverized him as she squealed and carried on. Not really. Ac-

tually, when I saw her, I forgot about pizza and only wanted to get out of there ASAP. I ran to my car, put it in overdrive (did VW bugs have overdrive?) and was listening to the Stones and driving like a madman to her home to collect my stuff. You know, my records and stuff. That was the last time I ever interacted with Bonnie. I think she married the bum and lived happily ever after.

Insert your story here.

We all have them, don't we? Some, like Bonnie, are more benign than others. Some have faced the pain of betrayal with a couple of little kids in the mix. It isn't far off to describe the feeling as shattered glass. There's that feeling that nothing will repair what's happening in my life. It is broken and to fix it would be like putting shattered glass back together.

The prophet portrays the Christ as "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief." He knows firsthand how you feel. Not only that, in Hebrews the Bible says that He empathizes with our hurts. In other words, He enters into them with us and holds our hand and can truly "be there" because He has truly been there. He is not a God far off but a God who is near. That is why prayer is so significant. When you pray He is face to face with you spiritually. You can count on Him being with you in the fray.

As Jesus watched the band of captors coming early that morning He knew that what had begun in the garden was only the beginning of the end...and a new beginning. You see, what kept Him going was you and me. We were in His mind when He faced His trial, His passion. He would be betrayed, forsaken, tried, beaten, mocked, crowned with thorns, and spit on; He would be scourged and crucified by His own will. Jesus said that He was laying His life down for His sheep.

On the other hand, Jesus will never betray you or forsake you. You can count on Him through thick and thin. If you feel like you don't deserve it then you are

in a better position than if you think you deserve it. "... while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." He loves you more than you can fathom. God cares, after all. Which "god" in any other religious belief system

has done what Christ has done? Jesus has no rivals. God's blessings came at great expense,
Pastor Steve

**“The Passion”**-----
March 9 - Mark 14:43-72

Enter In To God's Promises Today,
"They all condemned him as worthy of death. Then some began to spit at him; they blindfolded him, struck him with their fists, and said, 'Prophecy!' And the guards took Him and beat Him" (Mark 14:64).

John's gospel says, "He came to His own and His own did not receive Him, but as many as received Him, to them He gave the authority to become sons of God" (1:12).

The very people Jesus came to help rejected Him. They didn't think they needed a spiritual physician. They didn't think they needed help to understand the Scripture or to experience the power of God. So Jesus made it clear to them that because they said that they could see, instead they were truly blind. Their spiritual blindness was the reason they could not see Jesus for who He was. And so they condemned Him.

It's important to understand that the priests had their own temple police. These law enforcement officers were responsible for maintaining the peace in matters related to Jewish affairs. Jesus was on their case list because of the claims He was making about Himself. For a man to declare Himself the eternal God was no less than blasphemy in the mind of a Jewish teacher. Therefore, when Jesus claimed to be the Messianic figure in Daniel 7, that was the last straw.

There was a unanimous vote to put Jesus to death. To them He was an impostor and a deceiver and worthy of death. I wonder what Nicodemus

was thinking. He had come to Jesus one evening to question Him about spiritual things. He showed that he thought Jesus must be a prophet because of the things He was doing. Besides, he reasoned, only God could do these good miracles. This was in contrast to the arguments of the others who tried to attribute Jesus' miracles to devil power.

Now that He was condemned, this opened the floodgate to humiliate Him. And so they spat on Him and beat Him. I have never been spat upon, have you? I couldn't imagine anything more debasing. Here before them is the King of kings, the Creator of heaven and earth, and they spit in His face. Awful! How horrible can you get? They beat Him like he was a rag doll being tossed around by a pit bull. As a matter of fact, Psalm 22 describes this time: "Many bulls encompass me; strong bulls of Bashan surround me; they open wide their mouths at me, like a ravening and roaring lion."

These are only the beginning of His sufferings. Do you suffer in some way(s)? Christ understands suffering. Do you know someone who is currently in the throes of suffering? It may be helpful for them to focus on Jesus and remember His suffering. Peter applied the sufferings of Jesus to the life of the church. He said, "Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God" (1

Peter 4: 1,2). What “way of thinking” is Peter referring to here? Could it be an identification with the sufferings of Jesus so that we do not see suffering as a bad thing but actually as a bridge to spiritual growth?

Over the years I have seen people go down two roads in times of suffering and difficulty. Some people are bitter and some are better. Some shake their fist at God and others bow a knee. Sometimes it softens a heart and in other cases it hardens the heart. It really matters if the person turns to Jesus or not. Once you see your own sufferings in the light of His sufferings it helps you to appreciate what He went through. Like Peter says, it removes us further and further from sins

that actually weigh us down.

Peter’s language is interesting. He uses the military term “arm” to make sure that we get the point. If we drift with the crowd the chances are that we will probably wallow in the mire of bitterness and regret. But, being armed with the knowledge of Christ’s sufferings, we will be able to endure the hurts of this life and find that the sufferings of this life aren’t even worthy to be compared to the glories in the afterlife with Christ (See Romans 8: 18).

God’s blessings come unexpectedly through identifying with Christ’s Passion,
Pastor Steve



“They Crucified Him”

March 10 - Mark 15: 1-32

God’s Ways Are Not Our Ways,
I’d like to include in our discussion of the crucifixion a bit of what the Old Testament says about the priest of the Lord who served in the temple of God. These priests were required to be separate from the rest of the people. They had specific duties in regard to the animal sacrifices that were required in those days. As a matter of fact, sacrifices were still being offered in Jesus’ day. The New Testament makes it crystal clear that Jesus is both our Great High Priest and our Sacrifice. He offered Himself. Let’s consider what He offered.

Throughout the Old Scriptures there is an emphasis on the holiness of God. That means God is separate from all that is sinful. He is different from the base nature of sin. He is above sin. Because of this He stressed that his priests be careful to treat the holy things as holy and not become slack in the way that they did what the Lord required them to do. One of my favorite verses in the New Testament is Hebrews 7:26, “For it was indeed fitting that we should have

such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens.” And so when Jesus offered Himself as a sacrifice for sins, He was both a holy priest and a holy offering. In other words, He was pure. He was the perfect once-for-all sacrifice for the sins of the world.

Jesus was crucified as a criminal. He was condemned. Many around the open and public cross were mouthing abusive statements his way. He was hanging between heaven and earth and between two thieves. It was a humiliating and disgusting scene. The sight and smell and trauma of the scene was sickening. The physical nature of the sufferings of the Lord is a whisper of the suffering He experienced emotionally and mentally and spiritually, when He received the weight of the sins of the world on His frame. If you’ve ever seen someone wincing in pain then you can probably imagine that the look on Jesus’ face at that point was brutally pathetic. The force of the sin and guilt He bore would have been beyond description.

Imagine the reaction of the audience at the cross.

The Roman soldiers were probably accustomed to seeing this kind of thing and didn’t pay much attention; as a matter of fact, they were gambling near the cross for Jesus’ tunic. The other gospels say that Mary, John and Mary Magdalene were there and they were certainly visibly shaken and weepy. There were priests and Bible experts who mocked Jesus. I can imagine there were curious onlookers who had seen Jesus do miracles and probably shook their heads at Him. The fact is that the crucifixion was a public spectacle. Jesus’ death was testified to by friend, family and foe alike. No one would step up later that first century and say that there really was no Jesus of Nazareth who died on a hill outside the city of Jerusalem. How could they? It was all done in open view.

Listen to the irony of this statement by a religious zealot or two at the cross: “He saved others,” they

said, “but he can’t save himself!” What would have been the result if Jesus had saved Himself? Then we couldn’t be saved. Jesus could have saved Himself, certainly, but He chose not to in order for the likes of us to be saved. Actually, in not saving Himself, He saved others. He was the Lamb of God.

“Thank you Jesus for going to the cross to save us from our sins. We are forever grateful that you gave your life for us. When ‘they crucified’ you, we received forgiveness of our sins and real spiritual life. Help us to live like forgiven and thankful people. We want to make the cross a part of our daily vocabulary both in our prayers of thankfulness and when we talk about you with others. We boast in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

God’s blessings are at the cross,
Pastor Steve



“They Buried Him”

March 11 - Mark 15: 33-47

Are you the kind of person who needs to see the evidence for a thing before you will accept it and believe it? Maybe you have been equipped with a skeptical attitude from birth. Were you always a “show me” kind of person?

If this is true of you, then you need to know that the burial of Jesus is the exclamation mark on the crucifixion. It is the bright highlighting over the famous last words, “it is finished.” The burial is the neon light shining on the finality of the crimson cross. It eliminates the “shadow of a doubt.” It is the capstone on the whole project of salvation.

Don’t forget that most criminals, once flogged, died right there. The brutal Roman whip would open the life right out of a person. The fact that Jesus made it alive to the cross was a wonder in and of itself. The spear to the side opened the floodgate of the last remaining trickle of life in the body that was offered as a

spotless sacrifice for the sins of the world.

In our reading we have the Roman centurion reporting that, indeed, Jesus was dead. The report surprised Pilate. Why? Probably because he saw a strength in Jesus that was far superior to any other man that he had crucified. Maybe he expected Jesus to somehow pull through. Possibly it was wishful thinking that maybe in defiance of his own conscience and common sense Jesus would endure the cross and survive the ordeal. He must have known that the chances of survival for even a short period of time were doubtful. It was true that the Romans were masters of torture. It was the way they dominated and controlled the people. They could injure a man within a foot of his life and then allow him to suffer in suspension between heaven and earth for hours and sometimes days.

On the other hand, the Romans would not allow

a prisoner to come down before death had been verified. The order was death and the order would be carried out. That he was buried was confirmation that the job had been done. Jesus was dead. There were no ifs, ands or buts about it.

When the gospel was spelled out in its most simplified essence Paul made sure that we would always remember that our salvation was solely dependent on the work of Christ. He said that Christ died in accordance with the Scripture, that He was buried and that He was raised according to the Scriptures on the third day from His cross. It doesn't appear that the burial was "according to the Scriptures." In other words, there wasn't a specific verse about the burial in the Old Scriptures like there was for the death and resurrection, but without a burial we cannot be sure about the two other events. The burial gives the death and resurrection validity and clout.

The burial is like a bridge. It spans the three day gap between death and life. Jesus' resting place was a new tomb, donated by a rich member of the Jewish council, cut in rock surrounded by gardens and probably not too far from Mount Calvary. It was sealed with a large stone, sealed with a Roman seal and guarded by proven soldiers. There was no miracle that first day, nor the second, but on the third day Jesus would raise Himself from the dead. He had said He would. The only obstacle was a cold dark tomb and a large stone sealing the entrance.

Our burial will be more like a door. When death comes we will knock on that door and enter into

spiritual life or spiritual death depending on where we placed our faith. If you believe in the poles opposite the tomb, that is, the death and resurrection, you will enter into life. If your faith is in self or things or others or anything other than the work of Christ on either side of that tomb, you will be lost. When we die the soul departs and the "body" slumbers until the final resurrection; but by that time our fate will already be sealed. That resurrection will only be a gateway to judgment for rewards and punishments.

When a Christian is baptized he goes under water to signify burial with Christ and he comes up out of the water to demonstrate the resurrection of Christ. The old cruddy man is buried with Christ and he is raised to newness of life. "If any man is in Christ he is a new creation."

As long as Jesus is buried all He has stood for is invalidated. He said quite a bit about His death and He mentioned that He'd be coming back to life. As long as you could point to His burial spot there would be no reason to trust His words. If some tried to start any kind of "Jesus movement" all you'd have to do is bring your friends to the tomb. "There is the body of the carpenter from Nazareth. He was killed at the hands of the religious leaders and the Romans. He is dead. It's over. He was good while He lasted but now He lies all alone within the confines of this tomb."

It will only be a few days and then the tomb will have a vacant sign.

God's blessings come to those buried with Christ,
Pastor Steve

Christ arose."

I used to sing that chorus in church with my family on Easter Sunday. My sister and I would have sworn those people were saying "...with a mighty triumph in His toes." We could never figure out how that was connected to the Easter story. It didn't matter anyway because for us Easter was about the Easter bunny and candy and hidden eggs and family dinners. We didn't know the man from Galilee who could do miracles.

Before we get to Luke's and John's resurrection accounts, I'd like to stop here and begin to explore the Old Testament basis for the resurrection of the Messiah. Mark's account is interesting, but brief, so I'd like to suspend discussion from here and go back several centuries to when the Holy Spirit was inspiring the writers of old so that we'd have an inkling of what would happen in the future. In another place Jesus says that David spoke by the Spirit when he penned the words we have recorded in the Psalms. So let's go back to those words and find the origination of resurrection thinking.

Crucifixion language is crystal clear in the Old Testament. You can turn to Psalm 22 or Isaiah 52 and 53 or Zechariah 13 and see vivid accounts of the cross of Christ. His passion is detailed there. Some ask how the Jews do not see this as a reference to their Messiah. The answer is that they view these verses as referring not to the individual Messiah but to their nation instead. They can still not fathom how the Messiah could be so weak as to allow crucifixion. Yet, they do not offer animal sacrifices to atone for their sins today. So how can they experience forgiveness of sins?

Resurrection language is not as forthright as the crucifixion. We need help from New Testament writers to give us the place to look. And Luke does in the book of Acts. He records some of the early sermons by the apostles. In these sermons, when there was a Jewish audience, the apostle would characteristically quote from the only known Scriptures at that time in order to prove his point about Jesus. The place where they'd go was Psalm 16.

"I bless the Lord who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me. I have set the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad, and

my whole being rejoices; my flesh also dwells secure. For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol (hell), or let your holy one see corruption. You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy, at your right hand are pleasures forevermore" (verses 7-11). There it is, tucked away right in the middle of a song of worship.

Let's make several observations. Christ was not abandoned by the Father. Even though He had borne the weight of the sins of the world and felt forsaken by God, He was not alone after death—the Father was with Him. Secondly, the "holy one" here, the "special, set apart one" is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ. In Acts one of the apostles calls Him "the holy child." Don't you love that! Thirdly, this special child would not see corruption. The body lying in the tomb would be invigorated with a spiritual blast, rise, and appear to many. Jesus always made it clear that He would rise in His body. It was not the spirit of Jesus or some kind of ghost that would appear. The Bible says, "So the Jews said to him, 'What sign do you show us for doing these things?' Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' The Jews then said, 'It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?' But he was speaking about the temple of his body. When therefore he was raised from he dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken" (John 2:18-22).

Fourthly, I am struck by the phrase "at the right hand." This, of course, means close in proximity and in purpose. If someone is at my right hand it means that they are one with me on whatever purposes we are attempting to achieve. You've heard people say that so-and-so was their "right hand man." This meant a close partner in whatever they wanted to achieve. The apostles use the verses in Psalm 16 to show that God was keeping the body of the Messiah free from corruption even though He was buried and had been brutally maimed. Remember that after the resurrection Jesus ascends to the Father in heaven and sits at His right hand until a future time when His enemies would be brought to submission under His footstool.

Fortunately for us, as Christ was raised so we also will one day be raised. The sea and the ground



"He Was Raised"

March 12 - Mark 16: 1-20

He Is Risen!!
"Up from the grave He arose, with a
mighty triumph over His foes;

He arose the victor from the dark domain and He
lives forever with
His saints to reign. He arose, He arose, hallelujah,

and every urn bearing the remains of believers will be opened and they all shall hear the last trumpet sound and they shall be raised incorruptible and reign with Christ forever.

Sometimes people will ask if we will recognize one another in heaven. Were the disciples able to recognize Jesus after His resurrection? We will be able

to identify one another in God's kingdom. At what age we will be known is irrelevant. We will be known as we are known (1 Corinthians 13).

God's blessings come to those resurrected in Jesus,

Pastor Steve