

# Mark

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## Mark 1

THE WRITER of this Gospel was that "John, whose surname was Mark," (Acts 15: 37), who failed in his service when with Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey, and who afterwards became a bone of contention between them. He first failed himself, and then became the occasion of further failure with others greater than himself. This was a sorry beginning to his story, but eventually he was so truly restored that he became serviceable to the Lord in the exalted work of writing the Gospel which presents the Lord Jesus as the perfect Servant of Jehovah, the true Prophet of the Lord.

He entitles his book, "Gospel" or "Glad Tidings" of "Jesus Christ, the Son of God," so from the very outset we are not allowed to forget who this perfect Servant is. He is the Son of God, and this fact is further enforced by the quotations from Malachi and Isaiah in verses 2 and 3, where the One whose way was to be prepared is seen to be Divine, even Jehovah Himself. The mission of the messenger, the one crying in the wilderness, is the very beginning of His glad tidings.

That messenger was John the Baptist, and in verses 4 to 8 we get a brief summary of his mission and testimony. The baptism that he preached signified repentance, for the remission of sins, and those who submitted to it came confessing their sins. They had to acknowledge they were all wrong. Very fittingly therefore John kept himself severely apart from the society that he had to condemn. In his clothes, in his food, and in his location, going out into the wilderness, he took a separate place.

Moses had *given* the law. Elijah had accused the people of their departure from it, and had *recalled* them to a fresh allegiance to it. John, though he came in the spirit and power of Elijah, did not urge them to keep it, but rather to *honestly confess* that they had utterly broken it. This prepared them

for his further message concerning the infinitely greater One who was just to come, who would baptise with the Holy Ghost. His baptism would be far greater than John's, just as personally HE was far above him. He who can thus pour forth the Holy Spirit cannot be less than God Himself.

The beginning of the Glad Tidings in the work of John being thus described, we are introduced next to the baptism of Jesus. This is condensed into verses 9 to 11. Here, as all through this Gospel, the utmost brevity and conciseness characterises the record. Jesus comes from Nazareth, the humble and despised place in Galilee, and submits to John's baptism; not because He had anything to confess, but because He would identify Himself with these souls who in repentance were making a move in the right direction. It was just then, ere He came forth in His public ministry, that Heaven's approbation of the perfect Servant was manifested, lest any should misinterpret His lowly baptism. The Spirit descended upon Him as a dove, and the Father's voice was heard declaring His Person and His perfection. The Servant of the Lord is Himself sealed with the Spirit; the dove being emblematic of purity and peace. Having become Man, He must receive the Spirit Himself; presently in His risen estate He will shed forth that Spirit as a baptism upon others. In that Spirit He went forth empowered to serve. It is also to be noticed that for the first time there was a dear revelation of the Godhead, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The first action of the Spirit in His case comes before us in verses 12 and 13. Coming forth to serve the will of God, He must be tested, and the Spirit thrusts Him forth to this. Here for the first time we find the word "immediately" which occurs so often in this Gospel, though it is sometimes rendered as "anon," "forthwith," "straightway." If service be rendered rightly it must be characterised by prompt obedience, hence we see our Lord as One who never lost a moment in His path of service.

He must be tested before He publicly serves, and the test takes place at once. When the first man appeared he was soon tested by the devil and he fell. The second Man has now appeared and He too shall be tested by the same devil. Only instead of being in a beautiful garden He is in the wilderness into which the first man had turned his garden. He was with beasts who were wild because of Adam's sin. He was tested for forty days, the full period of probation, and He emerged as Victor, for holy angels ministered to Him at the close.

No details as to the various temptations are given to us here; only the fact of it, the conditions under which it took place and the result. The Servant of the Lord is fully tested, and His perfection is made manifest. He is ready to serve. So in verse 14 John is dismissed from the story. The beginning of the Glad Tidings is over, and we plunge without further explanation into a brief record of His marvellous service.

His message is described as "the Gospel of the kingdom of God," and a very brief summary of its terms is found in verse 15. The kingdom of God had been spoken of in the Old Testament, notably in Daniel. In Daniel 9 a certain time had been set for the coming of Messiah and the fulfilment of the prophecy. The time was fulfilled, and in Himself the kingdom was near to them. He called upon men to repent and to believe this. With this proclamation He came into Galilee. For the moment He was alone in this service.

But He was not alone for long. Here and there His message was received and from the ranks of those who believed He began to call some who should be more closely associated with Him in His service, and in their turn become "fishers of men." He Himself was the great Fisher of men, as is revealed by the two incidents recorded in verses 16 to 20. He knew whom He would call to His service. Seeing the sons of Zebedee He called them "straightway," and it is said of the sons of Jonas that when He called them "straightway they forsook their nets and followed Him." As the great Servant of God,

He was prompt in issuing His call: as under-servants they were prompt to obey.

It is worthy of note that all four who were called were men of diligence in their work. Peter and Andrew were engaged in their fishing. James and John were not lolling about during their time of leisure. They were mending the nets.

In verse 16, "*He* walked," but in verse 21, "*they* went." The men whom He had called were now with Him, listening to His words and seeing His works of power. Entering Capernaum, He taught "straightway" on the sabbath, and *authority* marked His utterances. The scribes were mere retailers of the thoughts and opinions of others, falling back on the authority of great Rabbis of earlier times, so it was this note of authority which astonished the people. It was so distinct that they at once detected it. He was indeed that Prophet with the words of Jehovah in His mouth, of whom Moses had spoken in Deuteronomy 18: 18, 19.

And not only had He authority but also *power* — real dynamic force. This was manifested on the same occasion in His treatment of the man with an unclean spirit. Controlled by the demon, the man recognised Him as the Holy One of God yet thought of Him as One bent upon destruction. Thus challenged, the Lord revealed Himself to be the Deliverer and not the destroyer. It is the devil who is the destroyer, and hence the demon, who was his servant, did as much as he could in that line by tearing the poor man before he came out of him. He could not retain his grip upon his victim in the presence of the power of the Lord.

Again the people were filled with amazement. They now saw "authority" expressed in His work, as before they had felt it in His word. Their question therefore was two-fold: what *thing?* and what *new doctrine?* These two things must ever be kept together in the service of God. Word must be supported by work. When it is not thus, or when, even worse, our works contradict our words, our service is feeble or vain.

In His case both were perfect. His teaching was full of authority, and with equal authority He commanded obedience even from demons; hence His fame spread abroad with a promptness which was in keeping with the promptitude of His wonderful service for God in regard to man.

We have not yet finished with the activities of this wonderful day in Capernaum, for verse 29 tells us that having left the synagogue they entered into the house of Simon and Andrew. This they did "forthwith," — that same characteristic word, indicating promptness. There was no waste of time with our blessed Master, nor was there waste of time with His new followers, for they present to Him "anon" — the same word — the case of need in that house. Human need, the fruit of human sin met Him at every turn. It was as evident in the house of those who had become His followers as it had been in the synagogue, the local centre of their religious observances.

Demonic power was manifest in the religious circle, and disease in the domestic circle. He was more than equal to both. The demon left the man completely and at once. The fever left the woman with similar promptness, and no period of convalescence was necessary before she resumed her ordinary household duties. No wonder that very soon "all the city was gathered together at the door."

The picture presented in verses 32 to 34 is very beautiful. "At even, when the sun did set," the work of the day being over, the multitudes gathered bringing a great concourse of needy folk, and He dispensed the mercy of His healing power in all directions. He would permit no testimony to Himself to be uttered by the powers of darkness. The mercy and might displayed were sufficient witness to who it was that was serving amongst men. In his Gospel John tells us that there were many other things that Jesus did, which have not been put on record. Here some are indicated without details being given.

The story, as given to us by Mark, moves rapidly forward. Till late in the evening the work of mercy went on, and then long before day He rose up and sought solitude for prayer. We have just noted the authority and power of God's perfect Servant. Here we see His *dependence* upon God without which there can be no true service. The Servant must hang upon the Master, and though He who serves is "Son," HE does not dispense with this feature: rather He is the highest expression of it in perfect obedience. We read that He learned obedience "by the things that He suffered" (Heb. 5: 8); and this word doubtless covers all His pathway here and not merely the closing scenes of suffering of a more physical sort.

What a voice this has for all who serve, no matter how small our service! His day was so full of activity that He took a large part of the night for prayer: *and He was the Son of God*. Much of our powerlessness is occasioned by our lack in the matter of solitary prayer.

The next four verses (36-39) show us the *devotedness* of God's Servant. Simon and others appear to have regarded His retirement as unaccountable diffidence, or perhaps as a waste of valuable time. All were seeking for Him, and He seemed to be missing this tide of popularity. But popularity was by no means His object. He had come forth in service to preach the Divine message, and so regardless of popular feeling He went on with His service through the towns of Galilee. He devoted Himself to the mission with which He had been entrusted.

And now, in the closing verses of this first chapter, we have a lovely picture of the *compassion* of this perfect Servant of God. He is approached by a leper, in body about as loathsome a specimen of humanity as can be. The poor fellow had some faith, but it was defective. He was confident of His power, but had doubts as to His grace. We should have been moved with disgust, considerably tinged with indignation at the aspersion cast upon our kindly feelings. He was moved with compassion. *Moved* with it, mark you! Not only did He view this miserable specimen with compassionate love but He acted. The deep fountain of Divine love within Him rose up and overflowed. With His hand He touched him and with His lips He spoke, and the man was healed.

There was no actual need that He should touch him, for the Lord cured many a desperate case at a distance. No Jew would have dreamt of touching him and thus contracting defilement, but the Lord did so. He was beyond all possibility of defilement, and His touch was one of sympathy as well as of power. It confirmed His word, "I will," and removed all doubt of His willingness from the man's mind for ever.

Again we see how our Lord did not court popular enthusiasm and notoriety. His instruction to the man was that he should allow the testimony to his cure to flow in the channel indicated by Moses. He however, filled with delight did the very thing he had been told not to do, and as a consequence for some days the Lord had to shun the cities and dwell in desert places. Very few things stir up human interest and excitement more than miraculous healing, but He was seeking spiritual results. There are modern healing movements which create considerable excitement in spite of the fact that their so-called "healings" are very unlike our Lord's. The actors in these movements most certainly do not retreat from the blaze of publicity, but rather delight in it.

## Mark 2

THIS CHAPTER OPENS with another work of power that took place in a private house, when after some time He was again in Capernaum. This time faith of a very robust type comes into view, and that, remarkably enough, on the part of friends and not on the part of the sufferer. The Lord was again

preaching the Word. That was His *main* service; the healing work was *incidental*.

The four friends had faith of the sort that laughs at impossibilities, and says, "It shall be done," and Jesus saw it. He dealt instantly with the *spiritual* side of things, granting forgiveness of sins to the paralysed man. This was but blasphemy to the reasoning scribes who were present. They were right enough in their thought that no one but God can forgive sins, but they were wholly wrong in not discerning that God was present amongst them and speaking in the Son of Man. The Son of Man was on earth, and on earth He has authority to forgive sins.

The forgiveness of sins however is not something which is visible to the eyes of men; it must be accepted by faith in the Word of God. The instantaneous healing of a bad case of bodily infirmity is visible to the eyes of men, and the Lord proceeded to perform this miracle. They could no more release the man from the grip of his disease than they could forgive his sins. Jesus could do both with equal ease. He did both, appealing to the miracle in the body as proof of the miracle as to the soul. Thus He puts things in their right order. The spiritual miracle was primary, the bodily was only secondary.

Here again the miracle was instantaneous and complete. The man who had been utterly helpless suddenly arose, picked up his bed and walked forth before them all in a fashion that elicited glory to God from all lips. The Lord commanded and the man had but to obey, for the enabling went with the command.

This incident which emphasises the spiritual object of our Lord's service is followed by the call of Levi, afterwards known to us as Matthew the publican. The call of this man to follow the Master exemplifies the mighty *attraction* of His word. It was one thing to call lowly fishermen from their nets and toil: it was another to call a man of means from the congenial task of scooping in the cash. But He did it with two words. "Follow Me," fell upon Levi's ears with such power that he "arose and followed Him." God grant that we may feel the power of those two words in our hearts!

What a wonderful glimpse we have been granted of the Servant of the Lord, His promptitude, His authority, His power, His dependence, His devotedness, His compassion, His refusal of the popular and superficial in favour of the spiritual and the abiding; and lastly, His mighty attractiveness.

Having risen up to follow the Lord, Levi soon declared his discipleship in a practical fashion. He entertained his new-found Master in his house together with a large number of publicans and sinners, displaying thus something of the Master's spirit. He exchanged his "sitting at the receipt of custom," for the dispensing of bounty, so that others might sit at his board. He began to fulfil the word, "He hath dispersed, he hath given to the poor," (Ps. 112: 9), and that evidently without having been told to do so. He began showing hospitality to his own set in order that they too might meet the One who had won his heart.

In this he is an excellent pattern for ourselves. He began to expend himself for others. He did the thing which most readily came to his hand. He gathered to meet the Lord those who were needy, and who knew it, rather than those who were religiously self-satisfied. He had discovered that Jesus was a Giver, who was seeking for such as should be receivers.

All this was observed by the self-satisfied Scribes and Pharisees, who voiced their objection in the form of a question to His disciples. Why did He consort with such low-down and degraded folk? The disciples had no need to answer, for He took up the challenge Himself. His answer was complete and satisfying and has become almost a proverbial saying. The sick need the doctor, and sinners need the Saviour. Not the righteous but the sinners He came to call.

The Scribes and Pharisees may have been well versed in the law but they had no understanding of

grace. Now He was the Servant of the grace of God, and Levi had caught a glimpse of this. Have we? Far more than Levi we ought to have done so, inasmuch as we live in the moment when the day of grace has reached its noontide. Yet it is possible for us to feel a bit hurt with God because He is so good to folk that we would like to denounce, as Jonah did in the case of the Ninevites, and as the Pharisees did with the sinners. The great Servant of the grace of God is at the disposal of *all that need Him*.

The next incident — verses 18 to 22 — discloses the objectors again at work. Then they complained of the Master to the disciples: now it is of the disciples to the Master. They evidently lacked courage to come face to face. This oblique method of fault-finding is very common: let us forsake it. In neither case did the disciples have to answer. When the Pharisees maintained the exclusiveness of law, He met them by asserting the expansiveness of grace, and He silenced them. Now they wish to put upon the disciples the bondage of law, and He most effectively asserts the liberty of grace.

The parable or figure that He used plainly inferred that He Himself was the Bridegroom — the central Person of importance. His presence governed everything, and ensured a wonderful fulness of supply. Presently He would be absent and then fasting would be appropriate enough. Let us take note of this, for we live in the day when fasting is a fitting thing. The Bridegroom has long been absent, and we are waiting for Him. At the moment when the Lord spoke the disciples were in the position of a godly remnant in Israel receiving the Messiah when He came. After Pentecost they were baptised into one body, and were built into the foundations of that city which is called "the Bride, the Lamb's wife" (Rev. 21: 9). Then they had the place of the Bride rather than that of the children of the bridechamber; and that position is ours today. This only makes it yet more clear that not feasting but fasting is fitting for us. Fasting is abstaining from lawful things in order to be more wholly for God, and not merely abstinence from food for a certain fume.

The Pharisees were all for maintaining the law intact. The danger for the disciples, as after events proved, was not so much that as attempting a mixture of Judaism with the grace which the Lord Jesus brought. The law system was like a worn-out garment, or an old wine skin. He was bringing in that which was like a strong piece of new cloth, or new wine with its powers of expansion. In the Acts we can see how the old outward forms of the law gave way before the expansive power of the Gospel.

Indeed we see it in the very next incident with which chapter 2 closes. Again the Pharisees come, complaining of the disciples to the Master. The offence now was that they did not exactly fit their activities into the "old bottle" of certain regulations concerning the sabbath. The Pharisees pushed their sabbath-keeping so far that they condemned even rubbing ears of corn in the hand, as though it were working a mill. They contended for a very rigid interpretation of the law in these minor matters. They were the people who kept the law with meticulous care, whilst they considered the disciples to be slack.

The Lord met their complaint and defended His disciples by reminding them of two things. First, they should have known the Scriptures, which recorded the way in which David had once fed himself and his followers in an emergency. That which ordinarily was not lawful was permitted in a day when things were out of course in Israel because of the rejection of the rightful king. 1 Samuel 21 tells us about it. Once again things were out of course and the rightful King about to be refused. In both cases needs connected with the Lord's Anointed must be held to override details connected with the ceremonial demands of the law.

Second, the sabbath was instituted for man's benefit, and not the reverse. Hence man takes precedence of the sabbath; and the Son of man, who holds dominion over all men, according to Psalm

8, must be Lord of the sabbath, and hence competent to dispose of it according to His will. Who were the Pharisees to challenge His right to do this? — even though He had come amongst men in the form of a Servant.

The Lord of the sabbath was amongst men and He was being refused. Under these circumstances the solicitude of these sticklers for the ceremonial law was out of place. Their "bottles" were worn out, and unable to contain the expansive grace and authority of the Lord. The sabbath "bottle" breaks before their very eyes.

### Mark 3

THE PHARISEES HOWEVER were by no means convinced, and they re-opened the whole question a little later when on another sabbath He came into contact with human need in one of their synagogues. The conflict raged around the man with a withered hand. They watched Jesus anticipating that they would be furnished with a point of attack. He accepted the challenge which lay unspoken in their hearts by saying to the man, "Stand forth" (v. 3), thus making him very prominent, and ensuring that the challenge should be realised by everyone present.

Another point concerning the sabbath is now raised. Is the law intended of God to prohibit good as well as evil? Does the sabbath render unlawful an act of mercy?

The question, "Is it lawful to do good . . . or to do evil?" may be connected with James 4: 17. If we know the good and yet omit it, it is sin. Should the perfect Servant of God, who knew the good, and moreover had full power to execute it, withhold His hand from doing it because it happened to be the sabbath day? Impossible!

In this striking way did the holy Servant of God vindicate His ministry of mercy in the presence of those who would have tied His hands by rigid interpretations of the law of God. It is important that we should learn the lesson taught by all this, in case we should fall into a like error. The "law of Christ" is very different in character and spirit from "the law of Moses," yet it may be misused in similar fashion. If the light and easy yoke of Christ is so twisted as to become burdensome, and also a positive hindrance to the outflow of grace and blessing, it becomes a more grievous perversion than anything we see in these verses.

The hearts of the Pharisees were hard. They were tender enough about the technicalities of the law, but hard as to any concern for human need, or any sense of their own sin. Jesus saw the dreadful state they were in and was grieved, but He did not withhold blessing. He cured the man, and left them to their sin. They were outraged because He had broken through one of their precious legal points. They went forth themselves to outrage one of the major counts of the law by plotting murder. Such is Phariseeism!

Faced by this murderous hatred, the Lord withdrew Himself and His disciples. We see Him withdrawing Himself from the blaze of popularity at the end of chapter 1. He did not court favour, nor did He desire to stir up strife. Here we find the perfect Servant acting in just the way that is enjoined upon the under servants in 2 Timothy 2: 24.

But such was His attractiveness that men pressed upon Him even as He withdrew. Multitudes thronged about Him, and His grace and power were manifested in many directions, and unclean spirits recognized in Him the Master whom they had to obey, though He did not accept their testimony. He blessed men and delivered them, yet He did not seek anything from them. First He had a small boat on the lake into which He could retire from the throng; and then He went up into a mountain, where He

called to Him only those that He desired, and of them He chose twelve who were to be apostles.

So not only did He answer the hatred of the religious leaders by retiring from them, but also by calling the twelve who in due time should go forth as an extension of His matchless service. He prepared thus to widen out the service and testimony. The chosen twelve were to be with Him, and then, when their period of instruction and preparation was complete, He would send them forth. The period of their training lasts until verse 6 of Mark 6. In verse 7 of that chapter we begin the account of their actual sending forth.

This being "with Him" is of immense importance to the one called to service. It is as necessary for us as it was for them. They had His presence and company upon earth. We have not that, but we have His Spirit given to us and His written Word. Thus we may be enabled prayerfully to maintain contact with Him, and gain that spiritual education which alone fits us to intelligently serve Him. The twelve were first chosen, then educated, then sent forth with power conferred upon them. This is the divine order, and we see these things set forth in verses 14 and 15.

Having called and chosen the twelve upon the mountain, He returned to the haunts of men and was in an house. At once the multitudes came together. The attraction He exerted was irresistible, and the demands upon Him such that there was no leisure for meals. So the first thing to be witnessed by the twelve when they began to be with Him was this strong tide of interest and the apparent popularity of their Master.

They soon however saw another side of things, and firstly that He was totally misunderstood by those who were nearest to Him according to the flesh. The "*friends*" were of course His relations, and they were filled doubtless with well-meaning concern for Him. They could not understand such incessant labours and felt they ought to lay a restraining hand upon Him as though He were out of His mind. Light upon this extraordinary attitude on their part is cast by John 7: 5. At this point in His service His brethren did not believe in Him, and apparently even His mother had as yet but a dim conception of what He was really doing.

But secondly, there were *enemies*, who were becoming even more bitter and unscrupulous. In verse 6 of our chapter we saw Pharisees making friends with their antagonists the Herodians in order to plot His death. Now we find scribes making a journey from Jerusalem in order to oppose and denounce Him. This they do in the most reckless way, attributing His works of mercy to the power of the devil. It was not just vulgar abuse, but something deliberate and crafty. They could not deny what He did, but they attempted to blacken His character. They looked His miracles of mercy full in the face, and then deliberately and officially pronounced them to be the works of the devil. This was the character of their blasphemy, and it is well to be quite clear about it in view of the Lord's words in verse 29.

But first of all He called them to Him and answered them by an appeal to reason. Their blasphemous objection involved an absurdity. They suggested in effect that Satan was engaged in casting out Satan, that his kingdom and house was divided against itself. That, if it were true, would mean the end of the whole Satanic business. Satan is far too astute to act in that way.

We must admit, alas! that we Christians have not been too astute to act in that way. Christendom is full of division of that suicidal kind, and it is Satan himself who, without a doubt, is the instigator of it. Had it not been that the power of the Lord Jesus on high has remained unaltered, and that the Holy Ghost abides, dwelling in the true church of God, the public confession of Christianity would long since have perished. That the faith has not perished from the earth is a tribute not to the wisdom of men but to the power of God.

Having exposed the foolish unreasonableness of their words, the Lord proceeded to give the true explanation of what had been happening. He was the One stronger than the strong man, and He was now occupied in spoiling his goods, by setting free many who had been captivated by him. Satan was bound in the presence of the Lord.

Thirdly, He plainly warned these wretched men as to the enormity of the sin they had committed. The perfect Servant had been delivering men from Satan's grip in the energy of the Holy Ghost. In order to avoid admitting this they denounced the action of the Holy Ghost as the action of Satan. This was sheer blasphemy; the blind blasphemy of men who shut their eyes to the truth. They put themselves beyond forgiveness with nothing but eternal damnation ahead. They had reached that fearful state of hardened hatred and blindness which once characterized Pharaoh in Egypt, and which at a later date marked the northern kingdom of Israel, when the word of the Lord was, "Ephraim is joined to idols: let him alone" (Hosea 4: 17). God would leave these Jerusalem scribes alone, and that meant no forgiveness but damnation.

This then was the unpardonable sin. Understanding what it really is, we can easily see that the folk of tender conscience, who today are troubled because they fear they may have committed it, are the last people who really have done so.

The chapter closes with the arrival of the friends of which verse 21 has told us. The Lord's words as to His mother and His brethren have seemed to some unnecessarily harsh. There certainly was in them a note of severity, which was occasioned by their attitude. The Lord was seizing the opportunity to give needed instruction to His disciples. They had seen Him in the midst of much labour, and apparently popular; and also the centre of blasphemous opposition. Now they are to have an impressive demonstration of the fact that the relationships that God recognizes and honours are those which have a *spiritual* basis.

Of old, in Israel, relationships in the flesh counted for much. Now they are to be set on one side in favour of the spiritual. And the basis of what is spiritual lies in *obedience* to the will of God: and for us today the will of God lies enshrined in the Holy Scriptures. Obedience is the great thing. It lies at the foundation of all true service, and must mark us if we would be in relation with the one true and perfect Servant. Let us never forget that!

## Mark 4

THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER ends with the Lord's solemn declaration that the relationships He was now going to recognize were those that had a spiritual basis in obedience to the will of God. This statement of His must necessarily have raised in the minds of the disciples some questions as to *how* they might know what the will of God is. As we open this chapter we find the answer. It is *by His word*, which conveys to us tidings of what He is, and of what He has done for us. Out of these things His will for us springs.

There were still great multitudes waiting upon Him, so that He taught them out of a ship; but it was at this point that He commenced speaking in parables. The reason for this is given in verses 11 and 12. The leaders of the people had already rejected Him, as the last chapter has made manifest, and the people themselves were in the main unmoved, save by curiosity and the love of the sensational, and of "the loaves and fishes." As time went on they would veer round, and support the leaders in their murderous hostility. The Lord knew this, so He began to cast His teaching in such a form as should reserve it for those who had ears to hear. He speaks in verse 11 of "them that are without."

This shows that already a breach was becoming manifest, and those "within" could be distinguished from those "without." Those within could see and hear with perception and understanding, and so the "mystery" or "secret" of the kingdom of God became plain to them. The rest were blind and deaf, and the way of conversion and forgiveness was being closed to them. If people *will not* hear, a time comes when they *cannot*. The people wanted a Messiah who should bring them worldly prosperity and glory. They had no use, as events proved, for a Messiah who brought them the kingdom of God in the mysterious form of conversion and forgiveness of sins.

We have the kingdom of God today in just this mysterious form, and we enter it by conversion and forgiveness, for thus it is that the authority of God is established in our hearts. We are still waiting for the kingdom in its displayed glory and power.

The first parable of this chapter is that of the sower, the seed, and its effects. Having uttered it He closed with the solemn words, "He that hath ears to hear, let him hear." The possession of hearing ears, or their absence, would indicate at once whether a man belonged to the "within" or to the "without." The mass of His listeners evidently thought it was a pretty story and pleasant to the ear, but left it at that, showing they were *without*. Some others, along with the disciples, were not content with this. They wanted to arrive at its inner meaning, and pushed their enquiries further. They belonged to the *within*.

The Lord's word in verse 13 shows that this parable of the sower must be understood or His other parables will not be intelligible to us. It holds the key which unlocks the whole series. The Lord Jesus, when He came, brought in the first place a supreme test to Israel. Would they receive the well-beloved Son, and render to God the fruit that was due under the cultivation of the law? It was becoming evident that they would not. Well then, a second thing should be inaugurated. Instead of *demanding* anything from them He would sow the Word, which in due season, in some cases at least, would *produce* the fruit that was desired. This the parable indicates, and unless we grasp its significance we shall not understand that which subsequently He has to say to us.

The Lord Himself was the Sower, without a doubt, and the Word was the Divine testimony that He disseminated, for the "so great salvation . . . at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard Him" (Heb. 2: 3). In John's Gospel we discover that Jesus is the Word. Here He sows the word. Who could sow it like He who was it? But even when *He* sowed the word, not every grain that He sowed fructified. In only one case out of the four was fruit produced.

It is equally certain that the parable applies in its principles to all those under-sowers who have gone forth with the word as sent by Him, from that day to this. Every sower of the seed therefore must expect to meet with all these varieties of experience, as indicated in the parable. The imperfect servants of today cannot expect better things than those which marked the sowing of the perfect Servant in His day. The seed was the same in each case. All the difference lay in the state of the ground on which the seed fell.

In the case of the wayside hearers the word got no entrance at all. Their hearts were like the footpath well trodden down. There was not even a surface impression made, and Satan by his many agents completely removed the word. Their case was one of complete *indifference*.

The stony ground hearers are the impressionable yet superficial folk. They respond to the word at once with gladness, but are quite insensible as to its real implications. It was said of true converts that they "received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Ghost" (1 Thess. 1: 6). This affliction, which preceded their gladness, was the result of their being awakened to their sin under the convicting power of the word. The stony ground hearer skips over the affliction, because *insensible* of his real

need, and lands himself into a merely superficial gladness, which fades in the presence of testing; and he fades with it.

The thorny ground hearers are the *pre-occupied* people. The world fills their thoughts. If poor, they are swamped in its cares: if rich, in its riches and the pleasures that riches bring. If neither poor nor rich, there are the lusts of other things. They have climbed out of poverty, and they lust for more of the good things of the world that seem to be coming within their reach. Engrossed by the world, the word is choked.

The good ground hearers are such as not only hear the word but receive it and bring forth fruit. The ground has come under the action of plough and harrow. Thus it has been *prepared*. Even so, however, all good ground is not equally fertile. There may not be the same amount of fruit; but fruit there is.

There was great instruction for the disciples in all this, and for us also. Presently He was going to send them forth to preach, and then they too would become sowers. They must know that it was the word they had to sow, and also what to expect when they sowed it. Then they would not be unduly affected when much of the seed sown appeared to be lost; or when, some result appearing, it faded away after a time; or even when, fruit appearing, there was not as much fruit as they had hoped for. If we know what is being aimed at on the one hand, and what to expect on the other, we are greatly fortified and strengthened in our service.

We must remember that this parable applies just as much to the sowing of the seed of the word in the hearts of saints as in the hearts of sinners. So let us meditate upon it with hearts very much exercised as to *HOW we ourselves receive the word that we may hear*, as well as to how others may receive the word that we present to them.

In verses 21 and 22 there follows the brief parable of the candle, and then in verse 23 another warning word as to having ears to hear. At first sight the transition from seed sown in the field to a candle lit in a house may seem incongruous and disconnected, but, if indeed we have ears to hear, we shall soon see that in their spiritual significance both parables are congruous and connected. When the word of God is received into an exercised and prepared heart it brings forth *fruit* that God appreciates, and also *light* that is to be seen and appreciated of men.

No candle is lit in order to be hid under a bushel or a bed. It is to shed its beams abroad from the candlestick. The second part of verse 22 is rather striking in the New Translation, "nor does any secret thing take place but that it should come to light." The work of God in the heart by His word does take place *secretly*, and the eye of God discerns the fruit as it begins to appear. But in due season the secret thing that has taken place *must* come to *light*. Every true conversion is like the lighting of a fresh candle.

The bushel may symbolize the business of life, and the bed the ease and pleasure of life. Neither must be permitted to hide the light, just as the cares and the riches and the "other things" should not be permitted to choke the seed that is sown. Have we ears to hear this? Are we letting the light of our little candle to shine? There is nothing hidden which shall not be made manifest, so it is quite certain that if a light has been lit it is bound to shine out. If nothing is manifested, it is because there is nothing to manifest.

This parable is followed by the warning as to what we hear. The dealings of God in His government of men enter into this matter. As we measure things out, so things will be measured out to us. If we really do hear the word in such a way as to enter into possession of it, we shall gain more. If

we do not, we shall begin to lose even that which we had. In Luke 8: 18, we get similar sayings connected with "how" we hear. Here they stand connected with "what" we hear.

*How* we hear is emphasized in the parable of the sower, but *what* we hear is at least of equal importance. Not a few have had taken from them even that which they had by lending their ears to error. They heard, and heard very attentively, but, alas! what they heard was not the truth, and it perverted them. If through our ears error is sown in our hearts, it will bring forth its disastrous crop, and the government of God will permit it, and not prevent it.

Verses 26 to 29 are occupied with the parable concerning God's secret work. A man sows the seed, and when the harvest is ripe he gets again to work, putting in the sickle to reap. But as to the actual growth of the seed from its earliest stages to the full fruition, he can do nothing. For many a week he sleeps and rises, night and day, and the processes of nature, which God has ordained, silently do the work though he does not understand them. "He knoweth not how," is true today. Men have pushed their investigations very far, but the real *how* of the wonderful processes, carried on in God's great workshop of nature, still eludes them.

So it is in what we may term God's spiritual workshop, and it is just as well for us to remember it. Some of us are very anxious to analyze and describe the exact processes of the Spirit's work in souls. These hidden things sometimes exert a great fascination over our minds, and we wish to master the whole process. It cannot be done. It is our happy privilege to sow the seed, and also in due season to put in the sickle and reap. The workings of the word in the hearts of men are secretly accomplished by the Holy Spirit. His work of course is perfect.

Imperfection always marks the work of men. If permitted, as we are, to have a hand in the work of God, we bring imperfection into that which we do. The next parable, occupying verses 30 to 32, shows this. The kingdom of God today exists vitally and really in the souls of those who by conversion have come under God's authority and control. But it may also be viewed as a more external thing, to be found wherever men profess to acknowledge Him. The one is the kingdom as established by the Spirit. The other the kingdom as established by men. This latter has become a great and imposing thing in the earth, extending its protection to many "fowls of the air;" and what they signify we have just seen — in verses 4 and 15 — agents of Satan.

This closing parable of the series was full of warning for the disciples, as the others were full of instruction. They were with Him and being educated before being sent forth on their mission. We have seen at least seven things: —

1. That the present work of the disciple is in its nature, *sowing*.
2. That what is to be sown is, *the word*.
3. That the results of the sowing are to be classified under four heads; in only *one* case is there *fruit*, and that in *varying degrees*.
4. That the word produces *light* as well as fruit, and that light is to be manifested publicly.
5. That the disciple is himself a hearer of the word as well as a sower of the word, and in that connection must take care *what* he hears.
6. That the working of the word in souls is *God's work* and not ours. Our work is the sowing and the reaping.
7. That as man's work does enter into the present work of extending the kingdom of God, evil

will gain an entrance. The kingdom, viewed as man's handiwork, will result in something *imposing yet corrupt*. This is the solemn warning, which we have to take to heart.

There were many other parables spoken by the Lord, yet not put on record for us. The others, spoken to the disciples and expounded to them, were doubtless very important for them in their peculiar circumstances, but not of the same importance for us. Those that were of importance for us are recorded in Matthew 13.

With verse 34 His teachings end, and from verse 35 to the end of Mark 5 we resume the record of His wonderful acts. The disciples needed to observe closely what He did and His way of acting, as well as to hear the teachings of His lips. And so do we.

The crowd, who had listened to these sayings of His but without understanding them, was now dismissed, and they crossed to the other side of the lake. It was evening and He was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The lake was noted for the sudden and violent storms that disturbed it, and one of special violence arose, threatening to swamp the boat. Satan is "the prince of the power of the air," and therefore we believe that his power lay behind the raging forces of nature. At once therefore the disciples were confronted with a test and a challenge. Who was this Person who lay asleep in the stern?

Could Satan wield the forces of nature in such a way as to sink a boat in which was reposing the Son of God? But the Son of God is found in Manhood, and He sleeps! Well, what does that matter? — seeing He is the Son of God. The action of the adversary, raising the storm while He slept, was indeed a challenge. As yet, however, the disciples realized these things very dimly, if at all. Hence they were filled with fear as the resources of their seamanship were exhausted: and they roused Him with an unbelieving cry, which cast a slur upon His kindness and love, though showing some faith in His power.

He arose at once in the majesty of His power. He rebuked the wind, which was the more direct instrument of Satan. He told the sea to be quiet and still, and it obeyed. Like a boisterous hound which lies down humbly at its master's voice, so the sea lay down at His feet. He was the complete Master of the situation.

Having thus rebuked the forces of nature, and the power that lay behind them, He turned to administer gentle rebuke to His disciples. Faith is *spiritual sight*, and as yet their eyes were hardly opened to discern who He was. Had they but realized a little of His proper glory they would not have been so fearful. And having witnessed this display of His power they were still fearful, and still questioning as to what manner of man He was. A Man who can command winds and sea, and they do His will, is obviously no ordinary Man. But, who is He? — that is the question.

No disciple can go forth to serve Him until that question is answered and thoroughly settled in his soul. Hence before He sends them forth there must be further exhibitions of His power and grace before their eyes, as recorded for us in chapter 5.

We too, in our day, must be fully assured who He is, before we attempt to serve Him. The question, What manner of Man is this? is a very insistent one. Until we can answer it very rightly and very clearly we must be still.

## Mark 5

THE CONVICTION, as to "what manner of Man" the Lord Jesus is, once having been reached by faith, it carries with it the assurance that He must be equal to meeting every emergency. Yet, even

so, it is well for the disciple to actually see Him dealing with men, and with the troubles that have come upon them by reason of sin, in His delivering mercy. In this chapter we see the Lord displaying His power, and thereby educating His disciples still further. That education may be ours also as we go over the record.

While crossing the lake, the power of Satan had been at work hidden behind the fury of the tempest: on arriving at the other side it became very manifest in the man with an unclean spirit. Defeated in his more secret workings, the adversary now gives an open challenge without loss of time, for the man met Him immediately He landed. It was a kind of test case. The devil had turned the wretched man into a fortress that he hoped to hold at all costs; and into the fortress he had flung a whole legion of demons. If ever a man was held in hopeless captivity to the powers of darkness, it was he. In his story we see mirrored the plight into which humanity has sunk under Satan's power.

He "had his dwelling among the tombs:" and men today live in a world that is more and more becoming a vast graveyard as generation after generation passes into death. Then, "no man could bind him," for fetters and chains had often been tried to no purpose. He was beyond restraint. So today there are not lacking movements and methods intended to curb the bad propensities of men, to restrain their more violent actions, and reduce the world to pleasantness and order. But all in vain.

Then, with the demoniac another thing was tried. Could not his nature be changed? It is stated however, "neither could any man tame him;" so that idea proved useless. Thus it has always been: there is no more power in men to *change* their natures than there is to *curb* and *repress* them, so that they do not act. "The carnal mind . . . is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be" (Rom. 8: 7), so it cannot be restrained. Again, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh" (John 3: 6), no matter what attempts may be made to improve it. So it can not be altered or changed.

"Always, night and day, he was in the mountains and in the tombs," — utterly restless — "crying," — utterly miserable — "cutting himself with stones," — damaging himself in his madness. What a picture!

And we must add, what a *characteristic* picture of man under the power of Satan. This was an exceptional case, it is true. Satan's grip on the majority is of a gentler sort, and the symptoms are much less pronounced; still they are there. The cry of humanity may be heard, as men damage themselves by their sins.

When the man spoke, the words were framed by his lips, but the intelligence behind them was that of the demons who controlled him. *They knew* what manner of Man the Lord was, even if others did not. On the other hand they did *not* know the manner of His service. There will indeed be an hour when the Lord will consign these demons along with Satan their master into torment, but that was not His work at that moment. Much less was it the manner of His service at that time in regard to men. To the demoniac Jesus came, bringing not torment but *deliverance*.

The Lord had bidden the demons to come out, and they knew that they could not resist. They were in the presence of Omnipotence, and they must do as they were told. They had even to ask permission to enter into the swine that were feeding not far away. The swine, being unclean animals according to the law, ought not to have been there. The spirits being unclean also, there was an affinity between them and the swine, an affinity with fatal results for the animals. The demons had led the man toward self-destruction, using the sharp stones: with the swine the impulse was immediate and complete. The man was delivered: the swine were destroyed.

The result, as regards the man himself, was delightful. His restless wanderings were over, for he

was "sitting." Formerly he "wore no clothes," as Luke tells us, now he is "clothed." His delusions had ceased, for he is "in his right mind." The gospel application of all this is very evident.

The result, as regards the people of those parts was very tragic however. They displayed a mind that was anything but right, though no demons had entered into them. They had no understanding or appreciation of Christ. On the other hand they did appreciate and understand pigs. If the presence of Jesus meant no pigs, even if it also meant no raging demoniac, then they would rather not have it. They began to pray Him to depart out of their coasts.

The Lord yielded to their desire and left. The tragedy of this was very great, though they did not realise it at the time. It was succeeded by the even greater tragedy of the Son of God being cast right out of this world; and we have now had nineteen centuries filled with every kind of evil as the result of that. The departure of the Lord created a fresh situation for the man just delivered from the demons. He naturally desired the presence of his Deliverer, but was instructed that for the present he must be content to abide in the place of His absence and there witness for Him, particularly to his own friends.

Our position today is very similar. Presently we shall be with Him, but for the present it is ours to witness for Him in the place where He is not. We too may tell our friends what great things the Lord has done for us.

Having recrossed the lake, the Lord was immediately confronted with further cases of human need. On His way to the house of Jairus, where lay his little daughter at the point of death, He was intercepted by the woman with an issue of blood. Her disease was of twelve years' standing and utterly beyond all the skill of physicians. Hers was a hopeless case, just as much as the case of the demoniac. He was in helpless captivity to a great crowd of demons, she to an incurable disease.

Again we can see an analogy to the spiritual state of mankind, and particularly to the efforts of an awakened soul as depicted in Romans 7. There are many struggles and much earnest striving, but in result, "nothing bettered but rather grew worse" would describe the case delineated there, until the soul comes to the end of its searchings, and having "spent all," has "heard of Jesus." Then ceasing all efforts at self-improvement and coming to Jesus, He proves Himself to be the great Deliverer.

In the case of the man we can hardly speak of faith at all, for he was completely dominated by the demons. In the case of the woman we can only speak of a faith that was defective. She was confident of His power, a power so great that even His clothes would impart it; yet she doubted His accessibility. The thronging crowds impeded her, and she did not realise how completely He — the perfect Servant — was at the disposal of all who needed Him. Yet the cure she needed was hers in spite of everything. The access she needed was made possible, and the blessing was brought to her. Satisfied with the blessing she would have slunk away.

But this it was not to be. She too was to bear witness to that which His power had wrought, and thereby she was to receive a further blessing for herself. The Lord's dealings with her are full of spiritual instruction.

The perfect knowledge of Jesus comes to light. He knew that virtue had gone out of Him, and that the touch had fallen on His clothes. He asked the question, but He knew the answer; for He looked round to see "her" that had done it.

His question also brought to light the fact that many had been touching Him in various ways, yet no other touch had drawn any virtue from Him. Why was this? Because, of all the touches, hers was the only one that sprang out of a consciousness of need, and faith. When these two things are present the touch is always effective.

A good many of us would be like the woman, and wish to obtain the blessing without any public acknowledgment of the Blessor. This must not be. It is due to Him that we confess the truth and make known His saving grace. Directly virtue has gone out from Him for our deliverance, the time of witness-bearing has come for us. Just as the man was to go home to his friends, the woman had to kneel at His feet in public. Both bore witness to Him; and, be it noted, in the opposite way to what we might have expected. Most men would find the witness at home the more difficult: most women the witness in public. But the man had to speak at home, and the woman in the presence of the crowd. She spoke however not *to* the crowd, but *to Him*.

As the fruit of her confession the woman herself received a further blessing. She got definite assurance from His word, that her cure was thorough and complete. A few minutes before she had "*felt* in her body that she was healed," and then she confessed, "*knowing* what was *done in her*." This was very good, but it was not quite enough. Had the Lord permitted her to go away simply possessed of these nice "*feelings*," and this "*knowledge*" of what had been "*done in her*," she would have been open to many a doubt and fear in the days to come. Every small feeling of indisposition would have raised anxiety as to whether her old malady might not recur. As it was, she got His *definite word*, "Be whole of thy plague." That settled it. *His word* was far more reliable than *her feelings*.

So it is with us. Something is indeed done in us by the Spirit of God at conversion, and we know it, and our feelings may be happy: yet, even so, there is no solid basis on which assurance can rest *in feelings*, or in what has been done in us. The solid basis for assurance is found in *the Word of the Lord*. Not a few today lack assurance just because they have made the mistake which the woman was on the point of making. They have never properly confessed Christ, and owned their indebtedness to Him. If they will rectify this mistake as the woman did, they will get the assurance of His Word.

At the very moment of the woman's deliverance the case of Jairus' daughter took on a darker hue. Tidings of her death arrived, and those who sent the message assumed that though disease might disappear before the power of Jesus, death lay outside His domain. We have seen Him triumph over demons and disease, even when the victims were beyond all human help. Death is the most hopeless thing of all. Can He triumph over that? He can, and He did.

The way that He sustained the faltering faith of the ruler is very beautiful. Jairus had been quite confident as to His ability to heal; but now, what about death? — that was the great test to his faith, as also of the power of Jesus. "Be not afraid, only believe," was the word. Faith in Christ will remove the fear of death for us as well as for him.

Death was but a sleep to Jesus, yet the professional mourners mocked Him in their unbelief. So He removed them, and in the presence of the parents and those of His disciples who were with Him, He restored the child to life. Thus for the third time in this chapter is deliverance brought to one who is beyond all human hope.

But the beginning of verse 43 is in sharp contrast to verses 19 and 33. There is to be *no testimony* this time; accounted for, we suppose, by the contemptuous unbelief that had just been manifested. At the same time there was the most careful consideration for the needs of the child in the way of food, just as there had been for the spiritual need of Jairus a little before. He thought both of *her body* and of *his faith*.

## Mark 6

AFTER THESE THINGS, leaving the lakeside He went into the district where His early life had

been spent. Teaching in the synagogue, His words astonished them. They quite dearly recognized the wisdom of His teachings and the might of His acts, and yet all this wrought no conviction or faith in their hearts. They knew Him, and those related to Him according to the flesh, and this but blinded their eyes as to who He really was. They were not insulting in their expression of unbelief, as were the mourners in the house of Jairus; but it was rank unbelief nevertheless, so great that He marvelled at it.

The view that they had of Jesus was just that of the modern Unitarian. They were altogether convinced of His humanity, for they were so well acquainted with its origins as far as His flesh was concerned. They saw it so clearly that it blinded them to anything beyond, and they were offended in Him. The Unitarian sees His humanity, but nothing beyond. We see His humanity no less clearly than the Unitarian, but beyond it we see His deity. It does not trouble us that we cannot grasp intellectually how both can be found in Him. Knowing that our minds are finite, we do not expect to explain that into which infinity enters. If we could grasp and explain, we should know that what we thus comprehend is not Divine.

As a result of this unbelief, "He could there do no mighty work," save that He healed a few sick folk, who, evidently, did have faith in Him. This emphasizes what we have just noted in connection with verse 43 of Mark 5. As, in the presence of ribald unbelief, the Lord withdrew any testimony to Himself, so, in the presence of His unbelieving fellow-countrymen, He did no mighty works.

Now we might feel inclined to think that His action should have been just the opposite. But it does seem in Scripture that when unbelief rises to the height of *mockery*, the testimony *stops* — see, Jeremiah 15: 17; Acts 13: 41; Acts 17: 32 — Acts 18: 1. Also it is evident that though "Jesus of Nazareth" was "approved of God . . . by miracles and wonders and signs" (Acts 2: 22), yet the main object was not to convince stubborn unbelief, but to encourage and confirm weak faith. We are shown in John 2: 23-25, that when His miracles did produce intellectual conviction in certain men, He Himself put no trust in the conviction so produced. Hence He did no great works in the Nazareth district. He "could" not do them. He was limited by moral considerations, not by physical ones. Miracles were *not suitable* to the occasion, according to God's ways: and He was the Servant of God's will.

What *was* suitable was the faithful rendering of a dear testimony; hence "He went round about the villages, teaching." A great display of miracles might have produced a revulsion of feeling and intellectual conviction, which would not have been worth having. The steady teaching of the Word meant sowing the seed, and there would be some worth-while fruit from that, as we have seen.

This brings us to verse 7 of this chapter, where we read of the twelve being sent forth on their first mission. Their period of training was now over. They had listened to His instructions, as given in Mark 4, and witnessed His power, as displayed in chapter 5. They had also had this striking illustration of the place that miracles should occupy, and of the fact that though there were times when they might be unsuitable, the teaching and preaching of the Word of God was *always in season*.

Miracles and signs of a genuine sort are not in evidence today; but the Word of God abides. Let us be thankful that the Word is always in season, and *let us be diligent in sowing it*.

The sending forth of the twelve was the inauguration of an extension of the Lord's ministry and service. Hitherto all had been in His own hands, with the disciples as onlookers; now they are to act on His behalf. He was absolutely sufficient in Himself: they are not sufficient, and hence they are to go forth two and two. There is help and courage in companionship, for just where one is weak another may be strong, and He who sent them knew exactly how to couple them together. Companionship is specially helpful where pioneering work is being done; and so in the Acts we see Paul acting on this instruction of the Lord. Service is an individual matter, it is true, but even today we do well to esteem

rightly fellowship in serving. "We are God's *fellow-workmen*" (1 Cor. 3: 9. N. Tr.).

Before they left, they had power or authority given to them over all the power of Satan. They also had instructions to strip themselves of even the ordinary necessities, carried by the traveller of those days. Further, they were given their message. As their Master had preached repentance in view of the kingdom (see 1: 15), so were they to preach it.

Those who serve today do not hold their commission from Christ on earth, but Christ in heaven; and this introduces certain modifications. Our message centres in the death, resurrection and glory of Christ, whereas theirs in the very nature of things could not do so. They discarded travelling necessities, inasmuch as they represented the Messiah on earth, who had nothing, but who was well able to sustain them. We are followers of a Christ who has gone on high, and His power is usually exercised in freeing His servants from dependence on props of a spiritual nature rather than from those of a material sort. We may certainly, however, take great comfort from the thought that He does not send His servants forth without giving them power for the service before them. If we are to cast out demons He will give us power to do it. And if our service is not that but something else, then power for the something else will be ours.

They — and we too — are to be marked by utmost simplicity: no running about from house to house in search for something better. They represented Him. He acted by proxy through them; and hence to refuse them was to refuse Him. His saying in verse 11 as to Sodom and Gomorrah is similar to what He said of Himself in Matthew 11: 21-24. Those who serve Him today are not apostles, still in a lesser degree the same thing doubtless holds good. God's message is not the less His message because it comes through feeble lips.

Their service, whether in preaching, casting out demons or in healing, was so effective that *His* Name — not theirs — was spread abroad, and even Herod heard His fame. This miserable king had so bad a conscience that he at once assumed that John the Baptist, his victim, had come to life. Others considered Christ to be Elijah, or one of the old prophets. No one knew, for no one thought of God as able to do some new thing.

At this point Mark digresses a little to tell us, in verses 17-28, how John had been murdered at the behest of a vindictive woman. Evil man though he was, Herod possessed a conscience that spoke, and we see the masterly craft by which the devil captured him. The trap was set by means of a young woman with pretty face and form, an older woman attractive and revengeful, and a foolish vanity which made the unhappy king think much more of his oath than of God's law. Thus the vain and lustful man was manoeuvred into the act of murder, with ultimate damnation for himself. His uneasy conscience only provoked superstitious fears.

In verse 29, Mark merely records that John's disciples gave his mutilated body burial. He does not add as Matthew does that they "went and told Jesus" (Mark 14: 12). He passes on to record the return of the disciples from their journeyings, telling their Master of all that they had done and taught. It was then that the Lord withdrew them into a desert place, that apart from the crowd and the busy service they might spend quiet time in His presence. It is instructive to notice that the passage in Matthew makes it pretty certain that the distressed disciples of John also arrived just at that time.

Let us never forget that a period of rest in the presence of the Lord, apart from men, is necessary after a period of busy service. The disciples of John came from their sad service heavy-hearted and distressed. The twelve came from triumphant encounters with the power of demons and disease, probably flushed with success. Both needed the quiet of the presence of the Lord, which avails equally to lift up the drooping heart and check undue elation of spirit.

However, the period of quiet was but brief, for the people sought after Him in their crowds, and He would not say them nay. The heart of the great Servant comes out most beautifully in verse 34, where we are told He was "moved with compassion." The sight of them, "as sheep not having a shepherd," only induced *compassion* in Him, not — as so often with us, alas! — feelings of annoyance or contempt. And He was *moved* by the compassion He felt; that is the wonder of it.

His compassion moved Him in two directions. First, to minister to them as to spiritual things. Second, to minister to them carnal things. Notice the order: the spiritual came first. "He began to teach them many things," though what He said is not recorded; then when the evening was come He relieved their hunger. Let us learn from this how to act. If men have bodily needs it is good that we should meet them according to our ability; but let us always keep the Word of God in the first place. The needs of the body must never take precedence over the needs of the soul, in our service.

In feeding the five thousand, the Lord first of all tested His disciples. How much had they taken in as to His sufficiency? Very little apparently, for in answer to His word, "Give ye them to eat," they *only* think of human resources and of money. Now any resources of a human sort that were present were by no means ignored. They were very insignificant, but they were appropriated by Jesus that in them His power might be displayed. He might have turned stones into bread, or indeed produced bread from nothing; but His way was to utilize the five loaves and two fishes.

His work has been carried on in just this way throughout the present epoch. His servants possess certain small things, which He is pleased to use. And further, He dispensed His bounty in an orderly manner, the people being seated in hundreds and fifties, and He employed His disciples in the work. The feet and hands that conveyed the food to the people were theirs. Today the feet and hands of His servants are used, their minds and lips are placed at His disposal, so that the bread of life may reach the needy. But the power that produces results is *wholly His*. The very feebleness of the means used makes this manifest.

As the perfect Servant He was careful to connect all that He did with heaven. Before the miracle took place He looked up to heaven and rendered thanks. Thereby the thoughts of the crowd were directed to God as the Source of all, rather than to Himself the Servant of God on earth. A word to ourselves, containing a similar principle, is found in 1 Peter 4: 11. The servant who ministers spiritual food is to do so as from God, that God may be glorified in it and not himself.

We may also extract encouragement from the fact that when the great crowd was fed, far more remained than the little with which they started. The Divine resources are inexhaustible, and the Servant who relies upon his Master will never run out of supplies. In this respect there is a very happy resemblance between the loaves and fishes placed in the hands of the disciples and the Bible placed in the hands of disciples today.

The feeding of the multitude accomplished, the Lord at once dispatched His disciples to the other side of the lake and gave Himself to prayer. He not only connected all with heaven by thanksgiving in the presence of the people, but He ever maintained touch for Himself as the Servant of the Divine will. From John 6 we learn that at this point the people were enthusiastic and would have made Him a king by force. The disciples might have been entrapped by this, but He was not.

The crossing of the lake furnished the disciples with a fresh demonstration of who their Master was. The contrary wind hindered their progress, and they toiled forward slowly. He again proved Himself supremely above both wind and wave, walking upon the water, and able to pass them by. His word calmed their fears, and His presence in their boat ended the storm. In spite of all this, the real significance of it eluded them. Their hearts were not yet ready to take it in. Nevertheless the people

generally had learned to recognize the Lord and His power. Abundance of need was presented to Him, and He met it with abundance of grace.

## Mark 7

AS WE COMMENCE this chapter the opposition of the religious leaders again comes to light. The disciples, filled with labour — as verse 31 of the previous chapter has told us — were not observing certain traditional washings, and this roused the Pharisees, who were the great sticklers for the tradition of the elders. The Lord accepted the challenge on behalf of the disciples, and answered by a searching exposure of the whole Pharisaic position. They were hypocrites, and He told them so.

The essence of their hypocrisy lay in the profession of worship, consisting in outward ceremonials, when inwardly their hearts were utterly estranged. *Nothing counts with God if the heart be not right.*

Then, in carrying out their ceremonials they brushed aside the commandment of God in favour of their own tradition. The Lord not merely asserted this, but proved it by giving an instance of the way in which they set aside the fifth commandment by their rules concerning "Corban;" that is, things devoted to the service of God. Under cover of "Corban" many a Jew divested himself of all his rightful duties towards his poor old parents. And he did the thing with an air of sanctity, for did it not appear more pious to devote things to God rather than to one's parents?

The things that came under "Corban" were not things that God *demand*ed; had it been so His demand must have prevailed. There were things that *might be* dedicated, if so desired; whereas the obligation to support parents was a distinct *command*. Pharisaic tradition permitted a man to use a permissive enactment in order to avoid complying with a distinct command. They might try to support their tradition with sophistry which appeared pious, but the Lord charged them with nullifying the Word of God. The *written words* of Exodus 20: 12 were to Jesus "*the Word of God.*" There is no support here for that religious fastidiousness which declines to attach the designation "Word of God" to the written Scriptures.

We believe we should be right in saying that all human tradition in the things of God ultimately sets the Word of God at naught. The originators of the tradition probably have no such thought, but the master spirit of evil, lying behind the business, has just that *intention*.

Having unmasked the Pharisees as men whose hearts were far from God, and who dared to make of no effect the Word of God, the Lord called the people and publicly proclaimed the truth which cuts at the root of all religious pretension. Man is not defiled by physical contact with external things, but *is himself the seat of what defiles*. A hard saying this, and only they who have ears to hear will receive it.

The disciples had to ask Him privately concerning it, and in verses 18 to 23 we have the explanation. Man is corrupt in his nature. What comes from his very heart defiles him. Out of his heart proceed evil thoughts which develop into every kind of evil action. This is the most tremendous indictment of human nature ever uttered. No wonder the Pharisaic heart was far from God; but what a terrible thing that men with hearts like this should profess to draw near and worship Him.

These searching words of our Lord cut at the root of all human pride, and show the worthlessness of all human movements, whether religious or political, which deal merely with externals and leave the heart of man untouched.

His disciples as yet hardly understood these things, and experience will show us that professing

Christians are very slow to accept and understand them today; but we shall not get very far except we do understand them. However, it is one thing to expose the heart of man: something more is needed — the heart of God must be expressed. This the Lord proceeded to do, as the rest of the chapter shows.

To the very borders of the land which harboured so much of hypocrisy He went, and there came in contact with a poor Gentile woman in desperate need. His fame had reached her ears and she would not be denied. Yet the Lord tested her by His little parable about the children's bread and the dogs. Her answer, "Yes, Lord: yet the dogs under the table eat of the children's crumbs," was happily free of hypocrisy. She said in effect, "Yes, Lord: it is true that I am no child of the kingdom but a poor Gentile dog without any claim; but I am confident that there is enough power with God and enough goodness in His heart, to feed a poor dog like me."

Now this was *faith*. Matthew indeed tells us that the Lord called it "great faith," and it delighted Him. It also brought her all that her heart desired. Her daughter was delivered. How great the contrast between the heart of God and the heart of man! The one full of benevolence and grace: the other full of every kind of evil. How happy for us when instead of harbouring hypocrisy we are marked by honesty and faith.

In verse 31 He again returns to the neighbourhood of the lake, there to meet a man who was deaf and dumb — a condition that was strikingly symbolic of the state in which the mass of the Jews were found. The poor Gentile woman had had ears to hear, and consequently found her tongue to utter words of faith, but they were deaf and had nothing to say.

In healing this man the Lord performed certain actions, which doubtless have symbolic meanings. He took him aside from the crowds, that He might deal with him in privacy. His fingers, symbolic of Divine action, touch his ears. That which came from His mouth touched the mouth of the dumb man. Thus the work was done, and the deaf and dumb both heard and spoke. If any ears are opened to hear the voice of the Lord, it is the fruit of Divine action which takes place in secret. And if any tongue can utter the praise of God or the Word of God, it is because that which comes from His mouth has been brought into contact with ours.

Nothing is said as to the faith of the man. What he felt he was unable to express, and others brought him to Jesus. He was met, however, in full and unstinted grace. Once more it was a case of the goodness of the heart of God being manifested by Jesus.

Evidently the people in some measure were conscious of this, and in their amazement they confessed, "He hath done all things well!" Coming where it does, this word is all the more striking. The early part of the chapter reveals man in his true character, and we find his heart to be a fountain whence proceeds nothing but evil — he has done all things *ill!* The perfect Servant reveals the goodness of the heart of God. He has done all things *well*.

With this verdict we too have abundant cause to agree.

## Mark 8

WHEN THE FIVE thousand were fed, as recorded in Mark 6, the disciples took the initiative by calling their Master's attention to the needy condition of the crowd. On this second occasion the Lord took the initiative, and drew His disciples' attention to their need, expressing His compassion and concern on their behalf. As on the first occasion so again now the disciples have simply *man* before them, and think only of his powers which are wholly unequal to the situation. They had not yet learned to measure the difficulty by the power of their Lord.

Hence the instruction which was conveyed by the feeding of a huge crowd with earthly resources of the tiniest order, was repeated. There were slight differences, both as to the number of the people and the number of the loaves and fishes used, but in all the essentials this miracle was a repetition of the other, as once more He fulfilled Psalm 132: 15, and displayed *the power of God* before their eyes.

Having fed the multitude, He dismissed them Himself, and immediately after departed with His disciples to the other side of the lake, just as on the previous occasion. On His arrival certain Pharisees came with aggressive intent requesting a sign from heaven. He had as a matter of fact just been giving very striking signs from heaven in the presence of thousands of witnesses. The Pharisees had no intention of following Him, and hence had not been present so as to see the sign for themselves, still there was ample witness to it if they cared to listen. The fact was of course that on the one hand they had no desire to witness any sign that would authenticate Him and His mission, and on the other hand they had no ability to see and recognize the sign even when it was plainly before their eyes. Their utter unbelief grieved Him to the heart.

In verse 34 of the previous chapter, when He was confronted with human weakness and disability of a bodily sort, He sighed: here confronted with blindness of a spiritual sort, He sighed *deeply* in His spirit. Spiritual incapacity is a far more serious matter than bodily incapacity. They were blind leaders of a blind generation and groping about for a sign. No sign would be given to them, for to blind men signs are useless. This was the occasion when, as recorded at the beginning of Matthew 16, the Lord told them they could discern the face of the sky, but not the signs of the times.

Let us not dismiss this matter as being something which only concerns the Pharisee: in principle it also concerns ourselves. How often has the true believer been troubled and disheartened, thinking God has not spoken, or acted, or answered, when really He has, only we have not had eyes to see. We may have continued beseeching Him for more *light*, when all the time all that was wanted was a few *windows* in our house!

The motive actuating these Pharisees was wholly wrong, since their object was to tempt Him. So the Lord abruptly left them and departed again to the other side of the lake, which He had left but a short time before, and the disciples were without bread. Thus for the third time they were face to face with the problem raised in the feeding of the five thousand and the four thousand, only on a very small scale.

Alas! the disciples no more met the problem in the strength of faith when it was on the small scale than when it was on the great scale. They too had not so far had eyes to see the power and glory of their Master, as displayed twice in His multiplication of the loaves and fishes. True faith has penetrating vision. They should have discerned who He was, and then they would have looked not to their paltry loaves or fishes but to Him, and every difficulty would have vanished. In the small crises that mark our own lives are we any better than they were?

The Lord's charge about the leaven of the Pharisees and of Herod is not explained to us here, as it is in Matthew, but we must note its significance. He referred to the doctrine of the two factions, which worked like leaven in those who came under the influence of the one and the other. That of the Pharisees was hypocrisy. That of the Herodians was utter worldliness. In Matthew we read of the leaven of the Sadducees, and this was intellectual pride which led them into rationalistic unbelief. Nothing does more effectually blind the mind and understanding than leaven of these three kinds.

The blind man of Bethsaida, of whom we read in verses 22 to 26, exactly illustrates the condition of the disciples at that time. When the blind man was brought to the Lord, He took him by the hand and led him out of the town, thus separating him from the haunts of men, just as previously He had turned

His back upon the Pharisees and those with them (verse 13). Outside the town the Lord dealt with him, performing His work in two parts — the only time, as far as we remember, that He acted thus. As the result of the first touch he saw, "men as trees, walking." He saw, but things were badly out of focus. He knew that the objects he saw were men, but they looked much bigger than they were.

Thus it was with the disciples — man was too great in their eyes. Even as they looked at the Lord Himself it would seem that His humanity eclipsed His Deity in their eyes. They needed, like the blind man, a second touch before they saw all things clearly. The presence of the Son of God amongst them in flesh and blood was the first touch that reached them, and as a result they began to see. When He had died and risen again and was ascended to glory, He laid His second touch upon them in shedding forth His Spirit, as recorded in Acts 2. Then they saw all things clearly. We may well earnestly pray that our spiritual vision may not be near-sighted and out of focus, lest the great trees, we think we see, turn out to be merely feeble little men strutting about. Such a state is possible for us, as 2 Peter 1: 9 shows, and there is no excuse for us, since the Spirit has been given.

The blind man, when cured, was not to go into the town nor testify to any in the town; moreover the Lord Himself now withdrew with His disciples to Caesarea Philippi, the most northerly town within the confines of the land, and very near the Gentile border. Clearly He was beginning to withdraw Himself and the testimony to His Messiahship from the blind people and their yet more blinded leaders. Here He raised the question with His disciples as to who He was. The people hazarded differing guesses, but all imagined Him to be some old prophet revived, just a *man*, and none had sufficient interest to really find out.

Then Jesus challenged His disciples. Peter became the spokesman and answered confessing His Messiahship, but this only produced a rejoinder which probably astonished them greatly, and may astonish us as we read it today. He charged them to be silent as to His Messiahship, and began to teach them as to His approaching rejection and death and resurrection. Any testimony that had been rendered to Him as the Messiah on earth was now formally withdrawn. From this point He accepted His death as inevitable, and began to turn the thoughts of His disciples to that which was impending as the result of it. This was the orderly progress of things on the human side; and it does not contradict nor clash with the divine side — that He knew from the outset that which was before Him.

Moreover, the disciples were as yet hardly fit to bear further testimony, had it been needed. Peter indeed had some measure of spiritual sight, for he had just confessed Him as the Christ; yet the intimation of His approaching rejection and death raised a vehement remonstrance from this very man. In this Peter's mind was being swayed by Satan, and the Lord rebuked this spirit of evil who was behind Peter's words. Peter's mind was set on "the things that be of *men*," and so he answered very aptly to the man of whom we have just read, who saw men as trees walking. Though he recognized the Christ in Jesus, he still had men before him, and in this the other disciples were no better than he. So how could he go forth as an effectual witness to the Christ whom he recognized? No wonder, after all, that at this point He charged His disciples that they should tell no man of Him.

We may pause here, each to face the fact that we cannot effectually go forth in testimony unless we really know the One of whom we testify, and also know and understand the situation that exists, in the face of which the testimony has to be rendered.

In the closing verses of our chapter the Lord begins to instruct His disciples in the presence of the people as to consequences that would follow from His rejection and death. They imagined themselves to be following a Messiah who was to be received and glorified on earth; and the fact was, He was about to die and rise again and be for the present glorified in heaven. This entailed an immense change

in their outward prospects. It meant the denying of self, the taking up of the cross, the losing of life in this world, the bearing of shame as identified with Christ and His words, in the midst of an evil generation.

The force of "deny himself" is hardly expressed by "self-denial," which is the denying oneself of *something*. What the Lord speaks of is not that but the denial, or the saying of "no," *to oneself*. Also, "take up his cross" does not mean bearing trials and troubles merely. The man who in those days took up his cross was being led to execution. He was a man who had to accept death at the hands of the world. To say "no" to oneself is to accept death *internally*, on one's own spirit: to take up one's cross is to accept death *externally* at the hands of the world. That is what discipleship must mean, since we follow the Christ who died, rejected of the world.

This thought is expanded in verses 35-37. The true disciple of Christ is not aspiring to gain the whole world; he is ready rather to lose the world, and his own life in it, for the sake of the Lord and His Gospel. The perfect Servant, whom Mark depicts, gave His life that there might be a Gospel to preach. Those who follow Him, and are His servants, must be prepared to give up their lives in preaching the Gospel. If they should be ashamed of Him now, He would be ashamed of them in the day of His glory.

## Mark 9

THESE WORDS, if they at all realized their import, must have come to the disciples as a great blow. Hence the Lord, in His tender consideration for them, proceeded to give them very ample assurance as to the reality of the glory that is to come. They had expected God's kingdom to come with power and glory in their lifetime, and that illusion being dispelled, they might easily jump to the conclusion that it was not coming at all. Hence the three disciples, who seemed to be leaders among them, were taken aside to the high mountain that they might be witnesses of His transfiguration. There they saw the kingdom of God come with power — not in its fulness but in sample form. They were granted a private view of it in advance.

In the first chapter of his second Epistle Peter shows us the effect that this wonderful scene had upon him. He was an eye-witness of the majesty of Christ, and thereby he knew that His power and the promise of His coming was no cunningly devised fable, but a glorious fact, and so the prophetic word was made "more sure," or "confirmed." He knew, and we may know, that not one jot or little, of that which has been foretold concerning the glory of Christ's coming kingdom, will fail.

The transfiguration scene itself was a prophecy. Christ is to be the shining Centre of the kingdom glory, as He was on the mountain top. Saints will be with Him in heavenly conditions, just as Moses and Elijah were: some of them buried and called forth by God, like Moses; some raptured to heaven without dying, like Elijah. In the kingdom too there will be saints on earth below, enjoying earthly blessedness in the light of the heavenly glory, just as the three disciples were conscious of blessedness during the brief vision. It was "after six days," and only six were present, so all was on a small and incomplete scale; still the essentials were there.

Peter, ready to speak as ever, blurted out what he intended to be a compliment, but which in reality was far otherwise. The scene of glory could not then be prolonged upon earth, nor could the Christ — nor even Moses and Elijah — be confined to earthly tabernacles. But more serious than this mistake was the thought that Jesus was only *the first amongst the greatest of men*. He is not the first amongst the great, but "the beloved Son," of the Father, *perfectly unique, immeasurably beyond all comparison*. No other may be mentioned in the same breath with Him. He stands alone. This the

Father's voice declared, adding that He is the One who is to be heard.

The Father's voice has been heard very rarely by men. He spoke at Christ's baptism, and now again at His transfiguration, this time adding, "Hear Him." Since then His voice has never been heard by men in intelligible fashion. The Son is the Spokesman of the Godhead, and it is to Him that we have to listen. God once spoke through the prophets, Moses and Elijah: He now has spoken in His beloved Son. This shuts Peter out, as well as Moses and Elijah, which is significant when we remember what the Romish system makes of Peter and his supposed authority. In this incident Peter again showed that as yet he was just like the man whose eyes were out of focus, so that he saw men as trees walking.

No sooner had the Father's voice thus exalted His beloved Son than the whole vision was gone, and only Jesus was left with the three disciples. Saints disappear, but Jesus remains. The words, "They saw no man any more, save Jesus only," are very significant. If any of us approximate to that in our spiritual experience, we shall no longer be like a man who sees men as trees walking, but be like the man after the second touch, seeing all things clearly. Jesus will fill the picture as far as we are concerned, and man be eclipsed.

All this was made known to the disciples, as verse 9 shows, in view of the time when His death and resurrection should be accomplished. Only then would they really understand it all, illuminated by the Holy Spirit, and be able to effectually use it in testimony. At that moment they did not even understand what rising from among the dead really signified, as the next verse shows. The rising *of* the dead would not have puzzled them in any special way: it was this rising "*out of,*" or "*from among,*" the dead — which first took place in Christ — that raised such questions. The first resurrection of the saints, the resurrection of life, is of the same order. Are there not many, calling themselves Christians, who are full of questions as to it today?

The disciples' question as to Elijah, and his predicted coming, was naturally raised in their minds by the transfiguration scene. The Lord used it to again turn their thoughts to His death. In regard to this first advent of His, the part of Elijah had been played by John the Baptist; and his murder was symptomatic of what was to happen to the greater One, of whom he was the forerunner.

The scene on the high mountain soon came to an end but not so the scenes of human sin and misery and suffering which filled the plains below. From the heights to the depths they had to come, to find the rest of the disciples defeated and anxious in the absence of their Master. Immediately He appeared the crowds were amazed, and all eyes turned from the distracted disciples to the calm and all-sufficient Master. A moment before the scribes had been heckling the disciples, now He questions the scribes, invites the confidence of the troubled father, and displays His sufficiency.

Happy is the saint who is able to bring something of the grace and power of Christ into this troubled world! But even so, we shall have to wait for His coming and kingdom to see fully accomplished what this scene foreshadows. Only then will He transform the whole world, and turn the defeat and disquietude of His tried and distracted people into *the calm of His presence* and into a *complete and manifested victory*.

There had been a singular manifestation of the glory of God in the peaceful scene upon the mountain-top, whilst at the foot of the mountain the dark power of Satan had been displayed, with all the distraction that it brings. The boy demon-possessed, the father disappointed and distracted, the disciples defeated and dejected, the scribes not at all averse to making capital out of the incident. The Lord walks into the midst and all is changed.

In the first place, He puts His finger upon the spot where the root of the failure lay. They were a

faithless generation. The root was *unbelief*. This applied to His disciples, as well as to the rest. If their faith had fully laid hold of who He was, they would not have been baffled by this test, any more than when confronted by the matter of feeding the multitudes. They were still like the man of chapter 8, before he saw all things clearly.

But now the Master Himself is in the midst, and the word is, "Bring him unto ME." However, the first result of the boy being brought was disappointing, for the demon flung him down in a terrible fit. Yet this was made to serve the purpose of the Lord, for on the one hand it made the more manifest the terrible plight of the boy the very moment before he was delivered, and on the other it served to bring out the feelings and thoughts of the anguished father. His cry, "If Thou canst do anything, have compassion on us, and help us," revealed his lack of faith as to His power, whilst he was not too sure of His kindness.

The reply of Jesus was, "The 'if thou couldst' is [if thou couldst] believe" (N. Trans.). That is, He said in effect, "There is no 'if' on My side, the only 'if' that enters into this matter is on your side. It is not 'if I can do anything,' but 'if you can believe.'" This put the whole thing in the true light, and in a flash the man saw it. Seeing it, he believed, whilst confessing his former unbelief.

Having evoked faith in the man, the Lord acted. The object before Him was not to create a sensation amongst the people; had it been, He would have waited for the crowd to collect. His object evidently was to confirm the faith of the father, and of any others who had eyes to see. The demon had to obey, though he wrought his worst before relinquishing his prey. This display of demonic power, after all, only gave an opportunity for a more complete display of Divine power. Not only was the boy completely delivered but also delivered for ever, since the demon was commanded to enter him no more.

Having thus manifested the power and kindness of God, the perfect Servant did not court popularity amongst the crowds but retired to a certain house. There His disciples in quietness enquired as to the reason of their failure, and got His answer. Again and again we ought to be asking their question, as we find ourselves weak in the presence of the foe; and as we do so we shall doubtless get just the answer they got, as recorded in verse 29. The Lord had already declared how unbelief lay at the root of their powerlessness: now He specifies two further things. Not only is faith needed, but also prayer and fasting.

Faith indicates a spirit of confidence in God: prayer — dependence on God: fasting — separation to God, in the form of abstinence from lawful things. These are the things which lead to power in the service of God. Their opposites — unbelief, self-confidence, self-indulgence, are the things that lead to weakness and failure. These words of our Lord play like a searchlight upon our many failures in serving Him. Let us consider our ways in the light of them.

In verses 30 and 31 we again see the Lord withdrawing Himself from publicity, and instructing His disciples as to His approaching death and resurrection. We first saw this in verses 30 and 31 of the previous chapter.

It was the next great event in the Divine programme, and He now began to keep it steadily before the minds of His disciples, though at the moment they failed to take it in. Their minds were still filled with expectations of the coming of a visible kingdom, so they were unable to entertain any idea that controverted that.

The idea that Christ's kingdom would immediately appear appealed to them because they expected to have a large place of honour in it. They conceived of it in a carnal way, and it awakened

carnal desires in their hearts. Hence on the journey to Capernaum they fell to discussing who of them was to be greatest. The Lord's question was sufficient to convict them of their folly, as was evidenced by their abashed silence; yet He knew it all, for He proceeded to answer them though they made no confession.

His answer appears to be two-fold. First, the only way that leads to real greatness is one that goes to the bottom as servant to all. This being so, we can see how the Lord Jesus is pre-eminent even apart from His Deity. In manhood He has taken the lowest place, and become Servant to all in a way that is infinitely beyond the service of all others. The one most like Him is likely to be first.

In the second place, He showed that the personality of the servant is of small significance: what does count is the Name in which He comes. We have that beautiful and touching scene in which He first set a small child in their midst, and then took him up in His arms, in order to enforce His point. That child was an insignificant scrap of humanity, yet to receive one such in His Name was to receive the Lord Himself, and also the Father who sent Him. The reception of a thousand such in any other name or on any other ground would signify but little. The fact is that the Master Himself is so supremely great that the relative position of His little servants is not worth disputing about.

This teaching seems to have come as an illumination to John, and caused his conscience to prick him as to their attitude towards a zealous man who acted in His Name, though not following the twelve. Why he did not follow, we are not told; but we must remember that it was not open to anyone to attach themselves to the twelve just as they chose: the Lord's own choice decided that matter. Whatever it was, the Lord's reply again laid all the emphasis on the value of His Name. Acting in His Name, the man was clearly for Christ and not against Him.

As a matter of fact this unofficial individual had been doing the very thing which the disciples had just failed to do — he had cast out a demon. Office is one thing; power is quite another. They should go together, in so far as office is instituted in Christianity. But very frequently they have not done so. And in these later days when offices have been unscripturally instituted, we again and again see some simple and unofficial person doing the thing which the official has no power to do. The power lies in *the Name* not the *office*.

Verse 41 shows that the smallest gift in the Name, and for Christ's sake, is of value in the sight of God and will meet with reward at His hands. Verse 42 gives us the converse of this: to be a snare to the feeblest of those who are Christ's is to merit and to get severe judgment. The losing of life in this world is a small thing compared with loss in the world to come.

This leads to the very solemn passage with which this chapter closes. Some of His hearers might have thought the Lord's word about the millstone a bit extreme He adds yet stronger words, which have hell-fire itself in view. His thoughts at this point evidently broadened out beyond His disciples to men generally, and He shows that any loss in this world is very small compared with the loss of all that is life in the next, and being cast into the fire of Gehenna. Hand and foot and eye are very valuable members of our bodies, and not to be lightly parted with; but life in the coming age is beyond all price, and hell-fire an awful reality.

The Valley of Hinnom, the refuse dump outside Jerusalem, where fires always burned and maggots continually did their work, was known as Gehenna; and this word on the Lord's lips became a terribly apt figure of the abode of the lost. Verily hell will be the great refuse heap of eternity, where all that is incorrigibly evil will be segregated from the good, and lie for ever under the judgment of God. This terrible fact reaches us from the lips of Him who loved sinful men and wept over them.

The first statement of verse 49 sprang out of what the Lord had just been saying. Fire searches and consumes and disinfects. Salt not only seasons but preserves. Fire symbolizes the judgment of God, which all must face in one way or another. The believer must face it in the way indicated by 1 Corinthians 3: 13, and by it he will be "salted," since it will mean the preserving of all that is good. The ungodly will be subjected to it in their persons, and it will salt them; that is, they will be preserved *in* it and not destroyed *by* it.

The latter part of the verse is an allusion to Leviticus 2: 13. Salt has been described as symbolizing that "power of holy grace, which binds the soul to God and inwardly preserves it from evil." We cannot present our bodies a living sacrifice to God if that holy grace is absent. It is indeed good, and nothing would compensate for its absence. We are to have in ourselves this holy grace which would judge and separate us from all that is evil. If each is concerned to have it *in oneself*, there will not be difficulty in having peace *amongst ourselves*.

## Mark 10

THE OPENING of this chapter brings us near to the closing scenes of the Lord's life. He was on the farther side of Jordan but near the borders of Judaea, and the Pharisees appeared, opposing Him by tempting Him. By raising questions as to marriage and divorce, they expected to entangle Him in some contradiction of the things that Moses had commanded, and so find a point of attack. The Lord did not contradict Moses, but He went behind him to God's original thought in the creation of man and woman. The Pharisees were great sticklers for the law of Moses, but He showed them that in this instance the law did not enforce God's original thought. It is important to notice this, for it supplies us with one reason why the law is not made the rule of life for the Christian.

The law fell below the height of God's thought, but Christ did not: He fully maintained it. Verse 9 lifts the whole matter of marriage from the level of man and human expediency to the level of God and His action. It is a divine institution and not a human arrangement, and therefore is not to be tampered with by men. If God joins, man is not to put asunder.

This verse states a great principle which is true universally. The converse also would be true — man is not to join what God has put asunder. It is a sad fact that ever since sin came in man has been consumed with a desire to undo what God has done. It is so in natural things, and many of the ills we suffer come from our tampering with things given of God, even in matters of food, etc., and generally upsetting the balance of things which He established. It certainly is so in things spiritual. Many a difficulty and much needless soul trouble springs from misunderstanding as to things which God has joined together in His Word, or things which He has sundered.

Having set marriage before them in the right light, the Lord deals, in verses 13 - 16, with children. As to these, the disciples share the ordinary thoughts of the world, which fall far below the thoughts of God. The disciples judged them to be too insignificant for the Master's attention, but He thought far otherwise. He received them gladly, took them up in His arms, put His hands upon them and blessed them. He also showed that the only way of entrance into the kingdom of God is by having the spirit and mind of the little child. If anyone approaches that kingdom as a *significant somebody* he finds the entrance barred. If he comes as an *insignificant nobody* he may enter.

Then, verses 17 - 27, we get the Lord's teaching in regard to possessions. It is striking how marriage, children and possessions follow one another in this chapter, for so much of our lives in this world is occupied with these three things. All three are perverted and abused in the hands of sinful

men; and all three are put in their right place in the teachings of our Lord.

The one who came running to Jesus exhibited many commendable features. Matthew tells us he was young, and Luke that he was a ruler. He was earnest and reverent and recognized in Him a great Rabbi, who could direct men to eternal life. He took it for granted that the life was to be obtained by human doings, according to the law. Evidently he had no idea of the Deity of Jesus, and hence the Lord's words in verse 18. He repudiated goodness apart from His being God, saying in effect, "If I am not God, I am not good."

As the young man asked his question with the law in his mind, the Lord referred him to the law, particularly to the commandments dealing with man's duty to his neighbour. He could claim to have observed these, at least as regards his acts, and Jesus beholding him loved him. This shows that his claim to correct observance of these things which the law enjoined was a true one. He was an exceptionally fine character, with features which in themselves were pleasing to God. The Lord did not belittle these pleasing features. He admitted them, and looked upon him with eyes of love.

Yet He tested him. One thing he lacked, and that was the God-given faith, which would have seized who Jesus was, and led him to take up the cross and follow Him; the faith which would have made treasure in heaven preferable to treasure on earth. He expected the Lord to direct him to some *work of the law* by which life should be reached; instead he was directed to a *work of faith*. Sad at heart he went away. He did not possess the faith, so it was impossible for him to show his faith by his works. The same test comes to us. How have we answered to it?

This is a tremendous question. How slow we all are to give up law-keeping for Christ and earth for heaven! No wonder the Lord speaks of the difficulty with which the rich enter the kingdom. Verse 23 speaks of them "that have riches," and verse 24 of "them that trust in riches." The fact is, of course, that it is very difficult to have them without trusting in them. We naturally cling to riches and earth. Christ offers the Cross and heaven.

The disciples, accustomed to regard riches as a sign of God's favour, were very astonished at these words; they felt that they cut the ground away completely from under our feet. So, indeed, they do. "Who then can be saved?" is a momentous question. Verse 27 gives a definite answer. Salvation is impossible with men, though possible with God. In other words it was as though the Lord said, "If it is a question of what man can do, *nobody* can be saved: but if a question of what God can do, *anybody* can be saved."

We emphasize that word. Salvation with men is not improbable, but IMPOSSIBLE. The door, as regards our own efforts is barred against us. God has opened another door however, but that is by death and resurrection, to which the Lord was now turning the thoughts of His disciples.

Though death and resurrection were before the mind of the Lord, earthly glory was still before the mind of Peter, and he betrayed it by his remark recorded in verse 28. He referred of course to the test which the Lord had just presented to the rich young ruler. Peter felt that, though the ruler had failed before the test, he and his fellow-disciples had not: indeed, he actually added, as Matthew records, "What shall we have therefore?" His mind, enquiring and impetuous, wished to anticipate the good things to come. The Lord's answer indicated that in the present age there should be great gain, though with persecutions, and in the coming age eternal life.

This saying of our Lord is illustrated by Paul's life of service, as seen in such scriptures as, Acts 16: 15; Acts 18: 3; Acts 21: 8; Romans 16: 3, 4, 23; 1 Corinthians 16: 17; Philippians 4: 18; Philemon 22. Houses were at his disposal in many a city, and many counted it an honour to fulfil the part of

brother, sister, mother or child toward him. Persecutions certainly were his. Eternal life in the world to come lies before him. Such is the lot of those who follow and serve this perfect Servant of God.

Verse 31 was evidently uttered as a warning and corrective to Peter. Forwardness here may not mean the first place there. All depends upon the motive underlying the service. If Peter wished to drive a bargain — so much following for so much reward — that alone would show defective motive. Still it does not say that *all* that are first shall be last, and *all* last first. Paul went ahead of all in his day, and who can challenge the purity of his motive, or the reality of his devotion to his Lord?

The thing that Peter and the rest greatly needed was to realize and understand the fast approaching death and resurrection of their Master. There is nothing that we today, nineteen centuries after the event, more deeply need to realise and understand. Not only is it the basis of all our blessing but it imparts its own character to all Christian life and service. No intelligent service can be rendered save in the light of it.

Verses 32 to 34 give us the fourth occasion on which the Lord instructed His disciples in regard to it; and the request of James and John, recorded in verse 37, furnished the Lord with a fifth occasion. Their minds were still filled with expectations concerning a glorious kingdom on earth, and they wished to advance their own interests in that kingdom. Now the Lord Jesus was here as the perfect Servant of the will of God, and this involved for Him the cup of suffering and the baptism of death. Places of honour in the coming kingdom will be apportioned to those who have served this wonderful Servant, according to the measure in which they had accepted suffering and death on His behalf. Yet, even so, He does not apportion these places of distinction. All that is at the discretion of the Father, for He remains true to the place of Servant which He has taken. Except we remain true to the place in which we are set, the place of identification with our rejected Lord, we cannot expect any place of special recognition in the glory of the kingdom.

This unblushing place-hunting on the part of James and John might incline us to blame them above the rest, were it not for verse 41, which shows that the same selfish desires were entertained by all, and that they objected, not because of the request the two had made, but because they had been forestalled in the way the two made it. Their annoyance however only gave further occasion for the display of the perfect grace of their Lord.

How easy it was, and is, for the disciples of Jesus to accept and adopt the standards and customs of the world that surrounds them, to take for granted that, because everybody seems to be doing it, it is the right thing to do. Again and again our Lord would say to us, "But so shall it not be among you." The nations have their great men, who exercise their authority in a lordly way. Amongst disciples of the Lord greatness is manifested in an entirely different way. Their true greatness is displayed in taking the lowly place of service to others — serving the Lord in serving them.

The Son of Man Himself is the shining example of service of this kind. Who so great as He in His original estate? Then "thousand thousands ministered unto Him" (Dan. 7: 10). Who took so lowly a place, ministering to others? Who carried service to such a length as "to give His life a ransom for many"? For this reason alone, apart from other considerations, the place of pre-eminence must be His. They, who follow Him most closely in lowly service in this day, will be chiefest in that day.

In verse 45, the Lord not only brings His death before His disciples for the fifth time, but He explains its significance. Previously He had emphasized the fact of His death, so that the minds of the disciples might no longer be obsessed by expectations of a coming visible kingdom. Now the meaning of the fact appears. He would die to pay the *ransom price* for many. Here then we have a plain statement as to the substitutionary and atoning character of His death from His own lips. It is "many"

here, for the actual, realized effect of His ransoming death is the point. In 1 Timothy 2: 6, where the bearing and scope of it is in question, the word is "all."

These dealings with His disciples took place "in the way going up to Jerusalem" (verse 32). In verse 46 they arrive in Jericho, and the closing scenes of His life begin. Bartimaeus, the blind beggar, furnished Him with a striking opportunity of setting forth the mercy of God. Mercy was what the blind man craved, though the people, who did not understand mercy of a divine sort, would have silenced him. Mercy however he got, and it went beyond his thoughts, for it not only gave him *sight* but enlisted him as a *follower* of the One who extended the mercy. The faith of Bartimaeus was shown in that he addressed Jesus as the Son of David though others spoke of Him only as Jesus of Nazareth. His may only have been little faith, for he did not rise to the height of calling Him Son of God; yet little faith receives an abundant answer as surely as great faith does. Let us be thankful for that.

## Mark 11

JESUS NOW DREW near to Jerusalem. His disciples were in His train, not only those who had spent three years in His company but Bartimaeus also, who had spent perhaps three hours. Bethany was the home of some who loved Him, and there He found the colt of an ass, so that He might enter the city as Zechariah had predicted. The Lord had need of that colt, and He knew who the owner was and that His need would meet with a ready response. He was the Servant of the will of God, and He knew where to lay His hand upon all that was necessary to fulfil His service, whether the ass in the chapter, or the guest-chamber in Mark 14, or as on other occasions.

He entered as the prophet said He would, "just," "lowly," and "having salvation." There was a burst of temporary enthusiasm, but men had no lasting desire for what was just, and holiness made no appeal to them. Moreover the salvation they desired was one of a merely outward sort: they would be glad to be free from the tyranny of Rome, but had no desire to be released from the bondage of sin. Their Hosannas had in view the kingdom of David which they hoped was coming, and hence their cries soon died away. The Lord made straight for the heart of things by entering the temple. As regards Israel's dealings with their God, this was the centre of all; and here their state religiously was most manifest. Everything came under His survey, for He "looked round about upon all things."

The incident as to the fig tree transpired the following morning. The fig tree is symbolic of Israel, and more particularly of the remnant of the nation which had been restored to the land of their fathers, and amongst who Christ had come. Luke 13: 6-9 shows this. The whole nation had been the Lord's vineyard, and the restored remnant were like a fig tree planted in that vineyard. The King having entered, according to the prophetic word, the supreme moment of testing had come. There was nothing but leaves. Even though it was not the time of figs, there should have been plenty of immature figs, the promise of future fruitfulness. The fig tree was worthless, and should bring forth no fruit for ever.

Following this, verses 15 - 19, we have the Lord's action in cleansing the temple. God's thought in establishing His house at Jerusalem was that it might be a place of prayer for all nations. If any man, no matter what race he belonged to, was feeling after God, he might come to that house and get into touch with Him. The Jews had turned it into a den of thieves. This was the appalling spectacle that met His holy eye when He inspected the house the evening before.

The Jews would doubtless have furnished good reasons for permitting these abominations. Did not the strangers need to change their varied monies? Were not the doves a necessity for the very poorest who could afford no larger sacrifice? But the whole thing had been debased into a money-

making concern. The man who came from afar seeking God might easily be repelled when he got to the house by the rascality of those who were connected with it. A terrible state of affairs! The custodians of the house were a pack of thieves, and the Lord told them so. This roused the scribes and priests to fury, and they determined upon His death.

Exactly similar evils have long ago been manifested in Christendom. This is a terrible thing to say, but truth demands that it should be said. Again religion has been turned into a money-making concern, so much so that the would-be seeker after God has often been utterly repelled. This thing may be seen in its most extravagant forms in the great Romish system, but it may be seen elsewhere in a modified way. It is the error of Balaam, and many run after it "greedily," as Jude 11 tells us. Let us see that we carefully avoid it. The house of God on earth today is formed of saints — not dead stones but "living" ones — but we have to learn how we are to behave ourselves in it, and Paul's first letter to Timothy give us the needed instructions. In that letter such words as these are prominent: "Not covetous," "Not greedy of filthy lucre," "Destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness . . . But godliness with contentment is great gain." If such words as these govern us, we shall be preserved from this snare.

Coming into the city the following morning the fig tree, to which the Lord had spoken, was seen to be dried up from the roots. The blight that had fallen upon it worked in a way that was contrary to nature, which would have been from the top downwards. This fact proclaimed it to be an act of God, and Peter was struck by it, and called attention to it, thus inviting the Lord to remark upon the occurrence. His comment appears to be twofold, since the word, "For," which begins verse 23 seems to be of doubtful authority.

The first thing is, "Have faith in God." Their tendency was to have faith in things visible, in the Mosaic system, in the temple, in themselves as a people, or in their priests and leaders. We have exactly the same tendency, and may easily pin our faith to systems, or to movements, or to gifted leaders. So we need to learn just the same lesson, which is that all such things fail, but that God remains. He is faithful, and He remains as the Object of faith when a curse falls upon our cherished little fig tree. Literally the word is, "Have the faith of God," it is as though the Lord says to us, "Hold on to the faithfulness of God no matter what may wither up and disappear.

But this led to the further word as to prayer, in which emphasis is again laid upon faith. "Whosoever shall say . . . and shall not doubt in his heart, but shall believe . . . he shall have whatsoever he saith." The *whosoever* and the *whatsoever* make this a very sweeping statement; so sweeping as almost to take our breath away. But this is connected with the prayer contemplated in the next verse, where we have, " *What things soever* ye desire . . . believe . . . and ye shall have them." In both these verses everything evidently hinges on the believing.

Now belief is faith, and faith is not just a human product, a kind of make-believe or imagination. Verse 24. for instance is not that if only I can work myself up to imagine I receive my request, I do receive it. My prayers according to verse 24, and my words, according to verse 23, must be the product of genuine faith; and faith is the spiritual faculty in me which receives the divine Word. Faith is the eye of the soul, which receives and appreciates Divine light. If my prayer is based on intelligent faith, I shall believe that I receive, and I shall actually receive the desired thing. And so also with what I may say, as in verse 23.

Cases which illustrate the 23rd verse might be cited from present-day missionary service. Not a few times in heathen lands have the servants of the Lord been confronted with sad cases of demon possession challenging the power of the Gospel. With full faith in the Gospel's power they have both

prayed and spoken. What they said came to pass, and the demon had to depart.

Verses 25 and 26 introduce a further qualifying factor. Faith puts us into right relations with God, but our relations with our fellows must also be right, if we are to pray and speak effectually. As those who are the subjects of mercy, who have been so greatly forgiven, we must be filled with the spirit of mercy and forgiveness ourselves. If not, we shall come under the government of God.

Being again in Jerusalem and walking in the temple, the chief priests and other temple authorities came up challenging the authority by which He had acted in cleansing the building the day before. The Lord answered them by asking them to pronounce upon a preliminary question as to the validity or otherwise of John's baptism and ministry. They demanded the credentials of the great Master, but what about the credentials of the humble forerunner? It would be time enough to undertake the consideration of the greater problem when they had settled the lesser problem. Let them decide as to John.

They were betrayed by the way they handled this matter. They had no thought of deciding it on its merits; the only thing that weighed with them was expediency, and as to that they were impaled upon the horns of a dilemma. A decision either way would land them in a difficulty. They were sharp enough to see this, and hence they decided to plead ignorance. But this plea was fatal to their demand that the Lord should submit His credentials to their scrutiny. They proclaimed their incompetence in the easier matter, and so could not press their demand in the more difficult.

"From heaven or of men?" this was the question as to John. It is also the question as to the Lord Himself. In our day we may go further and say it is the question as to the Bible. John was but a man, yet his ministry was *from* heaven. The Lord Jesus was truly here by means of the Virgin, yet He was *from* heaven, and so also His matchless ministry. The Bible is a Book given us by men, yet it is not *of* men, for those who wrote were "moved by the Holy Ghost" (2 Peter 1: 21).

Once we have in our souls a divinely given conviction that both the Living Word and the written Word are from heaven, their authority is well established in our hearts.

## Mark 12

AS WE CLOSED Mark 11 we heard the leaders of the Jews plead ignorance. Whether John's baptism was from heaven or of men they could not tell, and much less could they understand the work and service of the Lord. We open this chapter to see it plainly demonstrated that He perfectly knew and understood them. He knew their motives, their thoughts and the end to which they were heading. He revealed His knowledge of them in a striking parable.

The first verse speaks of "parables," and Matthew's Gospel shows us that at this point He uttered three. Mark only records the middle one of the three — the one that foretold what these Jewish leaders were going to do, and what the results would be for them. In this parable the "husbandmen" represented the responsible leaders of Israel, and a summary is furnished of the way in which through the centuries they had refused all God's demands.

In speaking of a vineyard the Lord Jesus was continuing a figure which had been used in the Old Testament — Psalm 80; Isaiah 5; and elsewhere. In the Psalm the vine is clearly identified with Israel, and out of it is to come a "Branch" who is, "the Son of Man whom Thou madest strong for Thyself." In Isaiah it is very manifest that God was not getting out of His vineyard what He was entitled to expect. Now we find the story carried a good deal forward. The owner of the vineyard had done his part in providing all that was needful and the responsibility as to the fruit lay with the husbandmen to whom the vineyard was entrusted. They failed in their responsibility, and then proceeded to deny the rights of

the owner and maltreat his representatives. Last of all they were tested by the advent of the owner's son. So the leaders of Israel had maltreated the prophets, and slain some of them. And now the Son had appeared, who is the Branch of whom the Psalm speaks. This was the supreme test.

The position of the Jew as under the law is portrayed in this parable. Consequently the question was whether they could produce that which God demanded. They had not done so. Not only was there an absence of fruit, but there was the presence of positive hatred for God and those who represented Him; and this hatred reached its climax when the Son appeared. The responsible leaders were moved by envy, and they wished to monopolize the inheritance for themselves, and so they were prepared to slay Him. A day or two before they had determined upon His death, as verse 18 of the last chapter told us. Now the Lord discovers to them that He knew their evil thoughts.

And He showed them also what would be the terrible consequences for themselves. They would be dispossessed and destroyed. This was historically fulfilled at the destruction of Jerusalem, and will doubtless have a further and final fulfilment in the last days. The One whom they rejected will become the dominant Head of all that God is building for eternity. When that prediction is fulfilled it will indeed be a wonder in the eyes of Israel.

The statement that the lord of the vineyard "will give the vineyard unto others," is an intimation of what comes more fully to light in John 15. Others will become branches in the true Vine, and will bring forth fruit: only they will no longer be under the law in doing so, nor will they be selected from amongst the Jews only. The Lord's words were a warning that their rejection of Him would mean their setting aside by God, and the gathering in of others, till ultimately the One they rejected would dominate everything. They saw that the parable pronounced judgment against them.

Not daring for the moment to lay hands on Him, they commenced a verbal offensive against Him, endeavouring to catch Him in His words. First came the Pharisees jointly with the Herodians. Their question as to the tribute money was skilfully designed to make Him an offender one way or the other — either against the national feelings of the Jew or the Roman. His answer however reduced them to impotence. He made them admit their servitude to Caesar by an appeal to their coinage. Their lips, not His, pronounced it to be Caesar's image. Then He not only gave the answer to their question which was perfectly obvious in the light of their own admission, but also used it as an introduction to the far more weighty matter of God's claims upon them. No wonder they marvelled at Him.

We may notice how, in verse 14, these opponents paid tribute to His perfect truth. In a way far beyond anything they realized — in the most absolute sense — He was the truth and taught the truth, wholly undeflected by man and his little world. Of no other servant of God could this be said. Even Paul was influenced by human considerations, as Acts 21: 20-26 shows. Jesus alone is the perfect Servant of God, and He was so poor that He had to ask for a "penny" to be brought to Him.

Next came the Sadducees, asking Him to unravel the matrimonial tangle which they propounded. He did this and convicted them of their folly; but before doing so He revealed its underlying causes. They did not know the Scriptures — that was ignorance. They did not know the power of God - that was unbelief. Their unbelieving error was upheld on these twin pillars. Modern unbelief of the Sadduceean type is supported by just the same two pillars. They continually misquote, misinterpret, or otherwise mangle Scripture, and they conceive of God as though He were anything but Almighty — as just a man, though of larger powers than ourselves.

The Lord proved the resurrection of the dead by quoting the Old Testament. The fact of it lies implicit in Exodus 3: 6. God was still the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob hundreds of years after their death. Though dead to men, they lived to Him, and that meant they must rise again. There the fact

lay in the Scripture, and in denying it the Sadducee only convicted himself of ignorance.

Since the fact was there in Scripture the Lord, true to His Servant character, appealed to the Scripture and did not assert the fact dogmatically on His own authority. What He did state dogmatically is in verse 25, where he makes dear the state or condition into which resurrection will introduce us, thus going beyond what the Old Testament taught. The resurrection world differs from this world. Earthly relationships cease in those heavenly conditions. We are not to be angels, but we are to be "as the angels which are in heaven." Immortality and incorruptibility will be ours.

The plain fact was therefore that the Sadducees had conjured up a difficulty in their ignorance which had no existence in fact. Their discomfiture was complete.

One of the scribes who was listening perceived this, and he ventured to propound a question that they often debated amongst themselves, concerning the relative importance of the various commandments. The Lord's answer brushed aside all their elaborate arguments and quibbles as to one or other of the ten commandments by going straight to the word contained in Deuteronomy 6: 4, 5. Here was a commandment which brought within its scope all the other commandments. God demanded that He should be absolutely supreme in the affections of His creatures; if only He were so, all other things would fall into their right place. Here is the great master-commandment which governs everything.

In this commandment there lay an element of great encouragement. Why should God care about possessing the undivided love of His creature? Faith would answer this question by saying — Because He Himself is love. Being love, and loving His creature, even though lost in his sins, He cannot be satisfied without the love of His creature. Israel could not "steadfastly look to the end" of the law. Had they been able to do so, that is what they would have seen.

For the second commandment the Lord referred the man to Leviticus 19: 18, another unexpected passage. But this commandment evidently springs out of the first. No one can have ability and inclination to treat his neighbour rightly except he first is right in his relations with his God. But love is the essence of this second commandment no less than of the first. To love one's neighbour as oneself is the limit under the law. Only under grace is it possible to go a step beyond this, as for instance Aquila and Priscilla did, as recorded in Romans 16: 4. However, "Love is the fulfilling of the law" (Rom. 13: 10), and this is said in connection with this second commandment.

The scribe felt the force of this answer, as verses 32 and 33 show. The series of questions began with the confession, "Master, we know that Thou . . . teaches" the way of God in truth." This was said by the Pharisees and Herodians in the spirit of hypocrisy. It ended with the scribe saying in all sincerity, "Well, Master, Thou hast said the truth." The man saw that the love which would lead to the fulfilling of these two great commandments is of far more importance than offering all the sacrifices which the law enjoined. The sacrifices had their place but they were only a means to an end. Love is "the end of the commandment," as 1 Timothy 1: 5 tells us. The end is greater than the means. Thus the scribe approved of the answer that had been given to him.

The Lord's rejoinder in verse 34 is very striking. He pronounced the man as "not far from the kingdom of God," and this showed two things. First, that anyone who gets away from what is outward and ceremonial, to realize the importance of what is inward and vital before God, is not far from blessing. Second, that important as such a realization is, it does not of itself suffice for entrance into the kingdom. Something further is needed, even the spirit of a little child, as we saw when considering Mark 10. The scribe was near the kingdom but not yet in it. This reply, we judge, staggered the man, as well as the other listeners, and because of this no one cared to ask further questions. Such a man as this,

well versed in the law of God, they took to be in the kingdom as a matter of course. The Lord's words challenged their thoughts. Yet, in seeing that God aims at, and values, that which is moral and spiritual beyond what is ceremonial and fleshly he had travelled a long way towards the kingdom. Romans 14: 17 enforces the same thing as regards ourselves, at least in principle. Have we fully recognized it?

His opponents having finished with their questions the Lord propounds to them His great question, arising out of Psalm 110. The scribes were quite clear that the Messiah was to be the Son of David; yet here is David speaking of Him as his Lord. Amongst men, and in those days, a father never addressed his son in such terms, but the reverse: the son called his father, lord. How could the Christ then be Son of David? Were the scribes wrong in what they asserted? Or could they explain it?

They could not explain it. They were silent. The explanation was exceedingly simple, but face to face with the Christ, and unwilling to admit His claims, they wilfully shut their eyes to it. He was the Son of David, and David called Him Lord by the Holy Ghost, so there was no mistake. The explanation is that it was the Son of God who became the Son of David according to the flesh, as is so plainly stated in Romans 1: 3. When once the Deity of the Christ is fully acknowledged all is plain. These verses throw a good deal of light upon the statement in 1 Corinthians 12: 3, that, "No man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost."

The Lord had now answered all the questions of His adversaries, and asked them a question which they could not answer. Had they been able to answer it, they would have been put into possession of the key to the whole situation. The mass of the people were still glad to listen to Him but the scribes were blind, and in verses 38-40 the Lord warns the people against them. Those who were being blindly led are warned against their blind leaders. The real motives and objects of the scribes are unmasked. The Word of God from His lips pierces between soul and spirit in an unerring way.

Their characteristic sin was self-seeking in the things of God. Whether in the market-place — the business centre, the synagogue — the religious centre, or in feasts — the social circle, they must have the commanding place, and to this end they wore their distinctive dress. Having gained the leading position they used it to feather their own nests financially at the expense of widows, the most defenceless class in the community. The acquisition of power and money was the end and object of their religion. They followed "the way of Balaam the son of Bosor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness" (2 Peter 2: 15); and there are all too many in our day who still tread that evil way, the end of which is "greater damnation," or "severer judgment." The adjective, you notice, is not "longer" as though differences might exist in the *duration* of punishment; though there will be differences as regards its *severity*.

The adversaries had provoked this discussion with their questions, but the last word was with the Lord. The closing words must have fallen from His lips with the force of a sledge-hammer. He calmly took to Himself the office of Judge of all the earth and pronounced their doom. Had He not been the Son of God this had been folly and worse.

But the same Son of God sat over against the treasury and beheld the gifts of the crowd, and lo! He can with equal certainty appraise the value of their gifts. A poor widow approaches — possibly one who had suffered from the swindling of rapacious scribes — and casts in her little all. Two of the smallest coins were left to her, and she threw them both in. According to human thoughts her gift was absurd and contemptible in its smallness, its presence would not be noticed, and its absence would not be felt. In the Divine estimation it was more valuable than all the other gifts put together. God's arithmetic in this matter is not ours.

With God the motive is everything. Here was a woman who instead of blaming God because of

the misdemeanours of the scribes, who claimed to represent Him, devoted her all to the service of God. This delighted the heart of our Lord.

He called His disciples to Him, as verse 43 tells us, and pointed the woman out, proclaiming the virtue of her act. This is particularly striking if we notice how Mark 13 opens, for His disciples were anxious to point out to Him the greatness and beauty of the Temple buildings. *They pointed to costly stones wrought by men's busy hands. He pointed to the moral beauty of a poor widow's act.* He told them that their great buildings would all crash into ruin. It is the widow's act that will be remembered in eternity.

And yet the widow gave her two mites to the temple chest that received contributions for the upkeep of the temple fabric! The Lord had already turned His back on the temple and now was pronouncing its doom. She did not know this; but in spite of being a little behind the times in her intelligence, her gift was accepted and valued according to the devoted heart that prompted it. What a comfort this fact is!

God was before her in her gift, and God abides even when temples are destroyed. Things material — upon which we may set our hearts — disappear, but God remains.

## Mark 13

THE LORD'S PREDICTION that the Temple should be utterly destroyed led to His prophetic discourse. The disciples did not question the fulfilment of His words, they only wished to know the time of fulfilment and, true to their Jewish instincts, what the sign of it would be. His answer to their questions is very instructive.

In the first place, He fixed no dates: any answer He gave as to the time was of an indirect sort. In the second place, He went beyond the immediate scope of their questions to the larger issues of the last days and His own advent in glory. This feature is seen in many Old Testament prophecies, which were given in view of some impending event of history, and which definitely applied to that event, and yet were so worded as to apply with yet greater fulness to events that are to transpire in the last days. In the case before us, there was a fulfilment in the destruction wrought by the Romans in A.D. 70, which comes out more clearly in Luke's account of this discourse, and yet *the* fulfilment is connected with the coming of the Lord. This feature of prophecy is alluded to in the saying, "No prophecy of the Scripture is of any private interpretation" (2 Peter 1: 20).

In the third place, He brought the full weight of His prophecy to bear upon the consciences and hearts of His hearers. If their question was prompted by a considerable measure of curiosity, He lifted the whole matter to a much higher plane by His opening words, "Take heed lest any man deceive you." The course of things that prophecy reveals runs counter to all that men naturally would expect. The attractiveness of the false prophets lies in the fact that they ever predict things which fall in with men's desires and seem eminently reasonable. We must be on our watch, for false prophets abound today in the pulpits of Christendom.

The first warning, in verse 6, concerns those who come, impersonating the Christ. The central point of the conflict is always here. The devil knows that if he can deceive men as to Him, he can deceive them in everything else. If we are wrong as to the centre we are bound to be wrong to the far circumference. To be rooted in our knowledge of the true Christ renders us proof against the seductions of the false ones.

Next we are warned not to expect easy times as to world conditions. Wars and turmoil amongst

the nations, and disturbances in the face of nature are to be expected. These things must not be interpreted as indicating the great climax, for they are but the preliminary throes. Moreover the disciples of the Lord must expect to be confronted with special difficulties. They will be subjected to opposition and persecution, and their nearest relations will turn against them, and hatred from men generally must be their portion. Against this however the Lord sets the fact that these adverse circumstances shall turn to occasions of testimony, and that they would have special support and special wisdom, as to their utterances, from the Holy Ghost.

Some have deduced from verse 10, reading it in conjunction with Matthew 24: 14, that the Lord cannot be coming for His saints until the Gospel has been carried to all the nations of today. But we have to bear in mind that the disciples, whom the Lord was addressing, were at that moment the God-fearing remnant in Israel, and had not yet been baptized into one body, the church: and also that the "Gospel" in this verse is a general term that would cover not only the Message that is being preached today, but also that "Gospel of the kingdom" of which Matthew speaks, and which will be carried forth by the God-fearing remnant, which will be raised up after the church is gone.

Verse 14 does give us the sign for which the disciples asked. Daniel speaks of "the abomination that maketh desolate" (Dan. 12: 11), and this is alluded to in our verse, for the word "desolation," we are told "is an active word," having the force of "causing desolation."

There is to be the public establishment of an idol in the sanctuary in Jerusalem — such as we have predicted in Revelation 13: 14, 15 — an insult to God of a most flagrant kind. That sign will indicate two things: first, that the time of special affliction, of which Daniel 12: 1 speaks, has begun: second, that the end of the age, and the intervention of Christ in His glory, is very near. The remainder of the Lord's discourse is occupied with these two things. Verses 15 - 23 deal with the former; verses 24-27 deal with the latter.

The language of verse 19 shows that the Lord had the great tribulation in view, and the earlier verses show that its centre and most intense fury is found in Judaea. Verses 15 and 16 would indicate that it will set in with great suddenness. Instant flight will be the only way of escape for those who fear God. Its ferocity will be such that if it were permitted to run a lengthy course it would mean extermination. For the elect's sake it will not be permitted to continue, but will be cut short by the advent of Christ. From Daniel 9: 27 we gather that the tribulation will commence, when the head of the revived Roman empire causes "the sacrifice and the oblation to cease," in the midst of the last seven years. This being so, there will be only three and a half years to run before the Lord Jesus puts an end to it by His glorious appearing.

By the tribulation the devil will seek to crush and *exterminate* the elect. But this is not all, as verses 21 and 22 show. There will be at that time a special number of false Christs and prophets appearing, by whom he hopes to *seduce* the elect. He would accomplish it, "if it were possible." Thank God, it is not possible. The true saints will know that the real Christ is not going to hide Himself in some corner, so that men have to say, "Lo, here is Christ; or, lo, He is there." He will shine forth in His glory at His coming, and every eye shall see Him.

The tribulation will come to its end in final convulsions that will affect even the heavens, as verses 24 and 25 show. Sun, moon and stars are sometimes used in Scripture as symbols of supreme power, derived power and subordinate power respectively; and "powers that are in heaven" are in view, as the latter part of verse 25 shows. Still this discourse of the Lord is not marked by a large use of symbols, as the book of Revelation is, so we think that literal convulsions affecting the heavenly bodies must not be excluded, especially as we know there was a literal darkening of the sun when Jesus died.

The darkening of that day will serve to throw into greater relief the brightness of His shining forth, when He comes in the clouds with great power and glory.

The glorious appearing of the Son of Man will be followed by the gathering together of "His elect." These were mentioned in verse 20, and they are those who "endure unto the end" (verse 13), and they shall be saved by the appearing of Christ. These elect are the God-fearing remnant of Israel in the last days; for the Lord was addressing His disciples who at that moment were the God-fearing remnant in the midst of Israel, and they would without a doubt have understood His words in that sense. These elect ones will be found in all parts of the earth, and the instruments used in their gathering together will be angels: gathered together, they will become the redeemed Israel who will enter upon the millennial reign. All this must be differentiated from the coming of the Lord for His saints as predicted in 1 Thessalonians 4, when the Lord Himself will descend from heaven and our gathering together will be unto Him.

The allusion to the fig tree in verse 28 is a parable, and therefore we must expect to find in it a meaning deeper than that which is connected with a simile or an illustration. The fig tree doubtless represents Israel, as we saw in reading Mark 11, and therefore the budding of her branches sets forth the beginning of national revival with that people. The "summer" represents the age of millennial blessedness for the earth. When real national revival sets in for Israel then indeed the appearing of Christ and the millennial age is very near.

The word "generation" in verse 30 is evidently used in a moral sense and not in a literal, meaning people of a certain type and character, just as the Lord used the word in Mark 9: 19, and in Luke 11: 29. The unbelieving generation will not pass until the second advent, nor indeed will the generation of those that seek the Lord. The coming of the Lord will mean the passing away of the evil generation, and at the same time the full establishment of all His words, which are firmer and more durable than all created things.

Verse 32 has presented much difficulty to many minds because of the words, "neither the Son." We may not be able to explain them fully, but we may at least say two things. First, that in this Gospel the Lord is presented as the great Prophet of God, and that this was a matter reserved by the Father and not given to Him as a Prophet to reveal. Second, that if Matthew 20: 23, and John 5: 30, be read and compared with our verse, we shall see that the three passages run on parallel lines, as to giving, knowing and doing, respectively. In Matthew we get the actual words, "Not mine to give." We might summarize Mark as "Not Mine to *know*," and John as "Not Mine to *do*." Unbelief has made great use of the word used in Philippians 2: 7, "made Himself of no reputation," or more literally, "emptied Himself," building upon it the theory that He divested Himself of knowledge so as to become a Jew with the notions of His time; and thus they are enabled — so they think — to impute error to Him on many points. He did empty Himself, for Scripture says He did so. The three passages we have mentioned give us a proper idea of what was involved in it, and lead us to bless His Name for His gracious stoop. The theory of unbelief would rob Him of His glory, and us of any regard for His words — words which, He has just told us, will never pass away.

The five verses which close this chapter contain a very solemn appeal, which should come home to all of us. In verse 33 we get for the fourth time the words, "Take . . . heed." The Lord opened His discourse with these words, and He closed with them, and twice between (verses 9 and 23) He uttered them. The prophetic revelations He gave are all made to bear upon our consciences and lives: He forewarns us that we may be forearmed. Knowing the infallibility of His words, but not knowing when the time is, we are to "watch," that is, be keenly awake and observant, and also to pray, for we are no

match for the powers of darkness, and so we must maintain dependence upon God. We are left to do our appointed work in a spirit of expectancy, anticipating the coming of the Son of Man.

The threefold repetition of the word, "Watch," in these five verses is very striking. We must lay great emphasis on it in our minds, and the more so in that our lot is cast in the late days of this dispensation when His coming cannot be far distant. It is very easy to succumb to the lure of the world, when our minds become drowsy and unalert. A great and important word is this word — WATCH. And the last verse of our chapter shows that it certainly is intended to apply to us.

## Mark 14

AS WE OPEN this chapter, we come back to historical details, and reach the closing moments of our Lord's life. Verses 1 - 11 provide us with a very striking introduction to the last scenes. In verses 1 and 2, crafty *hatred rises* to its climax. In verses 10 and 11, the supreme exhibition of heartless *treachery* is briefly recorded. The verses between tell a story of devoted *love* on the part of an insignificant woman — its beauty enhanced by the story standing between the record of such hatred and such treachery.

The hatred of the chief priests and scribes was equalled by their craft, yet they were but tools in the hands of Satan. They said, "Not on the feast," yet it was on the feast: and again, "Lest there be an uproar of the people," yet there was an uproar of the people, only it was in their favour and against the Christ of God. They little knew the power of the devil to whom they had sold themselves.

The woman of Bethany — Mary, as we know from John 12 — may not herself have fully understood the import and value of her act. She was moved probably by spiritual instinct, realizing the murderous hatred that was surrounding the One she loved. She brought her very precious ointment and expended it upon Him. Her action was misunderstood by "some" — Matthew tells us that these were disciples, and John adds that Judas the traitor was the originator of the censure — who were thinking about money and the poor, particularly about the former. The Lord vindicated her, and that was enough. He accepted her act and valued it according to His understanding of its significance and not according to her intelligence, even though she was, as we suppose, the most intelligent of the disciples. We may see in this a sweet forecast of the gracious way in which He will review the acts of His saints at the Judgment Seat.

His verdict was, "She hath done what she could," which was very high praise. Moreover He ordained that her act should be her memorial where-ever the Gospel is preached. Her name is known and her act remembered by millions today — nineteen centuries after — with all honour, just as also Judas is known in dishonour, and his name has become a synonym for baseness and treachery.

These opening verses show us then that as the moment of crisis approached everybody came out in their true light. The hatred and the treachery of the opponents became blacker: the love of the true was kindled, though none expressed it as did Mary of Bethany. In verse 12, however, we pass to the preparation for the Last Supper, during the course of which the Lord gave far more impressive witness to the strength of His love for His own. There was some testimony to their love for Him, but it was nothing in the presence of His love for them.

The Lord Jesus had no home of His own, but He knew well how to put His hand on all that was needed for the service of God. The owner of the guest-chamber was doubtless someone who knew and revered Him. The disciples knew the sufficiency of their Master. They attempted nothing on their own initiative, but simply looked to Him for direction, and acted on it. Hence the One who had not

where to lay His head had no lack of suitable accommodation for the last meeting with His own.

For many centuries the Passover had been celebrated, and those who ate it knew that it commemorated Israel's deliverance from Egypt; few, if any, realized that it looked forward to the death of the Messiah. Now for the last time it was to be eaten before it was fulfilled. What filled the minds of the disciples we know not, but evidently the mind of the Lord was centred on His death, and to it He turned their thoughts in announcing that His betrayer was amongst them, and that a woe rested upon him. Then He instituted His own Supper.

Brevity characterizes Mark's record all through, but nowhere is it more pronounced than in his account of the institution of this. The essentials however are all here: the bread and its meaning, the cup and its significance and application, which causes it to be designated by Paul, "the cup of blessing which we bless." For the Lord Himself the fruit of the vine, and what it symbolized, earthly joy, was all past: no more would He touch it until in the kingdom of God He would taste it in a new way altogether. All earthly hopes and joys on the old basis were closed for Him.

The lesson that we have to learn is in keeping with this fact. God may in His gracious providences permit us to enjoy on earth many things that are happy and pleasant, yet all our proper joys as Christians are not of an earthly order but of a heavenly.

From the upper chamber, where He had instituted His supper, the Lord led forth His disciples to Gethsemane. A hymn or psalm was sung — Psalms 115-118 being the usual portion, it is said. It was for the disciples just the customary thing, no doubt; but what must it have been for the Lord? To sing, as He went forth to fulfil the Passover type by becoming the sacrifice; and Psalm 118, towards the end, speaks of binding "the sacrifice with cords, even unto the horns of the altar." He went forth to suffering and death, bound by the cords of His love; and the disciples to failure, defeat and scattering.

He warned them of what was before them, referring them to the prophecy of Zechariah, which foretold the smiting of Jehovah's Shepherd and the scattering of the sheep. But the prophet proceeded to say, "and I will turn mine hand upon the little ones," and this answers to verse 28 of our chapter. Those who were His sheep nationally were scattered, but the "little ones," elsewhere called by Zechariah "the poor of the flock," were regathered on a new basis, when once the Shepherd was risen from the dead. Hence He was to meet them not in Jerusalem but in Galilee.

Peter, filled with self-confidence, asserted that he would not stumble though all the others might do so, and this in the face of the most explicit declaration by the Lord, foretelling his fall. The others did not wish to be outdone by Peter and so committed themselves to a similar assertion. What accounted for it was the unholy rivalry that existed amongst them, as to who should be the greatest. Mark makes this manifest with especial clearness, as may be seen if we compare, Mark 9: 33, 34; Mark 10: 35-37, and 41. Peter no doubt felt that now had come the opportunity in which he might demonstrate once and for all that he was head and shoulders above the rest. And the rest were not willing for him thus to forge ahead; they had to keep up with him. Peter's fall seemed to come very suddenly, but all this shows us that the secret roots of it went back a long way into the past.

Peter's bold words were soon to be tested, and first of all in Gethsemane which was reached immediately after. He and his two companions were only asked to watch for an hour. This they could not do; though only to Peter, who had been so particularly boastful, did the Lord address His gentle words of remonstrance, using his old name of Simon. This was appropriate, for he was not true at that moment to his new name, but rather displaying the characteristics of the old nature that was still in him. Their Master was "sore amazed" and "very heavy," and "exceeding sorrowful unto death," and yet they slept, not once merely but thrice.

Against the dark background of their failure, however, the perfection of their Master only shone the more brightly. The reality of His Manhood comes before us very strikingly in verses 33 and 34, and the perfection of it too. Being God, He knew in infinite fulness all that would be involved in dying as the Sin-bearer. Being perfect Man, He possessed every proper human sensibility untarnished — our sensibilities have been blunted by sin, but in Him was no sin. Hence He felt everything in infinite measure, and fervently desired that the hour might pass from Him. And yet again, having taken the Servant's place, He was perfect in His devotion to the will of the Father, and so though desiring that the cup might be taken from Him, He added, "Nevertheless not what I will, but what Thou wilt."

We may summarize it all by saying, that being *perfect God* He had infinite capacity for knowing and feeling all that the approaching hour of death meant for Him. As *perfect Man* He entered fully into the sorrow of that hour, and could do no other than pray for that cup to be taken from Him. As *perfect Servant* He presented Himself to the sacrifice in wholehearted subjection to His Father's will.

Three times did our Lord thus commune with His Father, and then He returned to face the betrayer with his band of sinful men. We may remember that three times was He tempted of Satan in the wilderness at the outset, and it seems certain, though not mentioned here, that the power of Satan was also present in Gethsemane, for when going forth from the upper chamber He had said, "The prince of this world cometh, and hath nothing in Me" (John 14: 30). This also helps to account for the extraordinary somnolence of the disciples. The power of darkness was too great for them, as it ever is for us, except we are actively supported by Divine power. Let us take note that not only does the power of Satan sometimes rouse believers to wrongful actions, it sometimes *just sends them to sleep*.

In saying to Peter, "The spirit truly is ready," the Lord evidently acknowledged that there was in His disciples that which He could appreciate and recognize. Yet "the flesh is weak," and Satan just then was terribly active, so that nothing but watchfulness and prayer would have met the situation. Let us take the word home to ourselves. As the end of the age approaches Satan's activities are to become more rather than less, and we need to be awake with every spiritual faculty alert, and also to be filled with the spirit of prayerful dependence upon God.

Verses 42 - 52, occupy us with His arrest by the rabble sent by the chief priests under the leadership of Judas. They were, of course, not Roman soldiers but servants of the temple and of the ruling classes amongst the Jews. What a story it is! The multitude with their violence, expressed in their swords and staves: Judas with the basest treachery, betraying the Lord with a kiss: Peter springing to sudden and carnal activity: all the disciples forsaking Him and fleeing: an unnamed young man attempting to follow, but ending only in flight with shame added to his panic — violence, treachery, false and mistaken activity, fear and shame. Again we say, What a story! And such are we when brought face to face with the power of darkness, and out of communion with God.

As to Peter, this was step number three on his downward road. First came his entanglement in the ruinous competition for the first place amongst the disciples, which worked out into self-confidence and self-assertion. Second, his lack of watchfulness and prayer, which led to his sleeping when he should have been awake. Third, his carnal anger and violence, followed by abject flight. The fourth step, which brought things to a climax we have at the end of the chapter.

As to the Lord Jesus, all was calmness in perfect submission to the will of God, as expressed in the prophetic Scriptures. His light shone as ever without the smallest flicker.

"Faithful amidst unfaithfulness,

'Mid darkness only light."

Verses 53-65, summarize for us the proceedings before the Jewish religious authorities. All were assembled to sit in judgment upon Him, and so the thing as far as they were concerned was not done in a corner. This shows strikingly what depth of feeling had been aroused. A crowded council, and it was at the dead of night! The fire burned in the courtyard, and we are permitted to see Peter creeping in amongst the foes of his Lord for the sake of a little warmth.

There was no thought of an impartial trial. His judges were unblushingly seeking such witness as would enable them to pronounce on Him the sentence of death. However the power of God was at work behind the scenes, and every attempt to fasten on Him the trumped-up charges came to nothing. Many efforts were made; a sample of them is given us in verse 58, and we recognize a distortion of His utterance which is recorded in John 2: 19. Accusation after accusation broke down by the perjurers falling into confusion and contradicting one another. It seems as though God enveloped their ordinarily acute minds in a fog of confusion.

Driven to desperation, the high priest stood up to examine Him, but to his first question Jesus answered nothing — evidently for the sufficient reason that there was as yet nothing to answer. When challenged as to whether He was the Christ, the Son of God, He at once answered, saying, "I am." Both question and answer lacked nothing in definiteness. There stood the Christ, the Son of God, by His own plain confession; and not only this but He asserted that as Son of Man He would have all power in His hand, and that He would come again in glory from heaven. On this confession He was condemned to death.

The prophet Micah had predicted that "the Judge of Israel" should be made subject to human judgment. This came to pass: yet it is most striking that when the great Judge *was* brought into human judgment every attempt to convict Him upon *human* evidence failed: *all human witnesses fell into confusion*. They condemned Him on the ground of the witness He bore to Himself; and even in doing this they broke the law themselves. It was written: "He that is the high priest among his brethren . . . shall not . . . rend his clothes" (Lev. 21: 10). This the high priest ignored, so agitated was he in the presence of his Victim, so transported with anger and hatred.

The storm of hatred burst upon the Lord as soon as they had discovered a pretext upon which to condemn Him; but in their buffetings and spittings they were but unconsciously fulfilling the Scriptures. The mock trial before the Sanhedrin ended in scenes of disorder, just as confusion had been stamped upon their earlier proceedings — confusion made the more conspicuous by His serene presence in their midst. The only word He uttered as far as Mark's account is concerned, is recorded in verse 62.

Verses 66-72, give us in a parenthesis the climax of Peter's failure: the earlier steps which led to it we have already noticed. He was now warming himself in company with those who served the adversaries of his Lord, and three times he denied Him. Satan was behind the testing, as Luke 22: 31 shows us, and this accounts for the skilful way in which the remarks of the different servants drove him into a corner. The first asserted that he had been "with" Jesus. The second that he was "one of them," evidently meaning one of His disciples. The third reaffirmed this, and claimed that he had proof of it in his dialect, and this one apparently was kinsman to Malchus, whose ear Peter had cut off, as John records.

As Peter saw the net of evidence with its fine meshes dosing in around him, his denials became more violent: first, a pretence that he did not understand; second, a flat denial; third, an avowal that he did not even know the Lord, accompanied with curses and swearing. They were unwilling to accept his protestations of "unfaith," but they must have been convinced by the sad "works" he produced, that

Jesus was to him quite unknown. We have to contemplate the warning with which Peter furnishes us, and see to it that we have *faith* which expresses itself in the appropriate *works*.

But if Satan was at work in regard to Peter so also was the Lord, according to Luke 22: 32. He had prayed for him, and His action brought back to Peter's fevered mind the very words of warning that He had uttered. The remembrance of them smote his conscience and moved him to tears; and in that work in his heart and conscience lay the beginnings of his recovery. When any saint is permitted so to fail, that his sin becomes public and a scandal, we may be sure that it has roots of a secret sort which go back into the past. We may be sure also that the journey back to full recovery is not taken all in a moment.

## Mark 15

THE FIRST VERSE of this chapter picks up the thread from Mark 14: 65. The Romans had taken away the power of capital punishment from the Jews and vested it wholly in Caesar's representative, hence the religious leaders knew they must present Him before Pilate and demand the death sentence upon some ground which appeared adequate to him. Verse 3 tells us that they "accused Him of many things," but we are not told by Mark what those things were. We are struck however by the way in which one phrase occurs over and over again in the earlier part of the chapter — "The King of the Jews" (verses 2, 9, 12, 18, 26). Luke tells us definitely that they said He was "forbidding to give tribute to Caesar, saying that He Himself is Christ a King." Mark's brief account infers this, though not stating it.

Once more, before Pilate, the Lord confessed who He was. Challenged as to being the King of the Jews He simply answered, "Thou sayest it," the equivalent of "Yes." For the rest He again answered nothing, for the reason that in all the wild charges of the chief priests there was nothing to answer. It is worthy of note that Mark only records two utterances of our Lord before His judges. Before the Jewish hierarchy He confessed Himself to be the Christ, Son of God and Son of Man: before the Roman governor He confessed Himself to be the King of the Jews. No evidence prevailed against Him; He was condemned because of who He was, and He could not deny Himself.

Moreover Pilate had sufficient knowledge to discern what lay at the root of all the accusations, "he knew that the chief priests had delivered Him for envy." This led to his ineffectual attempt to divert the thoughts of the multitude to Jesus, when it was a question of the prisoner to be released. The influence of the priests with the people was too much for him however, and hence, desirous of pleasing the crowd, Pilate outraged what sense of justice he had. He released Barabbas, the rebel and murderer, and scourging Jesus, delivered Him to be crucified.

The voice of the people prevailed over the better judgment of the representative of Caesar: in other words, autocracy on that occasion abdicated in favour of democracy, and the popular vote determined it. An old Latin proverb states that the voice of the people is the voice of God. The facts of the crucifixion flatly deny that proverb. Here the voice of the people was the voice of the devil.

Verses 16-32 give us in a very graphic way the terrible circumstances surrounding the crucifixion. All classes combined against the Lord. Pilate already had scourged Him. The Roman soldiers mocked Him in ways that were cruel as well as contemptuous. The ordinary people — just passers-by — railed at Him. The priests mocked Him with sarcasm. The two crucified thieves — representatives of the criminal classes, the very scum of humanity — reviled Him. High-born and low-born, Jew and Gentile, were all involved. Yet in result they were all helping to fulfil the Scriptures,

though doubtless unconsciously to themselves.

This is particularly striking if we take the case of the Roman soldiers — men who were unaware of the existence of the Scriptures. Verse 28 takes note that the crucifixion of the thieves on either side was a fulfilment of Isaiah 53: 12, but many other things they did also fulfilled the Word. For instance, His visage was to be "marred more than any man," according to Isaiah 52: 14, and there was fulfilment of this in the crown of thorns and the smittings. The Judge of Israel was to be smitten "with a rod upon the cheek," according to Micah 5: 1; this the soldiers did, as verse 19 of our chapter shows. Verse 24 records the fulfilment by them of Psalm 22: 18. "They gave Me also gall . . . and . . . vinegar," says Psalm 69: 21, and this also the soldiers did, though the fulfilment is not recorded here but in Matthew. We think we are right in saying that at least 24 prophecies were fulfilled in the 24 hour day when Jesus died.

All men in that hour were displaying themselves in their darkest hue, and in these verses we do not read of one thing that He said. It was just as the prophet had said, "As a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so He openeth not His mouth." It was man's hour, and the power of darkness was at its zenith. The perfection of the holy Servant of the Lord is seen in His suffering in silence all that He endured from the hands of men.

That which the Lord Jesus suffered at the hands of men was very great, yet it falls into comparative insignificance when we turn to consider what He endured at the hands of God as the Victim, when made sin for us. Yet all this far greater matter is compressed by Mark into two verses — 33 and 34; whereas his account of the lesser master covers 52 verses (Mark 14: 53 — Mark 15: 32). The fact is, of course, that the lesser could be described, whilst the greater could not be. The darkness which descended at midday hid from men's eyes even the externals of that scene.

All that can be related historically is that for three hours God put the hush of night upon the land and thus blinded men's eyes, and that at the end of the hours Jesus uttered the cry of anguish, which had been written as prophecy a thousand years before, in Psalm 22: 1. The holy Sin-bearer was forsaken, for God must judge sin and irrevocably banish it from His presence. That utter and eternal banishment *we deserved*, and it will fall upon all who die in their sins. *He endured it to the full*, but since He possessed the holiness, the eternity, the infinitude of full Deity, He could emerge from it at the close of the three hours. Yet the cry, that came from His lips as He did so, showed that He felt the full horror of it. And He had a capacity to feel that was *infinite*.

That which He suffered at the hands of men is not to be thought of lightly. Hebrews 12: 2, says, "Who . . . endured the cross, despising the shame," but we must note the difference between *shame* and *suffering*. Many a man of great physical courage would feel the shame more than suffering. He felt the suffering but He despised the shame, inasmuch as He was infinitely above it, and He knew that He was, "glorious in the eyes of the Lord" (Isaiah 49: 5). We believe that we may say that never was He more glorious in the eyes of the Lord than when He was suffering under the judgment of God as the Sin-bearer. Such was the paradox of Divine holiness and love!

The effect of that cry upon the onlookers is given to us in verses 35 and 36. They would hardly have seen a reference to Elijah in His words if they had not been Jews: but then, how dense and ignorant not to have recognized the cry to God which lay enshrined in their own Scriptures.

The fact of His actual death is given by Mark in the briefest possible fashion. He breathed out His spirit into the hands of God directly after He had cried with a loud voice. What He said is recorded in Luke and John. Here we are simply told the way He said it. There was no gradual failing of strength so that His last words were in a feeble whisper. At one moment a loud voice and the next moment He was

dead! His death was so manifestly supernatural as to greatly impress the centurion who was on duty and watching. Whatever may have been, in his own mind, the exact significance of his words, he must have at least felt that he was a witness of the supernatural. We endorse his words and say, "Truly this Man was the Son of God," in the fullest sense.

The truth of these words was also borne witness to by the rending of the veil of the temple. This great happening appears to have synchronized with His death. It was the Divine hand that rent it, for any human hand would have had to rend it from the bottom to the top. The elaborate typical system instituted in Israel, in connection with sacrifices and temple, all looked forward to the death of Christ; and, that death accomplished, the Divine hand tore the veil as a sign that the day of the type was over, and the way into the holiest was made manifest.

In every emergency God has in reserve some servant who will come forward and carry out His will. Stones *would* cry out, or be raised up to become men, if God needed them in an emergency; but they *never do*, because God is *never* in an emergency like that. He always has a man in reserve, and Joseph was the man on this occasion. This timid and secret disciple was suddenly filled with courage, and boldly faced Pilate. He was the man born into the world to fulfil in its season the prophetic word of Isaiah 53: 9, — "with the rich in His death." Having fulfilled it, he drops completely out of the record.

He missed the opportunity of being identified with Christ in His life, but he did identify himself with Him when He was dead. This is remarkable, for it exactly reversed the procedure of the disciples. They identified themselves with Him during His life, and failed miserably when He died. The apparent defeat of Jesus had the effect of emboldening Joseph. It stirred the smouldering embers of his faith into a sudden blaze. He "waited for the kingdom of God," and we may be sure that in the day of the kingdom the faith and the works of Joseph will not be forgotten by God. His kind of faith is just the sort we need today — the sort that blazes up when defeat seems sure.

Joseph's action had the effect incidentally of bringing before Pilate the supernatural character of Christ's death. No man could take His life from Him; He laid it down by Himself, and that at the suitable moment when all was accomplished. The two thieves, as we know, lingered on for hours after, and their death had to be hastened by cruel means. Pilate marvelled, but the fact being corroborated, he yielded to the request. Thus the will of God was done, and from that moment the sacred body was out of the hands of the unbelievers. Hands of love and faith performed the offices and laid Him in the tomb. Devoted women too had stood as witnesses when even the disciples had disappeared, and they saw where He had been laid.

## Mark 16

LOVE AND FAITH were clearly there, but as yet their faith was dull and unintelligent as to His resurrection. Even the devoted women were full of thoughts as to the embalming of His body, as the opening verses of this chapter show. But this dullness of theirs only enhances the clearness of the proofs that ultimately overwhelmed them with the conviction of His resurrection. At the rising of the sun on the first day of the week they were at the sepulchre only to find that the great stone blocking its entrance had been rolled away. They entered to find no sacred body, but an angel, in appearance like unto a young man.

Matthew and Mark speak of an angel: Luke and John speak of two. This presents no difficulty of course, since angels appear and disappear at will. The angel who appeared as "a young man . . . clothed in a long white garment" to the affrighted women had appeared a little before to the keepers as one with

a countenance "like lightning, and his raiment white as snow," so that a kind of paralysis fell upon them. He was one thing to the world and quite another to disciples. He knew how to discriminate, and that these women were seeking Jesus, though they thought Him to be still in death. Ignorant they were, yet they loved Him; and that made all the difference.

The angelic testimony however did not accomplish much for the moment. It impressed the women right enough, but mainly in the way of fear and trembling and amazement. It did not produce that calm assurance of faith which opens the mouth in testimony to others. They could not yet take up the words, "I believed, therefore have I spoken" (Psalm 116: 10; 2 Corinthians 4: 13). Presently they would share in this "spirit of faith," which was possessed by both Paul and the Psalmist, but that would be when they came into touch with the risen Christ for themselves.

Scripture clearly indicates that angels have a ministry to perform on *behalf of* saints — as witness, Hebrews 1: 14. Their ministry to saints is infrequent, and usually alarming to those who receive it, as was the case here. However their message was very definite. "He is not here," was the negative part of it, and that the women could verify for themselves. The positive word was, "He is risen." That they could not verify, for the moment, and hence it does not seem to have very deeply impressed them.

There follows, in verses 9-14, a brief summary of the three striking appearances of the risen Lord, accounts of which in more detail are given to us in the other Gospels.

First comes that to Mary Magdalene, which is given us so fully in John's Gospel. She was the first to actually see the Lord in resurrection: Mark puts this fact beyond doubt. This is significant as showing that the Lord thought in the first place of the one whose heart was perhaps more devastated by the loss of Him than any other. In other words, love had the first claim on His attention. In result, she did indeed believe, and therefore she was able to speak in the way of testimony to others. But, even so, her words had no appreciable effect. The others did indeed love the Lord, for they mourned and wept, and the very depth of their grief rendered them proof against any testimony which fell short of an actual sight of Himself.

Second, comes His appearance to the two going into the country, which is given to us in Luke with such detail. These had not denied Him like Peter, but they had so lost heart that they were drifting aimlessly away from Jerusalem, as if wishful now to turn their backs on a place filled for them with broken hopes and a most tragic loss and disappointment. Their sight of the risen Christ reversed their footsteps and brought them back to their brethren with the glad tidings. Even that however did not overcome their unbelieving dejection. It is just as well for us that it was so. Resurrection carries us outside the present order of things, and His resurrection is a fact of such immense import, that it must indeed be established by multiplied evidence of an unimpeachable sort.

Third, His appearance to the eleven. This may possibly *not* be one of the occasions that are given us in more detail in Luke and John, for it says, "as they sat at meat," or, more literally, "lay at table." Take the account in Luke for instance — He would hardly have asked, "Have ye here any meat?" if they had been reclining at a meal. The presence of food would have been too obvious. It may therefore have been an occasion not noticed in the other Gospels. On this occasion He brought home to them their unbelief as a matter of reproach, and yet notwithstanding He gave them a commission.

It is remarkable how the commissions, that are recorded in the four Gospels, differ the one from the other. That which is stated in Acts 1: 3, would prepare us for this. Many times during the forty days He appeared to them, speaking of things pertaining to the kingdom of God. During this time He evidently presented to them their commission from different points of view, and Mark gives us one of

them. We may well wonder that, having had to upbraid them for their unbelief, He should send them forth to preach the Gospel so that others should believe. Yet, after all, the one who through hardness of heart has been stubborn in unbelief is, when thoroughly won himself, a valuable witness to others.

The scope of this Gospel commission is the largest possible. It is "all the world," and not merely the little land of Israel. Moreover it is to be preached to "every creature," and not to the Jew only. It is, in other words, for *everybody everywhere*. The blessing that the Gospel conveys is spiritual in nature, for it brings salvation, when faith is present and baptism is submitted to. We must not transpose the words, *baptized* and *saved*, and make it, "He that believeth and is saved shall be baptized."

In no scripture is baptism connected with justification or reconciliation, but there are other scriptures which connect baptism with salvation. This is because salvation is a word of large content, and includes within its scope the practical deliverance of the believer from the whole world system, whether Jewish or Gentile in character, wherein once he was embedded. His links with that world system are to be cut, and baptism sets forth the cutting of those links — in one word, *dissociation*. He who believes the Gospel, and accepts the cutting of his links with the world that held him, is a saved man. A man may say he believes, and even do so in reality, yet if he will not submit to the cutting of the old links, he cannot be spoken of as saved. The Lord knows them that are His of course, but that is another matter.

When it is a question of "damnation," (or "condemnation"), baptism is not mentioned. This is very significant. It shows the ground on which condemnation rests. Even if a man is baptized, if he does *not* believe, he will be condemned. The outward ordinance is plainly prescribed by the Lord, but it can only be administered as faith is professed; and profession, as we know only too well, is not synonymous with possession. Salvation is not effective apart from faith. Peter may tell us that, "Baptism doth also now save us" (1 Peter 3: 21), but note that it is "us," and the "us" are believers.

A good deal of controversy has raged around verses 17 and 18. The miraculous things mentioned are connected by some with the preachers of the Gospel, and it is asserted that they ought to be in full manifestation today. Two or three things may be helpfully noted.

In the first place, the things are to follow not them that *preach*, but them that *believe*.

In the second place, the Lord asserts that these signs *will follow*, apart from any previous conditions on the part of the preacher. There is no stipulation that he must experience a special "baptism of the Spirit," such as is often urged. If men believe, these signs shall follow; so says the Lord. All that could be deduced from their absence would be that no one has really believed.

In the third place, certain words do not appear in the statement, which some seem mentally to read into it. *It does not say*, that these signs will follow *all* that believe, in *all* places, and for *ad* time. If it did we should be shut up to the conclusion that hardly anybody today has believed the Gospel: we have not even believed it ourselves!

These words of our Lord have of course been fulfilled. We can point to four things out of the five occurring, as recorded in the Book of Acts. The fifth thing, the drinking without harm of some deadly thing, we have no record of, yet we have not a shadow of doubt that it happened. He said it would, and we believe Him. His word is enough for us. He gives the signs according to His own pleasure, and as He sees they are needed.

The two verses that close our Gospel are exceedingly beautiful. We remember that it has set before us our Lord as the great Prophet, who has brought us the full Word of God, the perfect Servant, who has fully accomplished His will. All has been related with striking brevity, as becomes such a

presentation of Himself. And now at the close, with the same brevity, the end of the wonderful story is set before us. The Lord having communicated to His disciples all that He desired, "He was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God."

On *earth* He had been *cast out*, but He is *received up* into *heaven*. His works on earth had been *refused*, but now He takes His seat in a place which indicates administration and power of *an irresistible sort*. But it is put that He was "received up," and thus what is emphasized is, that both His reception and His session are due to *an act of God*. The perfect Servant may have been refused here, but by the act of God He takes the place of power, where nothing shall stay His hand carrying out the pleasure of the Lord.

The last verse indicates the direction in which His hand is moving during the present time. He is not as yet dealing with the rebel earth in righteous government: that He will do when the hour strikes for it, according to the purpose of God. Today His interests are centred in the going forth of the Gospel, as He had just indicated. His disciples did go forth, preaching without boundaries or limitations, but the power that gave efficacy to their words and labours was *His*, and not theirs. From His lofty seat on high He wrought with them, and gave the signs which He promised, as recorded in verses 17 and 18. He gave these signs to confirm the word, and that confirmation was specially needed at the outset of its proclamation.

Though the signs of verses 17 and 18 are but rarely seen today, signs do still follow the preaching, signs in the moral and spiritual realm — characters and lives that are wholly transformed. The perfect Servant at the right hand of God, is *working still*.