

# The Gospels Introduced

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*The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*

—Mark 1:1

Let us set the table for understanding the Gospel of Mark by first bringing you two sermons of introduction: one offering some general perspectives about the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; and one offering some specific perspectives on the Gospel of Mark. The third sermon will begin the exposition of Mark's Gospel.

You may ask, "Why are you spending time on two sermons that set the table before bringing out the main course?" Setting the table is not wasting time, nor is it irrelevant to enjoyment of a good meal. Setting the table gives you the tools for properly eating the meal, enjoying the experience, and profiting from it. It would be rather difficult to eat a steak without a knife and fork. So in these first two sermons we will set the table and offer some appetizers that will sharpen your hunger for the first full-course meal.

Understanding these introductory perspectives should also help you offer an intelligent, believing response to the Gospel of Mark. They will give you some basic tools to understand the Gospels in general, and the Gospel of Mark in particular, and will also help you in studying and applying the Word of God on your own.

Let us begin by considering some general principles about the Gospels, that is, that section of the Bible that runs from Matthew through John. We will address five questions:

### **1. How did the Gospels come to us?**

Most of you who are Bible-reading, church-going Christians have a better understanding of how the epistles of the New Testament have come to us than you do of how the four Gospels have come to us. Take 1 Corinthians, for example. We understand that Paul had received information from the household of Chloe that there were problems in the church at Corinth. Paul wrote the Corinthian church to address these problems. So, we rightly conclude that 1 Corinthians was an apostolic response to a first-century church's problems. A similar case can be made for most of the other New Testament epistles.

But most of you may not understand how we received the four Gospels. In a general way, of course, we can say that the four Gospels have come to us as have all the other books of the Bible, namely, through God-ordained writers inspired by the Holy Spirit who have recorded for us the history of God's mighty saving activity in the midst of His people.

In other words, the books of the Bible record for us what is frequently called "the history of redemption." By that term we mean that God throughout history has been doing a work of redeeming or saving His people. Through that work which has been going on ever since man fell into sin in Paradise, God has given to us in various periods of history written documents that embody the record of His saving purposes and acts.

What are the major facts of that history as they relate to the Gospels? For many centuries God's gracious saving purpose was focused on the nation of Israel. That nation, which reached the apex of its development as a kingdom under the reigns of David and Solomon, was sent by God into captivity because of its sin. Afterwards a remnant of the people returned to the land of Palestine. For four hundred years, sometimes called "the silent years," God sent no prophet to these people. No one appeared in Israel who could say, "Thus saith the Lord."

During those silent years, Israel and the rest of the then-known world came under Roman rule. Then one day God sent

into the wilderness of Judea a strangely dressed but powerful preacher named John, known as John the Baptist (or the Baptizer). John called the nation to repentance and baptized those who responded to his call as a sign and seal of their repentance and the remission of their sins. While the region of Palestine was electrified by his preaching and influence, John announced that he was only the forerunner of One who would baptize with the Holy Spirit. He spoke of this person as, “the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). That Lamb of God, known as Jesus of Nazareth, soon came to be baptized by John in the River Jordan. While Jesus was standing in the water, the Holy Spirit came upon Him in the form of a dove and a voice spoke out of heaven, saying, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:17).

After spending forty days in the wilderness where He resisted Satan’s temptations, Jesus of Nazareth began a public ministry of teaching, preaching, and healing, which became the focal point of religious concern wherever He went in Palestine.

The official religious leaders of Israel opposed the rising tide of Jesus’s popularity. After three years of public ministry, Jesus was arrested, condemned, and executed as a common criminal. He rose from the dead on the third day, and for the next forty days appeared to select individuals and groups of His disciples, confirming His resurrection, giving them directives about their responsibilities after He would return to heaven, and assuring them that He would send His Holy Spirit to empower them as His witnesses.

Ten days after Jesus ascended to heaven, the Holy Spirit came upon the body of His disciples assembled in Jerusalem, who immediately began to tell others what they had witnessed in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus of Nazareth. As they did so, many others came to embrace Christ as Savior and Lord, and were baptized. They then formed communities of believers called “churches.” The news of salvation in Jesus spread through all parts of Palestine and into the Roman Empire. Within

the space of one generation, nearly all of the known world had been confronted with this testimony of believers about the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth.

Three points should be underscored in this brief history of what God was doing in Christ as recorded in the four Gospels and continued in the book of Acts. First, *the apostolic church was founded by the oral apostolic witness to the teachings and actions of Jesus Christ*. When Peter stood up to preach at Pentecost, he did not have any of the four Gospels in his hands. He didn't even have the Old Testament in his hands. But he had memorized much of Scripture. And he knew its true meaning through the ministry of Christ and the Holy Spirit (Luke 22:45). Peter also spoke as an eyewitness to the life and work of Jesus of Nazareth. In Acts 2:22, having announced his text (Joel 2:32), Peter begins his application by saying, "Ye men of Israel, hear these words; Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know." He goes on to say in verse 32: "This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses."

Thus, the apostles of Jesus were eyewitnesses in the strictest sense of the term. When a witness is called into court and put on the witness stand, he is asked to testify about what he has seen with his eyes and heard with his ears. So, in the outworking of the saving purposes of God, the apostolic church throughout the entire Roman Empire was founded upon the apostles' oral witness to the teachings and actions of Christ (cf. Luke 24:44–48).

Second, *the oral apostolic witness was the basis of the written record of the teachings and acts of Christ*. In the first two verses of the Gospel of Luke, Luke writes to Theophilus: "Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us, even as they delivered them unto us, which from the beginning were eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word"

Do you see which came first? Eyewitnesses told what they had seen and heard, and now some of those witnesses—including

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—and others who heard them are writing an account of their testimony. Luke goes on to say in the next two verses, “It seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write unto thee in order, most excellent Theophilus, that thou mightest know the certainty of those things, wherein thou hast been instructed” (Luke 1:3–4).

You see, the instruction came by the oral proclamation of eyewitnesses. The written body of witness followed. The oral apostolic witness was the basis of what ultimately became the written witness.

Third, *this written witness of the four Gospels then became the standard for the church’s witness to God’s salvation in Jesus Christ.* The apostles and evangelists adhered closely and reverently to what they had seen and heard from their divine Master, and their disciples faithfully reproduced their testimony. At the beginning, the need of an authoritative written record did not exist, since the facts of Christ’s life and His words were fresh and vivid in people’s memories. But as the church grew, it soon included those who had little or no personal knowledge of these facts. The church now needed a written record of the testimony of those first eyewitnesses.

These apostles and evangelists presented the teachings and acts of Jesus with a view to winning converts to Christ and establishing converts in the faith of Christ, and as they did so, the body of what they conveyed began to take a particular shape and form in accord with what Christ had delivered to them. That peculiar shape and form is embodied in the four Gospels, each of which was written with a somewhat different audience in mind. In no case, however, did they distort what Christ had delivered to them. It is a serious error to suggest that Paul reinvented Christianity, as many allege; or that the apostles perverted Christ’s “simple message of brotherhood” into a way of salvation, as the modernists teach.

So the four Gospels came to us by the inspiration of God, when, after the church was founded under the guidance of the

Spirit, the need for written records was urgently set before the apostles. From about AD 65 to 85, the apostles responded to that need by writing these four Gospel accounts.

## 2. What is the nature of the Gospels?

The Gospels do not fit into any other genre of literature. Christ's unique person and work, upon which the Gospels focus, requires "a literary form that is without clear parallel" in all of the literature being written at that time.<sup>1</sup> Let me explain this uniqueness by first stating what the four Gospels are not, then explaining what they are.

First, *the Gospels are not four different gospels or belief systems*. Basically there is only one gospel. That gospel is Jesus Christ, the good news of God's way of salvation for guilty sinners. The four Gospels are simply different ways of portraying this one gospel, this one Savior.<sup>2</sup>

Second, *the Gospels are not four attempts to give a complete biographical, chronological history of the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth*. In each of the Gospels, whole segments of Jesus's life are passed over in silence. At other times, such as in Luke 2:52, several years are compressed into one sentence: "Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man." No attempt is made in any Gospel to provide comprehensive coverage of Jesus's life. The Gospels tell us little about His childhood and nothing about the influences that shaped Him as a teenager. If you read the Gospels carefully you will notice that more than 25 percent of their content focuses on the last week of our Lord's life on earth.

The Gospel of Mark starts with Christ as a full grown adult, age thirty, who is about to commence His public ministry. It then covers only the last three years of His life and work. Mark begins

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1. D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 46–48.

2. Gordon D. Fee and Robert L. Hubbard Jr., gen. eds., *The Eerdmans Companion to the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 517.

by announcing, “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1).

Third, *the Gospels are not four attempts to give a minute court record of selected teachings and actions of Jesus*. In different Gospels, sayings and events are not reported word-for-word the same. For example, consider the Parable of the Sower. Compare Matthew’s account (13:1–9) with Mark’s version (4:1–9) of the parable and its interpretation. Certain words and phrases are different. The same concepts appear in both Gospels, but expressed or worded differently.

The same is true of events in the life of Jesus. In the various Gospels, the same event is described from different perspectives. Sometimes different numbers of people are involved. Two of the gospel records tell about the healing of a blind man named Bartimaeus. Matthew tells us that two blind men were healed, while Mark refers to only one. But that does not mean that one account is wrong, because the Gospels do not purport to be four attempts to give an exact transcription of the sayings and actions of Jesus. We must not come to these records imposing upon them our notions of what they ought to be and what they ought to say.

What then is the nature of the Gospels? They are divinely inspired, independently formulated narratives of the redemptive ministry and deeds of Jesus of Nazareth. Written as historical narratives in story form,<sup>3</sup> they constitute what we may call two things: portrait galleries of the King; and collected and collated sayings of the King that proclaim the good news of God’s salvation in Christ to lost sinners.<sup>4</sup> The Gospels, then, are not biographies of Jesus,

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3. Cf. Samuel Byrskog, *Story as History—History as Story: The Gospel Tradition in the Context of Ancient Oral History*, WUNT 123 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000).

4. P. W. Smuts suggests that in this digital age it might be helpful “to think of the Gospels as edited video clips of Jesus’ life, with each Gospel writer selecting the same or different camera angles of the same incidents, or selecting different video material to narrate his distinctive record of the life and ministry of Jesus.” *Mark by the Book: A New Multidirectional Method for Understanding the Synoptic*

but accounts of representative teachings and acts of Jesus that the Holy Spirit wanted recorded. They were selected to present Him to all the world as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy and as the suffering Savior who brings salvation to the world. Christ's sufferings are such a large part of the Gospels that Martin Kähler observed, with little exaggeration, that the Gospels are primarily "passion narratives with extended introductions."<sup>5</sup>

The Gospel writers are creative artists. Bearing in mind that "a painting, with the interpretive dimension that it affords, often can reveal the truth about a subject more effectively than a photograph," it has been rightly said that the Gospels are more like paintings than photographs.<sup>6</sup> Try to picture four independent artists, each with his own gifts, his own point of view, his own creativity and style; his own peculiar use of colors, perspective, shading, and all those things that make up what we might call the individual traits of a given artist. Those of you who have studied art know there are certain characteristics of Rembrandt's paintings that are qualitatively different from those of any other painter.

Then picture, if you will, four long picture galleries named Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. As you walk into the picture galleries of the King, you will notice certain pictures of Christ in Matthew's gallery. When you compare those with Mark's, Luke's, or John's, you come away with two distinct convictions. You will be convinced that Matthew simply did not copy Mark's work; or Mark, Luke's; or Luke, John's; or John any combination of the others. Guided by the Spirit, each artist worked accurately and

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*Gospels* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2013), xvii,n. I like to use the illustration of taking photographs at Mount Rushmore from four different perspectives of the presidents carved into stone. From one perspective, all four presidents are fully in view; from another perspective only the first two are visible, while the other two perspectives catch only the opposite sides of George Washington's face.

5. Martin Kähler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ*, trans. and ed. Carl E. Braaten (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1964), 80n11.

6. Donald Hagner, *The New Testament: A Historical and Theological Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 64.



independently of the others in painting his pictures of Jesus of Nazareth, the King.

But you also come away with another equally unshakeable conviction: they are all portraits of the same person, Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Son of Man, the Savior and Lord of sinners. When you compare your impressions of Matthew's gallery with what you sense at the end of Mark's gallery, there is no way you could think or imagine that they were painting two different people. They were painting one glorious person, one glorious Savior, one glorious Redeemer. Every representation is true to life and divinely inspired, and there is no contradiction between or among them.

With few exceptions, that is how the early New Testament church viewed the four Gospels as well. As Donald Hagner writes,

The four different portraits of Jesus in the NT should be regarded as an enrichment rather than an embarrassment. With the same story told from different perspectives we are able to come to a more adequate understanding of Jesus and his message. The early church realized this and in the second century wisely resisted the temptation to follow Marcion (a mid-second-century gnostic Christian), who accepted only one gospel as canonical.... By the end of the second century the fourfold Gospel was accepted in the early church as a given. The early church certainly did not regard the Gospels, for whatever differences one might care to mention, as incompatible with one another or as presenting irreconcilable portraits of Jesus. Rather, they were perceived as enriching our understanding of Jesus.<sup>7</sup>

Understanding the Gospel writers as artistic productions helps resolve a number of issues related to the so-called Synoptic Gospels, such as the basic similarities but significant differences in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The word "synoptic" literally means "as seen together." The problem is that all the writers do not always see exactly the same, that is, from the same viewpoint, or with the same pair of eyes. Happily, hermeneutical perspectives,

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7. Hagner, *The New Testament: A Historical and Theological Introduction*, 60.

or methods of interpretation, help solve these difficulties. P. W. Smuts thus proposes a multidirectional hermeneutic or method of interpretation to best understand and apply the Synoptic Gospels today. The Gospels, he says, must be read in four ways:

- *Downward*, plumbing into the theological depths of each within the context of the particular Gospel;
- *Sideways*, comparing them to each other and appreciating the various Gospel parallel traditions and emphases (as just discussed);
- *Backward*, in the context of all that has preceded them in the Old Testament; and
- *Forward*, as foundational for shedding light on the rest of the New Testament.<sup>8</sup>

In sum, when interpreted multidirectionally, the Synoptic “problem” becomes more of an enriching asset than a source of vexation.

### 3. Why were the Gospels written?

From the Gospels themselves, we discern at least five basic reasons why they were written:

First, they were written to *evangelize*. The apostle John is explicit in John 20:30–31: “Many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book: but these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name.” John says, “I have deliberately selected my materials with a

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8. Smuts, *Mark by the Book*, xv–xxii. For further help in implementing this hermeneutical model, see Kurt Aland, ed., *Synopsis of the Four Gospels* (Stuttgart: German Bible Society, 1987), and G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, eds., *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007). For a clear, simple presentation of the Synoptic problem, see Robert G. Gromacki, *New Testament Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974), 54–59.

view to persuading you concerning who Christ is, and then with a view to your coming to faith in Him.”

This evangelistic purpose was particularly true in regard to the Gentiles, who were not steeped in the Old Testament and in Jewish tradition as much as the Jews were, though the Septuagint was used by God to pave the way for the gospel among the Gentiles. It got the attention and won the hearts of many Greeks, and these people often show up in the Gospels and in Acts. Nevertheless, they needed something more than oral tradition. As Donald Guthrie explains:

The Gentile mission, in fact, would have been greatly assisted by written documents for catechesis, and although the need may not have been at once recognized it must have dawned upon the missionary church at an early stage. Closely linked with catechetical requirements would have been those of apologetics. The non-Christian world would naturally want to know what kind of person Jesus was, and the urgent need for an authoritative answer is easily recognizable. Whereas...an apostolic oral witness would at first suffice, the spreading work of the gospel would soon require more permanent accounts.<sup>9</sup>

Second, they were written for *confirmation*. The first four verses of Luke are addressed to Theophilus. Luke concludes his Gospel by stating its purpose: “that thou mightest know the certainty of those things, wherein thou hast been instructed” (Luke 1:4). It’s as if Luke said to Theophilus (and also to us): “You’ve heard the truths of the gospel, you’ve believed them, you’ve embraced them, but I am writing them down for you to confirm your understanding and conviction regarding these truths.” Such confirmation is vital because our salvation from sin and death is based on historic fact. If Jesus of Nazareth did not do what others said He did, and if He was not what He claimed to be, then He is no Savior, and we are not saved.

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9. Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1990), 23.

Third, they were written to give *instruction*. The Gospels were written to instruct believers in the ancient church about the person and work of Christ as the basis of saving faith in the Savior and Lord. They were written to teach us what the gospel is, as well as to instruct us regarding the promises and commands of Christ that provide the content of faith and the terms of Christian discipleship. Remember how He told the apostles to make disciples by teaching them to observe whatever He commanded them (Matt. 28:18–20)? Once the apostles passed from the scene, how could the church to the end of the age observe everything Christ commanded unless what He commanded was embodied in writing?

Fourth, they were written to provide an *example*, that is, to set Christ's life before us as a pattern that we must strive to conform to. The gospels teach us that to abide in Him we must walk as He walked. How can Christ be my pattern if I don't know how He lived? How did He relate to the sick, the destitute, the downcast, and the outcast? How did He react to religious hypocrisy? If I am to walk as He walked, I must have some concrete record of how Jesus conducted Himself in every aspect of life. Only then can He become my exemplar as well as my Savior.

So in the Gospels I have the record that Christ lived as I must live. He died the death I should die for my sin. And that record of His life and death is the basis of the faith that is unto salvation. That record also shows me how to obey Him, for I may turn to the written word for whatever He has commanded. When I want to see those commands fleshed out in my own experience I turn to these Gospels, and pray, "Lord, help me to be like Thee."

Finally, they were written to be *read* in public worship. The church carried on the practice of the synagogue, giving a large place to public reading of Scripture in worship, both those we call the Old Testament, and those which would soon form the corpus of the New Testament. Guthrie writes, "It is highly probable that some account of the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus would from earliest times need to be included in the forms of Christian worship. But although once again actual eyewitnesses

would, at first, well supply the lack, in the Gentile regions where direct Palestinian eyewitnesses were not available the need for written records would require no time to develop.”<sup>10</sup>

When you read the Gospels or hear them preached, how are these five purposes fulfilled in your walk with Christ? Do they evangelize you, confirm your faith, instruct you in faith, set Christ before you as a pattern, and move you to worship the triune God?

#### **4. What is the relationship of the Gospels to the rest of the New Testament?**

There are three matters to note here. First, *the Gospels are part of the New Testament documents*. They were written some thirty to fifty years after the establishment of the apostolic church throughout the Roman Empire (AD 65–85). Furthermore, we know that they are New Testament documents from the simple statement of Mark 1:1: “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Mark says that what he is writing is good news, announcing to the world that God has done a new work in the person of His Son, for the salvation of all who truly believe in Him. The Gospel of Mark and all of the other gospel records are packed full with gospel truth, that is, the good news of the glorious person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Second, *the Gospels delineate and expand the apostolic preaching and teaching summarized in the book of Acts*. In the book of Acts, Luke repeatedly offers summaries of apostolic sermons. Most of those summaries take less than a minute to read. In nearly every case, those sermons rely on earlier Scripture. The apostles cite the prophecies and promises of the Old Testament and bear witness to Christ as the fulfilment of them. So Paul entered the synagogue in Thessalonica and “reasoned with them out of the scriptures, opening and alleging, that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead, and that this Jesus, whom

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10. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 23.

I preach unto you, is Christ” (Acts 17:2–3). The gospel records provide the evidence that supports this apostolic line of reasoning.

That is particularly true of Luke and Acts, a two-volume collection that serves as the historical backbone of the New Testament. Under the Spirit’s inspiration, Luke organized the history of Christ’s teachings and actions in two phases: one leading up to and culminating in the ascension of Christ (Luke); the other tracing the events that occur subsequent to the ascension of Christ (Acts). In his Gospel, Luke unveils how Christ lives, ministers, and dies, showing how He accomplishes redemption (Luke 1:68–75); in Acts, he shows how Christ, by His Word and Spirit, applies His accomplished redemption to believers, and gathers a church to Himself, “chosen for eternal life” (cf. Acts 2:47; Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 54).<sup>11</sup>

Once we understand this relationship between the Gospels and Acts, we should no longer wish we could have seen Jesus, the apostles, and the New Testament church with our own eyes. We have a greater privilege. In the Gospels, we have the apostolic witness forever embodied in the inspired New Testament (cf. 2 Peter 1:17–21). And in the book of Acts we have the privilege of entering into the very fellowship of the apostolic church. First John 1:3 puts it this way: “That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ.”

Dear Christian, if you rightly understand the relationship of the Gospels to the rest of the New Testament, in particular to the book of Acts, you will not envy those who sat at the feet of Peter and John and heard their eyewitness testimony. For once they had spoken that Word, the apostles moved on to other places. But we may now have an apostle in our living rooms, our studies, and our kitchens who continually tells us about our Savior’s redemptive

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11. This paragraph is adapted from *The Reformation Heritage KJV Study Bible*, ed. Joel R. Beeke, Michael P. V. Barrett, Gerald Bilkes, and Paul Smalley (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), 1352.

words and actions, as well as His redemption to believers in the fellowship of the church, through the pages of the inspired Gospels.

That's why the present arrangement of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament is so effective. If the New Testament books were arranged as they were written, the first book would be James. Next would be several of Paul's letters. Only then would you have the first of the Gospels, all of which were written in the second half of the first century. But in God's kind providence, the arrangement of Gospels, Acts, Epistles, and Revelation is perfectly suited for the abiding needs of the church. For what came first was the testimony of those who reported what Jesus did and said. And when new believers were gathered into communities of believers, then the epistles, which are steeped in the historic facts recorded in the Gospels and Acts, were used to confirm, instruct, guide, encourage, and rebuke these believers. So the Gospels are the historical foundation for the teaching of the epistles. It is the Gospels, as Donald Hagner notes, that "constitute the turning point and climax of salvation history. [They are] the story of God at work, fulfilling the promises to Israel and accomplishing the redemption of humanity."<sup>12</sup>

The epistles build upon the historic redemptive facts of the Gospels by defining the doctrines that flow out of these facts. Then they tell us how to put the truths of the gospel into practice. Thus, the New Testament as a whole teaches us propositional truths about Jesus, spells out those truths in what we call doctrine or theology, and then gives us imperatives (clear and forceful directives) on how we should live. Gospel history or truth leads to gospel doctrine, which in turn leads to gospel practice. Or, moving from effect back to cause, practice is always conditioned by and rooted in doctrine, and doctrine is always grounded in historic truth. It is this combination that makes Christianity so powerful.

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12. Hagner, *The New Testament: A Historical and Theological Introduction*, 59.

Third, *the Gospels provide for the union of propositional truth about Jesus Christ and personal attachment to Him*. Saving faith in the gospel involves both the hearing and receiving of what theologians call propositional truth. A proposition is an assertion that is offered for consideration (as to its validity) and acceptance (as to its utility). In Christianity, a proposition is a truth set forth which, when proven from Scripture, is to be fully believed in the mind and wholeheartedly embraced in a Christian's life and practice. No one can become a Christian who does not hear, affirm, and practice certain propositional truths.

Consider 1 Corinthians 15:1-2: "Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand; by which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain." Paul is saying, "I'm going to go back over the gospel that I proclaimed to you, the gospel you received, the gospel in which you stand, the gospel by which you are saved. If you receive it and abide or stand in it, you are saved by that truth." Thus, the hearing and wholehearted reception and adherence to such propositional truth is necessary for salvation.

Paul then presents the gospel in particular propositions. "For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures." The first propositional truth is, "that Christ died for our sins," an historical event. Verse 4a then adds, "that He was buried," proving that He was really dead. Paul then announces another propositional truth: "that He rose again the third day" (v. 4b). The same Christ who died, whose body was buried in the tomb came out of that tomb on the third day. The resurrection is not an idea; it was a physical body that died on the cross, that then went into and came out of the tomb. Paul is saying, as it were: "If you receive and affirm these propositions as truth with mind and soul, and hold on to them, you will be saved. Cease to receive them and live by them, and you will be damned! There is no Christianity without these foundational, propositional truths." Paul thus concludes in



verse 17: “And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins.” You are guilty, condemned, lost, hopeless!

Christianity involves the hearing and wholehearted reception and retention of propositional truth. But saving faith in Christ also involves entering into and remaining in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. That’s why Mark does not begin his Gospel by saying, “The beginning of the gospel of saving propositional truth.” Though it is that, it is more than that. It is news of a person, the Son of God, who must be known and experienced. Hence Mark says, “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

Likewise, John 1:12 says: “As many as received him [not just propositions about Him] “to them gave he the power to become the sons of God, even to them who believe on his name.” Or consider Colossians 2:6: “As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him.” Christ did not say, “Come to the propositions about Me,” but said, “Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” He also promised, “Him that cometh unto me I will in no wise cast out.” And He stated firmly, “I am the way, the truth, and the life; no man cometh unto the Father but by me.” Saving faith unites the complete believer, body and soul, to the complete person of the Redeemer.

So we must enter into a personal relationship with Christ and remain in Him. Jesus says, “Abide in me...if a man abide not in me he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them and cast them into the fire, and they are burned” (John 15:4, 6). Christ gives Himself to us in His Word and by His Spirit. In obedience to that Word, and by that same Spirit, we give ourselves to Him. Being saved is not just a once-for-all decision to receive Christ. If the attachment is real from the start, it will be an abiding attachment. These, then, are foundational elements for a saving relationship with Christ.

The Gospels are important, for they provide us with the necessary materials for the union of propositional truth about Jesus Christ and personal attachment to Him. We are not called to be

attached to a person who is unknown or undefined or who comes to us in a cloud of mystery. Christian faith is not an irrational leap in the dark, or a mere feeling of dependence on we know not what.

Marriage is serious business. I'm not going to pledge to love, cherish, and nourish some unknown person or commodity. Likewise, God does not call upon us to enter into personal attachment to an unknown Christ. He has given us the Gospels to tell us about Christ the King. He says, "Would you be married to my Son? Consider Him. This is my beloved Son. Look at Him in all the humiliation of His incarnation. Look at Him in His development from infancy to boyhood, and then to manhood. Look at Him identifying Himself with sinners as He is baptized. Look at Him speaking peace to troubled seas, binding the devil, casting out demons, healing the sick, feeding the hungry, seeking and saving the lost, and proclaiming the kingdom of God. Listen as He speaks with such power and grace that even His enemies wonder at the words that proceed from His lips. Hear Him thunder against pride, greed, and hypocrisy. Hear Him inviting the neediest sinner to come to Him. Behold Him as He receives publicans and harlots. In effect, His Father testifies of Christ's worth, saying, "This is My beloved Son. When I call you to personal attachment I do not call you to some unknown or undefined mystical Christ. I call you to the Christ who appeared on earth in the fullness of time, and is proclaimed to you in the facts and propositional truth of the gospel."

God also says, "I do not call you to accept mere propositional truth without the union of your person with Christ's person." Saving faith is not mere historical faith, the mere affirmation that the facts recorded in the Gospels are true. The true believer says, "I, with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Savior Jesus Christ. I am called a Christian because I am a member of Christ by faith, and thus am partaker of His anointing. I am His, and He is mine."<sup>13</sup> Merely believing the

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13. Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 1, 32; Song of Solomon 2:16, 6:3.

propositional truth about Christ is not enough; you must also be personally joined to Him, submit to Him, follow where He leads, and become conformed to His image.

The Gospels provide the material for this fusion of propositional truth and personal attachment through an experiential knowledge of Jesus Christ. No verse in the Gospels better illustrates this than John 17:3, "This is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent."

What a privilege it is to have the four Gospels in our hands! Do you believe their propositional truths? Are you personally attached to Christ, who is the essence of all the truth these propositions convey, indeed, who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life (John 14:6)? Can you say with the apostle Paul, "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Phil. 1:21)?

You ought to be deeply concerned about your soul if Christ is not your Savior and Lord, and if you have never seen such beauty in Him that nothing else will satisfy. Likewise, if you have walked through the galleries of the King's four Gospels all your life without forming a personal attachment to the King, you are in a dangerous condition. Christ will not save you unless you repent of your sin and unbelief, and surrender in faith to the King of kings.

My friend, go back to God's four gospel records about His Son, and cry to God to give you eyes to see what is really there: the very glory of God shining in the face of Jesus. In the coming months, as we walk up and down the gallery of the Gospel of Mark, I pray that your soul will find no rest until the Holy Spirit makes Christ so indispensable as your Savior and so beautiful as your Lord and King that you will fall at His feet and cry out, "Lord Jesus, give me Thyself, or else I die!"

Meanwhile, let me lovingly warn you: if in this life you do not come to see Christ as your Savior in "the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God," the first time you will see Him as He really is will be on Judgment Day, when you will see Him as your Judge. Then you will know that He is exactly who He claimed to be in the four Gospels: the One whom God has made both Lord and Christ, and

the Judge of the living and the dead. Oh, seek the Lord while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near!

### **5. How should we approach our study of the Gospels, particularly the study of Mark?**

Three words tell us how to study the Gospel of Mark: *reverence*, *dependence*, and *expectancy*. Let us briefly examine each.

We should first study this Gospel with *reverence*. This involves profound honor, deep respect, holy awe, and godly fear. We ought to approach the Gospels in general with reverence and Mark in particular, realizing that we are handling the infallible, “God-breathed” Word, the living and active Word that can make us and keep us “wise unto salvation.” Jesus Himself was aware of the need for reverence in handling God’s eternal and abiding Word. “Heaven and earth shall pass away: but my words shall not pass away” (Mark 13:31). Jesus was profoundly conscious that the very words He used to express the mind of God were stamped with the abiding truth and trustworthiness of the word of God. Thus we must approach the exposition of the Gospel of Mark with profound reverence, coming to God’s house as humble students and believers of God’s Word rather than as judges and critics of that Word.

We also should study the Gospels with reverence because we will be held accountable on the Judgment Day for this inestimable privilege. Jesus says to His disciples in Matthew 13:17, “For verily I say unto you, That many prophets and righteous men have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them [the deeds of Jesus]; and to hear those things which ye hear [the words of Jesus], and have not heard them.” Comparatively few people in world history have had the privilege of sitting under a sound exposition of the Gospels of Jesus Christ. What a privilege, but also what a responsibility you thus have. All the sermons you hear about the words Christ spoke and about the deeds He performed in the Gospel of Mark will revisit you on Judgment Day. Your eternal destiny will be formally and publicly announced before the universe by the very One who is set before us in Mark’s

picture gallery of the Savior King. Will you then not bow in reverence before the exposition of this Gospel?

Second, our approach to the Gospels must be marked by a spirit and attitude of *dependence*. We might be tempted to think that walking through the picture galleries of the King will automatically overwhelm and captivate people who behold His beauty. Furthermore, we might be tempted to think that mere exposure to His words of power and grace will automatically bring us under His sway. Would God it were so, but it is not. The truth is that we are dependent upon God for the powerful assistance of the Holy Spirit as we study the gospel records to know what they mean for us.

By nature, we reject the Word of God, both in its written form, the Bible, and in its living form, the Lord Jesus Christ. We hate the light, and love the darkness, preferring ignorance and rejecting knowledge. Only the light of God can enlighten our darkness. Only the work of the Spirit can overcome our natural enmity to the truth; “no man can say [confess] that Jesus is the Lord but by the Holy Ghost” (1 Cor. 12:3). When Peter answers Christ’s question about His identity by saying, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God,” Jesus tells Peter, “Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven” (Matt. 16:17).

You and I are utterly dependent upon the Spirit to give us ears to hear what the Gospel of Mark has to say. So we must approach our study in an attitude of dependence upon God, that He would grant us present and powerful assistance through the Holy Spirit. That attitude must incite us to earnest and persistent prayer so we can receive the Holy Spirit (Luke 11:13), to a vigorous repudiation of all confidence in ourselves or in the preacher (Jer. 17:5), and to confession of sin and mortification of all that would resist, grieve, or quench the Spirit.

Third, we must approach the study of Mark with *expectancy*. When parents are expecting a child, they eagerly await the due date of that baby. Likewise, when we speak about examining the truth of the Gospels with expectancy, we do so with eager

anticipation of the presence of the Holy Spirit to take the Word and apply it to our minds and souls so as to save us and to transform and conform us to the image of Christ.

So, as we study in the Gospel of Mark we should come with an expectancy born of the conviction that this record of Christ's life, deeds, death, and resurrection is not being expounded merely as an intellectual exercise or historical inquiry. Rather, we expect that God's Spirit will take Mark's account and so apply it to us in truth and reality that we would have heart dealings with this Christ. Then we will not merely admire the grace of Him in saying to the paralytic let down through the roof by his four friends, "Thy sins be forgiven thee," but we will long to hear Him say to us as well: "Son, thy sins be forgiven *thee*." The faithfully recorded words of Mark will then become words of life to our hearts and lives.

My unsaved friend, what we will proclaim to you is not mere opinion or philosophy, but the facts about a living person, "Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mark 1:1). We will tell you about Jesus of Nazareth, the incarnate Son of God, who lived a perfect life, died a sinner's death, was buried, and was raised from the dead. By His Spirit, through the preaching of the Word, Christ calls you to Himself now as surely as He once stood on the shores of the Sea of Galilee and said, "Peter, James and John, follow me." He comes to you in His own Word and by His Spirit, and says, "Follow me. Come into living, trustful attachment to my Person. And in that attachment all the virtue of My work will be yours. My God will be your God, My righteousness will be your righteousness; My death for sin will be your death to sin; My resurrection, your resurrection; My life will be your life."

To you, dear believers, what determines whether or not we are growing in grace? Is it not the degree to which, in your own experience, you maintain true, living, vital communion with Jesus Christ by the Spirit who dwells in Christ as the Head, and in you as the members of His body? Is it not true in your experience that when He is near and precious, everything else seems to fall into place, and life is good? But when He becomes distant, and

anything or any other person rivals His affection, do you not experience that everything gets cloudy, and you lose your way?

May we take up the study of the Gospel of Mark, with such grace in our hearts, that beholding our mighty Lord and faithful Savior in the mirror of His Word, we shall know Him and love Him as we never have before, and be made all the more willing and ready, henceforth, to live unto Him. May we come to the Gospel of Mark with reverent hearts, fearing God, affirming the truth of His Word, depending on the help of the Holy Spirit, and expecting Him to lead us into all truth, so that we may grow in the knowledge and grace of “the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1).





## The Care of Christ

*Rev. Ian Macleod*

*And he was in the hinder part of the ship, asleep on a pillow:  
and they awake him, and say unto him, Master, carest thou not  
that we perish?*

—Mark 4:38

Dear congregation, to get any glimpse of the glory of Christ ought to make us wonder and say, “What a glorious person Jesus Christ is!” Yet, as we do so, we might ask, “How can I come near to someone as wonderful and glorious and holy as He is?” We might feel more like Peter, who says, “Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord” (Luke 5:8). It might make us wonder why someone as glorious as this would have anything to do with us. Why would He care about someone like you or me? This passage answers the question, “Does Jesus care about someone like you and me?” It is quite possible that that is not a particularly pressing question to you when life is going smoothly—when health is good, when family life is good, when friends are good, when school and work are good. Yes, we all have our ups and downs but generally life is smooth and life is good. But it certainly *does* become a question that presses upon us in the context of suffering—when you get devastating news, that phone call, that doctor’s report; when things seem to go terribly wrong, then the questions that often come are, “Does God see? Does God care?” Even atheists will ask these kinds of questions in time of great trouble. You can think of the time after 9/11—the new atheists came out, and they had this very militant

approach: “Where was God? Does He not see? Why did He do nothing? Does He not care?”

But what about you in your own trials and in your own difficulties, in your own heartbreaks and temptations, in your own unbelief and questions, when things happen that seem so difficult to understand and you have disappointments and distresses. Life seems to go out of control, and not just outwardly but so often inwardly. There may be a calm outwardly on our face, but inwardly there is this storm. Maybe that is you today. Maybe there is a storm in your conscience: a sense of your sin, a sense of what sin deserves, a sense that you are going to perish. This then is no theoretical question. Does Jesus care? And here we are getting to the very heart of His character. What is He like? And under this theme—does Jesus care?—we want to see three things from this passage:

1. This is a question that Christ purposely raises in the minds of His people.
2. This is a question that He powerfully replies to.
3. This is a question that He perfectly redirects.

First, He purposely raises this question in the minds of His people: Does He care? Children, you know this story well. One day after teaching and healing, Jesus tells His disciples to go to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. As you know, they are fishermen, and this is a trip they have made hundreds or thousands of times, perhaps even daily. They are fishermen, so they know exactly what to do. They are at home on the sea. And most likely it was a beautiful day for sailing. At least, we don't read of them objecting or saying this is a bad idea, that the weather is not favorable. And then, too, Jesus falls asleep in the boat. This suggests to us very strongly that there is a calm on the Sea of Galilee.

People who know more about it tell us that on the Sea of Galilee, storms can, and often do, come up very quickly, and that is exactly what happens here. That, in itself, would not have been a major surprise to these fishermen. Suddenly, the wind picks up,

the sky gets dark, they begin to feel the wind and rain, and not just rain, but lashing rain, and there are strong waves hitting the boat. And I suppose, even up to that point, they are not yet out of control. And yet, it seems that this storm is unlike any other. For all their efforts, these experienced fishermen come to the place that must be the worst nightmare for every sailor—to *be out of control at sea*. To be out of control anywhere is a terrifying thing. Children, you know that: you ride your bike down a steep and winding hill and you think you are going along fine, but suddenly you lose control, and it is a very scary thing. Or maybe you are driving a car, and you start to skid, you try to correct, and you overcorrect, and before you know it you are out of control. It's a terrifying thing: you can see your life flash in front of you. Well, here on the sea, these fishermen are out of control. Waves are coming into the boat, and verse 37 tells us that they "beat into the ship, so that it was now full." The disciples reach a point of sheer desperation—"We are going to die; we are going to perish!"

But there are two other things in this account that are particularly troubling and confusing to the disciples, more than the water that is filling the boat. First, *they are here because they obeyed Jesus*. They are not like Jonah, running away from the Lord and doing the opposite of what He said. They are here because Jesus told them to go. "Let us depart to the other side." It wasn't a suggestion. It was a command. And what did they do? They promptly obeyed. They did what disciples are meant to do—obey and follow the Lord. They took Him "even as he was," Mark tells us, "in the ship." It suggests they went quickly; they didn't hang around; they took Him as He was in the ship. Matthew tells us that His disciples followed Him. Luke simply says, "They launched forth." Is that not what disciples do? Does Jesus not say in John 10:27, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me"? Does He not also say there in verse 28, "And they shall never perish"? But the reason the disciples are in this storm, at this point of perishing, as they see it, is precisely because they did what Jesus told them. Doesn't that add to the trouble and the storm?

Maybe even today you find yourself in a storm that never seems to end, and the hardest thing about it is that as far as you can see, you are in it because you were doing what was right—you were following the Lord. But there is something else. It is not just that they are obeying Jesus—maybe it is even more this—it's that Jesus was asleep. Interestingly, this is the only time in the Gospels that we are told of Jesus being asleep. Their problem is that they are looking at their situation and they cannot make sense of what Jesus is doing. What Jesus is doing or not doing does not line up with the circumstances around them or with what I, or we, think He should be doing. They are in the middle of a life-threatening storm, and verse 38 so *calmly* tells us, “Jesus was in the hinder part of the ship, asleep on a pillow.” “I will both lay me down in peace, and sleep: for thou, LORD, only makest me dwell in safety” (Ps. 4:8). It is very obvious here that Jesus is in a very deep sleep. Children, maybe some of your parents think you could sleep through anything, but when you get a little older, it is not always so easy to go into a deep sleep. Jesus is a fully grown man, and He is in a deep sleep. There is a life-threatening storm, there is howling wind, there are crashing waves filling the boat and drenching Him with its water, and Jesus does not wake up.

What does that tell you about Jesus? It tells you He was absolutely exhausted. He was absolutely exhausted! You see the real humanity of Christ. He has been preaching all day—an exhausting thing for any man. He has been performing miracles and healing and dealing with the people all day long. He is on His way to Gadara to deal with a demon-possessed man, and He is absolutely exhausted. Nobody worked as hard as Christ did. Nobody had the responsibility; nobody had the enormous pressure on their shoulders as He did. So the disciples, no doubt, are happy to let Him sleep. They were the fishermen—this is what they are good at—so they happily let Him sleep.

But do you see a lesson here? Do you see that Jesus is testing them exactly at the point where they thought they were strongest? The Lord often does that. Moses is known for his meekness, but

what happens? He strikes out in anger and is not allowed into the Promised Land. Peter is known for boldness and courage, and yet it is a little maid that makes him deny and swear that he does not know Jesus of Nazareth. Here are these fishermen, and what are they known for but their skill, their strength, and their courage at sea. This is their expertise, their sphere of competence, but here they are in a boat, in a storm at sea, out of control, crying out and saying, “We perish!”

And yet, even in that, you hear the germ of faith. Why are lifelong fishermen crying out to a carpenter’s son to help them in a storm, except that they realize that this is no ordinary man? What we are emphasizing here is that Christ has a purpose in bringing His people through the storm. He is bringing His people to see that their strength is weakness in His sight. He is bringing them to see just how poor and weak and needy they are. He is bringing them to see that they need Christ at every single point. There is no area of their lives of which they can say they can do without Jesus. There is no area of our own lives where we can say, “It’s okay for Jesus to be asleep here; I can take the helm in this area of my life.” No. This is what Jesus is bringing them to see: that this is simply not true. We need Christ at every point—our best efforts, the places we consider ourselves most strong, and even our faith itself is weakness in His sight. Faith can be a very fragile thing. But Jesus often brings devastating experiences into the lives of His people—not to harm them, not because He does not love them, not to destroy them, not so they perish—but so they depend more and more upon the Savior. “Carest thou not that we perish?” is a question that Jesus purposely raises in their minds because it is a question that He wants to answer.

That brings us, second, to this: does Jesus care? It is a question to which He gives a powerful reply. Before we look at the powerful reply, we do need to recognize that it is a *painful* reply. In many ways, this is the most painful question that anyone could have ever asked the Savior. People can say many things about you. People can question your strength; they can question your courage, your

intellect, your ability, your stamina, your knowledge, or your wisdom, but when people question your *care*, that is the really sore spot. Because what is the most notable difference between the good shepherd and the hireling? The good shepherd, Jesus says in John 10, is the one who gives his life for the sheep. He does not flee when the wolf comes—he lays down his life for the sheep. That is contrasted with the hireling who *does* flee when the wolf comes. Why? Because he does not care for the sheep. That is how you know the difference between a good shepherd and a hireling—it is in their *care* for the sheep. Can you feel the sting of this question? “Master, don’t you care?”

What a thing to say to Christ! Maybe it was the first thing He heard as He woke up from sleep—words that, no doubt, went through His real human heart like a dagger. “Master, carest thou not that we perish?” The very reason He is here is because He cares. All you have to do is look at Him lying there in the boat: look at Him exhausted, worn and spent, in a deep sleep, so tired that He sleeps through a storm. Look at Him there, and you have all the proof you need that here is one who cares. This is the eternal Son of God. This is the brightness of the Father’s glory. This is the express image of His person. This is the one who upholds all things by the word of His power. This is the one who slumbers not nor sleeps. Yet here He is, in His human nature, absolutely exhausted in a boat. Why? Because He is made in all points like unto His brethren so that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest to them; so that, ultimately, He could die for their sin. And this is His journey: He is on His way to Jerusalem and to Calvary itself, not to sleep a sleep of exhaustion, but to sleep the sleep of death. Oh, how deeply He cares!

It is a painful question, but it is a question He has been leading them to ask for this very purpose—that He would give this powerful reply, and that He would show them just how much He does care. Because, children, what was it that woke Jesus, if not the storm? What brought Him out of His sleep, if not the wind and the rain and the drenching sea? What woke Jesus up from His

deep sleep? What woke Jesus up from His deep sleep was a cry for help—a cry for mercy and for salvation. “Lord, save us,” they say. “We perish!” That is what woke Him up. Thomas Boston says that the language of passion in the disciples is sometimes mixed with the language of grace.<sup>1</sup> Passion and grace. We could also say unbelief and faith. These two things are coming together here. There is the noise of the sea and the waves and the noise of their unbelief—We are going to perish! There is the noise of unbelief—Jesus does not care! But that is not what woke Him up. What woke Him up was the sound of the bleating of His sheep. He heard the cry of faith—the cry for His mercy, for His help, for His salvation—and we read, “And he arose.” I simply want to tell you today that if you come to this same Lord in your storm, whether it rages inside of you or outside of you, and you say, “Lord, rise, help and redeem us; Thy mercy we trust,” you will have His full attention. You can read Psalm 18 when you have time this afternoon and it will give you a vivid picture of how the Lord in heaven responds to the cry of His afflicted people.

Here is His purpose then: He wants to show them just how much He really does care. What a powerful reply we have in verse 39. “And he arose, and rebuked the wind, and said unto the sea, Peace, be still. And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm.” There is something so very impressive about the sea, isn’t there? Even as you stand on the safety of the shore and look out over the vast sea or ocean, there is something about the size of the sea and the power of the sea, with its relentless waves crashing on its shore, that is so very impressive! But the size and power of the sea are not as impressive as the one who made it, the one who claims it as His own. Psalm 95 says, “The sea is his, and he made it.” The one asleep on the boat—He made the sea. It belongs to Him.

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1. Thomas Boston, *The Whole Works of Thomas Boston: Discourses on Prayer*, ed. Samuel M’Millan (Aberdeen: George and Robert King, 1852), 11:49. Exact quote: “The language of passion is sometimes mixed with the language of grace in the prayers of saints; which when they discern, they will be ready to correct.”

I wonder what Christ's first thought was as He woke up. We know His mind was saturated with Scripture. Everything He did, He did with Scripture in His mind, Scripture informing Him. Each day He rose, His spiritual instinct was, "I will Thee bless." Where did His mind go when He woke up in the storm? Yes, He had heard His disciples, and He had heard the storm, and He saw the sea, but what was His first thought? Did His mind go to Psalm 93? "The floods have lifted up, O LORD, the floods have lifted up their voice; the floods lift up their waves. The LORD on high is mightier than the noise of many waters." Or did His mind go to Psalm 89:9? "Thou rulest the raging of the sea: when the waves thereof arise, thou stillest them." And here, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace, *arises* and simply *speaks* to the sea and speaks to the wind, and says, "Peace, be still," and what happens? The swelling sea obeys His will, and its angry waves are stilled into a great calm.

Isn't that altogether marvelous? There are times in your lives when all you can see are the storms and the waves, and everything seems out of control. We can look at what is happening in our world today, and it so often seems so choppy and out of control. But the real difficulty is often that we do not hear the voice of the Good Shepherd. I don't see what Jesus is doing. It is as though He is asleep, as though He is not aware of my situation and my pain, as though He doesn't care. And that storm within you that no one else sees? You feel all alone in it, everyone else seems asleep, and you wonder if Jesus cares. He has raised that question in your mind so that He would answer it by showing you who He is and how much He really does care.

That brings us, third, to see: does Jesus care? It's a question that He perfectly redirects. After rebuking the wind, after dealing with the elements, He turns to another troubled sea, a sea inside His disciples, and He asks them, "Where is your faith?" Notice, He does not ask, "Where is your skill? Where has your courage gone? Your competence? You are fishermen, aren't you? Where has your naval expertise gone?" No, no, the real question for



them is, “Where is your faith? Where has *it* gone?” Because the problem here is that the circumstances around them have begun to control them and their faith, rather than the other way around. The circumstances have blurred the vision of faith. Sometimes faith can seem like it is almost 20/20, and you see God and Christ so clearly, and you think, This is where I’m going to stay. But then storms come and blur your vision, and you wonder if it was all just a dream. Jesus is saying here that the circumstances have blurred your faith. “Is this the view of Me,” Jesus is saying, “that you have? Is this consistent with all that you have seen and heard of Me? Is this the impression I have given you in all that I have taught you, in all I have said and done? That I am one who does not care? That I am one you are to follow and obey and trust, and yet in doing so you *will* perish? Where is your faith?”

We should be very thankful for these questions. Sometimes Christ says, “Why do you have so little faith?” Sometimes He says, “Where is your faith?” When we hear that, we ought to ask ourselves, “Do I have faith? Do I trust Christ? Do I believe in the Son of God? Is He my only hope? Do I need Him and depend on Him for everything I have? Do I have faith?” The Lord often uses stormy experiences to bring people to faith, to show them that they do not have faith, to show them that they are depending on their own strength and not on Christ, and to bring them away from that false security so that they will depend on Him alone. Think of Martin Luther in that thunderstorm. He thought he was going to die, and yet the Lord used it to bring him to Himself. Think of Saul of Tarsus on that road to Damascus, thrown off his horse, seeing a great light, and hearing, “Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?” What waves these were for Saul! But why? Why were they there? Not to destroy him, but to bring him to faith, to bring him to the Lord Himself. Think of Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4. Nebuchadnezzar is proud and thinks Babylon is his. He has done all this. The Lord brings him into a great storm; He brings him down and humbles him. He makes him feed with the animals; He humiliates him. Why? To destroy him? No! To make him say

that there is none like the most high God, the one living and true God, the one who does His will in the armies of heaven. None can stay His hand or say to Him, “What doest thou?” So, if the Lord is asking you today, “Where is your faith?” and you have to say that you are in circumstances that show you that you do not have faith, then the reason is so that you would cry out to Him for it. It is His gift, and He gives it. Go to Him for it.

But of course, here, with the exception of Judas, these men *do* have faith. Yet where is the evidence of it? They are acting as if they have none. If you put the three Gospel accounts of this together, one says, “Lord save us, we perish!” Someone else is shouting, “Master, carest thou not that we perish?” Someone else is just saying, “Master, Master, we perish!” They are calling upon the carpenter’s son for help.

And the wonderful thing here is that Christ powerfully replies—even to the weakest of faith. You would look at this and say, “This is poor faith, this is weak faith, it is almost no faith at all. It seems so small and flimsy in such a great storm. It will never succeed.” But remember that, a few verses before this, Christ describes the kingdom of Heaven as being like a grain of mustard seed, which, though small, grows up and becomes taller than all herbs, and shoots out great branches (Mark 4:31–32). If you would have asked the disciples after this event if they had faith, they might not have recognized it themselves. But Christ recognized it! And it was precious to Him. He saw the grain of mustard seed. He saw it and heard it in their cry, and it was precious to Him. It awoke Him out of sleep, and He rebuked the wind and there was a great calm.

I want you to see here how this perfectly redirects the disciples to where they need to be. Look at the effect this has on them, because it is staggering. There are actually two effects. The first effect is not what you would expect. You would expect to read, “There was a great calm on the sea, and they had a great calm in themselves; they were relieved, and they settled down and were composed and at peace themselves,” but no, it doesn’t say that

at all. It says, “And they feared exceedingly.” It is as if they were more afraid after the storm than when they were in the storm. But of course, this was a different kind of fear. This, children, is what we call *the fear of God*. This fear has adoration, reverence, love, and respect in it. It is a fear where you are aware that you are in the presence of God. That is the fear that the disciples had, *exceedingly*. It shows why Jesus was doing all He was doing. He was drawing out their faith—the germ, the mustard seed. He was drawing it out; He was redirecting the unbelieving question, “Does He care?” to the question of faith: “Who is He?”

That is the second effect—*He is making them focus on Him*. In the middle of verse 41 we read, “What manner of man is this?” Not, “What manner of faith do I have?” but, “What manner of man is this?” Because this is what faith looks to: faith looks to Christ. Faith is taken up with who Christ is. Who can speak to the wind and the sea, and it obeys his voice? What manner of man is this? That is a wonderful question to be taken up with. And, indeed, this man is a real man. He is a real man—you can find Him physically and emotionally exhausted. You can find Him sleeping through a storm, you can find Him hungry in a wilderness, and you can find Him thirsty beside a well. He is a real man. But He is also a man of perfect faith and a man of perfect trust in His heavenly Father. Oh, the wonder of this man! He is no mere man. A *real* man, yes, but He is no *mere* man. Because this man who is absolutely exhausted is the same man who says to you, “Come unto me, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28). This man, whom you can find hungry in a wilderness, is the one who says, “I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger” (John 6:35). This one who you can find thirsty beside that well is the one who says to you, “If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink” (John 7:37). What manner of man is this? This is the God-man. This is the man, as Zechariah tells us, who is God’s fellow (Zech. 13:7).

You have these storms in your own life, within and without—  
anxiety, worry, conscience, sin—but has it brought you to this:

“What manner of man is this?” This is the man you need. This is the God-man you need. Perhaps we think of the church and its persecution, and we see storm clouds gathering. Here is where the church ought to focus its eyes: “What manner of man is this?” The next verse in Mark’s gospel is so beautiful: “They came over unto the other side of the sea” (Mark 5:1). Jesus will always bring His people to the other side of the sea. You perhaps think the storm will never break. You think it will never end. But this will be true of you, as it was true of the disciples: they came over unto the other side of the sea, and, ultimately, He is bringing His people to the place where there is no sea, to heaven itself.

Let us look at one last thing here, because the great effect of all of this—the perfect redirection of all this—is to redirect us to another storm. It is to redirect us to Calvary. You ask, “What manner of man is this?” and you see in this man one who can save His people from perishing in the sea of divine wrath. Here, we see, it is not simply the wind and the rain and the outward circumstances of our life that need to be calmed. Ultimately, *this* is the reason Christ is here: He is here to subdue not the storm on a sea but sinners to Himself. He is here to save sinners from perishing in their sin, to save them from perishing in a lake that burns with fire unquenchable. That is why He is here. And to do that, God has to do something much more than simply speaking the word of His power. He can create out of nothing this way. But He cannot save a sinner this way. God cannot remove sin simply by speaking a word. Something more is needed to subdue your heart, to take away your sin and the guilt of your sin. For that, Christ had to go through another storm. It’s the storm spoken about in Psalm 69, a psalm that speaks about the sufferings of Christ, a psalm that the New Testament quotes more than any other in referring to the suffering of Christ. And that psalm begins with the Lord Jesus saying, “Save me, O God; for the waters are come in unto my soul. I sink in deep mire, where there is no standing, where the floods overflow me.” You ask, Why is He there—the brightness of the Father’s glory, His beloved Son, the express image of His person,

upholding all things by the word of His power—why is He in such a storm? He is there because the Father sent Him. Speaking reverently, it is the Father's initiative: He sent the Son. He says that in this psalm: "For thy sake I have borne reproach; shame hath covered my face. I am become a stranger unto my brethren."

Think about the storm the Savior is in and ask, "What did the Savior find in that storm?" When the storm clouds gather over Gethsemane, when Calvary's shadow begins to stretch over the man, Christ Jesus; when the waves of divine wrath begin to beat into His soul and flood into Him, as this man who has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows, as He prepares, as He begins to be wounded for the transgression of His people, as He begins to be bruised for their iniquities, when His soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even unto death: what does He find? In Matthew 26:40, He comes to the disciples and He finds them asleep. Again and again and again. "For their eyes were heavy." "Could ye not watch with me for one hour?" Could He not say, "Don't *you* care?" Psalm 142—another psalm that speaks of Christ in His suffering—tells us, "I looked on my right hand, and beheld, but there was no man that would know me: refuge failed me; no man cared for my soul." He was in this storm alone, and there was no disciple. There was no angel, no, not even God Himself rose to rebuke this storm. No voice is heard saying to these waves and billows of divine wrath, "Peace, be still." Psalm 88, as it is written in Psalter 240, applying again to Christ, says, "Thou hast brought me down to darkness, 'neath thy wrath I am oppressed...waves of wrath have surged about me." Ask it again: "What manner of man is this?" Dare we look at the suffering Savior on Calvary, dare we look at that cross, and ask, "Carest thou not?" This is the reason He undergoes such an awful storm, the reason why He is there in Calvary speaking about floods and innumerable sins and iniquities, like great waves, flooding into His soul. Why has He come here? Why has He come to this? The unmistakable and glorious answer is: because He is the God who for His people cares.

What think ye of Christ? I see a man of perfect composure and poise in the boat. I see a man of awesome power—even the wind and rain obey His voice. But most of all I see this: I see one who cares for His people. This is a truth we need to learn in all our storms. Peter, who was in this boat, learned this lesson. Most believe that Peter is the apostle behind the Gospel of Mark. Likely, then, it was Peter crying out, “Master, carest thou not?” But in Acts 12, Peter is in another storm. Herod has just killed James, the brother of John, and because it pleases the Jews, he captures Peter. And here we are in Acts 12; it’s the night before they are going to execute Peter—what a storm he faced when Herod would have brought him forth. Yet, the same night, Peter, in that storm, bound with two chains between the soldiers, *was sleeping*. And it took an angel to wake him up. It appears he was in a deep sleep too. He had learned the lesson. No doubt, he remembered the lesson of that night on the boat: that the Lord often brings His people through storms in order to focus their attention on Him and His great care for them. And it is Peter, then, who tells you and me, “Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time: casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you” (1 Peter 5:6–7).

Amen.

# Many Sins Forgiven, Much Love Given

*Rev. David Lipsy*

Scripture Reading: Luke 7:36–50

## Introduction

Most of us remember Jesus saying, “The last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen.” But what does that mean, really? How should we understand that?

In almost all things in natural life, the first *are* first, *not* last, and the last *are* last, not first. But as we find with respect to *many* things in our Lord’s kingdom, the kingdom of heaven, it is the very reverse of the world. Instead of me trying to *describe* or *explain* what Jesus meant by those words, I would like to *show* what He meant using a true history.

Though we will consider the *entire* passage found in Luke 7:36-50, let me repeat at this time only Luke 7:47 to begin. “Wherefore I say unto thee, Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little.”

We will consider:

1. A noteworthy woman
2. A self-righteous man
3. A saved sinner

## Setting

Jesus had entered into Capernaum, a town that He visited more than any other town except perhaps Jerusalem. He had just miraculously cured a Roman centurion’s servant. He had wondrously

raised a widow's son from the dead. He also demonstrated to John the Baptist's messengers that He was indeed the Christ of God, so that John would be reassured. But afterward, as Jesus spoke of John the Baptist being the greatest of all prophets, a two-fold reaction to His words can be seen.

First, there was the reaction of the "ordinary people." Verse 29 reads, "All the people that heard him, and the publicans, justified God, being baptized with the baptism of John." These people, the ordinary, together with the scandalous publicans, justified God. In other words, they agreed with what Jesus was saying.

But then there is the other reaction (v. 30). "But the Pharisees and lawyers rejected the counsel of God against themselves, being not baptized of him." They evidently thought they knew better than Jesus and the people, and therefore did *not* repent in response to John's call to do so.

This already is a brief example of the last being first and the first last, the leaders rejecting God's prophet while the ordinary people believed him. Jesus then painted a word picture describing the leaders' reaction, comparing the unbelieving to children who would not play along with their friends, not wanting to play wedding or funeral. Jesus was saying these corrupt leaders neither rejoiced when the gospel was preached nor repented when the call to repent came to them. No, the leaders would instead slander both John and Jesus, falsely accusing John of being possessed and Jesus of being a glutton and drunkard. Right after this, however, a most curious invitation was given to Jesus. A Pharisee actually invited Him to a meal at the Pharisee's own home. That leads us to our first thought.

### **1. A noteworthy woman**

Small towns differ from large cities in a number of ways, but one is, in a small town, it doesn't seem to take long for news to travel. After Jesus accepted the Pharisee's invitation we read, "And he went into the Pharisee's house, and sat down to meat. And, behold, a woman in the city, which was a sinner..." Our children might



think, “But isn’t everyone a sinner? Why does it say that about this one woman?” And they would have a point, since the word translated “sinner” was, after all, the ordinary Greek word used for that.

But this was a gracious way for Luke to somewhat shield us from the fact that this woman was a well-known sinner—sadly, well known for her sinful lifestyle, something the Pharisee clearly knew. So we would say this woman was famous, but not for good reasons. All the town seemed to know what she was doing, how she was living.

I wonder if a woman like that would be welcomed at the Lord’s Supper in our church? That might seem like a shocking question and for good reason, since the Lord’s Supper, as the Lord’s Supper form says, is not for those *living* in sin, delighting in it in an ongoing manner. But what if a woman or man or young person were saved by the Lord? Would he or she be welcomed to the Lord’s Supper then?

Perhaps some of us would be moved to tears of joy, thinking, “Has he or she been saved? Did Jesus deliver her too? Him too?” Maybe others would reserve judgment—let it winter; let’s see over time whether he or she really is a truly saved person. Perhaps still others might think, “What is *she* doing there? If the minister or elders knew what I know about her, she’d be turned away.”

Somehow the woman in this history learned that Jesus was dining in the Pharisee’s home. Verse 37 reads, “When she knew that Jesus sat at meat in the Pharisee’s house, [she] brought an alabaster box of ointment.” If you’ve ever lived in sin, were notorious for your sinful life, you know it is no easy thing to come back to church or attend for the first time in your life. Shame can run deep, especially if most people at church know about you. And if people turn their heads, give that glaring, knowing look, it can be enough to send such a person right back out the door.

For this woman to enter a Pharisee’s home, uninvited, would normally have been a very, very difficult thing to do. Why? Pharisees had little time for, and even less interest in, infamous sinners. Those people needed to change, fix up their life, be like us. The

apostle Paul would later say that the Pharisees, as a group, were the strictest sect of religious leaders at the time. They pretended to be very holy, making sure everyone knew they fasted, gave tithes, made long prayers, and so on. But this woman—she was the very opposite. She was a *sinner*.

Jesus had once told a parable describing the Pharisees' attitude toward such people. Remember the parable of the Pharisee and the publican? The Pharisee prayed, "God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess," and on and on he would pray. So it would normally not be an easy thing for this lady to just walk into a Pharisee's home, while he was eating, uninvited. But she did! She wanted, she *needed*, to see someone.

So there she is, walking right into the Pharisee's house. But what is she carrying? An alabaster box of ointment. Think of an expensive container with a lovely perfume in it. Who was this for? What would she do with it? The Pharisee was clearly perplexed at first by all this. Not Jesus. We'll return to this woman a little later—what she was about to do was lovely and important. But first, we need to think a moment about another person in this history.

## **2. A self-righteous man**

Pharisees, as we said, thought they were examples for the people, spiritual examples, following God's law seemingly without flaw. But since Jesus, as God, knew the heart and motives of all people, including all of us today, He had a very different view of most of them. Seven times in one chapter, Jesus called them "hypocrites," people who pretended to be religious but inside were clearly *not* that. But because most of them never experienced a serious uncovering by God of their sins to their consciences, and hence never truly experienced the love and mercy of God toward them, it was easy for them to look down on other people, holding themselves up as the standard. And that became clear in this history as well.

We won't yet give away what this woman did when she met Jesus, but just her being there and doing anything with Jesus offended the Pharisee. Verse 39, "Now when the Pharisee which had bidden him saw it, he spake within himself, saying, This man, if he were a prophet, would have known who and what manner of woman this is that toucheth him: for she is a sinner." Good people have no dealings with sinners like that. That's the way he saw things, this Pharisee. How do you see them? How eager, even comfortable, are *we* around those we don't know, especially those who it appears are trapped in sin? Is it, "Good people have no dealings with sinners"? Would you or I be flattered if someone called us a Pharisee?

I know in some churches there are those who have concerns about Lord's Supper attendance. Why do so many people attend? Do their lifestyles reflect love for the Lord and a life lived by His grace? Why do so many people come to the table compared with the number who attend, say, Bible studies or prayer services or midweek services? I have my concerns too. I have no doubt we are in need of revival. But I hope our concerns do not stem from a misunderstanding of the gospel and how it affects us, for clearly that was the case with this Pharisee. Let us see if we can understand what was about to unfold in his house.

Verse 38. She "stood at [Jesus's] feet behind him weeping, and began to wash his feet with tears, and did wipe them with the hairs of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment." It was customary in Israel to eat meals while reclining, kind of like laying on a couch with one's head propped up to eat. Lying that way, your legs would typically be behind you as the front of your body faced the low table. It would appear the woman intended to anoint Jesus's head with the precious ointment she brought, as that was a way to honor someone. But whether it was out of love or thankfulness or repentance or a combination of them all, she began to cry, her tears falling on Jesus's feet. Perhaps in response to this, she did something that was not customary, letting down her hair, which action would normally be quite questionable. She

likely did so because she didn't know how else to dry the tears that now covered Jesus's feet. It was not as unusual then as it would be now to kiss someone's feet, as that, too, was a sign of great respect and reverence. But a person would not keep doing that, which the verb tense indicates she did. Finally, perhaps out of a sense of embarrassment, she used the perfume to anoint Jesus's feet rather than His head, which would have been customary.

Why was she doing all this? It must have been quite a scene. It certainly caught the attention of the Pharisee, and he wasn't pleased. Why was a woman like this doing something like that to Jesus? But after a moment's thought, the Pharisee turned his attention from this woman to Jesus. Doesn't Jesus know who this is? How could He be a prophet and not know? Verse 39, "When the Pharisee which had bidden Jesus saw it, he spake within himself, saying, This man, if he were a prophet, would have known who and what manner of woman this is that toucheth him: for she is a sinner." In the Greek, a clause starting with "if" could suppose a thing to be true, as in, "If he were a prophet (and he is)..." But written another way, the way it is in this text, it suggests the negative, as in, "If he were a prophet (but he must not be)..." In the Pharisee's mind, a prophet and a sinner don't belong together, evidently forgetting how many, many times God sent prophets to the people of Israel precisely when they sinned grievously!

So there we are—a notorious sinner, a self-righteous Pharisee, with the woman doing something to Jesus that was quite surprising, even shocking, while the Pharisee was questioning the whole scene before him. The only question that remains is, what will *Jesus* do and say?

### **3. A saved sinner**

There's something about the woman in this history we haven't yet considered. It's not easy to spot right away, and the wording of verse 47 can be a little confusing for some if they're not careful. But before we go there, let us hear what Jesus has to say about what was happening before him. Jesus, not saying a word about the

woman (yet), begins by telling the Pharisee that He has something to say to him. “Master, say on,” he answers, feigning respect. Maybe the Pharisee thought, “Perhaps at last Jesus will comment on this woman and condemn her,” as he already had done in his own mind. Instead, Jesus had a simple riddle for the Pharisee to solve. “There was a certain creditor which had two debtors: the one owed five hundred pence, and the other fifty. And when they had nothing to pay, he frankly forgave them both. Tell me therefore, which of them will love him most?” I think most of our children could answer that question. If a man forgives you a huge debt that you owe him, and then forgives someone else a really little debt, who would be most thankful? The Pharisee says the obvious, though he answers cautiously. “I suppose that he, to whom he forgave most.” Jesus affirmed this to be the correct answer and then began the lesson. Verse 44, “He turned to the woman, and said unto Simon, Seest thou this woman?” Jesus speaks as if it were possible Simon didn’t see her, though of course Jesus knew Simon saw her, and He knew what he thought of her. Then Jesus began to explain how this woman, the sinner, showed more respect and kindness to Him, Jesus, than the Pharisee did.

The Pharisee did not provide wash water for Jesus’s feet, a custom befitting the hot, dusty climate. Such an act was a common courtesy for one’s guest. The woman washed Jesus’s feet with her tears. She wiped them with her hair rather than the customary towel. It was also a sign of respect to greet a guest with a kiss on the cheek, something still done in some countries in Europe and in the Middle East. But though Simon did not so to Jesus, which was a sign of disrespect to the Savior, the woman kissed Jesus’s feet repeatedly. Again, it was an ordinary kindness to anoint a valued guest with a bit of oil. But Simon denied his guest even that courtesy. The woman anointed Jesus’s feet with the perfume. So instead of the Pharisee shaming Jesus, the self-righteous man was now the one bearing shame, as Jesus pointed out that this woman showed far more courtesy and kindness than he, the host, had done.

But we still are left with the question, Why did she do all this? Jesus explains, “Wherefore I say unto thee, Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little.” The meaning of Jesus’s statement has been contested over time, but it really need not have been. Some have suggested that because the woman loved Jesus so much, He forgave her. But that doesn’t fit the brief parable Jesus told Simon. In the parable, the debtor loved the one to whom he owed the money because he forgave him the debt. So it was with this woman. We therefore understand the verse to mean, “Her sins, which are many, are forgiven, on account of which she loved much.”

So now we know what had happened. Because this woman, notorious sinner that she was, heard and believed that Jesus saved sinners, had a heart for sinners, ministered to sinners, and even came to seek and save that which was lost, this drew her to Jesus, despite her shame and embarrassment. She was willing to endure the condemning looks of the Pharisee just so she could express her love to the one prominent religious leader who didn’t reject sinners like she had been. So whether these were tears of repentance, tears of love, tears of thanksgiving, or all these mingled together, she wept at Jesus’s feet.

I purposely haven’t given many of words of application so far because I wanted us to fully grasp what was happening in this scene, this history. But it’s time we look into this mirror, this part of God’s Word, and ask, “Who am I in this history?”

Am I the woman before casting herself on Jesus’s mercy and grace, still living in sin whether known or unknown by others? We don’t have to be a notorious sinner, a well-known sinner, because wicked sinners can hide their sins just as easily in a church behind a suit or dress as one who lives in the world. The Pharisees did that and so can we, God forbid. Are you still caught in sin, decidedly not in love with Jesus? If so, you need this Savior’s love to draw you out of your condition. So beseech Him for that.

Are you perhaps the Pharisee, content with your spiritual condition, judgmental of others, even if you don't claim to be saved yourself? Do you think like the Pharisees did, "At least I'm not like this or that person"? You realize, of course, that if you are most like this man, the Pharisee, Jesus uttered the most searing condemnations of such people during His ministry on earth. You would qualify as a "whited sepulcher."

Are you the woman in the act of turning to Jesus, even though you feel draped with a reputation from your past, perhaps also your present? Has God opened your eyes to see hope in the person of Jesus? Is He drawing you to Himself, teaching you that the enormity of your sinfulness can be overwhelmed by the enormity of His grace, mercy, and forgiveness, all for His own name's sake?

When we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we see this same history replayed. If people knew the past sins of many of us, they would blush. Yet it isn't our sterling reputation that draws us to the table—it is Jesus. And yes, maybe there is a Pharisee or two at the table. I know I certainly qualified as one and sometimes still can. But if that is the case, such a condition calls for repentance from us on account of our self-righteousness. Self-righteousness is disbelieving what God says about our righteousness—that it is nothing but filthy rags apart from Jesus. But might you be one who has nothing in self of which to boast yet have been given a heart of love for the Savior who gave you hope, the Savior who awakened you, drew you, convicted you, but then led you to cast your hope, your sins, your all upon Him, the only Savior?

Who are you, beloved? Where do you fit in? Where would you want to be in this history? Weeping at the feet of Jesus, telling Him, perhaps without words, how sorry you are for sinning so against Him? Offering back to Him, in service to Him, any gifts He's given you? Or are you too ashamed? Too uncertain? Not assured? Let us then see how the Lord comforted her and perhaps that will, in these last moments, also comfort you, O ye of little faith.

Verse 48, "And he said unto her, Thy sins are forgiven." Were not her sins already forgiven, even as Jesus alluded to earlier?

After all, she loved much because she was forgiven much. But beloved, herein is a very, very important lesson. She was drawn to Jesus before being assured of forgiveness. She came to Jesus despite her sins, despite her awful reputation and lifestyle, despite what others might have and did think of her. And so may a sinner today, even now! She was weeping at Jesus's feet, but He comforted her by letting her know that her past was past and that a new day had dawned. The past was past because the Lord put her sins away with His own precious sacrifice, His own precious blood shed on the cross. "He will turn again, he will have compassion upon us; he will subdue our iniquities; and thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea" (Micah 7:19), or, as King Hezekiah once said, "Thou hast in love to my soul delivered it from the pit of corruption: for thou hast cast all my sins behind thy back" (Isa. 38:17). The memory of our past ought to serve to humble us but not defeat us. Jesus welcomes sinners to bring their past, and their present to Him so that through faith in Him we may experience them being removed. Jesus "appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself" (Heb. 9:26).

Of course, Simon the Pharisee and other guests were shocked by Jesus saying this woman's sins were forgiven. Who did He think He was to just say that, thinking He could forgive sins, since only God could do that! Besides, where was the sacrifice? For without the shedding of blood, the blood of a sacrifice, there was no forgiveness possible. But the last time you witnessed the Lord's Supper being celebrated, you saw the sacrifice, i.e., the symbol pointing to the sacrifice, there on the Lord's Supper table. The sacrifice was made long ago, but its wondrous effects remain as powerful today as ever they did, including for notorious sinners.

Perhaps another Lord's Supper has come and gone. You may think it's too late, you missed it, it's past. But Jesus Christ is still here, beloved, clothed in the gospel. We reflect on His sacrifice, but we rejoice in His abiding presence. The golden scepter of His mercy is stretched out still to broken, repenting sinners. You may draw near, even as you are, to Him this very day. He will receive



you just as He received that poor weeping sinner. We do not expect Him to speak in a voice we can hear, but He speaks through His Word just as powerfully as He did with His voice then.

Notice that Jesus didn't respond to Simon when Simon questioned in his heart why Jesus thought He could forgive this woman's sins. No, Jesus had no more to say to Simon. The lesson was already given. And Jesus isn't obliged to answer your questioning of Him in the life of this or that sinner, for He was not sent to satisfy curiosities but instead to comfort penitents.

“And he said to the woman, Thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace.” It would be foolish to conclude her faith was the ground of the woman's salvation. Faith is merely an instrument, a God-given means by which our trust rests in Jesus, not in ourselves or others. But see how, even though faith is a gift of God, Jesus called it her faith—“Thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace.” The Lord works through our relying upon Him, through our trusting in Him, even as He works in us that trust in Him in the first place.

There the history ends. No more conversation. The woman departs. Jesus eventually departs. Simon is left to wonder about what he just saw and heard. Was he ashamed now of how he treated Jesus, his guest? Was he perhaps thinking, pondering, who this Jesus actually is? We don't know the answer to these questions, except to repeat what our Lord Himself once said. “Many are called; few chosen.” Many have heard the gospel, have read this history, and let it lie, walking back into the darkness of unbelief and sin. What will you do with this history, beloved?

A simple history with three persons in view—a sinner, a self-righteous man, and a Savior of sinners who still beckons, “Come unto me.” The day is far spent, the night is at hand—repent and believe the gospel. Repent and believe the Savior. Repent and believe and know and be assured that “This man receiveth sinners and eateth with them.”

Amen.