

How would you answer the question, “In what direction is Jerusalem?” We writers addressed that question many times in the New Testament, and any Israelite of my time would easily have been able to answer it.

We writers of the Gospels did not spend precious scroll space writing about such things as politics, geography, trade routes. You probably have little knowledge of those things as they existed in my time, but everyone in our time had a good understanding of them!

With a rudimentary understanding of our trade routes, geography and politics, you will be able to spot many nuances in our Gospel stories that you would otherwise miss. I will tell you nothing here that is critical to your salvation, but there are some things that will enhance your understanding and enjoyment of the New Testament.

More important than having that knowledge is the new ability you will attain of understanding my peers as people not much different than yourselves. Many people of your time consider people like me as so distant in time and experience as to be almost mythical characters. But we were concerned with the same things as you. Just like you, we worried about how to make enough money to feed our families and ourselves, we wanted to wear clothes that made us feel good around our friends, and we wanted to be loved by others. We got tired when we walked uphill, and hurt badly when we got beaten or stoned. The daily news informed us about making decisions, and world events, politics and economics influenced our lives whether we liked it or not, exactly like your lives are influenced by those same factors.

Let’s start by looking at the last Old Testament book, *Malachi*. It was written more than four centuries before Jesus was born. What happened during that long, long period of God’s silence?

On the world stage, empires influencing Israel came and went. During Malachi’s time, the Persians were dominant. Following them were the Greeks, the Roman Republic, and the Roman Empire. Jesus and I were born during the rule of the Roman Empire.

Augustus was the first Roman Emperor, and he ruled from 27 BC to 14 AD. He was Emperor when Jesus was born. He established new laws and ensured peace throughout the empire that would last for more than a century. Tiberius was his son, and he ruled from 14 AD to 37 AD, the time period when Jesus taught and when the early church was established.

Rome’s emperors ruled their vast empire by delegating authority to local leaders, who would delegate some authority to native leaders. Emperor Augustus granted his authority over Judea

to King Herod in 37 BC, and he ruled until about the time of Jesus' birth. He was also known as Herod the Great. Upon his death, Judea was split into four parts which were ruled by his descendants and various Roman appointees. One son, Herod Antipas, ruled Galilee during the life of Jesus and for a decade thereafter. He was involved with the trial of Jesus and the death of John the Baptist.

Agrippa I was the grandson of Herod the Great. He ruled over much of Israel from 37-44 AD, which was during the growth of the church. His son, Agrippa II, ruled over much of Israel from 44 AD until 92 AD when the church really exploded in growth. These are the Agrippa's referred to in the Bible. Additionally, Rome had their own officials who dealt with Judea, such as Pontius Pilate.

On a more local level, the Romans allowed the Jewish leaders to make many decisions. In Judea, virtually all of the citizens were Jewish. Since the time of Malachi, the Jews had grown in number and once again dominated the population of the area formerly controlled by the twelve tribes of Israel.

During those four "silent" centuries, the Jews had greatly developed their theology and leadership structure. The Jewish leaders were organized into a body known as the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was primarily composed of leaders from the Pharisees and Sadducees, two Jewish sects. The Sadducees were wealthier and more politically motivated, while the Pharisees were more legalistic about the Jewish religion.

There was constant tension between the Romans and the Jews. The Jews wanted to be independent and not pay taxes to Rome, while the Romans wanted the Jews to be peaceful and pay taxes. However, the Roman and Jewish leaders had several things in common. They both wanted trade to increase, peace to prevail, and wanted to retain their political positions. To do those things it was all about money. Just as America's President Clinton's 90s's campaign once trumpeted, "It's the economy, Stupid!"

Before I started following Jesus, I was a doctor. I was highly educated, and was acutely aware of how the rise and fall of countries, rulers, and families began with international trade, and how trade routes functioned. In fact, I was quite aware that Jesus located his headquarters in Capernaum because it was located on a critical spur of the ancient trade route known as the Via Maris, or Way of the Sea.

The Via Maris trade route went from Damascus to Caesarea to Egypt. On its northeast end, it met other trade routes in Damascus which went to Europe and Asia. On its southwest end, it met other trade routes in Egypt which reached Africa. In its middle was the city of Caesarea, a newly built deep-water port that reached Rome and the rest of the Mediterranean Sea. The Via Maris trade route was critical to world-wide trade, and whoever controlled it became fabulously wealthy. In fact, the Via Maris was the main reason Israel was a critical country in my time, instead of an unimportant piece of property like most of the land in the world.

The Via Maris became critical in my life-time because King Herod created the deep-water port of Caesarea in 10 BC. This greatly increased the trade on the Via Maris and was a main reason King Herod became so famously wealthy.

Trade routes in your modern world are so numerous and ubiquitous that you don't even think about them. Your paved roads, trucks, airplanes, and shipping containers are all part of a massive interconnected and global set of trade routes. Your life is hugely influenced by trade routes, but you don't notice.

In 1956, President Dwight Eisenhower made a drastic change in the trade routes through America, while he also changed the military security of the nation. He began the Interstate Highway system that greatly improved how quickly the military could deploy, as well as vastly improving the trading routes through America.

President Eisenhower was intimately familiar with the vast highway system that the ancient Romans had built, and may have gotten the Interstate Highway idea from them. The highway system of the Romans greatly improved how quickly its military could deploy, as well as vastly improving its trading routes. Its highway system was a major factor in the Empire staying in power over a vast area for hundreds of years.

You have far fewer transportation limitations than we did, but you have the same basic trade limitations we had. There has to be a source of supply and a source of demand for a product. The costs of transportation, thievery and taxes have to be low enough that the price of a product stays reasonable as moves along a trade route. It is much costlier to transport heavy and bulky objects. Finally, governments can force uneconomic transactions through the trade routes by military force and government regulations.

In the times of the New Testament, there were certain products that tended to dominate international trade flows. Rome controlled Northern Africa, so it forced the flow of grain, gold, and slaves from Northern Africa. Rome's one million citizens required a huge amount of food every day that could only be supplied by huge grain ships from Africa. Asia supplied Rome with silks, perfumes, spices and other precious objects in return for gold, jewels and slaves. Israel produced wine, grain, and fish. During my lifetime, Rome was wealthy and trade flowed like never before. From an economic point of view, Israel did better in my life than it had for a thousand years.

The Via Maris trade route went through Capernaum. Don't you think Jesus knew that when he moved his headquarters there? The Roman highways and ancient trade routes spurred trade, but also provided the early Christians missionaries easy ways to travel so they could effectively evangelize. In fact, almost all of the early churches were founded along Roman highways, trade routes and shipping ports.

Looking at some of the cities in Israel, Capernaum was a prosperous city during the time of Jesus because it was a supplier of fish from the Sea of Galilee, it also produced grinding tools

from the local lava rock, and was a natural choke point on the Via Maris trade route. Caesarea was important because it was the only deep-water port on the coast of Israel. Jerusalem was important because it was a crossroads of local trade routes, and was the center of religious worship and local government.

Before leaving these topics, I want to mention one more thing. You may not think of food production very often, since agriculture involves only a tiny number of people in modern countries. In my time, farming was a very critical aspect of life. Owning land was critical, which is why it was handed down from generation to generation. Geographical considerations of space and land fertility were critical to most families. As in most societies, food production was the main source of employment for most people. Some experts believe as many as 90% of people in ancient cultures were involved with producing food. When Jesus used agricultural stories, almost everyone had a vivid understanding of what he was talking about.

As you learn the stories of the Bible, I hope you will be able to remember these facts about trade routes, geography and politics. The people of the New Testament were much like you. They made the best decisions they could, given the information they had. And, they had much more information about their times that you do not have, and they inherently understood how that information was interwoven in the stories Jesus told.

Every listener of Jesus knew that if a Samaritan was going from Jerusalem to Jericho, he would be going downhill on a highway well-known for its thieves and robbers. They knew that Samaritans were religious enemies of the Jews, but some of Jesus' earliest converts were Samaritans. Every listener of Jesus knew that the Jews often took the road from Jerusalem to Jericho to avoid going through Samaria, but the Samaritans rarely took the road. Because of our knowledge of geography, politics and trade routes, we heard Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan as a story of a God extending impossibly, unlikely grace and love to somebody who had chosen to be separated from God. That was incredibly good news to us, not just a nice story.

So, up. The answer? Up. Since Jerusalem is located in the mountains, in what direction is Jerusalem? Up.

My name is John Mark, and I wrote the *Gospel of Mark*, not the *Gospel of John*.

My book starts with the beginning of Jesus' ministry. I don't address the birth of Jesus, his childhood or his ancestry like Matthew and Luke do. But, I do reveal that Jesus is the coming Lord predicted by the prophet Isaiah more than seven centuries before the birth of Jesus. I also reveal that John the Baptist is the messenger sent to prepare the way for Jesus, the coming King Jesus. So not *all* the highlights but definitely the high points of his life. His life on earth, that is.

I knew Jesus and his apostles, but I was not an apostle. My wealthy family were supporters of the early church in Jerusalem, and my cousin was Barnabas, an early church leader. I deserted him and Paul on their first missionary journey, joined Barnabas on his second missionary journey, and later became an important helper of Paul's.

Although the *Gospel of Mark* never specifically reveals its author, it has traditionally been agreed that I, John Mark, wrote it. Many people believe I was the unidentified young man who fled naked on the night Jesus was betrayed,¹ as only the *Gospel of Mark* describes. Many experts believe that my good friend, Peter, helped guide the writing of my book.

Because my book is the shortest of the gospels, many experts believe it was the first gospel account written, and that the other gospel writers may have used it for source material. For instance, more than three-quarters of my book is also found in the *Gospel of Luke* and *Gospel of Matthew*. So, this episode will concentrate on some things found in my book, but not found in those two Gospels.

There are some striking points of emphasis in parts of my book. I often emphasize the healings and miracles of Jesus, the opposition of the Pharisees to the ministry of Jesus, and details that only Peter would have known.

After some background, my book begins with the first sermon ever preached by the best preacher who ever lived. Listen carefully, and you will hear the entire first sermon preached by Jesus. "The time has come and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe the good news!"² That's the entire sermon! And, the best sermons for the next two thousand years will include this same message.

¹ Mark 14:51-52

² Mark 1:15

When you read my little book, you will notice that I sometimes show Jesus as preaching, sometimes healing people, and sometimes doing both. I sometimes show Jesus as doing something that many of you do not believe in. I show Jesus as casting out demons, quite a different thing than healing people from diseases. Watching a demon be cast out is something you never forget. Just listen to my account of Jesus' early activities in Capernaum: "And at evening, after sunset, they brought to him those that were diseased, and those that were possessed with demons. The entire city gathered at the door. And he healed many that were sick of various diseases, *and* cast out many demons."³ (long pause to change subjects)

The Pharisees were a sect of the Jews who viewed themselves as experts in the Mosaic laws and how those laws should be followed. From the first, they did not quite know what to do with Jesus. He interpreted Scriptures differently than they did, was interested in following God's intent and God's heart, and hated the way the rules of the Pharisees imprisoned people's lives and hearts. It was not long before the Pharisees and Jesus started to clash, and the heavy artillery first came out because of a man who did not want to be noticed.

One Sabbath, Jesus was teaching in Capernaum. In the rock-clad synagogue...in the far corner was a poor, trembling man with a shriveled right hand. Poor, because he could not have a good job; trembling, because he expected the Pharisees to boot him out because of his deformity. Instead, the Pharisees decided to use him to try to trap Jesus. They watched to see if Jesus would heal him on a Sabbath, which would be a violation of their rules.

To his horror, the poor man heard these words "Stand up in front of everyone!" It was Jesus. Everyone was embarrassed for the man. Jesus continued, "Is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath, or to do evil. To save life or to kill?" The entire room collectively held our breath. "Stretch out your hand." Everyone heard the command so now, everyone was embarrassed even more because the man clearly could not stretch out his hand. As the man tried to obey, the tension in the room broke into pandemonium. His fingers began to open, the ligaments stretched, the muscles expanded. He reached and reached and reached, and he was completely healed.⁴

From that day on, the Pharisees, the now embarrassed Pharisees, plotted how they might kill Jesus. They hated Jesus because he wouldn't follow their rules or give in to their authority. He was furious with them because of their pride and hard hearts. It would be almost three years later before they accomplished their goal of killing him.

The popularity and reputation of Jesus skyrocketed as he healed and preached. People came to be healed from all over Israel, and from faraway regions like Idumea, Tyre and Sidon. Yet, another factor that drove the hatred of the Pharisees; Jesus increasing popularity. They were so

³ Mark 1:32-34

⁴ Mark 3:1-6

angry, they even charged Jesus with casting out demons through the power of Beelzebul. They could not have made much of a worse accusation. They attributed God's work to Satan, which is a very stupid thing to do.

It seemed that as Jesus grew more frustrated with the Pharisees, he became more compassionate to the masses of regular people who followed him. Rather than speaking to them in complex, religious jargon like the Pharisees and other Jewish leaders, Jesus spoke in simple parables. This allowed the people to understand as much as they were capable of. It also allowed them to remember Jesus' words so they could repeat them and reflect on them.

One day, Jesus decided to teach his followers a new lesson, so he took them back to his hometown of Nazareth. On the way there, his followers talked among themselves about the joyous celebration they expected from his hometown. They got just the opposite. His hometown took offense at Jesus because he was acting too big for his britches. Their familiarity with him brought contempt. Their lack of faith was so astounding that Jesus did not do many miracles for them. Denied miracles because you are too familiar with somebody or something, even God... Ever happened to you? God doesn't answer 100% of prayers that you never pray.

About half-way through Jesus' ministry, something horrific occurred that changed his behavior. John the Baptist had been in jail for about a year and a half, since near the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Herod Antipas had jailed John the Baptist because he had been openly critical of Herod's marriage to Herodias, the former wife of Herod's brother, Philip. Herodias wanted to kill John, but Herod Antipas kept him alive because he knew John to be righteous and holy, and because the people considered John to be a prophet.

On Herod's birthday, the daughter of Herodias danced for the entire party. Herod was so thrilled by it all, that he promised, with an oath, to give her whatever she asked. Based on her mother's command, the daughter asked for John's head... on a platter. Herod was aghast, but did not want to break his oath in front of his guests, so he beheaded John.

Jesus chose to avoid retaliatory measures by Herod due to the increase of his popularity, and to avoid the growing hostility of the Pharisees, *and* to avoid the crowds so he could teach his disciples. He started moving from a predominantly public ministry to a predominantly private one. One measure he took was to travel outside of Herod's domain of Galilee.

Jesus led his followers far north to the region of Tyre and Sidon. This region was not in Israel, and most of the inhabitants were not Jewish. He wanted to keep his presence secret so he could spend private time with his close followers, but his reputation for healing preceded him. A Greek woman came to him and begged him to heal her demon possessed daughter.

Jesus turned her away, saying that he had come to serve the Jews. She refused to leave, and said that she would be satisfied to have only the crumbs that fell from the tables of the Jews. Her faith (to himself, in admiration of her). Because of her faith, Jesus immediately healed her

daughter. By doing this, he ensured that he would need to leave that area soon if he was to have any privacy.

He traveled back to east side of the Sea of Galilee in the area known as the Decapolis. He continued to heal people, and even took the occasion to miraculously feed a crowd of four thousand men, along with the women and children, who had been following him for days with little or nothing to eat.

As his ministry started drawing to a close, Jesus continually tried to show his disciples how to be more dedicated to his cause. Once, he said to them, "For he that is not against us is for us. For whoever gives you a cup of water to drink in my name, because you belong to me, truly I say to you, he will not lose his reward....If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out: it is better for you to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye, than have two eyes and be thrown into hell."⁵ The disciples were always learning about the seriousness and danger of sin. They were constantly learning how to serve, and how not to be self-centered.

But they were tired of serving, they wanted to be served. It was a huge ego problem for Jesus' followers. Many of them followed Jesus believing he would lead the Jews to overthrow the Romans and become a great nation as they were under King David. Many followed Jesus hoping to share in the plunder and honors that would surely follow after that happened. Even his closest followers expected him to establish an earthly kingdom. They could hardly believe their ears when Jesus said things like, "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be a servant of all."⁶

As the life of Jesus drew to an end, he gave the Pharisees one more opportunity to overcome their fawning dedication to their hundreds of man-made rules. One of their experts tested Jesus by asking which of the commandments was most important. He had no choice but to agree with the answer since Jesus gave him the top two from the Law of Moses: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength: this is the first. And, the second is like it: love your neighbor as yourself."⁷

If only the Pharisees could have just understood his answer. They would have been freed from their spiritual bondage, and would have been able to accept Jesus as their long-desired Messiah! Instead, they took it as another challenge, which led Jesus to condemn their hard hearts. It led them to condemn Jesus to death.

I was well acquainted with other wealthy Jews and the Jewish leaders, such as Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea. That's why I was able to give so many details of the night of Jesus' death. You see, I would have had the relationships to personally listen in at the house of Annas and

⁵ Mark 9:40-41, 47

⁶ Mark 10:44

⁷ Deuteronomy 6:4-5, Leviticus 19:18

before the Sanhedrin, or to learn the details from others who were there. It might even have been my influence that allowed Peter to enter the courtyard where he denied Jesus.

When you read my account, you will learn the details of the last night of Jesus' first life. He was seized at Gethsemene on the Mount of Olives, dragged across the Kidron Valley ravine to the house of the high priest where Peter denied him, tried before the high priest, before the Sanhedrin, before Pilate, before Herod Antipas, and condemned to death by Pilate. I tell you about how the soldiers mocked and beat Jesus before taking him to his place of crucifixion.

I write about how Jesus died quicker than Pilate expected, and how Joseph of Arimathea risked his reputation and position by going to Pilate and boldly asking for the body of Jesus. When Pilate learned from his centurion that Jesus was dead, he gave the body to Joseph. This was also a bold move on Pilate's part since he might have expected the followers of Jesus to use the body to stir up trouble. He must have known and trusted Joseph to act honorably, which he did. Joseph wrapped the body in linen cloth and laid it in a tomb prepared for himself, and rolled a stone over the entrance to bring the story of the life of Jesus to an end. And that was the end... of Jesus' *earthly* life, that is

“Can anyone here tell me three types of fishing gear discussed by the prophet Habakkuk that demonstrate how we can be better fishers of men?”

(an aside) Matthew and I played the original Trivia game, Bible Trivia game. He would toss out the question. I waited as the fishermen in the room struggled to remember what was in the book of that minor prophet, then finally chimed in,

“Hooks and two kinds of nets. They demonstrate that we should use the best applicable methods to make disciples, not use just one technique.”

Matthew and I *loved* that kind of stuff. Geeks...I believe would be your appropriate term. Bible Geeks.

We’d met several years after the death of Jesus.¹ Most modern scholars believe he wrote his book more than three decades after that. So, I knew him for those three decades leading up to his writing the *Gospel of Matthew*.

Matthew and I were close friends for two reasons that are apparent to anybody who has read our books. First, we were passionate about bringing the Jews to belief in Jesus. I am known as the Apostle to the Gentiles, but I was intent on always going to my Jewish brothers first in order to make them disciples of Jesus. That leads to the second reason Matthew and I were close.

Matthew and I were experts in the Old Testament, and we continually used Old Testament passages in our writings to convince the Jewish people that Jesus was the savior that the Old Testament prophets often prophesied about. Over the decades we knew each other, we constantly got special insights from Holy Spirit about those passages. Matthew and I delighted in sharing those insights with one another. (he gives a “you know” look) Bible Geeks!

About 80% of Matthew’s book can be found in *Luke* and *Mark*. Rather than repeat stories from episodes about those two books, I will tell you about a few passages in Matthew’s gospel that have to do with the fulfillment of Old Testament Scripture. I just love this stuff. (he keeps this vibe from the opening)

¹ Acts 9:27

From the start, Matthew reveals that the prophet Isaiah foretold the birth of Jesus. Mathew quotes Isaiah, "A virgin will get pregnant, and will give birth to a son, and will name him Immanuel."² He goes on to describe how Mary conceived through the Holy Spirit, not through a man.

I teased Matthew a little bit for using such an obvious scripture from the prophets, but he made it clear the next prophecy was as obvious to even the chief priests and teachers of the law. When Herod asked where the Christ was to be born, they quoted the prophet Micah, and told him the Christ was to be born in Bethlehem.³

Matthew did show his obvious inspiration from the Holy Spirit with his next two obscure quotes. He told the story that after Jesus was born, the wise men refused to return to Herod and give him information about the birth of Jesus. That made Herod so mad that he killed all the babies in Bethlehem and its vicinity. Prior to that, an angel had warned Joseph to take Jesus and go to Egypt, from where he returned after Herod died. Matthew quoted an obscure passage in *Jeremiah* that foretold the killing of the innocent babies,⁴ and another passage in *Hosea* saying that Jesus would return from Egypt.⁵

From the start of his gospel, Matthew would have impressed any Jew with his knowledge of the Old Testament and how it pointed to the coming of Jesus. They might not have been convinced, but they would have been impressed. What Matthew did next was a stroke of genius.

John the Baptist was still highly revered by the Jews even though he had been dead for several decades. Mathew reminded everyone about John the Baptist and how he was prophesied by Isaiah,⁶ and that his authorized mission from God was to prepare the way for the coming King. He reminded people that John had authority over the Jewish leaders, and that he baptized Jesus. He reminded people that disciples of John transferred their devotion to Jesus because John said Jesus was the chosen one of God.

Matthew waits for a few passages, then through the words of Jesus, Matthew reminds everyone that the prophet Malachi had said a messenger was to be sent ahead of the Messiah, and Elijah must come back before the day of the Lord.⁷ Then the hammer drop; John is the messenger and the figurative Elijah, and so the conditions are fulfilled for the Messiah to arrive...and that Messiah is Jesus!

² Isaiah 7:14

³ Micah 5:2

⁴ Jeremiah 31:15

⁵ Hosea 1:1

⁶ Isaiah 40:3

⁷ Malachi 3:1, 4:5

If Matthew had stopped writing there, his gospel would have been invaluable. But increasing the value all the more, he continued to tell the story of Jesus. Some of his Scriptures references are humorous to those of us in the know. For instance, he used the prophet Isaiah to show that Jesus was prophesied to live in Capernaum.⁸ I think he pressed that point because Capernaum was also Matthew's home and place of employment.

I have to admire him for not pulling any punches when he described his call to follow Jesus. He openly admitted that he was a hated tax collector who spent time with other tax collectors and sinners. I grinned when I noticed that he found a way to use a passage from *Hosea* to prophesy about his calling to follow Jesus.⁹

Luke and Matthew wrote about many of the same things, but Matthew was insistent about continually showing how Jesus fulfilled the Scriptures the Jews so revered.

He used a passage from *Isaiah* to show that Jesus would heal people of their diseases.¹⁰ He used a passage from *Hosea* to show that God really wants people to be merciful more than he wants their sacrifices.¹¹ He used the words of Isaiah to show that Jesus was the servant of God empowered by the Holy Spirit.¹² Over and over, Matthew used the Scriptures to show how they pointed to Jesus being the Messiah.

You would think Jesus' life and teachings would have been enough to convince the Jews, but Matthew rightly understood a big stumbling block for the Jews was their misunderstanding of Scriptures. They knew the Scriptures, but often applied them incorrectly or were more intent on following man-made rules and interpretations. Unless Matthew could show correct interpretations adequately, the Jews would remain hard-hearted and not willing to come to Jesus.

Imitating what he learned from Jesus, Matthew used the Jewish leaders as the perfect way to accomplish his aim. The Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes, teachers of the law, and priests were the authorities when it came to Scripture interpretation. Scripture geeks, if you will. Somehow this was true even though they often disagreed among themselves. Jesus and Matthew knew that if they could show the authorities to be wrong, the rest of the people might gain true understanding. I'm not sure he really thought the authorities would ever change their minds, because authorities of any kind don't like to be wrong. Some things just don't change, I'm sure you agree.

⁸ Isaiah 9:1-2

⁹ Hosea 6:6

¹⁰ Isaiah 53:4

¹¹ Hosea 6:6

¹² Isaiah 42:1-4

The first public rejection of Jesus by the authorities was when Jesus healed a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute. It is important to note that he was blind and mute because of demon-possession, not for a physical reason. When Jesus healed him, the Pharisees mocked Jesus and said he only drove out demons by the power of Satan. Jesus used parables and logic to defeat the accusation of the Pharisees.

The Pharisees and teachers switched gears, they asked to see a miracle of Jesus. The implication in their question was that if he did a miracle to prove he was the Messiah, perhaps they would believe. Jesus knew they were only being argumentative, so he accused them of being wicked and evil for wanting a miracle that they would not believe. He contrasted them to the people of Ninevah and the Queen of Sheba who truly repented and wanted to learn when they were faced with the truth. From then on, Jesus was an enemy of the Jewish authorities.

In comparison, Jesus had compassion for the common people because they were so helpless. They could not understand the esoteric arguments and teachings of their leaders, and they could not follow all of their man-made rules. So, Jesus talked to the people in parables, telling stories that made sense to them. They were quite intelligent enough to understand the lessons Jesus was teaching once it was phrased correctly. The people were always amazed at his understanding and his authority.

Matthew used a passage from *Isaiah* and from *Psalms* to show why Jesus taught the way he did.¹³ Isaiah indicated that people with hard hearts could never understand. That pointed to the fact that many of the Jewish leaders had hard hearts. In contrast, the common people who were humble, could hear and understand the truth. Since Matthew knew the parables were so important, he recorded many that neither Mark nor Luke wrote about.

Matthew records in detail one very important event in his life and in the life of the apostles. Mark and Luke only briefly mention the event. In the tenth chapter of Matthew, he gives a very detailed description of Jesus sending out the Twelve with authority to drive out evils spirits and heal every kind of disease and sickness. The success of the event doubtless was a turning point in the training of the apostles, and was indelibly inscribed on Matthew's heart and consciousness. My friend could not resist quoting the prophet Micah while he talked about this event.¹⁴

Before finishing, I want to point out one more thing. Matthew was very diligent in writing about Jesus, his teachings, and his prophecies given near the end of Jesus' life. It is only through Matthew that we learn the Parable of the Landowner and Evil Tenants,¹⁵ the many scriptural

¹³ Isaiah 6:9-10, Psalm 78:2

¹⁴ Micah 7:6

¹⁵ Matthew 20:1-16

fulfillments of Jesus' Triumphal Entry¹⁶, and some of Jesus' final comments against the Jewish authorities and his lament over Jerusalem.¹⁷ Only Matthew records the Parable of the Wicked Servant, the Parable of the Wise Virgins, and the Parable of the Talents.¹⁸ Only Matthew records Jesus' words about the judgement at the coming of the Son of Man, with its famous lines about the sheep and goats.¹⁹

Yes, we would be much poorer if it weren't for the writing of my friend, Matthew. He is the sole source for many of Jesus' teachings, and he was a master at using the Old Testament to prove the applicability of many prophecies to Jesus. And, a fellow Bible Geek.

I have a new question for him the next time we meet. Who was the most effective preacher of the Old Testament?²⁰

[starts to walk away, then comes back and sits down. Makes a motion like he is sharing a secret with the audience.] Jonah. He preached a sermon of less than a dozen words and got 120,000 people to repent!

¹⁶ Matthew 21:10-17

¹⁷ Matthew 23:8-40

¹⁸ Matthew 24:43-25:28

¹⁹ Matthew 25:31-46

²⁰ Jonah. Jonah 3:4, 4:11

Matthew

I can still see Jesus standing at the top of the small hill — a natural depression in it. His words¹ reverberate through the crowd, down the depression, southward toward the edge of the Sea of Galilee, though he is speaking only slightly louder than a normal voice.² The sky is bright blue, the few sea birds are silently circling overhead. Just a quiet as the birds are, the thousands of people hanging on every word.

Jesus is about to summarize many of his teachings into the greatest lesson ever heard. My name is Matthew and I should know. I was there, memorized his words, and wrote them down

I met Paul long before this writing became well-known. We had many long discussions about Jesus, but the very first thing Paul wanted from me was to teach him this lesson. Word – for – word.

Paul

Next to Gamaliel, my childhood teacher, Matthew has the best memory of any man I've ever known. When he started teaching me this lesson, I felt as if I were listening to Jesus himself. (looks in the distance and then starts quoting)

Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are they that mourn: for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek: for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are they which hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they will be filled.

Matthew

Blessed are the merciful: for they will obtain mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart: for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers: for they will be called the children of God.

Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of God.

Paul

¹ The following is the Sermon on the Mount taken from the King James Version of the Bible, as modified where needed by the writer of this story to use modern words, grammar, and punctuation. This is meant to be a script, not an exact translation.

² Such a place still exists today on the north edge of the Sea of Galilee

Blessed are you when men shall denounce you, and persecute you, and say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be very glad, for great is your reward in heaven, because they likewise persecuted the prophets which were before you.

Matthew

You are the salt of the earth, but if the salt has lost its saltiness, it cannot regain it. It is good for nothing, but to be thrown out, and to be walked on. You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick, and it gives light to all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.

Don't think that I've come to destroy the law or the prophets. I have not come to destroy, but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one tiny punctuation mark shall pass from the law, until all is fulfilled.

Paul

Whoever breaks one of the least commandments, and teaches others to do so, he will be the least in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever does them and teaches them, will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say to you, that except your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter into the kingdom of heaven.

Paul

You have heard that it was said in the old days, "You shall not kill, and whoever kills shall be in danger of the judgment." But I say to you, that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause will be in danger of the judgment; and, whoever insults his brother will be in danger of the council; but whoever says, "You Fool," will be in danger of hell fire!

Therefore, if you bring a gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift before the altar, and go away. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

Agree with your enemy quickly, while you are with him, unless he takes you to court, and the judge delivers you to the officer, and you go to prison. Truly I say to you, you will by no means come out of prison until you have paid the last penny.

Matthew

You have heard that it was said in the old days, "You shall not commit adultery," but I say to you, that whoever looks at a woman lustfully has committed adultery with her already in his heart. And if your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out, and throw it away. For it is better for you that one of your body parts should perish than your whole body should be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off, and throw it away. For it is better for you that one of your body parts should perish than your whole body be thrown into hell.

It has been said, "Whoever shall divorce his wife, let him give her a writing of divorcement." But I say to you, that whoever divorces his wife, except for the cause of fornication, causes her to commit adultery. And whoever marries her that is divorced, commits adultery.

Paul

Again, you have heard that it was said in the old days, "You shall not make false oaths, but do for the Lord what you swear." But I say to you, don't make oaths at all, neither by heaven, for it is God's throne, nor by the earth, for it is his footstool. Neither by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Neither swear by your head, because you can't make one hair white or black. But let your "Yes" be yes, and your "No" be no. For whatever is more than these is of evil.

You have heard that it has been said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," but I say to you, don't resist evil actions. But whoever hits you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue you and take away your coat, let him have your cloak also. And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him that asks you, and don't turn away from him that would borrow of you.

Matthew

You have heard that it has been said, "You shall love your neighbor, and hate your enemy." But I say to you, love your enemies, bless them that curse you, and do good to them that hate you. And pray for those which spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be the children of your Father which is in heaven. For he makes his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

Paul and Matthew

For if you love those which love you, what reward have you? Do not even the publicans do the same? And if you salute your brothers only, what are you doing more than others? Do not even the publicans do the same? Therefore, be perfect, even as your father which is in heaven is perfect.

Matthew

Take heed that you do not give to charity before men, to be seen of them. Otherwise you have no reward of your Father which is in heaven. Therefore, when you do give to charity, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Truly, I say to you, they have their reward. But when you give to charity, do not let your left hand know what your right hand does, that your charity giving may be in secret. And, your Father which sees in secret himself shall reward you openly.

Paul

And when you pray, don't be as the hypocrites are, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets that they may be seen of men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward. But when you pray, enter into your closet, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father which is in secret, and your father which sees in secret shall reward you openly. But when you pray, don't repeat yourself uselessly, as the heathen do, for

they think that they shall be heard for their many words. Don't be like them, for your Father knows what things you need before you ask him.

Paul and Matthew

Pray like this: Our Father which is in heaven, holy is your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our errors, as we forgive those who err against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil; For yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

Paul

For if you forgive men their errors against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: but if you don't forgive men their errors against you, neither will your Father forgive yours.

Matthew

Silence. Just silence like you can't imagine. As if that crowd had uncovered a secret treasure that they could keep forever if they just listened hard enough. The birds were quiet, the wind died down. This was the longest lesson we had heard Jesus teach, and he was only half way through.

When you fast, don't be like the hypocrites with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces, that they may appear to fast. Truly I say to you, they have their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that you don't appear to fast to men, but to your Father who is in secret, and your Father, who sees in secret shall reward you openly.

Don't lay up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust corrupts, and where thieves break through and steal. But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust corrupts, and where thieves do not break through nor steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

The lamp of the body is the eye. If your eye is clean your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is evil, your whole body will be full of darkness. If therefore the light in you is darkness, how great is that darkness!

No man can serve two masters! For either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will be devoted to the one, and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.

Paul

Therefore, I say to you, "Take no thought for your life, what you shall eat, or what you shall drink, nor how to clothe yourself. Is not life more than meat, and the body than clothes. Behold the birds of the air, for they don't sow or reap, nor gather into barns; yet, your heavenly Father feeds them. Aren't you much better than they?"

Which of you by thinking can add one inch to his height? And why think about clothes? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they don't work or weave, and yet I say to you, that even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. So, if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and gone tomorrow, shall he not clothe you better, you of little faith?

Therefore, don't ask, "What will we eat?" Or, "What will we drink or how will we dress?" For the Gentiles pursue these things. Your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.

But seek first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. Don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will think of itself. Sufficient for the day is its own problems.

Matthew

Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgement you judge, you will be judged, and with what measure you use, it will be measured to you again. And why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye, but don't consider the beam that is in your own eye? Or how will you say to your brother, "Let me take the speck out of your eye," while a beam is in your own eye? You hypocrite! First take out the beam from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.

Paul

Don't give that which is holy to the dogs, nor throw your pearls before pigs, or they will trample them under their feet, and turn and rip you apart.

Matthew

Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone that asks, receives; and he that seeks, finds; and to him that knocks, it will be opened.

Paul

Or what man of you, whom if his son asks for bread, will he give him a stone? Or if he asks a fish, will he give a serpent? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him? Therefore, all things whatever you want others to do to you, do you to them; for this is the law and the prophets.

Matthew

Enter in at the straight gate. For wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leads to destruction, and many will go in there. Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leads to life, and few will find it.

Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are vicious wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Do people gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Every good tree makes good fruit; but a bad tree makes forth bad fruit. A good tree cannot make bad fruit, neither can a bad tree make good fruit. Every tree that doesn't make good fruit is cut down, and thrown into the fire. By their fruits you will know them.

Paul

Not everyone that says to me, "Lord, Lord", will enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that does the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, "Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in your name? And in your name have cast out devils? And in your name done many works?" And then I will say to them, "I never knew you! depart from me, you evil doers!"

Therefore, whoever hears these sayings of mine and does them, is like a wise man, who built his house upon a rock. The rain came down, and the flood came, and winds blew, and beat on that house. It did not fall, for it was founded on a rock. Everyone that hears these sayings of mine, and doesn't do them, is like a foolish man, who built his house on the sand. The rain came down and the floods came, and winds blew. And great was its fall.

Matthew

When Jesus finished saying all these things, the crowd continued to sit in a stunned silence. Jesus taught as someone with authority, not like a religious expert that proved his wisdom by quoting another expert that was quoting another expert.

Slowly, the world started coming back to life. People started stirring, a few children began to cry, and I remember hearing sea birds fighting over a rotten fish. I looked at Jesus, and he gave me a nod. "Matthew, he said, "You are given the gift of memory. Write down all I say." And then he winked, "And you will be blessed."

From that day on, I understood that my main role with the apostles was not to keep track of the money, Judas could do that. It was not to be bold, Peter could do that. It was not to have compassion and love, John could do that. My role was to remember the words of Jesus and write them down. And I was blessed for doing it. You know my writings as the *Gospel of Matthew*.

The best fisherman on the Sea of Galilee was old man Zebedee.¹ He hired me as a young man because I was so strong that I could haul nets all night long and never get tired. He would tell the others, “Careful not to knock muscleman overboard he’ll sink to the bottom like a rock. I always wondered if that’s where Jesus got the idea to change my name from Simon the Fisherman to Peter the Rock.”²

Over time, Zebedee made partners of his sons, James and John in his business. And also my brother Andrew and me³ We did well as a partnership, until Jesus came along and offered us the opportunity to be fishers of men instead of fishers of tilapia. Lifechanging. It was abrupt and borderline rude that we immediately left poor Zebedee when we heard the offer, but he stayed in business without us.⁴

My brother Andrew and I were from the tiny village of Bethsaida, near the northeast shores of the Sea of Galilee.⁵ We knew James and John from the time we were small children. Inseparable then, and we stayed inseparable through our time with Jesus. In fact, many people considered us to be the inner circle of Jesus. I tell you all of these things to explain how well I knew John, the writer of the *Gospel of John*.

John not only wrote the *Gospel of John*, but *First, Second and Third John*, and the book of *Revelation*. He wrote the *Gospel of John* many decades after the death of Jesus, and after the gospels of *Matthew, Mark and Luke* were written. He was familiar with those three gospel stories and didn’t feel the need to replicate them or duplicate much of what they had to say.

Some of your modern scholars think John was trying to fill in events that the other gospels didn’t address. If so, there was plenty of material for John, because as he wrote, Jesus did so many things that even the whole world would not have room for the books that could be written about them.⁶

¹ Mark 1:20

² Matthew 16:18

³ Luke 5:7-11

⁴ Luke 5:11, John 21:3

⁵ John 1:44. The lake level has dropped in recent decades and the village is not as close as it used to be.

⁶ John 21:25

I think that's partially true, but I think the main reason John wrote his gospel the way he did is that he saw the world entirely differently than the rest of us. John came closest of any apostle to seeing the world through Jesus' eyes. John's eyes looked through lens of love. They looked through lens of spiritual insight the rest of us didn't have. It is no wonder John was described as the one Jesus loved.⁷ It is also no wonder that as Jesus was dying, he entrusted his mother to John.⁸ John and Jesus had a special bond, everyone knew it.

Matthew and Luke begin their gospels talking about events surrounding the birth of Jesus. John begins his gospel by talking about the birth of time.

I was never jealous of John... as a person, but I did envy his way with words. Nothing ever written is as sublime as the first lines of the *Gospel of John*: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The Word was with God in the beginning. All things were made by him; and without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men."⁹

John conveyed so much in so few words. Jesus and God existed together before the beginning of time. Jesus is the Word, Jesus is God. Everything that exists was made through Jesus. All life comes through Jesus. Jesus is the light and life of all mankind.

Then my friend, John, followed his opening statement with words that would resonate throughout the centuries, words that would both unite and cause dissension in the churches. Listen, "And the Word was made flesh, and lived among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."¹⁰

The God of the Universe became a man and lived among us as a man. We were all witnesses of that fact. We personally lived with the Son of God, who was himself God,¹¹ and knew him to be full of grace and truth. Why we apostles were chosen to live with Jesus is still a mystery to me.

How does any human even begin to comprehend any of those statements John made about Jesus? Maybe we can't on our own. Maybe that is why God sent John the Baptist. He came as a witness to testify to Jesus. Even John the Baptist himself said that he wasn't the light of the world, but Jesus is.

From thousands of years later, you might question why God had to send John the Baptist ahead of Jesus. Why didn't God just send Jesus in a spectacular entrance from Heaven so everyone would know who he was? That's what I would have done. I can't fully answer that question, but

⁷ John 13:23, 19:26, 21:7

⁸ John 19:26

⁹ John 1:1-4

¹⁰ John 1:14

¹¹ John 1:18

I can tell you that God had been planning the entrance of Jesus and the need for John the Baptist for countless eons. God had given the Jews notice of it through the prophets, especially Malachi. The Jews were expecting a forerunner of the Messiah, but they didn't recognize John the Baptist as being that person.

John the Baptist did just what he was supposed to do. He prepared the way for Jesus by convincing people of their unrighteousness, talking about Jesus, gathering disciples to be ready for Jesus, and then dying so he would not be a distraction or competition. John the Baptist was so amazing that Jesus called him the greatest man ever to be born.¹²

One of the most lasting accomplishments of John the Baptist was that he trained, and then turned over to Jesus, the first dedicated follower of Jesus...my brother, Andrew.

James, John, Philip, Nathaniel and I joined Jesus, too. We followed Jesus to Cana, where he did his first public miracle. Cana was only eight miles from Jesus' home town of Nazareth, and the family of Jesus most likely knew many people from there. On this occasion, Jesus' mother and family members were attending a wedding, as we were.

The wedding party was going well when a most embarrassing thing happened – the host ran out of wine. In that society, that would have been a huge social disgrace and a bad omen for the newlyweds. Jesus' mother might have been part of the wedding providers, because she was aware of the problem. She came to her son and simply said, "They have no more wine." Jesus seemingly wanted to stay uninvolved, but like a good mother and friend, she just told the nearby servants to do as Jesus said. She didn't know how Jesus would solve the problem, but she had faith that he would.

You can imagine Jesus taking a big sigh, giving Mary a loving look, and then telling the servants to fill six huge jars with about 150 gallons of water. What followed was quite a sight. Servants rushing out to the public well and drawing huge amounts of water, and then hauling through the crowd to the six jars. It took many trips and caused quite a scene. When the jars were filled to the brim, the servants took some of the water out and took it to the master of ceremonies. It was not only wine, but the best wine. Instead of an embarrassing announcement of the wine being gone, the master of ceremonies complimented the bridegroom for saving the best wine for last.

We didn't know it at the time, but the miracle of the wine was an indication that a new religion was coming to replace the old Jewish religion, and the new would be far better than the old. After the wedding, Jesus, his followers and his family went to Capernaum, the site of his new headquarters.

Like the other Gospel writers, John did not always follow a strict chronological sequence. At this point in his story, John says that Jesus went up to Jerusalem for the Passover celebration. He

¹² Matthew 11:1

doesn't say the path Jesus took, but Jesus often came toward the Temple from the south, going by the Pool of Siloam, on the southern edge of the old City of David. Jesus would climb the steep hill on the slick coffee colored paving stones laid by Herod the Great. He would pass the small shops by the side of the road where vendors sold food, animals to sacrifice, and changed money. His face would darken as he remembered how they took advantage of his mother and father. But he never expressed his disapproval of these services that were needed to worship in the Temple in the manner required by the Temple leaders.

On that particular day, we completed the ceremonial cleansings in the pools south of the Temple Mount, and reciting the Psalms of Ascent, we climbed the Southern Steps . We climbed the stairway to the top of the Temple Mount, and headed toward the Temple. Jesus stopped. He stared at the Temple courts which were packed with even more vendors! An expression clouded his face, one that none of us had ever seen. He moved to the side and grabbed a long cord. What is he doing, I thought. He rose and slowly, walked toward a vendor of doves and pigeons.

Then, in cold fury, he overturned tables, opened cages and animal pens. He had made the cord into a whip! He drove out the people, the cows, the sheep. The turmoil only increased when the coins of the money changers hit the stones! People scrambled to avoid Jesus' whip and grab as many coins as they could. It was pandemonium, but the courts soon emptied out. Jesus stood there panting, and the Jewish leaders rushed him in a panic, worried more about the nearby Romans than about the loss of money. They certainly were not concerned that God's house was being profaned.

Pointing fingers at Jesus, they demanded a sign to signify by whose authority he was acting. This might have been a ploy to get him to do a miracle, but I think they could have been concerned that Jesus was acting under the authority of the Romans, who worried about collecting taxes on everything. "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." Jesus challenged them, unexpectedly.

The leaders were incredulous, as you would have been. They looked around at stones as big as small houses, in a temple that had taken forty-six years to build! He could not possibly re-build it in three days. I think they had some suspicion that Jesus could miraculously tear down the Temple in front of their eyes.

But, Jesus was not the Temple building, he was talking about his body. He was prophesying about the manner of his death and resurrection, but nobody, including the apostles, had any idea of what he was talking about. After Jesus died and was resurrected, we remembered what he had said that day.

During the remainder of Passover, Jesus performed many signs and wonders, and many people believed in him. One of the Jewish leaders came to meet with Jesus at night. He was a great teacher who wanted to ask about the teachings of Jesus. Nicodemus listened as Jesus endeavored to teach him about the mysteries of the teachings. Like a mustard seed, those teachings took root in his heart, and he eventually became a follower of Jesus.

John concluded this portion of his narrative with a special gift to the world. In one of the most quoted verses of the New Testament, John summarized the unbelievable gift of God. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life."

So profound. Life changing, wouldn't you agree?

I had different goals than the other three gospel writers. Matthew stressed Old Testament prophecies to prove to the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah, the anointed one, and the King of the Jews. Mark used the life of Jesus to prove to the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah and the Suffering Servant talked about by Isaiah. Luke used the life of Jesus to show that Jesus came for all peoples, not just the Jews. He had a special interest in showing how inclusive Jesus was. So, yes, I had different goals when I wrote my account, the *Gospel of John*.

I was the last one to write a gospel. There was no need for me to repeat the actions and words of Jesus that were recorded by the other three. Many of the actions of Jesus had become well known, and the others did not need to be stressed. In fact, I ended my gospel by saying that Jesus did so many things that if every one of them were written down, they would fill the whole world with the books that would be written.¹

I wanted to show that Jesus was the Son of God, and explain more about the natures of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. We Jews often repeated “The Shema,” found in Deuteronomy 6:4: “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” This incredible prayer illustrates the monotheistic essence of Judaism. We worshiped the one and only God of the universe.

We Jews worshiped one God, but it was not a conflict for us to understand that God was a spirit and had a spiritual nature. The second sentence in Genesis says that the Spirit of God hovered over the waters of the earth. The Jews saw God as an entirely different type of being than humans, although they slowly started visualizing God as their father, not just their creator.²

In the view of the Jews, Jesus became a blasphemer when he talked of God as his personal father, and him being the literal son of God.³ This conflicted with their view of God being one, and also equated Jesus with God. It got even more complicated as Jesus began talking about the Holy Spirit. For the next two thousand years people would try to understand the relationships of God the Father, God the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

I did address those things, but my main purpose was to explain the nature of God that had not been revealed in the Old Testament. The Old Testament revealed God as creator of the universe, a just judge, all powerful, all knowing, and a myriad of other characteristics. What the

¹ John 21:25

² 2 Samuel 7:14 was one of the early instances when God started revealing his nature as a father.

³ John 5:18

Old Testament did not reveal was the extent to which God was a loving father of all people. A father who loved all people so much that he would sacrifice his very Son, so that all people could be reconciled to God.

What the more perceptive Jewish leaders understood was this: if Jesus was truly the Son of God and the Messiah, he had the right to teach about the true nature of God. If that happened, they would lose their preeminent position to teach about God. That contention would cause a battle to the death.

Jesus started teaching about God in a manner that appears benign to modern Christians, but would have been a slap in the face to the Jews of his time. In my gospel, I chose seven instances when he talked about himself, using “I am” statements. Modern Christians are so used to hearing people talk about themselves that they might miss the significance of this form of Jesus’ statements. The significance is found in an Old Testament story.

When God called Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, Moses asked about the name of God so that he could tell the Israelites. God said, “I AM THAT I AM.”⁴ In other words, one name of God is “I Am.” When Jesus began his statements with the words, “I am”, he was not only equating himself with God, but was revealing new facets of God’s nature. To the Jews, Jesus was blaspheming.

Jesus said, “I am the bread of life.”⁵ Jesus had recently fed the 5,000 but some were still wanting miraculous signs to prove who he was the Messiah. They pointed to the manna that their ancestors ate in the wilderness. Knowing that they really wanted to have bread to eat that didn’t require any work, Jesus switched the subject to spiritual bread. He said that the bread of God comes from heaven and gives life to the world. He pointed to himself as that true life-giving bread coming down from heaven.

Jesus said, “I am the light of the world.”⁶ Jesus was saying that his followers would walk in spiritual light and truth. They would have the power of understanding spiritual truths that bring eternal life. This must surely have been good news to those around him who were used to relying on the Jewish leaders to tell them about spiritual truth. It must have also been comforting because Jesus did not require them to follow the hundreds of rules that their leaders had instituted.

⁴ Exodus 3:14

⁵ John 6:35, 48, 51

⁶ John 8:12, 9:5

Jesus said, “I am the gate.”⁷ Jesus was using the gate of a sheep pen for an analogy. The gate keeps the sheep in a protected state, but also allows them to go out for food and water. Jesus does the same for his followers. He protects them and provides them life-sustaining resources.

Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd.”⁸ This statement would have reminded the Jews of their Shepherd-King, King David, and of the many shepherds they saw in the daily lives. Good shepherds allowed their flocks to survive and thrive. A good shepherd would risk his life to protect his sheep. Jesus’ hearers would certainly remember how David had risked his life to protect his flock from bears and lions.⁹ His hearers didn’t know it, but Jesus would soon lay down his life for the sake of his followers.

Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life.”¹⁰ This must have been a stunning statement to the Sadducees who did not believe in any resurrection. Jesus was saying that even though people would experience a physical death, they could have eternal life through believing and following him.

Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life: nobody comes to the Father, except by me.”¹¹ Jesus was saying that access to God came through belief in Jesus, not through sacrifices at the Temple. The only way to have eternal life is through belief in Jesus. This must have been a slap to the Jewish leaders who were acting as access to God and teaching that life came through obedience to their manmade commandments.

Jesus said, “I am the true vine.”¹² Everyone in the audience that day knew that grapes grew on the branches connected to the vines. Life came through the vines to the branches. Jesus was saying that true life could only come through him. Without him it was impossible to have spiritual life or to bear spiritual fruit.

These seven “I am” statements certainly taught people about the nature of Jesus, but they also taught about the nature of God. God loved them and wanted to have good relationships with them. This was quite a different notion than they had learned from the Old Testament. Now that God loved them, it was going to be much easier for them to love God...the one thing he had always wanted from his people.

No matter how poor a person was, no matter what sins they had committed, no matter who their fathers and mothers were...God wanted to forgive them and have relationship with them.

⁷ John 10:7, 9

⁸ John 10:11, 14

⁹ 1 Samuel 17:36

¹⁰ John 11:25

¹¹ John 14:6

¹² John 15:1

This had to be incredibly good news to them. Jesus chose to teach these lessons by going on the first foreign mission trip.

Jesus left the region of Judea where he was baptized, and returned to his home region of Galilee. He had two choices. He could have headed north up the Jordan River valley and turned west near the Sea of Galilee, or he could go west through the hills of Samaria and then turn north. Given those choices, most Jews would have gone north through the Jordan River Valley so they could purposely avoid Samaria.

Samaria was home to the Samaritans, a group of people despised by the Jews. Samaritans were descendants of the people groups transplanted by the Assyrians to the lands of the Northern Kingdom after its destruction hundreds of years before Jesus. Many of these people groups intermarried with Jews through the centuries. As such, the Jews considered the Samaritans to be an inferior ethnic and spiritual group, even though many of them had similar beliefs to the Jews. When the Jews had to travel through Samaria, they kept away from contact with them as much as possible.

Jesus stopped at the town of Sychar, and told his disciples to go into town and buy food. While they were gone, Jesus entered into an entirely inappropriate conversation. He started talking to a Samaritan woman of ill-repute. She had three strikes against her. Jesus should have stayed away from her instead of purposely talking with her.

He started the conversation by asking her for a drink from the well. Before the talk was over, he had taught her about the importance of having spiritual life, revealed her sinful life, and taught her to repent and receive forgiveness. In turn, she brought the whole village to hear Jesus.

Can't you just imagine that scene. A woman who had an awful reputation for sleeping with many different men convinced her entire village to come hear the words of Jesus. Maybe a few of the men were a little hesitant because she said that Jesus had told her everything she ever did. In the end, they convinced Jesus to stay two days and teach them. When Jesus left, many of them believed in him.

This must have been a shock to Jesus' followers. Jesus purposely went to obvious sinners, "bad people", to bring them into relationship with God. But the shock must have turned to joy. After all, if Jesus wanted the Samaritans to be reconciled to God, surely he would be happy to have Jews do so as well, no matter how much they had sinned. That was the nature of Jesus the Son reflecting the nature of the father, God. God, like Jesus, was in the midst of his people...all of his people... to show them how much he loved them.

Seven is a number signifying completeness, it had great significance to the Jews of Jesus' time. In the Gospel of John, the author, John, emphasizes seven miraculous signs performed by Jesus prior to his crucifixion. I am the most qualified person to tell this portion of Jesus' story. I was the seventh of the miraculous signs.

John specifically chose these seven signs out of a large number of miracles that Jesus did for a very specific reason. John wrote, "And Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book: but these are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God; and that by believing you might have life through his name."¹

John says that the first of Jesus' miraculous signs was turning water into wine. On that occasion, Jesus' mother and family members were attending a wedding in Cana, as were Jesus and his disciples.

The wedding party was going well when a most embarrassing thing happened – the host ran out of wine. In that culture, that would have been a huge social disgrace and a bad omen for the newlyweds. Jesus' mother might have been part of the wedding providers, because she was aware of the problem. She came to her son and simply said, "They have no more wine." Jesus seemingly wanted to stay uninvolved, but like a good mother and friend, Mary just told the nearby servants, "Do as he says." In response, Jesus turned about 150 gallons of water into wine.

The miracle of the wine was an indication that something new was coming to replace the old Jewish religion, and the new would be far better than the old.

The second miraculous sign was a physical healing.² Jesus was visiting again in Cana, where he was certain to be a celebrity because of his first miraculous sign of turning water into wine. A royal official from Capernaum heard that Jesus had arrived in the region, and he rushed to ask him a favor.

The royal official begged Jesus to go to Capernaum and heal his young son who was close to death. This powerful official dressed in his royal robes was begging an itinerant preacher in his,

¹ John 20:30-31

² John 4:54

most likely ragged brown robe, to help him. By using the word, "Sir," the official was humbly acknowledging that Jesus had more power than he did. By asking for the favor, he acknowledged that Jesus had the power to grant his request.

Seeing the man's distress... and faith... Jesus told him to return home, his son would live. Jesus' evaluation of the man was rewarded, because the man took Jesus at his word and returned home. While the man was traveling home, his servants met him with the news that his son was living. He was told that the fever left the boy at the same time Jesus had said his son would live.

So, based on receiving a miraculous sign, the man and his entire household believed. What the Bible doesn't reveal, is how many others believed based on this sign.

The third miraculous sign disclosed by John took place by the Pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem. The pool was surrounded by five covered colonnades. It seems there was a legend that an angel would from time to time stir the waters of the pool, and the first one entering the water after that would be healed. A great number of disabled people were crouched by the pool in hopes of beating everyone else into the water, and be healed.

Walking by the pool, Jesus noticed one particular man. He was disabled for thirty-eight years. When Jesus learned his history, he asked, "Do you want to get well?" **What was going through Jesus' mind when he asked that question, do you think? Was he pressing the man to make sure he hadn't given up? Was he allowing the man to express his faith? Was he not going to heal the man if his answer was insufficient?**

Instead of answering Jesus' question, the man said that nobody would help him, so he couldn't get in the water first. Imagine his surprise when Jesus ignored his answer and commanded, "Get up, pick up your bed, and walk!" Imagine his immense joy when he was able to do just that. Imagine his distress when the religious leaders abruptly made him stop. Especially, after not walking all those years!

One of the Ten Commandments was to keep the Sabbath holy, which the Pharisees had interpreted very strictly. They had thirty-nine different activities or works which were forbidden to do on the Sabbath, one group of which prohibited normal household chores. Picking up a mat and walking would have been a violation of their rules. Rather presumptuously, they told the man, "It is the sabbath day: it is illegal for you to carry your bed."

They placed the man in a horrible position. He was on the cusp of recognizing his dreams of being healed, attending the Synagogue, and being a productive member of society. The Pharisees could destroy every one of his dreams. All he could say was, "The man who healed me told me to pick up my bed and walk." They wanted to know who told him to do that, but he could not tell them because Jesus had left.

Apparently, the man went to the temple to have his healing acknowledged by the priests, because Jesus saw him there, and told him to quit sinning or something worse may happen to

him. The man went to back to the Jewish leaders and told them that it was Jesus who had told him to pick up his mat and walk. When the leaders confronted Jesus, he told them that he was doing his works through the Father. This infuriated the Jewish leaders, because it implied that Jesus could break the Sabbath with impunity, and that he was making himself equal with God. This caused them to try even harder to kill Jesus.

The fourth of the miraculous signs described by John was also shown in the other three Gospel accounts. Jesus fed five thousand men, along with women and children,³ with only five loaves of bread and two fish. And, he had twelve basketfuls left over. John says that the baskets were full of the pieces of the five barley loaves.⁴ This miracle was so powerful that the people wanted to use force to make Jesus king, although Jesus didn't want that.

The fifth of the seven miraculous signs occurred the night after Jesus went to a mountain to pray, and sent his disciples in a boat to go to Capernaum. About ten hours later, in the middle of the night, Jesus recognized that the disciples were stranded in the middle of the lake, rowing against a very strong wind. Jesus walked about three miles on the water, he was about to walk by the boat when the disciples saw him. They were terrified! "It is I, don't be afraid." Jesus said.

When he climbed in the boat with them, the wind died down immediately. Recognizing his ability to control the weather and nature, and to create bread miraculously, the disciples worshiped him as the Son of God. Incidentally, only Matthew gives us the detail that Peter walked on the water to join Jesus that night, but started sinking when his faith wavered.⁵

The sixth of the miraculous signs was a last straw for the Pharisees. It ensured that they would find a way to kill him. Already on their home turf in Jerusalem, and already in their crosshairs, Jesus found another way to irritate them.

He and his disciples were minding their own business when they walked by a blind man. The disciples asked, "Was this man born blind because he sinned or because his parents sinned?" They clearly thought those were the only two possible alternatives. They still labored under the misconception that physical disabilities were the result of spiritual sin. Jesus replied that the blindness wasn't caused by sin. And, he added the statement that the blindness occurred so that the work of God could be displayed in his life.

Jesus spat on the ground, mixed his saliva with the dirt, and pasted the resulting mud on the man's eyes. "Go wash in the Pool of Siloam," he said. The man walked down to the south end of the City of David and washed. And... came back with his sight.

³ Matthew 14:21

⁴ John 6:13

⁵ Matthew 14:28-31

The leaders insisted that the incident was a fraud, they questioned the man's parents. They refused to acknowledge the power of Jesus for fear of being ostracized. The Pharisees continued to harangue the man, but he continued to defend the person who healed him.

When Jesus found out that the Pharisees had thrown the man out of the Temple, he went to find him. Jesus confessed that he was the healer. The man said, "Lord, I believe," and he worshiped him. Jesus remarked that he had come into the world so that the blind could see, which was an obvious dig at the Pharisees' spiritual blindness. When they complained, Jesus told them that if they were truly blind, they would be innocent, but since they claimed to see, they were self-condemned.

And this brings us to the seventh, and last, miraculous sign....me. My name is Lazarus. My sisters were Mary and Martha. Our family lived in the small town of Bethany, about two miles east of Jerusalem. Jesus was our best friend, and he loved us deeply.

One day, I became extremely ill. My sisters sent word to Jesus that the one he loved was sick. Jesus was quite a distance from our house, and when he received word, he said that God and he would be glorified through the sickness, and he stayed where he was for two more days. In that period of time, I died. Then I was buried in a tomb.

Jesus told his disciples I had died, and that now it was time to go visit me. When Jesus arrived, I had been in the tomb for four days. My quick-tempered sister, Martha, chastised Jesus for not coming sooner to heal me. He finally got her to admit that he was the Christ, and she realized he had power over death. She brought Mary to see Jesus, and they all wept over the sadness of my death.

Jesus asked that they take him to the tomb, and commanded them to roll away the stone from the entrance. Martha, ever the bold one, said, "Lord, he has been dead four days. He stinks." Jesus reminded her to believe. They took away the stone, Jesus prayed, then he shouted at me, "Lazarus, come out of the tomb!"

How do I even begin to explain what happened next? I had been in the presence of God and angels, I had been experiencing heaven, or at least what I perceived to be heaven. Then I was sucked back to my old reality. My eyes were open, but they were covered by bandages. My arms and feet were bound to my body, I could hear the binding ripping apart. I stood, as if in a trance, and walked out of the cave and into sunlight and life. I really wasn't too happy about it, but how could I complain when it made my sisters so happy.

Some of the Jews came to believe in Jesus because of my resurrection. Others wanted to kill me, along with Jesus, to hide all evidence of him being the Messiah. My healing sealed the deal for the Pharisees. Jesus would have to die. Soon.

Seven Miraculous signs. John recorded them, the miraculous signs of Jesus. "I wrote these things so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that by believing you

might have life through his name.”⁶ That’s what he wrote. That’s why he wrote it, so *you* would believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and have life. Most of the Pharisees refused to believe, they did not attain life. I’m begging you, me the seventh miraculous sign. Please. Believe, and have life.

⁶ John 20:30-31

Matthew, Mark and Luke only briefly mentioned me in their Gospels. John gave me a little more recognition. He talked about how I introduced Nathaniel to Jesus, and how we came to be followers of Jesus.¹ John wrote about my role in the feeding of the five thousand.² He also recognized that I tried to introduce a group of Greeks to Jesus, with that attempt resulting in an important speech by Jesus about his impending death.³ And, John recorded the few words I said on the night before Jesus died.

Yes. Okay. So, there were two men named Philip in the Bible. One was the man who taught the Ethiopian eunuch and lived in Caesarea. The book of *Acts* talks about him. That is not me. I am Philip the apostle.

We were in the Upper Room, Jesus had just finished telling Peter that he would soon deny Jesus three times. Jesus tried to console all of us by telling us he was going away to the Father, but he would be preparing a place for each of us, and he would come back and take us to be with him. We would have been more consoled *if* we had understood what he was talking about.

Thomas blurts out, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going; and how can we know the way?” Jesus reply? “I am the way, the truth, and the life: No one comes to the Father, except by me. If you had known me, you should have known my Father, too.” Rather than catching the insinuation that we had never really known Jesus, I triggered one of the most famous passages in the Bible by opening my mouth.

I said, “Lord, show us the Father and it is enough for us.” Jesus looked at me with a sad smile. In the softest voice, he said, “Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.”

I should have been embarrassed, but I was astounded. I got it. I finally got it. The Father was God. Jesus was God. They were the same! I got it! I got a glimpse of the truth! For the next twenty minutes, Jesus opened the flood gates of truth.

Jesus and the Father and the Spirit were all in each other. And we had the ability to be in them, too. Jesus was going away, but we were going to receive the Spirit and peace. Our heads

¹ John 1:43-48

² John 6:5-7

³ John 12:20-36

exploded. In a few sentences, mysteries... hidden for eons were revealed to us. How could we even begin to comprehend what Jesus was saying?

That dilemma was solved moments later. Jesus rose from the table, and told us to leave with him. After we left the room and started down the hill to the Kidron Valley, Jesus stopped...leaned down... picked up a branch from a grapevine by the path. And...he told us a story.

“I am the true vine and my Father is the vinekeeper. Every branch in me that doesn’t bear fruit, he takes away: and every branch that bears fruit gets pruned so that it bears more fruit. You are clean through the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. A branch can’t bear fruit by itself, it has to be attached to the vine. You can’t bear fruit unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. The one that abides is in me, and I in him, that’s the one who bears much fruit. For without me, you can do nothing!” Jesus kept talking, but ended the example with..., “By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you.”

We walked on to the Garden of Gethsemane, and Jesus continued to pour out his parting words of wisdom to us. Each sentence was worth an entire lifetime of study, but I could not get my mind off of the story of the vine and branches. For the next two thousand years, people would be interpreting it as best they could. Let me tell you how I thought of it that night.

In Israel during early September, you become accustomed to the sight of vineyards during harvest season. You see thick brown vines growing up about three or four feet from the ground. Each vine ends at a gnarl from which numerous branches grow along the different directions of the trellises. From the branches grow a lot of large leaves that vary from dark green to yellow, bright red even, depending on the exact time of the season. In fact, most of what you see is an abundance of leaves. Hidden among the leaves are clusters of dark purple or light green grapes hanging from the branches.

The branches not only bear fruit, but they bear leaves. Having the proper amount of leaves is critical to making the most and best fruit. The point of pruning and trimming is to end up with the right amount of branch that produces the right mixture of leaves to yield the right amount of fruit. The vinekeepers are never finished. Their lives are a continuum of planting, growing, pruning, and harvesting...planting, growing, pruning, and harvesting.

That night, I knew this story is all about God and his desires. God the Father is the vinekeeper, but he is also the creator and owner of the vineyard. So, it is only his desires that matter, and **his primary desire is to be glorified!** This premise is the basis for understanding the parable. The teaching is very clear that God is glorified when the branches bear much fruit and thereby prove themselves to be disciples.

Generally, we apostles knew that we glorified God by living a life of continual praise and worship, and by proclaiming and expanding his kingdom. This is exactly what Jesus did on Earth,

so at the end of his life he was able to tell the Father, “I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do.”⁴

The vinekeeper is responsible for the vine being the most fruitful by preparing the soil and the vines. He cuts off⁵ and burns branches that don’t bear fruit. A branch doesn’t bear fruit if it becomes disconnected from the vine, *or* if it is capable of bearing fruit, but chooses to be totally unproductive or to produce only leaves.

God trims and prunes fruitful branches from excess branch growth, twigs, and leaves so they will be even more fruitful. The pruning and trimming process will likely feel unpleasant to me and may possibly vary in the form of discipline that God provides because... he loves me. In my daily life, pruning and trimming probably require the elimination of activities, emotions, or thoughts which make me ineffective and unproductive.

Jesus said he is the true vine. However, it is critical to remember that just before telling the parable, Jesus had said that he, the Father, and the Holy Spirit, all are in each other. So, abiding in Jesus is equivalent to abiding in God.

The vine knows that it cannot be fruitful unless the branches are connected to it since it is the source of all important nutrients needed for life. Jesus had often talked about being the source of life, and that the connection came through belief in Him⁶.

Followers of Jesus are the branches. The purpose of each branch is to produce much fruit. In order to do that, the branch will have to optimize its input of nutrients from the vine, and optimize its output by properly allocating its resources between the two activities of making fruit and making leaves.

During this teaching, Jesus taught us that healthy branches trust God, know Jesus and the Father, have faith in Jesus, obey Jesus, have the Holy Spirit, love Jesus and are loved by Jesus and the Father, have peace, love each other, don’t belong to the world; and testify about Jesus to others.

If I am an unfruitful branch, God will either work in my life to help me become fruitful or will allow me to be cut off from the vine and destroyed. If I am a fruitful branch, God will prune me to make me more fruitful. Painful at first, these actions are necessary for my own benefit and for God’s glory.

⁴ John 17:4

⁵ Arden Autry, a Greek expert, says that “cut off” means “cut off.” However, the footnote in the NIV says “pruning” in 15:2 can also be translated as “cleaning”. I want to consider both meanings, but I tend to like “cleaning” better because that makes 15:3 make more sense.

⁶ e.g. John 6:29, 6:40

Abide means that the branches are connected in such a close way that they live inside the vine, and the vine lives inside them. Peter calls it, “participating in the divine nature”⁷. Paul phrases it as living by the Spirit and keeping in step with the Spirit.⁸ Jesus puts it simply, “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home⁹ with him.”¹⁰

My intimacy with Christ, my closeness to him, as with all relationships with God, is grace driven. His grace is not only the enabler of my salvation, but is the enabler for going deeper in my attachment to him, and for bearing fruit. It is His great love for me that disciplines me to remove shortcomings so that I can respond to His invitation to have a more intimate relationship and be further transformed into a Christ-like person who can demonstrate God’s love to the world. The path to this deeper intimacy is through a lifestyle of personal abandonment and absolute trust.¹¹

It is my option to abide in Jesus, but Jesus commands me to do so. Why? Because ***I cannot bear any fruit unless I abide in Him.***¹² By this He means that although I may produce some works, I can’t produce works or fruit of value. No fruit. Nada. None. Zip. Zero. I may think I am making fruit, but I am not unless I am abiding in Him. I am entirely useless and stand in danger of being destroyed.

We apostles had already heard a story from Jesus about people who thought they were being fruitful but were going to be destroyed because in reality they weren’t being fruitful¹³. It’s the secret sauce. Abiding is the “secret sauce” to making all good deeds fruitful. It is through abiding that I am transformed from “a worker who loves to a lover who works.”¹⁴

If abiding in Jesus is so important, how can I start doing a better job of doing that? Here are some things I’ve thought of: regularly praying and reading the Scriptures, forgiving anyone that I have not yet forgiven, and setting my heart and mind on heavenly things.

According to the parable, I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that I am abiding in Jesus if I am bearing much fruit. That is one reason why it is critical to be clear about the definition of “fruit.”

⁷ 2 Peter 1:4

⁸ Galatians 5:16, 25

⁹ Or “abode”. Abode is the noun and abide is the verb.

¹⁰ John 14:23

¹¹ This paragraph is taken from Page 78 of the Influencer’s “The Journey” participant manual

¹² Jesus was personally familiar with this concept. He said of Himself, “I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing.” (John 5:19) The apostle Paul reiterated the idea that sometimes I think I have something when I actually have nothing in 1 Cor. 13:1-3, “...and if I have a faith that can move mountains but have not love, I am nothing.”

¹³ Matthew 7:16-23

¹⁴ Bob Sorge, *Secrets of the Secret Place*

If I am mistaken about the definition of fruit, I may very likely expend many resources producing something that isn't fruit. Having a proper understanding of fruit is crucial to intentionally living a fruitful life.

According to the parable, fruit can be described as those things that cause God to be glorified. In the context of this parable, fruit seems primarily to mean the making of disciples by proclaiming and expanding of God's kingdom. As we apostles found, disciples are made through both sharing the Gospel and doing good works that bring glory to God.

You may have noticed that I have talked about leaves several times in this story, but Jesus did not mention them in the parable. I mention them because they are a critical aspect of how I apply this parable to my own life.

We did not understand the science of growing grapes, but we knew the practicalities of doing so. We knew you needed enough leaves on the branch to make good grapes, but not so many leaves that the grapes had too little nourishment. In my own life, the leaves stand for activities that consume my time and energy, but do not produce fruit for God. If I have too many outside activities, I cannot maximize the fruit I produce.

In my time, our outside activities were fairly limited because we were so poor. You are not so fortunate. You have an unlimited amount of diversions at your fingertips. Television, movies, sports, hobbies, computers, Internet, and a long list of other activities. Fatigue, overscheduling, sleep, drugs, alcohol. There is no doubt that you have to be dedicated to God to allocate your resources between making fruit or making leaves.

Jesus said, "This is to my Father's glory that you bear much fruit showing yourselves to be my disciples." Which will it be in your life...fruit, or leaves?

I am one of the few people mentioned in all four gospels. Even Jesus' father does not have that privilege, although we share the same name. I am Joseph of Arimathea, and I have the unusual distinction of being a minor Bible character of whom you know more about than almost every other person in the Gospels besides Jesus himself.

As Matthew tells you that I was very rich, came from Arimathea, was a disciple of Jesus, went to Pilate to get the body of Jesus, wrapped the body of Jesus in a linen cloth, laid Jesus' dead body in my own new tomb, and rolled a giant stone over the tomb's entrance.¹

Mark says I was a prominent member of the Council, I was waiting for the Kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body, and was given it. I took down the body, wrapped it in linen, placed it in a tomb, and rolled a stone over the entrance.²

Luke adds the information that I was good and upright, I had not consented to the decision and action to crucify Jesus, I came from Judea, and that the tomb was new.³

John completes my information by saying that I was a secret disciple of Jesus because I feared the Jewish leaders, that I was accompanied by Nicodemus when I prepared the body of Jesus, that he and I wrapped the body in spices in accordance with Jewish customs, and that the tomb was in a garden where Jesus had been crucified.⁴ John adds that we laid the body in the tomb on the day of Preparation.

I tell you all of this detail for a very specific reason. I am uniquely qualified to tell you about the last day of Jesus' life. When you hear my story, you will also guess where the writers of the Gospels got some of their detailed information.

I was born with a silver spoon in my mouth, the child of a wealthy Jewish merchant. When I was young, my family moved from Arimathea to a large house on Mount Zion, only a few hundred yards west of the Temple in Jerusalem. In fact, we could walk straight east from my house, cross the bridge you know as Wilson's Arch, and enter the Temple grounds our treasured,

¹ Matthew 27:57-59

² Mark 15:43-45

³ Luke 23:50-53

⁴ John 19:38-42

custom-made robes billowing...without having to mingle with poor people or be bothered by beggars.

My father was a Sadducee, as were many of the other wealthy Jewish leaders. We were very socially concerned, didn't believe in the resurrection, and not overly concerned with intricate theological arguments. Although we didn't believe in the resurrection, we did believe that the Messiah would restore Israel to its rightful powerful position among the countries of the world. We looked for a Messiah that would restore King David's earthly power... (wryly) although that power had not really existed for nearly a thousand years.

Since we were wealthy, I went to school and studied the Torah with other wealthy children. Sometimes, exceptionally bright children, such as Saul of Tarsus, joined our group, but mostly I knew rich people. Rich people came to our house for dinner, and my parents' friends were all powerful. Wealth was much more important to us than having perfect theology. We paid poor rabbis to be concerned about theology for us, just as some of you modern people pay your preachers to think about theology for you.

Almost a week before the death of Jesus, I learned that he and his disciples were in town. I rushed to go hear the famous teacher, and found that he was surrounded by people of all kinds. Naturally, I gravitated to stand by my friends, other rich, and very richly-attired, Jews. We looked like gaudy peacocks next to poorly-clad Jesus and his rag-tag disciples. We rich, religious Jewish leaders loved our robes.

The more Jesus taught, the more I believed. The more Jesus taught, the angrier my friends became. They grew louder, and I grew quieter. They asked him loaded questions, and he turned back every verbal challenge. The people loved watching Jesus take on the religious establishment, and I did, too. I so badly wanted to hear Jesus, and my robes kept me safe from suspicion. I wasn't paying attention to the storm that was brewing.

I started hearing rumors that one of Jesus' followers had taken a bribe to betray him to the Jewish leaders.⁵ It sounded so silly. Why would such powerful men be afraid of a homeless preacher?

On Thursday night, I celebrated Passover with my entire family. Like other rich people, we had a choice lamb, and used expensive cups and plates. I have to admit that while the service was going on, I didn't notice any difference in it and the many others I had attended in my life. My life was as normal as could be. Until about midnight, when nothing in my world would ever be the same.

There was a loud, crashing knock on my front door. I jumped out of bed, threw on the nearest robe. My servants and I arrived at the door at the same time. There were many of my friends holding torches. They shouted for me to get dressed and come with them. There was an

⁵ Matthew 26:14-16

emergency, and the Sanhedrin was going to meet. It must be quite an emergency, I thought. The Sanhedrin almost never met at night since their decisions had to be made during daylight.

We entered the Sanhedrin building, I understood the commotion. They were afraid of Jesus. They wanted to kill him because they were afraid of him. Nothing was going to stop that bloodthirsty mob. But they had no authority to kill him! That's the knowledge I consoled myself with anyway. They only had legal authority to beat him before letting him go. I settled in for a long trial, and that is what I got.

Witness after witness, their testimonies conflicted or were patently false, but they kept calling them. Out of frustration, the leaders called to take Jesus to Pilate and ask for a sentence of death. It was daybreak, almost everybody in the room voted yes, but not me. I was too cowardly to object, but I did not vote for it. I was sure that Pilate would see his innocence and let Jesus go. I knew Pilate from some of my business dealings, and I knew him to be a smart, honest man. He was so stubborn that he would never give in to the demands of the Jewish leaders.

The sun rose, we took Jesus before Pilate, and our leaders asked to have Pilate crucify him. He had the authority to kill Jesus, but they did not. Pilate was known to crucify people for a lot less reason than appeasing the Jews, but he still was an honorable man. Jesus was tried before Pilate, and I heard the precious words from Pilate. "I find no guilt in this man."

That should have been the end of it. Pilate should have given him a light beating and let Jesus go. But he could not withstand the threats and pressure from the Jewish Leaders, so he sent Jesus to Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee, for further examination hoping the whole mess would go away.

Herod Antipas tried to question Jesus, but Jesus just ignored his questions. Rather than be humiliated in front of everyone, Herod Antipas quickly sent him back to Pilate.

Pilate repeatedly tried to release Jesus, but the leaders' threats kept coming and coming. He had Jesus savagely beaten hoping to satisfy the Jewish leaders, but that just inflamed them more. If Pilate would not kill Jesus, they would cause a riot among the people and Pilate might lose his job. He gave in. Finally, Pilate gave in, he gave the order. Crucify Jesus.

I could not believe it. The hate from the Jewish leaders was enough to kill an innocent man. I had done nothing to stop the travesty, and it was too late now to do anything. The fate of Jesus was sealed. He was going to be crucified and would most assuredly die a gruesome death.

I was humiliated, and scared, for me and for my people. We weren't sending a guilty man to his death, and there were few things that made God angrier than the shedding of the blood of an innocent man...especially if that innocent man turned out to be the very Son of God. Like the prophets before me, I prayed for my people and for myself.

Some of the Jewish leaders followed Jesus to Golgotha where he would be murdered, but most of us went to our homes...Shamefully. There was every reason for God to end our lives that day. As the hours passed and the sky darkened, and an earthquake happened, I believed we were all going to die. And we deserved to. A messenger came to my house and told me that the massive curtain, 60 feet high, and thick (he will gesture to about 4-5") massive curtain in the Temple had been torn in half. From top to bottom. I knew that only God could have done such a thing! God had abandoned his Temple and would never return.

I could not stand it any longer. I rushed out of my house, followed by a few of my most dedicated servants. In less than fifteen minutes, I reached a horrific scene. Three men hanging on crosses. As usual, they were placed next to a major road where people could see them, eye-to-eye, jeer at them, and be reminded of the absolute power of Rome.

Jesus was barely recognizable, but he was the one in the middle. Above his head was Pilate's sarcastic sign, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews." There was a small crowd of women nearby, staring at Jesus. But unlike typical Jewish women, they were praying instead of wailing.

I rushed up, just as a Roman soldier jammed his spear in Jesus' side. Involuntarily, from somewhere deep within me, I don't know where, a scream emerged but I kept it in. I couldn't let something like that happen...with who I was, and what I represented. No. Then, I watched in morbid fascination as blood and water shot from the hole in his side.

1. (extended pause as Joseph whole demeanor makes a pivot, right in front of us as he relives the moment to the point of looking down as if he's looking at his robes. He looks back up, he's different.)

He didn't feel the spear. Jesus was already dead. With his death, my fear of who I was, and what I was becoming, and the difference between them died, too. Just vanished. I nodded to an officer who stood nearby, and instructed him to follow me to Pilate. He was afraid to abandon his post, but he was more afraid of a wild-eyed rich Jew with unknown intentions headed to see his boss.

On the way, I realized that both Pilate and the Jewish leaders had a big, big problem. What would they do with the body of Jesus? Romans typically left the bodies of the crucified to rot on the cross as a deterrent to future criminals. But Pilate would be ashamed to have that body stay in the public eye since he knew Jesus was innocent.

The Jewish leaders were obligated to have the body buried within twenty-four hours after death, but they wanted to disassociate themselves from Jesus' death and just have the whole matter go away quietly.

When my small entourage reached Pilate's garden, I just walked in. I guess Pilate's body guards thought the officer with me was under orders to report, plus they were familiar with me from my past dealings with Pilate. When I entered the room, Pilate just gave me a questioning look. I

said, "Please, give me the body of the innocent man." The officer confirmed that Jesus was dead, and Pilate gave his body to me. I'm sure Pilate was appreciative that I was removing a sign of his shameful action.

Back we went to Golgotha, where the officer instructed his soldiers to remove the dead Jesus from the cross. I was sickened by the thought of them ripping his hands and feet from the nails, so my servants and I removed him from the cross. I then sent one servant to fetch linen cloth, and other servants to buy burial spices and perfumes. They had only an hour to buy those things because sundown was approaching, and the burial had to happen soon.

My servants gone, I was in a quandary. What would I do next? There was a muffled cough behind me, I turned around. Nicodemus. It was my friend, Nicodemus, another secret follower of Jesus. I said, "My new tomb is over there. We will carry him."

The blood drops of Jesus stained our robes our expensive, pompous, (he searches for a word, he's overcome)...robes that now, would never be washed. We reached the opening of the tomb, my servants began to arrive. Nicodemus and I personally prepared the body with the spices, and then carefully wrapped it with linen strips. We placed the headpiece over his face and head, and laid him down. With one last look, we left the tomb. It took six of us to lever the stone in place over the tomb face, where we sealed it. It would take a dozen strong men to remove that stone, because I had designed it that way.

Nicodemus and I were ritually unclean because we had touched a dead body. We would not be able to celebrate Passover, but neither of us really cared. Jesus was dead, and our hopes and dreams were shattered. We were no longer secret followers of Jesus, and would likely lose our seats on the Sanhedrin and our places in high society, and may lose much of our wealth. Standing there in our blood-stained robes, they seemed like treasures that no longer had any value.

There were only women left late that afternoon. The afternoon that Jesus died. All of the other followers of Jesus were gone. The male followers. They were afraid of the Jewish leaders even though there was no obvious threat against them. We had followed Jesus from Galilee, and were not about to abandon him now.

There were several women there, including Jesus' mother and me. Mary Magdalene. I had followed Jesus faithfully since he had cast seven spirits out of me.

We were exhausted both mentally and physically. We only had a few hours' sleep the previous night, because the men woke us up after Jesus had been taken by the Jewish leaders. We stayed outside while Jesus was tried before the high priest, before the Sanhedrin, and before Pilate and Herod. We tried to quiet the crowds stirred up by the Jewish leaders, but our pleas had no effect. We were a devoted group. But a group of *women*. (her tone will convey)

We watched the bloodied Jesus carry his cross a short way before Simon of Cyrene had to help him. We followed as close as possible while the soldiers led him to Golgotha, laid him on the cross, and beat the nails into his hand and feet. Shudderingly, we clustered together, when the cross dropped into the hole in the ground.

We listened to the two thieves on the other crosses berate Jesus, though one later changed his ways. Earlier, Mary the mother of Jesus, got a new son, when Jesus entrusted her to John. He had come by. Briefly. We heard Jesus say a few things through his clenched teeth and heaving lungs, saw him get speared by the soldier. We watched his dead body get carried off by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. We followed them to the tomb, saw them place the body in the tomb, and waited until the stone was levered into place.¹ It was over.

We should have gone back into town to get ready to celebrate Passover. We women—we had to prepare, but Jewish rituals were abhorrent to us at this moment. Together, we sat in the darkness across from the tomb, and prayed. Unlike the disciples...the men, we were able to stay awake and pray.

Allow me to let you in on a little secret. During that whole ordeal, none of us, including Jesus' mother, wailed or cried like Jewish women typically did at the death of a loved one. We had full confidence that Jesus would make things right, as he had always done. We didn't know how or

¹ Matthew 27:61

when, but we knew he would. It's why we stayed, while the men abandoned Jesus. They did not yet have full faith in Jesus. We....had no other options.

The next day, Saturday, we rested and tried to celebrate the Passover as best we could. Against the rules of the Pharisees, I went around the city and gathered the things that would be needed to prepare the body of Jesus for final burial. It proved difficult because nobody wanted to work or sell things on the Sabbath, but I was very persuasive. I knew that Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus had done their best, but neither of them had ever prepared a body for burial. That type of work was typically reserved for women.

I heard that soldiers had arrived to further secure the tomb. The Jewish leaders were worried that the disciples would steal the body and claim Jesus was resurrected, so they convinced Pilate to make sure that didn't happen. He instructed them to take a guard, seal the tomb, and post soldiers to make sure nothing happened.

Before dawn, on Sunday, I gathered my things, and headed to the tomb with several other women.² We left quietly so as not to wake the other women. I didn't have a clue how to roll back the stone, but the Holy Spirit urged me to go anyway. We arrived just as light was breaking. I was sure nothing worse could happen than what had already happened. That's when the violent earthquake hit. Mary and I went to our knees.

We saw a streak of light, blinding light, and an angel. An angel appeared before the tomb.³ It was giant, and wore clothes as white as snow. With a flick of its finger, the stone in front of the tomb was rolled back. The guards at the tomb fainted! They were petrified with fear, it was like they were dead!!

The angel said to us, "Do not be afraid." We knew then that this was a true angel, because that's what they often say when meeting humans. "He is not here, he has risen, as he said. Come and see the place where the Lord lay." We stumbled into the tomb and saw the grave clothes laying there ... but no body! The tomb had no body in it!

The angel continued, "Go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead and is going to Galilee. There you will see him." If you ever talk to an angel, you will obey him immediately, just as we did. Stepping over the soldiers, we rushed to tell the disciples. The angel entrusted women to take the news of Jesus' resurrection! Can you believe it?

The soldiers had recovered sufficiently, while we went to the disciples, they went to the Jewish officials. The Jewish leaders bribed the soldiers to tell everyone that the disciples had stolen the body of Jesus. Nobody needed an eyewitness like me to tell them the untruth in that

² Matthew 28:1, Mark 16:1

³ Matthew 28

statement. The soldiers would have been executed if such a thing had happened, and everyone knew it. Their very lives were a testimony to the resurrection of Jesus.

We got to the disciples. They could not believe our news.⁴ Peter ran to the tomb to find out, but he was outrun by the younger John. John arrived, peeked in the cave and saw the grave clothes laying in a heap as if a body just dematerialized through them. Peter came panting up and rushed by John into the tomb. He not only saw the grave clothes on the ground, but saw the headpiece folded up. That is when he believed. No soldier would have taken the time to fold it.

Peter and John returned to the disciples and gave them the incredible news. The body of Jesus was gone!

What happened to me? I went back to the tomb to pray. As I stood outside praying and crying, I bent over to look in the tomb, and saw two angels seated where Jesus' body had been. They asked why I was crying. I was incredulous at their question. "They have taken my Lord away, and I don't know where they put him?"

There was a noise, I turned. It was the gardener. I asked him where he had put the body, if indeed he had moved it. Then, one word changed everything. One word announced a change in the entire course of history. That one word was...my name.

"Mary." It was Jesus! I rushed to hold him. I never wanted for him to leave me again. He told me not to hold on, but to go tell the others, which I did.

Jesus had indeed risen! Jesus was ALIVE!

I went back to tell all the others, including the women, but honestly, I did not really expect any of them to believe me. But...not long after that, Jesus appeared to Peter, and then to the rest of the apostles.⁵ He eventually appeared to over 500 believers.⁶ Like the teacher he always was, Jesus opened their eyes to the meaning of the Scriptures they had read their entire lives. He proved to them he was the Messiah.

Based on what you know about me, you can probably guess what I did next. I went back to Galilee with the rest of the disciples, and got to spend the next several weeks around them and the Lord Jesus.

Maybe you're wondering about something. The same thing I used to wonder about. Why did Jesus pick me, a woman, a woman formerly possessed with seven demons, to be the first person to know about his resurrection? Why me?

⁴ Luke 24:11

⁵ 1 Corinthians 15:5

⁶ 1 Corinthians 15:6

Consider this instead: Why has he chosen you to know about him? Why do you get to have a Bible and hear the Gospel story? Why do you get to see him through the lives of his followers? Why do you get to know the same thing that I know? He is alive! Jesus... is... alive!

Original Doubting Thomas. The One and Only. Probably about the only thing you know about me, except that I was an apostle. How I came by that nickname? We will talk about that in a moment.

In the *Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, I am only mentioned in the lists of the apostles. John calls me Thomas, also known as Didymus. Since Didymus means “twin,” you can infer that I was known to have a twin. John mentions me four other times, two before the resurrection, and two after.

The first time John mentions me is when Jesus was headed to bring back his friend, Lazarus, from the dead. I knew that it was the beginning of the end of Jesus’ career, and probably his life, because he was headed into the places controlled by his enemies, the Pharisees. In a show of bravery, I told the other apostles, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” And we did go with him.¹

The second time John mentions me is on the night of the Last Supper. Jesus told us that he was going away and that he would come back to get us. When Jesus ended that statement by saying we knew the place where he was going, I was mystified. I had no idea what he was talking about, where was he going? I blurted it out, “Lord, we **don’t** know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” Jesus replied with some of his most famous words, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me.”²

The third and fourth time John mentions me will become apparent as we go through the rest of my story. (pauses to shift the subject)

After he was resurrected, Jesus first appearance was to Mary Magdalene. Ironic? I guess he was rewarding her for her faithfulness, while we apostles had deserted him on the last night and day of his life. She had served him in his life and in his death. I was glad he gave her special recognition. I was also glad that he also appeared to the other women that had served him in the same way.³

¹ John 11:16

² John 14:5-6

³ Matthew 28:9-10, Mark 16:9-11, John 20:11-18

His next appearance was that same day on the road to Emmaus, where he talked with Cleopas and his companion. They were about seven miles from Jerusalem, when Jesus appeared, but they didn't recognize him even though he talked with them. Jesus told them all of the things about himself in the Old Testament. Then, boom, they knew who he was. They rushed back to Jerusalem to tell the apostles the good news.⁴

They arrived that evening, ten of the apostles had already heard the good news from Mary and the women. And, they knew that Jesus had also appeared to Peter.⁵ One apostle heard the news, he found another apostle, and they found another (he gives a "and so on" gesture.). Scattered and hidden, all of us, but now we apostles gathered together. Behind locked doors, of course, because we still were afraid of the Jewish leaders... All eleven remaining apostles. Except one. Me.

I had gone to hide with my twin and his family. They were staying on the Mount of Olives, and were preparing to go back home after Passover was finished. We were among the poor people so I wasn't worried the leaders would mistake my brother for me. Nobody knew where I was...(let's this sink in), I didn't hear the good news of Jesus' resurrection.

The apostles felt safe behind their locked doors. Nobody could get inside without them knowing it. Nobody. Except Jesus. He just appeared...and stood there...among them. Peter once walked on water, this time he nearly walked on air. Everyone was freaked out, scared out of their wits, they thought they saw a ghost.⁶

"Peace be with you." Jesus said, then he held out his hands and feet for them to see the nail holes. He showed them the gash in his side where he had been pierced with a sword. They were overjoyed. They could not believe it was their Lord, so he solved the problem like a good Jew. With food! He ate a piece of fish.

Later, Jesus blessed them again, and breathed the Holy Spirit on them. He said they had the power to forgive sins, or not to forgive them. And then...he left.

The apostles searched everywhere for me, finally they found me. They could not wait to share the news. But...I would have none of it. I told them that I would not believe that Jesus had risen from the dead unless I touched the holes in his hand and side. They understood my reticence to believe. They understood that the disappointment would be too much for me to take if they could not prove it to be true.

We stayed together, the apostles, for the next several days. Every night, in the same house, behind locked doors. Exactly one week after the Lord had risen, still behind the locked doors,

⁴ Mark 16:12-13, Luke 24:13-32

⁵ Luke 24:33-35, 1 Corinthians 15:5

⁶ Luke 24:36-43

praying to God, Jesus appeared among us just as he had the first time. Again, "Peace be with you," just as he had the first time. But this time, he walked over to me.

"Reach here with your finger, and feel my hands; and reach here with your hand, and thrust it into my side: and stop doubting, but believe." I went to my knees, "My Lord, and my God." Jesus said, "Because you have seen me, you have believed. Those who don't see me and believe, are blessed, too."

Now you know how I got my nickname, Doubting Thomas.

Shortly after this appearance, we disciples hurried to Galilee to the mountain where Jesus told us to go. We worshiped him, but some still doubted. I was not one of those doubters.

While we were in Galilee, we spent a lot of time away from Jesus. I don't know what all he was doing during this time period, but there were many times we were left alone. The third time we saw Jesus was on the lake below the mountain.

Peter was feeling down because he kept thinking about how he had denied Jesus on the night before he died. Peter decided to relieve his anxiety the same way men have always done...go fishing. Get in the middle of a lake and think about nothing for a while. Sounded like a good idea, so Nathaniel, James, John, two others and I agreed to go with him. Zebedee loaned us a boat, and away we went.

And like happens to many fishermen, we fished all night and caught nothing. Nothing. I know, I know, we went fishing just to get away, but we were still perturbed that we caught nothing. After all, Peter, James, and John had made their living fishing on that lake before they followed Jesus.

As we rowed toward shore, we saw a man standing on the edge there, dawn was just breaking and it was still too dark to recognize people on the shore. We heard, "Friends, didn't you catch any fish?" Peter was like "how does he know?, and wanted to curse at him like he would have in the old days. Instead, we just said, "No." "Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you'll find some."

Now, Peter was about to explode. Not only had he failed to catch fish, here some nobody on the shore was trying to tell him, an expert, how to catch fish. In the time it took him to decide to go ballistic or not, the nets hit the water on the right side of the boat. Nathaniel and I had thrown them. We weren't fishermen. We didn't know it was foolish to throw the nets one more time.

He snickered as the nets sank, but Peter's eyes bugged out when we could not haul the nets up because they were buckling from the overload of fish. Finally, John said...so quiet, "It is the Lord." Splash! I mean, not even a second later. It was Peter in the water frantically swimming to shore to see Jesus. Peter helped us drag in the nets, where there were 153 large fish.

Jesus had already built a charcoal fire. We cooked our breakfast and ate with him. (Thomas closes his eyes and gestures for us to wait) Imagine that, seven apostles and Jesus sitting around a campfire eating fresh fish, dawn breaking over the Sea of Galilee. I can still smell it, hear it, and the peace. I never wanted that moment to end. Especially the way it did.

“Simon, Son of John,” said Jesus looking at Peter and using his first name, “do you unconditionally love me with deep devotion much more than these things.”

Peter squirmed as he sat on a log, and we squirmed for him. “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you like a brother.”

“Feed my lambs...Simon, Son of John, do you unconditionally love me with deep devotion?”

Again, Peter squirmed like a little kid caught stealing a cookie. “Yes, Lord, you know I love you like a brother.”

“Take care of my sheep.....Simon, Son of John, do you love me like a brother.”

Busted. Peter knew he was busted. Jesus knew that Peter was not willing to commit himself wholeheartedly. But Jesus also knew that Peter soon would. .

“Lord, you know all things. I love you like a brother.

“Feed my sheep.” And with that, we all knew that Jesus had forgiven Peter for his three denials, and had reinstated him as the leader of our group.

Jesus did so many things during his life and resurrection that all the books of the world could not tell of them. John, and the other Gospel writers wrote down what they could, and it was enough that anyone who believes them, can believe and have life in his name.

During the forty days after his resurrection, Jesus appeared to over five hundred people, many of whom lived for decades afterward and were willing to tell anybody who would listen about Jesus.⁷ As Jesus taught me though, those who are witnesses for Jesus without seeing him are blessed, too. You. That’s you! You are blessed every time you are a witness for Jesus.

One of the last things Jesus said in Galilee...We were on the mountain where Jesus had told us to go. It was there that Jesus gave instructions to all Christians for all ages. “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you

⁷ 1 Corinthians 15:6

always, to the very end of the age.”⁸ There was never a clearer instruction to eyewitnesses. To you, the blessed who believe without having seen.

⁸ Matthew 28:16-20 (NIV)

I have a name, you just don't know it. God does. He called me by name to come meet him a little over two thousand years ago. Out of tens of millions of angels,¹ the Holy One called me to meet him. Called me, by name! Can you even begin to imagine how the thunder rumbled as the sound of my name reverberated through Heaven?

God told me that he had created me before he created the Earth,² and that he had been watching me just as he watched all the other angels. He told me that of all the angels, I had a special propensity to be thankful. I was dazed... God had noticed me, and certainly, all of the angels were as thankful as I was, weren't they? I was in God's presence every moment. How could it be any better than that?

He smiled as he watched my puzzled face, he told me that he had a special assignment for me. My mind raced. I knew he had sent other angels on special assignments in the past, but I always thought those were the Archangels and other angels of special merit. I was just an *ordinary* angel.

God told me that it was time to send Jesus to Earth, and that I was to be the messenger in charge of all things related to Jesus. I fell to my knees at the sound of that message. How could God send Jesus away from his presence? Why Earth? What could Jesus possibly need from me? How could Jesus be born? If I could have fainted from that news, I would have, but angels don't faint.

In heavenly terms, it was only moments later before the news circulated that Gabriel had been sent to earth to tell two people they were going to have a special baby. Zechariah and Elizabeth were informed that they were to have a son, and they were to name him John.³ This was a big deal because they were far past the age of having children. Nonetheless, Elizabeth and Zechariah were soon pregnant. God was always causing miraculous things to happen on Earth, so I didn't really take much notice other than being thankful that God is a God of Miracles.

A few more heavenly minutes passed and the heavens shook in a way that they never had before. Gabriel, a very special and powerful angel, left Heaven on a mission from God. I heard that Gabriel was sent to an ordinary Jewish girl to tell her that she was going to have a baby. It

¹ Psalm 103:20, Revelation 5:11

² Job 38:4-7

³ Luke 1:5-25

was a shock to her, to Mary, because she was a virgin. That night, the Holy Spirit came upon her, and she became pregnant. At that moment, I understood that my special task had started. I don't know how I knew, but I did.

Sure enough, I was soon on my way to Earth with my first message. It was nighttime when I arrived, so I delivered my message in a dream⁴ to a Jewish man named Joseph. I told him not to be worried about Mary being pregnant, because she conceived through the Holy Spirit. He should marry her and name the baby boy Jesus, because he would save his people from their sins.

Joseph had one special trait that qualified him to be the earthly father of Jesus. He obeyed God completely the first time, every time. He took Mary as his wife., Angels don't typically get anxious, but God gave me the grace to be a little bit that way while Mary was pregnant. I wasn't worried for her sake, but I was anxious to continue my special mission. I could hardly wait for what might come next.

Have you ever been in total darkness, like in a deep cave with no lights? Have you ever been in complete silence, like in a soundproof recording studio? If you have, you just have a tiny inkling of what we angels experienced. We were stunned –the entirety of Heaven went completely dark and completely silent. Then a flash of light brighter than the brightest star, and a sound louder than millions of angels shouting praise to God. It was the most joyful and at the same time, the saddest moment that Heaven had endured since the beginning of time. Jesus left Heaven. Jesus became a human on earth.⁵

Now on to my next mission. In the middle of the night, I appeared in the sky over the little town of Bethlehem, and announced the birth of Jesus to everyone who could hear it...a few lowly shepherds, in a field, taking care of their lambs that would soon be sacrificed in the Temple.⁶ "Don't fear," I said. We angels must appear terrifyingly powerful to humans.

I went on to tell the shepherds that I had joyful news for all humans. Jesus had just been born, and he would be a savior. I told them that they could find him in Bethlehem, lying in a manger wrapped in cloths. I suspect that if I hadn't been an angel they wouldn't have believed any kind of savior could be born in a manger. As I told them the message, millions of angels appeared in heaven praising God and announcing the Good News. Then, all of us went back to Heaven.

You probably know most of the rest of the birth story of Jesus. The shepherds went into town to see Jesus, they praised God and told people about their experience, eight days later, Mary and Joseph had Jesus circumcised. When it was time, they took Jesus to the Temple, and gave

⁴ Matthew 1:20-25

⁵ John 1:14

⁶ Luke 2:8-15

their sacrifice for a firstborn son. It was there that they met Simeon and Anna, who prophesied over Jesus.

Later, wise men showed up from the east and gave presents to Mary and Joseph. The men were from Babylon, the very place where the ancestors of Jesus had been exiled about six centuries before his birth. Babylon, the country that ended the earthly kingdom of David. These men most likely didn't know they were honoring the descendent of David.

My next mission was to tell Joseph that danger was imminent, and for safety, he should take Jesus and Mary to Egypt.⁷ At the time, Herod was king of the entire country, and no place in Israel would be safe. As always, Joseph didn't say anything...he just obeyed quickly and completely. In Egypt, they used the gifts of the wise men to live since Joseph could not get any work there.

My mission after that was simple. I went to Joseph to tell him that Herod was dead and it was time to return to Israel. Joseph obeyed and returned to Israel. Upon arrival, Joseph learned that Herod's evil son reigned over Bethlehem. In another dream, I told Joseph to move to Galilee, a much safer place. Joseph did so, and ended up in the small town of Nazareth.⁸

Under the guidance of Joseph and Mary, Jesus grew up well-loved and strong in body. He loved the Scriptures, and spent untold hours talking to God. Frankly, there wasn't much for me to do while Jesus grew up and became an adult. I'm not saying Nazareth was dull, but there wasn't much danger there for sure.

That brings me to my next trip to earth, but I can't call it a special mission. When Jesus started his ministry, he immediately went to the wilderness where he fasted for forty days and was tempted by Satan. He withstood the temptation, and then we angels were allowed to minister to him.⁹ And that is when I, and the other angels, got a specific command from God.

While Jesus was on Earth, we were not allowed to give him special treatment. He had to be a man in all respects, and we had to allow that to happen. I didn't like it, but I was thankful to have God who always knows the right thing to do. **In the last years, I have come to learn that I don't know all the facts or the plans he has made.**

For the next three Earth years, we angels watched Jesus minister to other humans. He preached, healed, did miracles. He trained others to imitate what he did. Maybe his biggest career accomplishment was to teach humans how much God loves them, how much he wants to be reconciled to them. As much as we angels admired Jesus, we could not visualize God's

⁷ Matthew 2:13-15

⁸ Matthew 19-23

⁹ Matthew 4:11, Mark 1:8

end game. How was he possibly going to bring salvation to people who neither wanted to be obedient nor behave like children of God? When would he bring Jesus back to Heaven?

And...then...I got a call for my next mission. Jesus' time on Earth was irrevocably coming to an end, and I was now allowed to give him special comfort. I arrived in the garden on the west side of the Mount of Olives. I looked around, saw olive trees and an olive press. I heard Jesus', "Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me." He was praying. "Not my will, but yours be done."¹⁰ He prayed so hard that his sweat was falling like giant drops of blood. His agony for all of mankind for all of time was almost more than he could bear. I strengthened him all that I could, but I cried for his agony all the while. When he had enough strength, he went back to his apostles and roused them from their sleep.

You know the rest of the story. Jesus was betrayed by Judas that night, he went through the unjust trials of the Jews and the Romans, was beaten, had nails hammered in his hands and feet before being lifted up on a cross, he died, and was buried. Satan, the Jewish leaders, the Romans, they thought the story of Jesus had ended

We were in total shock. Every angel in heaven, horrified. The God of the Universe had let some lowly human beings torture and kill his beloved son! God could have wiped out every human being on earth in the time of one of their heartbeats, but didn't. We almost began to question God. Was he sitting idly by as they killed his only son?! Jesus asked his father to forgive them because they didn't know what they were doing, and by not wiping them out, he did. He honored Jesus' request.

Later, I went on my most favorite mission. I arrived at the empty tomb of Jesus on Sunday morning before dawn. I knew the tomb was empty because Jesus had risen from the dead. I sat on top of the tomb. Looked to the left, and saw two women. I looked to the right and saw a guard of soldiers in front of the tomb. They had been placed there by the chief priests and Pharisees to make sure that Jesus' disciples did not steal his body.

For theatrical effect, I made the earth shake... an earthquake. After that, I appeared like a giant being flashing lightning and wearing blindingly white clothes. I reached over and rolled the stone from in front of the tomb as if it were a pebble. That was no small feat since the stone had been sealed to the tomb. The soldiers were paralyzed with fear¹¹. Wouldn't you have been.

And then I said what angels often say, "Don't be afraid." I was filled with joy, but **the women** were filled with fear and sorrow. I continued, "I know you are looking for the body of Jesus, but he isn't here. He is risen from the dead." I invited them to look at the empty tomb, and told them to go tell the disciples that he had risen from the dead and would meet them in Galilee. They turned and walked away in a stupor, but hadn't gone far before they actually met the

¹⁰ Luke 22:42-43

¹¹ Matthew 28:1-4

risen Lord Jesus. Guess what his first words were to them. Go ahead, guess. “Don’t be afraid!”¹² (she laughs) such a great line! Never gets old!

Over the next forty days, Jesus would appear to more than 500 disciples. At the end of that time, he gave some of them the directive to stay in Jerusalem until they received power when the Holy Spirit would come upon them. I noticed that those were the same words that Gabriel used with his announcement to Mary, the mother of Jesus! I no sooner¹³ heard those words than I got my final mission.

I traveled to the Mount of Olives in the time of a whisper. I watched as Jesus rose into the sky, and the disciples were standing as though paralyzed. I was still wearing the same white clothes that I wore on the day of Jesus’ resurrection. Joining with another angel, I said the last words that I would ever say on earth, “Galileans, why are you standing there just looking at Heaven? This Jesus, who just ascended into Heaven, will come back in the same way as you saw him go up into Heaven.”¹⁴ And with that announcement, the hope of his disciples will endure until the end of Earth time.

¹² Matthew 28:5-7

¹³ 1 Corinthians 15:6

¹⁴ Acts 1:8-11