

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE LIFE OF CHRIST

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HIGHLIGHTS OF THE LIFE OF CHRIST I

The Birth of Jesus

With this lesson we begin a series of nine studies on the life of Christ. Given the volume of material available to us in the Gospel accounts, we clearly cannot hope to cover the ministry of the Savior in any comprehensive way. British expositor G. Campbell Morgan once wrote a book called *The Crises of the Christ*, in which he dealt with seven events from the life of Jesus that he considered most critical to understanding the ministry of the Master. We will follow a similar procedure. The events I have chosen for our consideration are all in a sense “turning points” - incidents that in one way or another helped to give shape to the ministry for which Christ came into the world. In general, I have chosen events rather than sermons or parables. These events will be extremely familiar to most of those in the class. Consequently, we will be looking at these critical moments in the life of Jesus largely in terms of their contribution to His overall work. Each lesson will be divided into three segments: the historical context of the event, the description of the event, and the significance of the event. This week we will look at the Incarnation.

THE CONTEXT OF THE EVENT

The Apostle Paul tells us that God sent His Son into the world “in the fullness of time.” When Jesus was born in Bethlehem between 7 B.C. and 4 B.C. (the peculiarity of Christ being born about half a decade “before Christ” is due to a miscalculation by the medieval monk Dionysius Exiguus, who first introduced the system of dating based on the birth of Christ; prior to this, years had been enumerated from the founding of the city of Rome), it was the right time in many ways.

First of all, it was the right time prophetically. God had promised in the Old Testament that He would send a Deliverer to rescue His people. Micah 5:2 indicated the place, Daniel 9 indicated the time (it is not necessary to accept the complex calculations of Sir Robert Anderson, who in his book *The Coming Prince* attempted to show that the prophecy of the seventy sevens in Daniel 9 worked out to a fulfillment on the very day of Jesus’ Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem, in order to recognize the temporal significance of Daniel’s prophecy), Isaiah 7:14 indicated the manner (though surely no one in Jesus’ day would have understood Isaiah’s prophecy in the way it was interpreted by the Holy Spirit through Matthew), and Isaiah 9:6-7 indicated the purpose.

The time was right in terms of popular expectation. Despite the fact that the Jews did not understand the significance of many of the Old Testament prophecies as they were later unfolded by divine inspiration in the writings of the New Testament, the Jews of Jesus’ day were looking for a Messiah. When the angel appeared to Mary to announce that she would be the mother of the Messiah, she was not surprised that such a thing should happen - it was the mechanics of the matter that had her confused. When Herod asked the scribes where the Messiah should be born, they had the information at their fingertips. Devout Jews like Simeon and Anna spent their lives in fervent expectation of the Savior’s arrival. Even a religiously ignorant person like the Samaritan woman knew the story of the Messiah who would come and deliver Israel. In fact, the first century produced numerous pretenders to the messianic title, some of whom are enumerated by Gamaliel in Acts 5:36-37.

Not only were the Jews looking for the promised Deliverer, but the pagans of the Roman world were becoming disillusioned with the traditional gods and goddesses who were worshiped in temples in every city and town of the Empire. These immoral, licentious deities were no better than their worshipers. The religiously sensitive among the pagans sought something better. Many turned to Judaism and its elevated monotheism as an alternative superior to the orgies of the pagan gods. Though they generally frowned on the shameful rite of circumcision, choosing to stay on the fringes of Jewish life as “God-fearers,” they provided a ready-made audience for the message of salvation spread by the apostles.

Thirdly, the time was right as far as the political conditions were concerned. Rome had united the Mediterranean world under its control, including the conquest of Palestine by the Roman general Pompey in 63 B.C. With Roman rule came the almost universal acceptance of the Greek language and culture, which had already been spread throughout the region by the conquests of Alexander the Great three centuries before Christ. The ease and rapidity with which Christianity spread in the years following the death of Christ may be credited at least partially to the unifying force of the Roman Empire, with its ease of travel, its network of roads, and its common language and culture. God in His providence had paved the way for the coming of His Son.

THE DESCRIPTION OF THE EVENT

The actual incident of the birth of Christ is so familiar to your class that it is hardly necessary to go over it. Instead, focus on the instances of supernatural intervention mentioned in the Gospel accounts. Have the members of the class go through the first two chapters of Matthew and the first two chapters of Luke and list all the examples of supernatural activity they can find (for the sake of time, dividing them up into groups and assigning a chapter to each group might be helpful). Nowhere in all of Scripture do we find such a concentration of angelic activity as in these chapters. Why is this the case? Give your students a chance to speculate on this for a few minutes. Hopefully, someone in the class will recognize that such frequent divine intervention clearly demonstrates God’s sovereignty at the very beginning of Christ’s work of salvation. Not only does the Son of God enter the world at God’s initiative, but we also find that God places His Son in the right circumstances and preserves His Son from Satanic attack through the use of supernatural means.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE EVENT

The birth of Christ is not something that was given a great deal of emphasis - not in Jesus’ lifetime, not in the New Testament in general, and not in the early history of the Church. During Jesus’ ministry, most people were unaware of the fact that He had been born in Bethlehem. Both His followers and His enemies assumed He was from Nazareth. After Jesus’ death, the apostles said little about the circumstances of His birth, focusing instead on the theological truth of the Incarnation when they discussed it at all. Even the Early Church paid very little attention to the birth of Christ. Christmas was not recognized as a formal church celebration until the fourth century, and even then the date was chosen in order to combat popular pagan festivals into which numerous new Christians were being drawn by the surrounding culture. What, then, should we see as the significance of the birth of Jesus?

First of all, the New Testament tells us that the Incarnation, as the beginning of Christ's earthly ministry, is God the Son's act of obedience to God the Father. In Philippians 2:5-11, Paul speaks of Jesus humbling Himself in order to become man. Consequently, the first lesson we are intended to learn from the birth of Christ is one of other-centered humility - after all, this is the lesson Paul draws from it in Philippians 2. The circumstances of Jesus' birth - to a poor couple in humble surroundings under adverse conditions - further serve to demonstrate the same point.

Secondly, the birth of Christ pictures for us the sovereignty of God in salvation. While the Bible never tells us specifically why God chose to use the Virgin Birth as the means for bringing His Son into the world, we may safely conclude that such a birth, which involved no human initiative, teaches us that salvation, from beginning to end, is a divine work to which we can contribute nothing.

Thirdly, the circumstances of the birth of Christ illustrate the universality of God's saving purpose. When God sent His messengers to broadcast the news of the birth of His Son, to whom did they go? We don't find them in the palaces of rulers or in the Temple or the synagogues. Instead, the angels appear to despised shepherds, while God sends a star to enlighten a group of pagan astrologers. No two groups of people could picture more clearly the universality of God's intention for delivering mankind. The message went to the rich and the poor, to those who were near and to those who were far away, to Jews and Gentiles, to the respected and the despised, to the learned and the ignorant, to those who knew God's Word and those who had probably never heard it before. Thus from the beginning of Jesus' earthly life, God made it clear that His intention was to reach out to all kinds of people and distribute His grace to the ends of the earth.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE LIFE OF CHRIST II

The Baptism of Jesus

The baptism of Jesus is recorded in all three of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-23) and alluded to in John 1:32-34. Matthew's account, because it is the longest, is the one most frequently cited.

THE CONTEXT OF THE EVENT

Jesus was baptized at the beginning of His public ministry (though scholars differ in their approaches to the chronology of the life of Jesus, most would place His baptism between 26 and 29 A.D.). Luke tells us that Jesus at this time was "about thirty years old" (Luke 3:23). If Jesus was born in 4 B.C. (see last week's lesson) and baptized in 26 A.D., He would have been 29 at the time of His baptism (there was no year 0); if His birth occurred in the year 6 B.C. and His baptism in the year 29 A.D. (a chronology which I personally favor, though it is hardly of earth-shaking significance), He would have been 34.

All four Gospels place the baptism of Jesus within the context of the preaching ministry of John the Baptist. This is true, not only because John was the one who baptized Jesus, but also because the ministry of John was intended to prepare the way for the ministry of Jesus Himself. Two key phrases neatly summarize the preaching of John the Baptist - "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand" and "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." John was sent to reveal man's sin and God's provision for that sin.

Part of John's work of revealing men's sin was the rite of baptism. Ritual cleansings had been part of Jewish practice for many centuries. Priests needed to wash before serving in the Temple. Ceremonial vessels needed to be cleansed before they could be used for sanctified purposes. Even the furniture and buildings of the Temple required ceremonial purification before they could be used in the service of God. During the Intertestamental Period, a group of strict Jews known as the Essenes (the probable authors of the Dead Sea Scrolls) practiced a form of ritual cleansing at their monastery in the desert. When the site of Qumran was excavated, a baptismal pool was found on the premises. Thus what John was doing was really nothing new. Jews were used to the idea of ritual purification.

THE DESCRIPTION OF THE EVENT

The Gospels tell us nothing of what Jesus did between His birth and His baptism with the exception of the account of His visit to the Temple at the age of twelve found in Luke 2. Any modern biographer would be interested in the formative years of the person about whom he is writing, but the Gospels leave us completely in the dark about Jesus' life prior to His public ministry. The reason for this is that the Gospels are not biographies. Instead, they are intended to elicit faith in the One whose ministry is described in them (John 20:31). Anything that is not germane to Christ's work of salvation is thus omitted from the consideration of the Gospel writers.

Thus, Jesus simply appears on the scene and asks to be baptized by John (they probably had been acquainted prior to this, since their mothers were distant relatives). In Matthew 3:13-17, we

find that John tries to talk Jesus out of being baptized, but Jesus insists. Undoubtedly the Holy Spirit had communicated to John that Jesus was the Messiah whose coming he was to announce, and John clearly thought it inappropriate to perform a ritual of purification on one whose holiness clearly superseded his own. John agreed to go through with it, and after Jesus came up out of the water, the Holy Spirit descended upon Him from heaven in the form of a dove, and God the Father verbally gave His approval of Jesus and the work upon which He was about to embark.

There is some question as to the nature of the dove and the voice at the baptism of Jesus. While John 1:32-34 indicates that John the Baptist saw the dove and heard the voice, there are other instances in the Gospels where those present could not discern what was being spoken from heaven (John 12:27-29). It is therefore at least possible that the dove and voice were visible and audible to John and Jesus alone. While the heavenly confirmation of Jesus' identity served to reassure John and undergird Jesus for the work ahead, the crowd does not seem to have responded in any noticeable way. Though some of John's disciples went and followed Jesus, they did so because John told them to do it, not because of the evidence of the baptism.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE EVENT

In discerning the significance of the baptism of Jesus, we really have very little to go on. The only interpretation of the event found in the text of Scripture is Jesus' comment in Matthew 3:15 that His baptism was necessary to "fulfill all righteousness." What could this possibly mean? [At this point, give the class a chance to respond. You might get some good ideas from them, and you will certainly get responses that you can organize in terms of the material presented below.]

The baptism of Jesus was significant in two areas, both relating directly to His public ministry. These areas are *inauguration* and *identification*. As mentioned previously, anything or anyone entering God's service needed to be purified. This included priests, prophets, kings, vessels, and buildings. Though Jesus, being sinless, did not really *need* purification, a purification ceremony was appropriate to "fulfill all righteousness" in the sense that one who was about to enter a life of service to God was expected to go through a ritual cleansing first. Thus, Jesus' baptism served to inaugurate Him to His public ministry. [This is an area where you can make a decision based on the available time. If you have enough time, take a few minutes to ask the class how Jesus fulfills the roles of prophet, priest, and king - the theocratic offices that required ritual purification. If it looks like time is running short, skip this part.]

After Jesus was baptized, John pointed Him out to his disciples and called Him the Lamb of God. In the Old Testament, the lamb was an animal offered in sacrifice, taking the place of the Israelites who should have died when the Angel of Death passed over Egypt. We know that Jesus came into the world to take the place of sinners through His atoning death on the cross. In order to do this, it was necessary for Him to *identify* with those for whom He died. He became man in order to die for human beings. This does not mean that He became a sinner, of course, but it does mean that he came to experience the consequences of being a sinner, beginning with the limitations of a human body, continuing with baptism for repentance, including the experience of temptation (our subject next week), and culminating with the suffering and death of the cross. Thus another way in which Jesus' baptism "fulfilled all righteousness" is that it enabled Him to identify with the sinful human beings for whom He came to give His life.

While the baptism marked the beginning of Jesus' public ministry and assured Jesus of His Father's support for the work He came to do, it encourages us also by showing us the extent to which He identified with us in our weakness. Our response should be that of John the Baptist, who went out and proclaimed to others that they needed to repent, for the Kingdom of God was at hand, and pointed them to the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE LIFE OF CHRIST III

The Temptation

The forty-day period during which Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness is a very familiar, yet often misunderstood, turning point in the earthly ministry of the Messiah. Unlike the birth and baptism, from which Scripture draws no explicit application, the temptation of Jesus is pictured in the New Testament as a source of comfort and encouragement to believers.

THE CONTEXT OF THE EVENT

The temptation is mentioned in the three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew 4:1-11; Mark 1:12-13; Luke 4:1-13), though Mark gives no details about the incident. All three Gospels indicate that the temptation took place immediately after Jesus' baptism. Having noted this, ask the members of the class when they are most vulnerable to temptation - when life seems to be going smoothly, or when they are experiencing suffering and everything is falling apart. The immediate response is usually that temptation is the most difficult to resist during times of trouble. In fact, the Bible indicates that such times of trouble are in themselves evidence of God's testing. Yet the true believer is invariably drawn toward God in such troubling times; in fact, this is one of the purposes for which God introduces them into our lives.

Upon further reflection, the members of the class should be able to recognize that we are most vulnerable to the darts of the Evil One when we are "on top of the world," for it is then that we tend to forget God and delude ourselves into thinking that we can handle things on our own. It is no surprise, then, that Satan strikes when Jesus is most vulnerable - not in the hours before the Cross (Have you ever noticed that Satan's attacks near the end of Jesus' life come through other people rather than in a more direct fashion?), but immediately following the first spiritual "mountaintop" experience of Jesus' ministry.

Another question that the class should consider before looking at the temptation itself is the matter of what Satan was trying to accomplish. The first thing to note here is that Satan was trying to do what he had been trying to do throughout Scripture - subvert God's plan of salvation. Remind your students of the variety of ways in which Satan had attempted to destroy God's plan in the Old Testament by corrupting the human race (first in the Garden of Eden, later in the time of Noah) and polluting the Messianic line (How many times was God on the verge of destroying Israel because of their idolatry?). Note his effort to destroy Jesus before He reached maturity (Herod the Great and the slaughter of the babies of Bethlehem). Having failed to keep the Messiah from coming into the world and reaching maturity, Satan now sought to ruin His ministry by turning Him away from God's chosen means of salvation, the Cross.

How could Satan be foolish enough to think that he could actually deflect the Son of God from His purpose? Didn't he know who Jesus was? Of course he did. Remember that Satan was the angel whose arrogance led him to believe that he could actually dethrone God Himself and take His place as sovereign ruler of the universe! Pride is deceitful, and the great Deceiver could never have become what he now is unless he first deceived himself.

THE DESCRIPTION OF THE EVENT

In order to understand what was happening during this important incident in Jesus' ministry, we should start by taking a look at Luke 4:2. Here Luke tells us that Satan was tempting Jesus throughout the forty-day period in question. People often have the idea that Jesus fasted for forty days in preparation for the temptation, then faced three challenges in a relatively short period of time. This was not the case. Satan pounded on Jesus for over a month, trying to wear Him down as His resistance lessened. The Devil must have presented a variety of temptations repeatedly, trying to undermine the saving purpose of God (note that this explains why Matthew and Luke list the temptations in a different order; if the temptations were repeated and varied, the order is insignificant). Anyone who has read C.S. Lewis' science fiction novel *Perelandra*, which gives a fictionalized account of the temptation in the Garden of Eden, will have a clearer picture of the cumulative effect of such temptation. Consequently, we should view the temptations given by Matthew and Luke as examples rather than exhaustive descriptions.

Begin consideration of the temptations themselves by asking the members of the class to give the purpose behind each temptation. Though the Bible does not give an explicit answer to this question, we may nonetheless discern what Satan may have been trying to accomplish. In tempting Jesus to turn stones into bread, the Devil was probably trying to get Jesus to misuse His powers. The miracles of Jesus were performed in order to authenticate the message He spoke and to demonstrate His identity as the Son of God. His miraculous powers were not intended to be used for self-gratification. Unlike many religious leaders who have succumbed to the temptation to use what eventually became almost absolute power for their own benefit (men as varied as Solomon, Muhammad, and Joseph Smith gave free reign to their lusts by accumulating multiple spouses, then rationalized it to their skeptical followers, often in religious terms), Jesus flatly refused to use His powers to benefit Himself.

The temptation to jump off the watchtower at the corner of the Temple grounds was essentially an attempt to get Jesus to use worldly means to accomplish godly ends. In essence, Satan was telling Jesus, "You want followers? I'll get you followers! What you need is a good agent. Imagine what the crowds in the Temple would say if you suddenly dove off the top of the tower and, just before you hit the ground, angels caught you and lowered you safely to earth. Your ministry would be off the ground and running with a bang!" Of course, Jesus didn't simply want to attract followers. His later ministry demonstrated that He wanted only those who had been called by God; He actively discouraged the large crowds who were following Him simply because they wanted to see miracles, receive healing, or get fed. Unfortunately, too many of those who claim to speak for Jesus have missed this point and act as if any method that causes people to respond to the message, however shallow or transitory that response may be, is of necessity good. Jesus called such disregard for God's ordained means "putting God to the test." Those who try to God's work in a way that God Himself has not ordained are presuming upon God's providence, much like someone who walks across a busy street wearing a blindfold.

The third temptation represents Satan's most direct attack on the ministry of Christ. By showing Him the kingdoms of the world and offering to give them to Him if He would bow down and worship, Satan tempted Jesus to bypass the Cross. As usual, of course, Satan promised something he was incapable of delivering. While he offers and can provide temporary earthly

pleasures, these pleasures turn out to be hollow and short-lived. There can be no glory without suffering, and no salvation without payment for sin. Had Jesus accepted the false glory offered by Satan, His people would have been lost in sin forever.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE EVENT

The temptation of Jesus has many levels of practical application. You probably will not have time to deal with all of them, so use those that seem to you most appropriate.

The first and simplest application comes from noting that Jesus always responded to Satan by quoting the Word of God. When the Psalmist wrote about hiding God's Word in his heart in order to avoid sin (Psalm 119:11), he realized that knowledge of the Scriptures can be a powerful weapon against temptation. The Holy Spirit is able to bring to the mind of the child of God only what is lodged in that mind to begin with. Those who know the Scriptures well are thus better equipped to fight temptation than those who know little.

Secondly, the triumph of Christ over Satan may readily be compared with the failure of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and the temptations faced by Christians every day. Satan's tricks never really change. Genesis 3:6 tells us that Eve was tempted by the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil because it "was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom." In I John 2:16, John tells us that the temptations facing us include "the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does." Jesus overcame the same temptations to which Eve succumbed - the temptation to gratify personal lusts, the temptation to try something that looks new or exciting, and the temptation to fulfill human pride by elevating oneself to a higher level. We face the same temptations.

The third area of application is related to the second. What are we to make of the fact that we face the same temptations overcome by Jesus? Is the temptation narrative intended to encourage us by letting us know that, if Jesus defeated Satan, we can do the same? Is it primarily the example of Christ that we are intended to see here? Quite the opposite is the case. We are intended to learn, not from the example of Christ, but from the example of Eve. We share the same flesh that led her into sin, and we are no more capable of resisting Satan's temptations than she was. The fact that Jesus conquered Satan is not supposed to encourage us to do the same, but rather to help us recognize that it is only through the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit who lives within the Christian that we can hope to overcome the temptations we face in daily life. We cannot conquer Satan; only Jesus can defeat such a powerful enemy. But because He has promised to be with His people always, we know that we can turn to Him in time of need and find strength in Him to overcome whatever temptation we may be facing (I Corinthians 10:13).

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE LIFE OF CHRIST IV

Jesus' First Miracle

In the last fifty years, people have made many trips beyond the earth's atmosphere into space. A number of incidents stand out in the memory of those who lived through the era of the space race - the orbital flight of John Glenn, Neil Armstrong's gigantic "step for mankind" onto the surface of the moon, the tragedy of the Challenger shuttle - but more than anything else, I remember being part of a group of seventh graders sitting around a small television on the stage of the school cafeteria and watching Alan Shepard blast off from Cape Canaveral for his brief adventure as the first American in space, a mere 23 days after Russian cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin had done the same.

There is always something special about the first time something happens. This week, we will be studying an important "first" in the ministry of Jesus - His first miracle.

THE CONTEXT OF THE EVENT

Jesus' first miracle probably occurred some months after His baptism and temptation. In the interim, He met some of the men who were later to become His disciples - Philip, Nathanael, Andrew, Peter, and possibly John (could he have been the other disciple of John the Baptist who was told to follow Jesus in John 1:35-39?). They began to follow Him at this point, but obviously not on a regular basis (the incident with Peter, Andrew, James and John beside the Sea of Galilee in Luke 5:1-11 was still over a year in the future). Not until almost two years after this first meeting did Jesus formally appoint His twelve disciples.

Thus, when Jesus appears in Cana to attend the marriage of a friend (the Mormon claim that this was Jesus' own wedding is sheer nonsense, completely insupportable from the text), the "disciples" who are with him are those four or five He met in Judea - in all likelihood, they were traveling with Him to Galilee to return to their own homes (John 1 tells us they were all from the town of Bethsaida, while Jesus at this time made His home in Nazareth).

THE DESCRIPTION OF THE EVENT

Weddings in first-century Israel were often lengthy and raucous affairs. They began when the groom and his attendants arrived at the home of the bride (in those days, they thought it was fun to arrive at the most awkward moment possible, preferably in the middle of the night - see the parable of the Ten Virgins in Matthew 25). The couple and their attendants would then weave through town in festive procession until they arrived at the home of the groom, where the wedding would take place. The ceremony would then be followed by feasting, which would end only when the food and drink ran out.

Judging by the role played by Mary in this particular wedding - she seems to have felt free to approach Jesus when a problem arose, then order the servants around - the wedding described in John 2:1-11 must have been that of a close friend of the family. The wine shortage was a problem indeed, for lack of appropriate refreshments would have been a serious breach of hospitality and would have embarrassed the groom on his wedding day.

Mary at this point steps in and asks Jesus for help. Her faith is commendable; she was confident that Jesus could do something to remedy the problem, despite the fact that He had not up to this point performed miracles of any kind (this passage clearly marks as fictitious the childhood miracles recorded in the pseudepigraphal gospels of the second and third centuries). Jesus' response to His mother's request has been a source of puzzlement to scholars for many years. [It is worth noting that the NIV translation conveys the sense of Jesus' words much more effectively than the harsh-sounding language of the KJV; too much scholarly verbiage in past years has been expended trying to explain that Jesus wasn't *really* being disrespectful to His mother.] Why did Jesus object to becoming involved in this situation, and what did it have to do with the fact that His "time" had not yet come? Several things can help us understand what is going on here.

First of all, when Jesus talks about His "time," He is referring to the time of His death (cf. John 17:1). Whatever His reason for not wanting to get involved in the problem of the wine shortage, it had to do with His death.

Secondly, we must understand the purposes of Jesus' miracles. While the fact that His miracles are called "signs" makes it clear that they were intended to reveal His identity and authenticate His message, we must also remember that they were acts of compassion designed to meet specific needs on behalf of specific people. Thus we find that Jesus often tells those for whom He performs miracles to keep quiet about what He has done for them. This is particularly the case in the early part of His public ministry. Obviously, He wants to meet their needs, but at the same time is not ready to declare His identity openly before the general public.

Why should He be reluctant to reveal who He is? We must remember that Jesus' works, just like His words, cut two ways. Like the double-edged sword of Scripture, they elicited faith in those who were chosen by God, while bringing unbelief, hardening, and further opposition from those who were not among the elect. Consequently, increased visibility produced increased opposition. Jesus knew from the very beginning of His ministry that He would eventually go to the Cross. His death would be brought about by the very opposition stirred up by His words and His miracles. Because Jesus knew that it was not yet time for His death, He worked very hard in the early stages of His public ministry to avoid drawing attention to Himself - especially to His miracles.

Thus, when Jesus agrees to help His friend avoid embarrassment, He carries things out in a way that draws as little attention to Himself as possible. The only people who knew what happened were Mary, the servants who drew the wine that had been water, and Jesus' little band of disciples. It is worth noting that the miracle indeed had the intended results - the groom's need of the moment was met, the faith of Jesus' followers was increased, and Jesus escaped without undue attention being drawn to Him.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE EVENT

Miracles must be viewed as means rather than as ends in themselves. Those who foolishly focused their attention on the miracles rather than the message found themselves the objects of divine wrath (Matthew 7:21-23; John 6:26-35). When Christians read accounts of Jesus' miracles, such as the one here where He turned the water into wine, we should not center our thoughts on the

miracle performed by our Lord. Instead, we should concentrate on Jesus Himself. The miracle was intended to draw His followers closer to Himself.

A Christian who is facing a problem may legitimately pray for deliverance from the uncomfortable circumstances in which he finds himself, but if that is the full extent of his prayer, he will gain no more than the relief experienced by the hapless bridegroom in the story. The groom may have escaped from the tight spot his own lack of foresight had gotten him into, but the text does not indicate that he knew Jesus any better after the incident than he had before. Miracles are intended to increase our faith and draw us closer to Christ, not just get us out of difficult or painful circumstances. When you pray in times of trouble, what are you really looking for - escape, or a deeper relationship with the Savior?

[NOTE: It is not really worth getting into a discussion of the nature of the wine produced by Jesus in this story. When He is accused by the Pharisees of being a drunkard (Matthew 11:19), the same word is used. They hardly would have reproached Him for immoderate consumption of grape juice.]

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE LIFE OF CHRIST V

Choosing the Disciples

Because Jesus' earthly ministry was so short, the choosing of the twelve disciples was a critical event in that ministry. After all, it was the disciples who were to have the responsibility of carrying on Jesus' ministry after His death and resurrection.

THE CONTEXT OF THE EVENT

Most Christians have the wrong idea about how, and especially when, Jesus chose His disciples. We saw last week that Jesus met several of the men who were later to become His disciples shortly after His baptism and temptation. These men included Andrew, Peter, Philip, Nathanael, and probably John (John 1:35-51). While these future disciples followed Jesus sporadically in the year that followed (disciples are said to be with Him when He travels through Samaria in John 4, but none are mentioned in connection with the visit to Nazareth in Luke 4, for instance), we find them, almost a year and a half after they first met Jesus, still carrying on a thriving fishing business (Luke 5:1-11). At this point, Jesus calls Peter, Andrew, James, and John to leave their nets and follow Him. Shortly thereafter, Matthew is added to their company (Luke 5:27-39). Particularly in the early chapters of the Gospels, the term "disciples" is used amorphously, referring to all those who follow Jesus - both the ones who will eventually make up the Twelve and those false followers who will turn their backs on the Messiah when the price of discipleship becomes too high for them to pay.

Several months later, Jesus formally appoints the twelve who will thereafter be known as His disciples (Mark 3:13-19; Luke 6:12-16). By this time, Jesus has reached almost the exact midpoint of His earthly ministry. Why did Jesus wait so long before appointing His disciples? [This might be a good question to open up to the class.] If Jesus' earthly ministry lasted three and a half years (the generally accepted figure), why did He wait twenty-one months before choosing the Twelve? In fact, we must view these twenty-one months as Jesus' "talent search" period. Obviously, as the sovereign Lord, He not only knew whom He was going to call, but through His call was able to change the hearts of those who were His. Yet, in the same way that God uses circumstances and experiences to bring people to Himself today, so Jesus used His encounters with these men to prepare them to receive and respond to His call.

As we will see next week, if the first half of Jesus' ministry involved preparing those who were to be His disciples to follow Him, the second half involved preparing them to carry on His work after His death. This second half can itself be divided into two halves, during the first of which Jesus taught His disciples primarily by example (through His work with the multitudes), then turned to concentrate on specific instruction of the Twelve during His final months on earth.

If the formal appointment of the Twelve initiates this period of instruction, it should come as no surprise to us that the first recorded incident following the choosing of the Twelve is the preaching of the Sermon on the Mount (Luke 6:17-49; Matthew's longer version in Matthew 5-7 is probably another example of Matthew's widely recognized tendency to group his material topically rather than chronologically). As soon as Jesus chooses the twelve men who are to be His special companions, He speaks to them about the nature of life in the Kingdom of God (the opening verses

of Matthew 5 note that, despite the crowds who had gathered around, Jesus spoke the words of this sermon primarily to His disciples). No one could ever accuse Jesus of fostering “easy-believism.”

THE DESCRIPTION OF THE EVENT

In this case, there really isn't much of an “event” to describe. Mark and Luke simply give us lists of the men chosen by Jesus to follow Him throughout the remainder of His public ministry. Yet we should be able to note certain things about these lists that can be instructive for us.

First of all, the lists are different. Given the penchant in those days for applying a variety of names to the same person - family names, Hebrew names, Greek names, nicknames, names related to occupation or place of birth - this shouldn't be terribly surprising. The disciple whose name was Simon was nicknamed Peter (“Rocky”) by Jesus, and is known elsewhere by the Aramaic version of the same nickname (Cephas). Most conflicts occur among the lesser-known disciples, however. From the early years of the Church, the conflicts have been worked out by identifying the following names as belonging to the same people: Matthew was also known as Levi (Greek and Hebrew names); Thomas was also known as Didymus (the latter, meaning “twin,” was clearly a nickname); Bartholomew was also known as Nathanael; Thaddaeus was also known as Lebbaeus or Judas (not Iscariot); Simon was known as the Zealot or the Cananaean (referring to his former political affiliation and his birth in Cana of Galilee); and Judas was also known as Iscariot (referring to his birth in the town of Kerioth). Such differences need not call into question the veracity and consistency of Scripture.

Secondly, Jesus seemed not to have concerned Himself much with affirmative action in His choice of disciples. All twelve were Jewish, and it appears that all but Judas Iscariot were Galileans. Their general backgrounds probably differed very little from one another.

On the other hand, their personalities differed significantly. Peter was the blustering spokesman who always seemed to be opening his mouth simply to change feet, while Andrew was quiet, allowing others to take center stage. James and John must have been called “Sons of Thunder” for a good reason. Matthew the tax collector and Roman sympathizer and Simon the Zealot must have had some interesting political discussions. Philip's Greek name could indicate that his family was among those Jews who accepted the Hellenistic culture spread by Alexander the Great three and a half centuries before; certainly his understanding of the Jewish religion would have differed from that of his friend Nathanael, the strictly observant Jew who was convinced that nothing good could come out of Nazareth.

Their occupations were mostly simple. At least four were fishermen, while one was a tax collector; of the others, we know nothing. Matthew is the only one whose job would have required much in the way of education. In fact, the religious leaders of the day dismissed them as “simple and unlearned men.”

The major thing that they have in common is that when Jesus called them, they willingly left everything and followed Him.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE EVENT

What are the lessons we can learn from the calling of Jesus' twelve disciples? The following applications present themselves:

First of all, while we certainly want to acknowledge that the focus of Jesus' earthly ministry was His work on the Cross, we should note that the focus of His dealings with people was His desire to provide for the continuation of His work after His earthly ministry was done. He could have healed more than He did; He could have evangelized more than He did. Instead, He devoted His greatest time and attention to the continuation of His work. This should make us aware of the importance of providing successors for ourselves. To do work is wonderful, but to prepare and equip others to do it after we have gone is more important still.

Secondly, we should note that the uniformity of Jesus' chosen disciples did not hinder the work that He had for them to do. Too often we think that God's work is most effectively done by people who minister among "their own kind," and thus we seek people from a variety of backgrounds to minister to the variety of people in need of the Gospel. While there is certainly some value to this, we should also recognize that Jesus did not seem to consider this particularly important. Given the power of the Holy Spirit that He promised to give to His followers, He knew that the ones He had chosen would be able to spread His Word among all kinds of people, their basic uniformity notwithstanding.

Thirdly, the diversity of personalities among the disciples did not keep them from working together to spread the Gospel. Though they had their squabbles while Jesus was on earth, they seem to have been able to make decisions quite amicably after He left them. The Holy Spirit is able to bring together a variety of personalities and draw strength rather than conflict from those differences. Ask the class what attitudes allow groups of people to draw strength from their differences? Certainly primary among these attitudes are a recognition of one's own weaknesses and an appreciation for the strengths of others.

Fourthly, and most importantly, the disciples were able to carry on the work of Christ because they were chosen by God, called by Jesus, and empowered by the Holy Spirit. What they accomplished was no human feat. Neither is the progress of the Church today.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE LIFE OF CHRIST VI

Feeding the Five Thousand

Excluding the Resurrection, the only miracle of Jesus that is recorded in all four Gospel accounts is the feeding of the five thousand (Matthew 14:13-23; Mark 6:30-46; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-15). Obviously, the Gospel writers considered it a very important event. Today, it will be our task to see why this is the case.

THE CONTEXT OF THE EVENT

We saw last week that the choosing of the twelve disciples marks the midpoint of Jesus' public ministry. Once Jesus had chosen His disciples, He set about the task of preparing them to carry on the work that He had come to earth to establish. During the first year in which they were constantly in His company, the disciples learned mostly by observing the way Jesus dealt with others. The year is filled with healings and exorcisms as well as parables and confrontations with Jesus' enemies. Toward the end of that first year of full-time service, Jesus gave His disciples their first test - He sent them out two by two on a preaching tour of the Galilean countryside. By all accounts, the tour was a marvelous success. The disciples got their first taste of the power of God flowing through their own fingers and they were amazed at the results. Jesus knew, however, that they still had much to learn if they were to carry on His work. Apostles had to be far more than preachers and miracle-workers, after all. The time had come for Jesus to devote His full attention to teaching and preparing the men whom He had chosen.

Up until this time, such concentrated attention on the disciples had been very difficult. Jesus was mobbed by crowds of people wherever He went. Scholars sometimes call the first year of His Galilean ministry "the year of popularity" for this very reason. Crowds followed Him, clamoring for miracles, healings, exorcisms, and food. Jesus and His disciples hardly had a spare minute to call their own. It was in such a time of great pressure that the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand occurred. That miracle proved to be the turning point in the focus of Jesus' ministry. After this, He would no longer spend His time with the multitudes. Instead, the bulk of His time and attention would be given to the twelve men He had chosen to be His disciples.

THE DESCRIPTION OF THE EVENT

The miracle itself is something the members of your class will have known about since childhood. Despite Jesus' desire to get away to a quiet place with His disciples after their preaching tour through Galilee, a large crowd sought Him out and clamored for His attention. Jesus ministered to them all day. As night approached, it became obvious that food was going to be a problem. The people had no food, Jesus and the disciples had no money, and there was no nearby town from which supplies might be obtained. A young boy offered his lunch to Jesus. Jesus took the lunch, then had the crowd sit down in the grass in orderly groups. He then blessed the food and gave it to the disciples with instructions to distribute it to the crowd. As they did so, the loaves and fishes were multiplied, so that the entire crowd of more than five thousand men, plus women and children, ate their fill. The disciples then collected the leftover food, which filled twelve baskets.

Too many people look at this miracle and miss the point. They either rationalize it away by saying that the little boy's generosity inspired others in the crowd to share their hidden caches of food with their neighbors, or they seek symbolism in the little boy who gave everything he had to Jesus, or the disciples who by faith distributed what they did not yet have in their hands, or even in the numerological significance of the number of baskets of food that remained. While the miracle performed by Jesus was unquestionably marvelous, and while there are various practical lessons that may be learned from the examples of the little boy and the disciples, the real significance of the feeding of the five thousand lies not in the miracle itself, but in its aftermath.

John 6:15 is a frequently overlooked verse, yet it provides the key to understanding why this miracle, above all others, was viewed as important by the Gospel writers. More than any other miracle in Jesus' public ministry, the feeding of the five thousand reveals the depth of the misunderstanding of Jesus' work among the multitudes to whom He ministered. Despite making it abundantly clear that He was not the type of political deliverer the Jews had been long anticipating, most of those who followed Him from place to place saw Him only in those terms. After Jesus fed the crowd, they were ready to mount a popular uprising and storm Jerusalem with Jesus at the head of a conquering army.

Jesus quickly removed Himself from their presence and spent the night in prayer. Having sent the disciples across the Sea of Galilee in a boat, He joined them in the middle of the night by walking across the water - much to their surprise and consternation.

Meanwhile, the crowd had not given up quite so easily as Jesus and His disciples had hoped. They had hopped into a small flotilla of boats and traveled all around the Sea of Galilee in search of Jesus. They finally found Him near Capernaum, and He preached perhaps the harshest sermon of His entire earthly ministry to them, unless one considers the denunciation of the religious leaders in Matthew 23 to be a sermon. The sermon on the Bread of Life speaks strongly against the digestive fixations of the multitude, challenging them both for their lack of understanding and their lack of faith. Jesus speaks clearly about the sovereign power of God in drawing men to salvation, then uses graphic imagery reminiscent of the Lord's Supper to convey the unity that exists between Him and His followers.

The result of this pointed message is that many of His "disciples" go away and follow Him no longer (John 6:66). In the months that follow, Jesus shows far less patience with such people. Even those who stimulate His compassion, like the Rich Young Ruler, receive only brief attention before His plain speech drives them away. Jesus can no longer afford to spend time on false disciples. He must devote all His attention to the true ones (with the necessary exception of Judas Iscariot, of course).

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE EVENT

One of the temptations with which Satan confronted Jesus in the wilderness was the temptation to turn stones into bread. Jesus responded to him by saying that man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. The people in Jesus' day, as is the case today, sought little more than "bread and circuses." They would follow anyone who fed

them and kept them entertained. Jesus was not in the feeding and entertaining business, though He would not turn His back on the genuinely needy.

The miracle of the feeding of the five thousand not only marked a turning point in the life of Jesus, it also marked one in the lives of His followers. Those who were following Him for the wrong reasons, seeking only food for the body and spectacles to entertain the mind, turned away and followed Jesus no more after this incident. The Twelve, on the other hand, refused to join the exodus of the mob. When Jesus asked them if they, too, would leave, Peter answered for the group as a whole: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God" (John 6:68-69). They were not following Jesus in order to be fed and entertained. Physical comforts and novelty were the last things they sought. Instead, they keenly felt the need for food for their souls - those satisfying words that proceed from the mouth of God.

Two questions flow from this. First of all, why do you come to church? Do you seek to be entertained? Is it the fellowship dinners that attract you? Like the Twelve, the food you seek should be the food your soul needs.

Secondly, what should a church offer to those who come? Too many offer the bread and circuses to draw the multitudes, but never preach the hard truth that separates the true believers from the false professors. Jesus was never afraid to speak the truth in such a way that those who sought false comfort would be driven away. Only those who were willing to eat of His flesh and drink of His blood (through union and communion with Him, not through transubstantiation) could tolerate the straightforward message of truth He communicated.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE LIFE OF CHRIST VII

The Transfiguration

In II Peter 1:16-18, the apostle Peter reflected upon one of his most memorable experiences during the days when Christ walked the earth. As far as Peter was concerned, few other incidents stood out more clearly in confirming to him the truth of the Gospel with which he had been entrusted. What incident did Peter have in mind? The only time the Gospels speak of the disciples seeing the glory of the Messiah and hearing a voice from God was on the Mount of Transfiguration. The incident is recorded in all three of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew 17:1-13; Mark 9:2-13; Luke 9:28-36).

THE CONTEXT OF THE EVENT

The Transfiguration probably occurred only a few weeks after the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand, which was the subject of last week's lesson. About six to nine months after formally choosing His disciples, Jesus sent them out on a preaching tour. When they returned, they were in need of rest, and Jesus intended to take them away to some quiet place. The multitudes intervened, however, and after Jesus fed them, they were ready to take Him forcibly and proclaim Him king. Jesus temporarily escaped from their clutches, but they soon caught up again, after which He preached the sermon on the Bread of Life. This sermon, as we noted last week, alienated most of the crowd, and they stopped following Jesus around.

At this point, Jesus and the disciples were finally able to take their long-needed vacation. They headed northeast into the region of Syrophenicia. It was there that Jesus cast the demon out of the Syrophenician woman's daughter. Jesus and His disciples then returned to the region of the Sea of Galilee, but on the less densely populated eastern shore (Decapolis), where He fed the four thousand.

They then headed northward, to the extreme northern border of Israel - the city of Caesarea Philippi, located at the base of the Mount Hermon range. Here occurred Peter's famous confession of faith, followed shortly thereafter by Jesus' first mention of His impending death to His disciples. It is these two incidents - Peter's confession of faith (where the disciples verbalized for the first time what they had come to realize in the preceding months - the true identity of the man they were following) and Jesus' initial revelation of His coming death - that provide the context for the incident we know as the Transfiguration.

THE DESCRIPTION OF THE EVENT

While tour guides in Israel will point out Mount Tabor in Galilee as the traditional site of the Transfiguration, it seems more likely to me that it happened on one of the majestic peaks of the Mount Hermon range - after all, we know that Jesus and His disciples were in Caesarea Philippi immediately before it occurred, and the description "high mountain" fits the Hermon range, which is the highest in Palestine, better than the rather dumpy and prosaic Mount Tabor. The location is really irrelevant, however.

Jesus ascended the mountain with the three disciples who were closest to Him and accompanied Him at many of the special times in His ministry - Peter, James, and John. When they arrived at the summit, Jesus was transfigured before them. The word “transfigured” comes from the Latin roots corresponding to the Greek roots behind the word *metamorphosis*, meaning a change in form. Like the caterpillar that metamorphoses into a butterfly, Jesus did not here become something different. Instead, what He always had been inside was revealed. Both His face and His clothing shone brightly (like the Bible’s descriptions of heaven, the narratives in the Gospels show the feebleness of human language when faced with the challenge of describing something beyond the realm of normal human experience).

After Jesus’ glory had been revealed, Moses and Elijah appeared with Him on the mountain. Much speculation has centered on the subject of why these two men appeared rather than a variety of other possibilities. Was it because both men had died under very peculiar circumstances? Moses was taken from this life and buried by God on the top of Mount Nebo, while Elijah was whisked up to heaven in a whirlwind, accompanied by a chariot of fire. If this was the reason, however, why was Enoch excluded? Others argue that Moses and Elijah represent the Law and the Prophets, which Jesus had come to fulfill through His earthly ministry, death, and resurrection. Interestingly enough, while Moses is often used as a symbol of the Law, he also is viewed in Scripture as the prototypical prophet (cf. Deuteronomy 18:15-18). In reality, I suspect that the men who appeared with Jesus appeared because they were best suited to converse with the Son of God about the subject that they then went on to discuss - His coming death in Jerusalem. Both Moses and Elijah had faced the threat of death at the hands of their enemies; both had proclaimed the truth of God to people whose ears were closed to that message; both knew the power of sacrifices offered to God - Moses through the experience of the Passover, Elijah through the contest on Mount Carmel. They were uniquely qualified to fortify Jesus as He faced the greatest challenge of His earthly life - the challenge of the Cross.

During this discussion, the disciples fell asleep. When they awoke, Peter was convinced that the Kingdom had arrived on earth and was ready to celebrate the Feast of Booths by building shelters for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah; after all, had not the prophet Zechariah predicted (Zechariah 14:16-21) that the coming of the Kingdom would be accompanied by a universal celebration of the Feast of Booths?

Peter’s foolish words are silenced by a voice from heaven. God basically tells Peter to keep quiet and listen. Peter and the other disciples are by this time petrified; they remembered what had happened to those who had seen the glory of God in the Old Testament. They knew that certain death awaited those who entered the Shekinah Glory without prior permission.

Jesus reassured them, and when they finally worked up enough courage to open their eyes, they found that Moses and Elijah were gone. Jesus instructed them to keep silent about what they had seen until after the Resurrection. There were probably two reasons for this. First of all, word of such an incident could not help but inflame even further the opposition that would eventually drive Jesus to the Cross. His time was approaching, but it had not yet come. Secondly, like so much of the rest of Jesus’ words and deeds, the disciples would not be equipped to understand what had happened on the mountain until they received the Holy Spirit. This is why, so often in the Gospels,

we are told that the disciples did not understand the things that Jesus told them until after He was raised from the dead.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE EVENT

When we talked earlier about the events that establish the context for the Transfiguration, we mentioned Peter's confession of faith and Jesus' first announcement of His impending death and Resurrection. It is clear from the description of those events in the Gospels that the disciples failed to link the two. It was easy for them to see Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God, but they could not conceive of such a man suffering the ignominy of crucifixion. The Transfiguration was intended to help them (and us) make that connection.

First of all, the Transfiguration demonstrated in an unforgettable way the truth of the statement Peter had made by faith less than a week earlier. Peter had confessed what he had not seen; now God allowed him to witness firsthand what he had confessed. Peter never forgot that glimpse of Christ's glory.

Secondly, the Transfiguration linked the glory of Christ and the death of Christ in the minds of the disciples. When Moses and Elijah appeared on the mountain, they discussed Christ's coming death. The disciples could clearly see that it was part of God's plan, not just some wild idea conceived by Jesus at the end of a bad day (this must have been about what Peter thought when Jesus first announced His coming death to the disciples). Furthermore, when Peter was ready to celebrate the Feast of Booths on the mountain - effectively proclaiming the arrival of the Kingdom in its glory without first going through the pain of the crucifixion - God cut him off almost in mid-sentence. The Transfiguration may have been a foretaste of glory, but the suffering had to come first.

Thirdly, the Transfiguration was significant because of what it meant to Christ Himself. Jesus was a man, and the thought of His coming death could not have been joyful. How much must it have meant to Him to fellowship with Moses and Elijah, then hear the confirming words spoken from heaven by His Father?

What about its significance for us? Certainly the lesson that suffering must necessarily precede glory is one we as Christians need to learn. We cannot expect to enter the Kingdom without tribulation any more than Peter should have expected glory - either for Christ or himself - apart from suffering.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE LIFE OF CHRIST VIII

The Death of Christ

When we studied Jesus' first miracle at the wedding feast in Cana, we saw Him tell His mother that His time had not yet come. We noted that, in the Gospels, "His time" is a reference to the time of His death. Thus we come this week to study the single most important event in the earthly ministry of Christ - the sacrifice by which He gave His life as a ransom for the sins of many.

THE CONTEXT OF THE EVENT

The Transfiguration occurred nine or ten months before the death of Christ. In the time between those two events, Jesus set His eyes toward Jerusalem and pursued the primary goal of His earthly work. After the Transfiguration, He spent about six more months in Galilee, though He did visit Jerusalem in the fall for the Feast of Booths and again in the winter for the Feast of Dedication (Hanukkah). He then crossed over the Jordan into Perea, headed north briefly, then came south again for the last time. On the way, He stopped in Jericho, where He encountered Bartimaeus and Zacchaeus, and arrived just before Passover in the little town of Bethany outside of Jerusalem. On the Sunday before Passover, He entered Jerusalem, riding on a donkey at the head of a praise-filled procession, thus fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9. In doing so, He was making a public proclamation of His Messiahship - an act sure to bring down the wrath of the religious leaders, who were already plotting to get rid of Him. Thus the stage was set for the death of the Lamb of God at the very season when Passover lambs were being sacrificed by the thousands in the Temple in Jerusalem.

THE DESCRIPTION OF THE EVENT

During the time between the triumphal entry into Jerusalem and the crucifixion, Jesus apparently stayed in Bethany at night while traveling into Jerusalem each day. During this time, He cleansed the Temple for the second time, carried on numerous disputes with the religious leaders, and spoke to His disciples about His second coming (the Olivet Discourse).

When the night before Passover arrived, Jesus made plans to celebrate the Passover Seder with His disciples. It was at this meal that Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, and from this place that Judas left to betray Jesus. Before dinner, Jesus washed the feet of His disciples. After dinner, He spoke to them of the coming of the Holy Spirit. They then left for the Garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives. On the way, Jesus spoke to them of the need to abide in Him, using the metaphor of the vine and the branches.

When they arrived in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus took Peter, James, and John with Him, leaving the others behind. He then left those three, telling them to wait for Him. He went on a little farther and prayed, then returned to find His disciples asleep. Shortly thereafter, a band of Temple guards (not Roman soldiers) led by Judas Iscariot arrested Jesus.

In the nine to twelve hour period between His arrest in the Garden and His crucifixion outside Jerusalem, Jesus faced six different trials - before Annas (the High Priest emeritus), Caiaphas (the reigning High Priest), the Sanhedrin (the Jewish "Supreme Court," made up of seventy Pharisees

and Sadducees), Pontius Pilate (the Roman prefect of Judea), Herod Antipas (the half-Jewish turncoat who was the Roman governor of Galilee), and Pilate again.

The first three were blatant violations of Jewish law, motivated largely by jealousy and fear. The religious leaders were not only jealous of Jesus' popularity, but they were also fearful of losing their places of favor with the Roman overlords if a religious uprising were to occur. They consequently ignored legal provisions that forbid self-incrimination, court trials at night, or unanimous capital sentences, among other things.

The last three trials were travesties motivated by nothing more than political expediency. From the moment Pilate first saw Jesus, he knew He was innocent. Yet he was afraid to offend the powerful religious leaders. His reign as prefect had not gone well, and he had developed a reputation for offending the local populace needlessly. He knew that one more negative report to Rome could end his career. The Sanhedrin used this threat as a club to gain his cooperation.

Pilate hated to condemn an innocent man, so when he found out that Jesus was from Galilee, he sent him off to Herod's palace in Jerusalem, breathing a sigh of relief that he had found someone to whom he could pass the buck. Herod, meanwhile, had been wanting to meet Jesus for a long time. The superstitious half-Jew had been fascinated by Jesus ever since he had had John the Baptist beheaded. He apparently expected to see some kind of traveling magician and was very disappointed when Jesus refused to perform any miracles for him. Herod then went into a sulking fit and sent Jesus back to Pilate.

The prefect now played his last card and offered to release Jesus as a sign of Roman goodwill. He gave the crowd a choice between Jesus and Barabbas, a Zealot who had earlier attempted to lead an uprising against the Roman government. He clearly misjudged the Jewish populace, as he had done so often before. Barabbas was not viewed as a criminal, but as a patriotic hero. With a little encouragement from the Sanhedrin, the mob cried out for the release of Barabbas and the crucifixion of Jesus. Pilate, unwilling to do right for its own sake and having painted himself into a corner with the Sanhedrin and the crowd, now had no choice but to accede to their wishes. He condemned Jesus to death by crucifixion.

After the usual tortures by the bored and brutal Roman soldiers (plus a few specifically designed to mock "the king of the Jews"), Jesus was forced to carry His own cross outside the city walls to the place of execution, Golgotha. There, He and two other condemned criminals were nailed to their crosses and left to die. By the normal standards of crucifixion, Jesus' death was remarkably fast. Some victims languished for days. Jesus "only" suffered for six hours, the last three of which were spent in a supernatural darkness (note how little the Bible tells us about Jesus' actual suffering, despite the graphically detailed accounts that are often heard in sermons or portrayed in movies like *The Passion of the Christ*).

The hypocritical leaders of the Sanhedrin, unwilling to have criminals desecrate the Sabbath, asked that the sufferers be put out of their misery. When the soldiers went to break the legs of the victims in order to hasten their deaths by suffocation, they found that Jesus was already dead. His body was then removed from the cross and He was buried in the nearby tomb owned by Joseph of Arimathaea. The women who prepared the body for burial did not have time to finish the job before

the Sabbath arrived at sunset, so they intended to return early on Sunday morning to complete the work.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE EVENT

How can one speak briefly about the significance of the death of Christ? Perhaps the best way of treating this vast area with which your students are so familiar is to divide them into small groups of two or three and have each group make a list of the different things accomplished by the death of Christ. Channel their thinking by asking them to consider certain specific areas - the significance of Christ's death for Christ Himself, for the world in general, for the Church as a whole, and for individual Christians. Give the groups ten or fifteen minutes to work - they should be able to come up with fairly substantial lists. Then ask each group to volunteer one entry from its list, and keep going as long as time permits or until the lists are exhausted. A review of the different consequences flowing from the death of Christ should serve as a reminder of just how much we owe to the grace of God in sending His Son into the world to die for us.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE LIFE OF CHRIST IX

The Resurrection of Christ

As important as the death of Christ was to His earthly ministry, it obviously would have been incomplete without His Resurrection from the dead. This, like Christ's death, is vital to our salvation, and thus deserves careful consideration.

THE CONTEXT OF THE EVENT

The immediate context of the Resurrection is provided by the death of Christ. Several points need to be noted. First of all, Christ's death was real. He did not simply faint on the Cross, only to be revived in the coolness of the tomb. Roman soldiers knew death when they saw it, and when they came to hasten the deaths of the sufferers on their crosses, they saw clearly that Jesus needed no such ministry of mercy. We should not permit scoffers to cheapen the Resurrection by questioning the reality of Jesus' death.

Secondly, we should note that the Resurrection was largely unexpected. Despite the fact that Jesus had mentioned it numerous times to His disciples in the months before His death, the shock of the moment seems to have driven it from their minds. Not only did they fail to expect His return from the dead, but they refused to believe it when they were told about it. The only ones who seemed to remember Jesus' words were the members of the Sanhedrin, who cynically asked for a guard and seal on the tomb in order to prevent what they anticipated would be an attempt at grave robbery. Among Jesus' followers, the atmosphere was one of gloom and fear. They clearly thought that their hope of the Messiah had suddenly and shockingly come to an end.

THE DESCRIPTION OF THE EVENT

The most interesting thing about the Bible's description of the Resurrection of Christ is that there is none. We are told what happened before and after, but the Bible makes no attempt to describe the Resurrection itself. The obvious reason for this is that there were no eyewitnesses, but admittedly this did not prevent descriptions of other important events from finding their way into the pages of Scripture (the Creation, for instance). God clearly intended that we concentrate more on the consequences of the Resurrection than on the details of the event itself.

The event produced a variety of responses among those directly touched by it. The religious leaders, with the willing cooperation of the Roman guard assigned to the tomb, instituted an immediate coverup, passing the word that the disciples had stolen the body. The disciples, who *knew* that they hadn't stolen the body, didn't quite know what to think when they began to hear word of angelic messages and an empty tomb. When Peter and John went to investigate, they found that the tomb was indeed empty.

At this point, Jesus began to appear - to Mary Magdalene near the tomb, to a group of women on the road, to Cleopas and another follower (probably his wife) on the road to Emmaus, and to ten of the disciples (Thomas and, of course, Judas were missing) gathered in an upper room in Jerusalem. All of these appearances occurred on the day of the Resurrection. In general, those who saw Jesus believed immediately, but those who had not yet seen Him remained skeptical.

One week later, Jesus appeared again to His disciples in Jerusalem (Thomas was there this time, and believed). As the weeks passed, however, doubts began to return, and Peter and some of the others prepared to return to their old way of life - the fishing business. They headed north to the Sea of Galilee and took a boat out into the lake. After a fruitless night of fishing, Jesus appeared to them on the shore. After gently rebuking Peter for His betrayal and unbelief, Jesus reaffirmed Peter's position of leadership and service. Jesus later appeared to a crowd of over five hundred people (probably the circumstances under which He issued the Great Commission), and finally ascended into heaven with His disciples looking on.

While Jesus' followers were now firmly convinced that He was alive, they were still a weak and helpless bunch. They remained in hiding in Jerusalem, gathering regularly for prayer, but didn't dare show their faces in public. All of this changed, of course, when the Holy Spirit came upon them on the Day of Pentecost. It was then that the power of Christ's Resurrection became part of the personal experience of His disciples.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE EVENT

For Jesus Himself, the Resurrection was the crowning affirmation of the complete fulfillment of His earthly task (Romans 1:4). He had done everything the Father had asked Him to do, and the Resurrection placed God's stamp of approval on His earthly life and sacrificial death.

As far as the significance of the Resurrection for believers is concerned, the most important passage of Scripture to which we must turn is I Corinthians 15. The chapter is divided into six paragraphs, dealing with the importance of and the evidence for the Resurrection of Christ (verses 1-11), the theological implications of the denial of the resurrection of the body (verses 12-19), the relationship between the Resurrection of Christ and the resurrection of believers (verses 20-28), practical implications of the denial of the resurrection of the body (verses 29-34), the nature of the resurrection body (verses 35-49), and the eschatological context of the resurrection of believers (verses 50-58). Divide the class into six groups and have each group work through one of these paragraphs in an attempt to answer the question, "What is the significance of the Resurrection of Christ for believers today?"

Paul begins the chapter, not with debate, but with established fact. The Resurrection of Christ is not seen here as something for which Paul must argue. He presents it as essential to the Gospel he preached to the Corinthians and as a vital factor tied in with the salvation of sinners. He presents two forms of evidence for the Resurrection of Christ, taken from Scripture and from numerous eyewitness accounts. These latter included many people known to the Corinthians, both personally and by reputation, as well as Paul himself, who saw Christ, not in the flesh, but on the Damascus Road. The Resurrection of Christ is therefore not a matter of debate, and any teaching that contradicts this fundamental truth of the Gospel is not to be tolerated.

In the second paragraph, Paul shows that the denial of the resurrection of the body not only contradicts the fundamental truth of the Resurrection of Christ, but that such a denial leads to other problems as well. In verses 12-13, Paul makes the basic point that any denial of the general teaching of the resurrection of the body implies a denial of the Resurrection of Christ. Verses 14-15 carry the argument further. Paul points out that if Christ is not alive, those who spend their time preaching

the Gospel are engaging in an exercise in futility (either that, or they are outright liars), and those who believe them are the most gullible of fools. Verses 16-19 indicate that not only would this imply the gullibility of believers, but would also leave everyone hopelessly in sin. Furthermore, those who have died in Christ are gone forever, never to be seen again. Christians are pathetic figures indeed if the Resurrection of Christ is a myth.

In the third paragraph, Paul uses the Old Testament image of the firstfruits to illustrate the relationship between the Resurrection of Christ and that of Christians. At harvest time, the first grain to be brought in was offered to the Lord. This did not mean that only the first grain harvested belonged to God, but was a symbol of the fact that the entire harvest came from Him and belonged to Him. Paul pictures the Resurrection of Christ as a firstfruits offering - God was claiming Christ as His own, but Christ was not the entire harvest. The Resurrection of Christ thus foreshadowed and guaranteed the resurrection of believers.

Paul also uses the idea of federal headship treated at greater length in Romans 5. If the death of Adam was the foreshadowing of the death to be experienced by all over whom he was the head, so the Resurrection of Christ, which involved the conquest of death, foreshadowed the resurrection of all over whom He is the Head. Paul presents the resurrection of believers as being within the broader context of the defeat of death by means of the establishment of the Kingdom of God.

Most of the attention given to the fourth paragraph has been focused on verse 29. Though the verse is of some interest, the problem posed by it is probably at this point insoluble. It would be best to ignore it in this lesson and simply note the points made by Paul in the rest of the paragraph. In verses 30-32, Paul sees a denial of the resurrection leading to the loss of motivation to suffer for Christ. If there is no resurrection, Christians certainly would be tempted to cling with much greater tenacity to this life.

In the fifth paragraph, Paul tackles the issue of the nature of the resurrection body. He considers arguments against the resurrection based on this question to be nothing more than straw men, and indicates through various examples in nature that the resurrection body is both the same as and different from the earthly bodies we now inhabit. Taking examples from plant and animal life as well as inanimate objects, Paul shows that God is perfectly capable of taking the same matter and arranging it differently according to His purposes. Thus God is able to take the same bodies in which we now live and renew them for eternal life. If it is true that the resurrection body is the same as the body in which we now live, it is also true that the body given in the resurrection is also different from the one we now inhabit. The old body is mortal, while the new is immortal; the old is sinful, the new is perfect; the old is weak, the new is strong; the old belongs to the life of the natural man, the new to the life of the spiritual man; the old is of the earth, while the new is of heaven; the old has its source in Adam, the new in Christ.

Paul concludes his argument in verses 50-58 by pointing out the necessity of the resurrection of the body. Our present bodies simply are not capable of eternal life. Because of this, the dead must not only be raised to a new bodily existence, but those living at the time of Christ's return must be changed - their bodies transformed into the likeness of the body of Christ (the Resurrection body of Christ is the best model available to us of what our bodies will one day be like). [Some have noted facetiously that verse 51 should be the theme verse of all church nurseries.] It is only when the

resurrection has occurred that death will be finally defeated. It is because this final victory is already assured because of the Resurrection of Christ that Paul is able to end the chapter with the confident exhortation to faithfulness of verse 58.