

1-07-01

"Paul Leaves Jerusalem"
Acts 23

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. Paul stands before the chief council of Jewish authority, the Sanhedrin. The Roman military commander had made the decision for Paul to be examined thus so that the real reason for Jewish opposition to Paul could be established. The missionary began his remarks by addressing the council as "men and BRETHERN." The high priest at that time, Ananias, perhaps thought that the use of BRETHERN was insubordinate for a "low-life" like Paul. He therefore commanded that Paul be struck in the face (a most humiliating form of reprimand) to prove Paul's inferiority before such an august group of leaders. This act of insolence riled Paul's temper, and he said that God would so treat the person who had ordered him to be stricken. In fact, Paul referred to the high priest openly as a tomb which, though appearing pleasant in appearance externally, was nevertheless a covering for one no longer alive. (See Matt. 23:27-28.) Paul's intent was to pronounce him to be a hypocrite and deceitful person. At this point someone near Paul asked him whether he should show more respect for the Jewish high priest? Paul acknowledged that such action was contrary to the Law (Exod. 22:28), but that he did not know that the high priest had given the order. At this time Paul had been away from Jerusalem for several years, and Ananias had been made high priest by Herod Agrippa I. He served as high priest until AD 58.

II. Paul did not apologize for his statement against the high priest, but he did, in this interlude in the chief matter before the group, note that the Sanhedrin was still made up equally of about one part Pharisees and one part Sadducees. He then called the group's attention to his own situation there. I am a Pharisee and a second generation one at that! Actually, I would not be here if I had not openly expressed my belief in the resurrection of the dead. (He had said the day before that he had talked with Jesus, the Messiah, after that Jesus had been crucified and killed, thus Jesus had been resurrected to life.) Luke then reminds readers that Paul's having witnessed to the trance (vision) in which one spoke to him was contrary to the belief of the Sadducees but not contrary to the belief of the Pharisees. Obviously the Pharisees would agree with the position, in principle, with a fellow Pharisee regarding the possibilities of messengers and spirits being sent to men. The Pharisees said that they found no fault with Paul's position, i.e., he could have had an experience with a spirit even if with a different person than Paul thought. In fact, the Pharisees stated that fighting Paul could be, in effect, fighting against God himself.

III. The dissension between the Pharisees and Sadducees was so intense that the Roman commander sensed that Paul's physical well-being was again in trouble. He then rescued Paul by bringing him back into the Roman bastion. The missionary spent the second night in custody where Jesus appeared to him and

encouraged him by commending him for his witness there in Jerusalem and promising him that he would also be permitted to witness in Rome. We know that Rome was included in Paul's hope, but note that the Lord does not include Spain, another hope of Paul, Acts 19:21; Rom. 15:24.

IV. The next day a self-made posse of Jews vowed to each other that they would neither eat nor drink until Paul's life had been taken. The posse was made up of over forty men. The conspiring group knew that their scheme could not be done without the cooperation of the Jewish leaders. They shared their plan with the chief priest and elders and asked them to request that the Roman commander again convene and continue the hearing which had been held the day before, telling him that there were further unsolved problems which needed more attention. The plot called for Paul's death to occur between the castle and the council chamber of the Sanhedrin. The Scriptures do not give many details about certain aspects of some of the main participants in the establishment and early affairs of the church, but in vs. 16 of this chapter, Luke reveals that Paul had a sister who lived in Jerusalem and who had a son (Paul's nephew). The nephew learned of the subterfuge planned against his Uncle Paul and was able to visit Paul in the prison and divulge the secret to him. Paul told one of the guards watching him to inform the commanding officer that his nephew had an urgent message for the commander. The commander listened to the boy's information and believed what he said. The nephew was told by the commander to be sure and not tell anyone of what he knew of the plot, and especially that the commander knew of it. The commander promptly called out a contingent of military personnel to change plans for Paul's disposition. He marshalled two hundred foot soldiers, two hundred spear carriers, and seventy cavalrymen on horseback to ferry Paul to Caesarea. There Paul was to be delivered to Felix, the supreme Roman authority in the area and who was headquartered on the coast at Caesarea. Paul was provided a horse and the entire military contingency left before daylight. What happened to the forty conspirators?

V. A letter was sent to Felix by Claudius Lysias, the Roman commander, to accompany Paul and the entourage as follows:
This man [Paul] was captured by the Jews who tried to kill him. I presented him to the Jewish Sanhedrin, and the discussion there led me to believe that the problems consist of merely religious matters, not broken Roman law. I learned afterwards that a big group of Jews had sworn to kill him. I have sent him to you and am informing his accusers that any further action will be in Caesarea. Sincerely, Claudius Lysias
The entire military force went with Paul to Antipatris (about half way), but only the seventy cavalrymen went on to Caesarea with him the next day. The rest of the force returned to Jerusalem from there. Felix received Paul and Lysias' letter, and when the governor learned that Paul was from Celicia, he told the missionary that he would stay in the stockade until his accusers came for his case.

I. It took the Jewish leaders from Jerusalem just five days to learn and follow through on the fact that Claudius Lysias, the chief Roman authority in Jerusalem, had rescued Paul and taken him to the next Roman authority in Caesarea, Governor Felix. They came down from Jerusalem to Caesarea well prepared to present their case against Paul. The high priest himself, Ananias, along with all the elders (Sanhedrin) and their chief spokesman, Tertulus, assembled in Caesarea. The latter was apparently not only a good speaker but well versed in Roman and Jewish law. He also knew well the political aspects of the precarious relationship of the Jews and the power emanating from Rome. Tertulus was, in effect, a Roman lawyer retained by the Sanhedrin to present its cases before Roman tribunals. Felix was the Roman procurator of all Judea who had been appointed by the emperor Claudius in 53 AD. He ruled the province in a mean, cruel and profligate manner. His period of office was full of troubles and seditions. At the end of Felix's term, Nero had become the emperor of Rome and appointed Porcius Festus to succeed him. Felix's wife was Drusilla, a daughter of Herod Agrippa I and of a Jewish mother. She was Felix's third wife and had been persuaded by him to leave her husband to marry him.

II. The court, with Felix presiding, called upon the Jews from Jerusalem to present their case against Paul. Tertulus took the floor and began their case. His first statement was the customary flattering the judge, in this case Felix. He stated that the Jews were extremely pleased with Felix's handling of the political affairs in Judea, having maintained the peace and performed many very worthy deeds to support the general welfare of the Jewish people. The Jews accept your grateful treatment with gratitude. Now, another matter has arisen which needs the noble procurator's attention. It is not our intent to be tiresome or boring to you, but I plead with you to be lenient (merciful) with us in your judgment. The Jews have discovered this man [Paul] to be annoying by encouraging our people to revolt against the Jewish people's religious customs and teachings. Not only has he perpetuated negative feelings against us in Jerusalem but also throughout the (Roman) world. In fact, he is the prime ringleader of a spurious religious sect referred to as the Nazarenes. What has brought his antiJewish activities to our attention at this time is his recent profaning the holy place of worship for all Jews, the Temple. We felt that his having profaned the Temple made him properly subject to our law. But before we could exercise such judgment, the commander in Jerusalem high-handedly took him from our jurisdiction, forcing us to bother you with the matter. Tertulus then turned to the assembled Sanhedrin and asked whether he'd properly presented their case, and they agreed unanimously with his presentation of their case against Paul.

III. After Tertulus had rested his case against Paul, the missionary was given the floor by Governor Felix. Paul then followed the pattern of presenting one's case by referring to Felix's long years of service

as having been a judge over the Roman affairs in Judea. This long service made Paul glad to have him sitting in judgment, and as a defendant before him, he believed that he (Paul) would be fully heard. Paul said that less than two weeks prior to this trial date he had gone up to Jerusalem to worship God. No one found him misbehaving in the Temple, inciting anyone to create disorder either there or, in the synagogues (schools), or even in the city anywhere. What has been said against me here is hearsay information that has not been proved, i.e., the accusation against me is not based upon factual evidence. I will admit here, however, that I do myself practice and teach others to believe and live after the Way, a position which these Jewish leaders consider heresy. I still believe the facts presented in the Old Testament (the law and the prophets) and worship the God who gave those documents to our Jewish forefathers. The hope I now enjoy is based upon the same promises which my accusers here hold, namely that there is to be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust. My conscience is absolutely clear in my relationship with God and men. For many years I have been living away from Jerusalem but have come back from time to time to worship, and on this most recent trip, I also brought money to help the needy among my nation (the Jews). In my travels throughout the area of Asia, I have met many Jews who also come to Jerusalem to worship. This last time as I was being purified in the Temple, some of these Asian Jews saw me, and, although I was doing nothing illegal, they wrongfully accused me of improper conduct according to Jewish law. These Jews should be the ones accusing me of impropriety, or the Jewish leaders should be specific about whether I acted incorrectly before them at the hearing at Jerusalem. Perhaps the one thing there which disturbed some of them was that I emphasized the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead. Some of them did take offense at that. I hereby rest my case.

IV. When both sides had concluded, Felix, who knew much about the new Christian position, decided that he would defer a verdict for Paul until he could summon the commander, Lysias, from whom he wanted additional evidence. Felix held Paul under guard but gave him considerable freedom as a prisoner. One restriction he did impose, none of his family or friends could see him. After some time Felix with his wife Drusilla sent for Paul for a visit. Paul gave the two God's plan of spiritual salvation through faith in Christ, including the need for repentance, a temperate lifestyle, and sure judgment against those who refused to accept the Way. Felix was convicted in the truth of Paul's testimony and trembled in concern, but he elected not to accept God's salvation through Jesus Christ. He did say that when the occasion presented itself, he would call for Paul again for further consultation. Luke tells us that Felix had an ulterior motive, he hoped that Paul would offer him a bribe to release him. For two years Felix, in concurrence with his successor, Portius Festus, left Paul imprisoned to please the Jews. [Next week, Lord willing, we will see how Paul adapts to the next step in his imprisonment under the next Roman in command, Portius Festus.]

Jan. 21, 2001

"Paul's Case Continues"
Acts 25

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. Paul had been in custody for two years under Felix's command in Caesarea when Portius Festus came to succeed him (came into Felix's room). Festus lost no time in checking into Jerusalem personally after coming to his new command in Caesarea. Just three days after arriving in Israel, he went up to the capital of the Jews. He asked the chief priest how things were doing, and the first concern he shared with the new procurator was about what could be done with "that troublemaker, Paul" whom Felix had been holding as prisoner. The chief priest spoke against Paul to the current new Roman appointee asking Festus back to Jerusalem. Luke reveals to us that the real reason the priest wanted Paul back in the holy city was for a chance to kill him while in transit. Festus refused to fill their wish but told the Jewish priest that he and his fellow Jewish leaders should come again to Caesarea with him to retry Paul on any charges of wickedness he had committed.

II. Chap. 25:6-11 After about a ten-day stay in Jerusalem, Festus returned to Caesarea, and the next day after returning convened a court session and summoned Paul to appear there. The trial in Chap. 24 under Felix was essentially repeated now under Portius Festus. The Jews from Jerusalem testified many unproven charges against Paul. Then Paul again stated that he had neither desecrated the Temple, the Caesar in Rome, or any other thing whatsoever. Festus, in order to please the Jews, asked Paul whether he would agree to return to Jerusalem for trial there before the Jews where Festus would preside. At this point and after all that had happened for some two years, Paul had reached his limit of tolerance and patience. He told Festus that as a Roman citizen he was claiming his prerogative of appealing to the Roman supreme court. He told Festus that he had done no wrong against the Jews and reminded Festus that he himself also very well knew the truth of the situation. If, Paul contended, I am worthy of death, then deliverance to the Jews is tantamount to having such happen, but since such is not the case (that he was guilty of any wrong), I APPEAL UNTO CAESAR.

III. Chap. 25:12 Now Festus was presented with a serious dilemma: He had not enough, if any, proof of Paul's guilt according to Roman law, but he felt severe pressure from the Jewish leadership to stop Paul's efforts to teach people throughout the entire Mediterranean basin, doctrines which they believed to be against their own religious welfare. (One need not become a Jew before satisfying God's will.) Such a religious dispute could get out of hand and develop into a general insurrection against Roman authority in the area. Festus knew that the Temple that Herod the Great had built was a stabilizing factor which was jealously guarded by the Jews. Any attack on it was a potential undermining of peace. The new procurator's immediate action was to consult with his advisors. Afterwards he pronounced his decision to honor Paul's appeal directly to the Roman Emperor.

IV. Chap. 25:13-22 [Coming into the narrative now is the newly

made king, Herod Agrippa II, and his sister, Bernice. His authority was, as king, ranked supreme over all others in the area of Judea, including Festus. Agrippa II was authorized to appoint the Jewish high priest, i.e., even the high priest of the Jews served in that position at his pleasure. Bernice was the eldest daughter of Agrippa I and therefore sister of Agrippa II. That Bernice and her brother King Agrippa II lived in an incestuous relationship was common knowledge in the area. By religion they were Jews, as was Festus. Bernice later became the mistress of the Roman Emperor Titus. She was also the elder sister of Drusilla who was the mistress of Felix. I make this information a part of the disclosure at this point to indicate the precarious moral situation the Jews were in in relating to the local Roman authorities. WA] After some time had passed, Agrippa and Bernice came to see the newly appointed procurator of Judea, Festus, at Caesarea. During the visit Festus told King Agrippa about the prisoner whom Felix had left with a legal case yet unsettled, Paul. Further, he said that the Jewish leaders wanted him dead, but he had withheld the death penalty in keeping with Roman law which states that one accused of a crime has the right to face his accusers and state his own case in their presence. Festus told Agrippa that he had summoned his accusers, but their accusations had to do only with religious matters (superstitions), not infractions of Roman law. For example, they (the Jews) disbelieved that a certain man named Jesus, whom they knew to be dead, was declared by the prisoner Paul to be still alive. I asked Paul if he would agree to go up to Jerusalem to stand trial before the Jewish court even if I presided, but he at once appealed to Caesar Augustus. Well, I still have him here in prison and am in a quandry as to what to do next. Agrippa told Festus that he would like to hear Paul also. Festus agreed to such a hearing.

V. Chap. 25:23-27 The next day Festus assembled all the city officials and military commanders together at the federal courthouse. When the group was ready, Agrippa and Bernice entered pompously, and Festus commanded that Paul be brought into the box for the interrogation. Paul came in and Festus announced to the group the purpose of the meeting. Festus addressed Agrippa and said that before them was the man whom the Jewish leaders wanted dead. He is a Roman citizen and has appealed to Caesar, and I have decided to send him to Rome at his own request. My problem is that I have no valid reason to do so, because he has not committed any crime according to Roman law. Since Agrippa is here, it is my hope that after this hearing, the great king will be able to assist me in preparing a statement regarding his crime to send to Caesar Augustus. It will look bad for me in Caesar's eyes if I forward a criminal to him for justice without outlining a reasonable charge against him. [Next week, Lord willing, we shall hear again the third testimony concerning Paul's dynamic conversion on the Jerusalem-Damascus Road.]

AND DON'T FORGET THAT THIS TUESDAY, THE 16th, IS THE COUPLES CLASS MONTHLY MEETING.

Jan. 28, 2001

"Paul's Final Defense"
Acts 26

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. With all of the notable citizens present in the judicial chamber, the king of Judea, Herod Agrippa II, told Paul that he had the floor to present his defense concerning why he should be sent to Caesar. Paul then raised his hand to alert the assembly to give attention to what he was about to say. He addressed King Agrippa as follows: "I am happy for this opportunity, King Agrippa, and I will give to you a complete account of the Jewish accusations against me. This opportunity is special for me since I know that you are completely familiar with Jewish customs and beliefs. For this reason I will be thorough and beg your patience, for it will take some time."

II. Paul's testimony continues, "After I left Tarsus in Cilicia as a youth, I went to Jerusalem for further training and to be with my own people, the Jewish nation. Because of my long time living there (in Jerusalem), I became well known among the Jewish leaders. They know that from my first days in the Holy City, I believed and practiced Judaism in its strictest requirements as a member of the sect of the Pharisees. Now these leaders could truthfully testify concerning my zeal in those days, but today these same leaders judge me to be wrong since I hold the same hope which was promised to our forefathers. This promise our people first heard and understood God to have begun when they were led out of Egypt and began as a kingdom of twelve tribes in the promised land. That promise was not completely fulfilled before recently, but God's final kingdom is now ready for establishment. Our forefathers served God continually with the promised hope that he would set up a kingdom of his own people. (See Heb. 11:39-40) It is my position that the kingdom of God is now, in fact, being created. The Jewish leaders disagree with my belief, King Agrippa. Why should you believe that God, our Creator, could not bring a dead person back to life again? I also had sincere reservations about the things being done and being said about Jesus of Nazareth just after his disciples began witnessing about faith in him and what he had done. I took strong action against the group of believers, first in Jerusalem where I personally committed many of them to prison. I could do this because I had authority from the chief priests. I even appeared at their trials before the Sanhedrin and witnessed against God's very chosen ones (saints). In the various synagogues I forced the believers in this Jesus as the Messiah to blaspheme against him or suffer the consequences of being shunned socially, or worse. When I had exhausted my abilities in the immediate area of Jerusalem, I requested and received authorization to go to other cities to persecute the followers of the Messiah (Savior) there."

III. "With specific authority from the Sanhedrin, I was commissioned to go down to Damascus from Jerusalem and bring believers in the Christ back to Jerusalem for trial against their blasphemy. About noon just before reaching Damascus, I saw a light coming down from heaven. The light was even brighter than the sun itself and came down and enclosed me and the entire entourage with me. The light

forced us to the earth, and in a prostrate position, I heard a distinct voice in Hebrew speaking directly to me, 'Paul, Paul, why are you causing me to suffer? My suffering is the reason that your conscience has been bothering you.' My answer to that voice was, 'Who are you, Lord?' The Lord said to me, 'I am Jesus, the one you are causing to suffer, but stand up, for I have a special task for you. This task is why I am communicating to you in this way. My responsibility for you is to become my servant and revealer of my salvation to the nonJews (Gentiles). This experience will become your testimony to the Gentiles along with other revelations which I will reveal to you later. I will deliver you from any harm which will come upon you, both from the Jewish nation and from the Gentile authority. Your message from me will also open the spiritual eyes of those who hear you, especially the Gentiles who will be delivered from the darkness of Satan to the glorious light of God. God will forgive the sins of all who accept my message and make them citizens of God's kingdom. As citizens of that kingdom these believers will be set aside (sanctified) because of their faith in me as their Savior.'"

IV. "When this miraculous event happened to me, King Agrippa, I was completely subservient to the message Jesus gave to me in the vision. Immediately, my zeal for doing what I now know to be what God truly wanted me to be doing was with even more determination than it was before, as a Pharisee. I went on into Damascus, but the message I gave there was exactly what I had gone there to destroy. Then on to Jerusalem, throughout all Judea, and to areas mostly occupied by Gentiles, I went telling everyone who would listen that all should recognize their condition as God saw them, turn to him, and then live a life which represented their condition under God's will. This is the real reason the Jews caught me in the Temple and have been trying to kill me. But God has helped me just as Jesus had promised me on the Dasmascus Road, and, as you can see here today, I continue to witness with my testimony both to common people as well as people of prominence, what Moses said would happen eventually, that the Messiah would be forced to suffer death, then rise and become a light to the Gentiles."

V. At this point in Paul's testimony, Festus interrupted to say to Paul that his scholarship and learning had affected his mental abilities. Paul told Festus that, on the contrary, his words were truthful and sober and that Agrippa knew that what he said was true, because Paul's activities had been open and known everywhere. Agrippa told Paul directly that his testimony had almost persuaded him to accept Jesus as his Savior. Paul replied that he was praying that not only Agrippa would believe, but that all who were there listening would become believers and become like him, except for the prisoner shackles. After Paul's presentation, Agrippa the king, his sister Bernice, Portius Festus the procurator (governor), and all the other dignitaries went into private conference. After discussing the case at some length, the conclusion was that Paul had done nothing worthy of awarding the death sentence. Agrippa told Festus that Paul could have been freed had he not appealed directly to Caesar Augustus.

Feb. 04, 2001

"Paul Sails for Rome"
Acts 27

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. Geographic synopsis: Left Caesarea by ship in the fall of 60 AD; to Sidon up the coast the next day; around the north side of Cyprus Island by Celicia and Pamphylia; to Myra in Lycia and transferred to an Alexandrian (Egyptian) ship headed for Italy; to Cnidus; south by Pt. Salmone on east tip of Crete Island; around south of Crete to Fair Havens near Lasea; attempted to make Phenice (Phoenix); by Cauda (Clauda) Island and westward; zigzag course north and south alternately toward Africa coast and the Adriatic Sea, but generally northwestward; unknown land was finally discovered.

II. Finally, the group of prisoners were ordered to be taken from Caesarea to Rome for their final legal disposition. They were put in charge of a Roman captain, Julius, who was especially commissioned for duties relating to Caesar himself. Paul was one of the prisoners designated for this sailing. While we do not know the particulars, Luke was evidently on the passenger list, for his account is referenced by first person pronouns throughout the chapter.

III. The ship taken was from Adramyttium in the province of Mysia near Assos and Mitylene. The plan was to sail close by the Asian coast on up to Thessalonica after transferring Julius and his Roman prisoners to another ship sailing for Italy. This probability is noted, because Luke states that Aristarchus was a passenger aboard. He does not designate this Aristarchus as the same person who traveled with Paul on the third missionary journey in Acts 19:29 and in Acts 20:4 when he helped collect and carry the Asian churches' gifts for the Jerusalem Christians. He could have been the same person returning to his home in Thessalonica. After sailing one day, the ship docked at Sidon up the coast where Julius permitted Paul to visit with Christian friends and get a supply of personal needs. After the short respite at Sidon, the ship set sail northward and west between the island of Cyprus and the Asian coast. This course was taken because the prevailing winds would not permit the desired route. They stayed close by the coastline near Celicia and Pamphylia until they reached the port of Myra in the province of Lycia.

IV. At Myra Julius, the Roman captain in charge of the prisoners, found an Alexandrian (Egyptian) ship docked there with orders to sail to Italy. He transferred the prisoners to the other ship. It is interesting to note that the friends of the prisoners, e.g., Luke, were permitted to accompany the prisoners enroute to Rome. The winds were so contrary to their desired route that it took several days to come to the area of the port of Cnidus. The captain of the ship decided to favor the windage and sail southward to the island of Crete. As they neared the eastern end of the island, they barely missed Pt. Salmoe. Steering hard to the west, they came to a safe place called The Fair Havens near Lasea. The wind was continuing to be very tempestuous as the winter weather had set in. They spent several days there until the Day of Atonement

which fell at the end of September or early in October. Sailing the Mediterranean was considered very hazardous beginning about the second week of November. Their expected voyage time could now take them even beyond that time. The way the weather had been up until this time, meant that this winter could be an early one. At least Paul recognized this possibility and suggested to the Roman captain that the cargo or even the passengers could be in jeopardy if the voyage was not halted until spring time.

V. Paul's advice was ignored by both Julius and the ship's captain and owner. Near Fair Havens was a port, Phenice (Phoenix), where better accommodations were available for the long winter stay. A day occurred when the ship's captain believed that due to a moderate wind from the south, they could make Phenice. They weighed anchors and set sail westward along the island. Not long after the ship left shore, a severe northeaster (Euroclydon) struck and literally took over navigation of itself. Since the ship's crew could hardly control the situation, they were hard put to miss the small island of Cauda (Clauda). There were quicksands to the south toward Africa, and the crew did everything possible to avoid that direction. They tacked storm sails as much as possible, struck the mainsail, and secured ropes tightly designed to add strength to the ship's hull in hopes of not being shipwrecked by the exceedingly high winds and sea. In order to keep the sea out of the hull, they threw the cargo overboard. Many days and nights passed during which neither sun nor stars were visible. The crew and passengers gave up hope of living through the storm. In the midst of this misery, anxiety, and hopelessness, Paul said, "Sirs (Roman captain and ship's captain), you would have done well to listen to me back in Crete, but, nonetheless, I assure you that we are all safe, except the ship. My God's messenger appeared to me last night and promised me that everyone of our lives will be spared." They, still, so feared for their lives that they lost their appetites and did not eat for two weeks. They had neared what promised to be land as indicated by depth sounding, and the group wanted to abandon ship lest rocks shatter the ship and kill them. Paul told them to stay on board and eat, because they were about to need extra strength. The group did eat and were cheered by Paul's suggestion. When the next day dawned, they discovered a small cove and stream nearby and tried to ease the ship there. However, the ship ran aground and remained fast. The aft of the ship broke from the bow and began breaking into small pieces. The waves were still violent, and the question arose whether the crew could be expected to make land without severe consequences. Julius' guards begged him to permit them to kill the prisoners in order to save their own lives. But Julius, no doubt remembered Paul's counsel concerning their safety, refused to take the suggestion of his men. According to Luke's account, not having Paul killed really is the factor that saved all the other prisoners. Julius gave the command that everyone subject to his authority should jump into the sea, swim if possible, and assemble on shore. Some of the men had to grab pieces of the ship which had fallen apart in order to make it to land. And so it happened that all 276 people escaped safely to land. The Lord had kept his promise, as always!

Feb. 11, 2001

"Paul Reaches Rome!"
Acts 28

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. When the wrecked ship's 276 passengers and crew assembled on the edge of the cove where they had been thrown by the grave tempest, they discovered the land to be the island of Melita (Malta). The natives there were evidently not civilized (without a western world-view) but were very amicable to the shipwrecked passengers. They showed no disrespect to any of the group, but since it was raining and the wind was cold, they built a fire to warm the wet and chilled visitors. As the ship's passengers began bringing wood for the fire, Paul brought a load and threw it on the flames. A poisonous snake ran from the heat, bit his hand, and hung on by its fangs. The island natives knew the snake and that its bite was fatal. Their reasoning was that Paul was one who was worthy of death, a murderer or some such evil person. The snake bite was an omen of evil according to their superstition. The sea could not get Paul, but the snake has. Paul shook the snake into the fire, and the local citizens kept watching Paul's hand for swelling and him to fall to the ground dead. After sufficient time had lapsed for Paul to succumb to the poison, their superstition turned to devotion and then to worship. (See Luke 10:19; Mk 16:18) Publius, the chief leader of the local citizens, entertained the group for three days, and during that time his father had a fever and a serious case of dysentery. Paul went in where he lay, prayed, put his hands on the sick man, and healed him. They stayed there for three months and during that time many came to Paul for healing of various illnesses. No doubt because of Paul's demonstration of God's power to heal, they gave special honor to the visitors, and at the end of their stay, they were sent on their way with abundant supplies for the remainder of their trip to Rome.

II. A ship from Alexandria with a figure head of Gimini in the zodiac was found that had wintered on the island also. It was now about the middle of February, 61 AD, and the captain considered the weather safe for sailing for Italy. They docked at Syracuse on Sicily and after three days sailed for Rhegium (KJV, "brought a compass," circled around the toe of Italy). A good south wind brought them shortly to Puteoli where Paul and Luke found fellow believers and stayed with them for a week before traveling on north by land. Believers from Rome met Paul all the way down south at Appius Forum and Three Taverns, and this show of concern encouraged Paul and caused him to thank God. Upon reaching Rome the prisoners except Paul were placed in the common stockade, but Paul was permitted to have a private guard and live in a private rented house. After only three days Paul invited the Jewish chief priests to his place and explained his situation to them. He told them that he had been delivered by the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem to Roman authorities although he had not trespassed Jewish customs or was he personally against the Jewish nation. "The Romans examined me and would have set me free, because I was not found to be guilty. Ultimately, I was forced to appeal directly to Caesar," Paul said. My position is that God is the hope of the Jewish people. The chief priests told Paul that they had neither heard from anyone personally nor

had communication from Judea about Paul. The priests did request that Paul tell them about the new sect (followers of a Messiah). They made an appointment and later Paul spoke to them a full day about Jesus' coming as a fulfillment of the promises made to Moses and the prophets of a Savior. Some believed and some did not, and they left after Paul quoted to them Isa. 6:9-10 and Jer. 5:20-21. The great missionary Paul told the Jews that the God of their fathers was turning to the Gentiles, because the Jews would not accept God's plan of salvation. Paul lived as a prisoner for two years in his own rented place witnessing continually about Jesus as Savior. No one bothered him.

III. Letters written by Paul during the period covered by Acts and later, with place and time written.

1. I Thess. from Corinth, 2nd jour., late 52
2. II Thess. from Corinth, 2nd jour., late 53
3. I Cor. from Ephesus, 3rd jour., early 57
4. II Cor. from Macedonia, 3rd jour., late 57
5. Gal. from Greece, 3rd jour., late 57
6. Rom. from Corinth, 3rd jour., early 58
7. Eph. from Rome, 63
8. Philip. from Rome, 63
9. Col. from Rome, 63
10. Phile. from Rome, 63
11. Titus from Rome, 63
12. I Tim. from Rome, 63
13. II Tim. from Rome, 63
14. Heb. from Rome, 63 Some scholars seriously question the place and dates of what I have given for Nos. 7 through 14, and, of course, Paul's authorship of Hebrews.

IV. General contents of the Pauline letters.

1. God's historical perspective of human salvation through his Son, Jesus Christ - Rom. and Gal.
2. Jesus Christ as God's exclusive means of salvation - Philii., Eph., and Col.
3. End-of-time events - I and II Thess. and I Cor. 15
4. Kingdom of God organization and practice (local church practice) I Cor., I and II Tim., Titus, and part of Eph.
5. Personal - I Cor., Gal., Philip., I Tim., Phile., and part of I Cor.
6. Heb. - Relationship of First with Second Covenant.

V. Roman emperors - Jesus' birth through sack of Jerusalem, 70.

1. Augustus Caesar, 27 BC - 14 AD (41 yrs.), 2. Tiberius, 14-37, 3. Caligula (Gaius), 37 - 41, 4. Claudius 41-54, 5. Nero 54-68, (suicide, 31), 6. Galba, 68-69, (murdered 1-15-69), 7. Otho, 69, (suicide, 4-15-69), 8. Vitellius, 1-2-69 - 12-22-69, (murdered), 9. Vespasian (Titus), 70-79. He had two sons named Titus and Domitian by Flavia Domitilla who both became Roman emperors after him. Before becoming emperor he served in the military over the Empire. He ordered son Titus to destroy Jerusalem in 70 AD.

Feb. 11, 2001

"God Keeps His Promise"
Matt. 1

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. "And the Lord God said unto the serpent, 'Because thou hast done this [deceived Adam and Eve], thou [Satan] art cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field; upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shall thou eat all the days of thy life: And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed,'" Gen. 3:14-15. We learn in Rev. 20:10 that "all the days of thy [Satan's] life" does come to a final end as God promised in Gen. 3:15. But oh what it cost our heavenly Father to defeat that old deceiver, Satan! The cost has involved thousands of years and the shedding of God's own Son's blood (life) upon a rough Roman cross. The problem of God's righteousness relating to Satan's rebellion has not been a minor element in mankind's history. God chose the female of the human species to produce the Seed who would ultimately effect the final elimination of Satan's influence over God's own people. Gen. 3:15 states plainly that the woman's Seed will be triumphant over Satan's seed (italics mine). We have been told through God's Word who the "her (woman's) Seed" is: Jesus Christ, God's Savior of all who will trust God's Word, Psa. 22:30; Isa. 53:8; Acts 8:32-35; Rom. 9:6-12; Gal. 3:16-22; 4:4-6. But who are the ones referred to in Gen. 3:15 as "thy (Satan's) seed?" For an answer we should examine other scriptures. The Jewish leaders are identified in John's Gospel in Chap. 8, especially vss.37-47, as offspring (seeds) of Satan. Jesus in this confrontation with the Pharisees made a clear distinction between the children of God and the children of Satan. John again makes a division in I John 3:10, "In this the children of God are manifest, and the children of the devil: whosoever doeth not righteousness is not of God, neither he that loveth not his brother." The righteousness of God comes to those who trust Jesus Christ for eternal life.

II. The Rom. 9:8 passage, "- - - They which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God: but the children of promise (God's promise) are counted as [for] the seed [God's posterity]," makes an appropriate introduction to the beginning of the Gospel of Matthew. Many people who begin their reading of the New Testament are overwhelmed at the outset when they read first the "begat" verses, Matt. 1:1-17. However, the genealogy of our Lord is very meaningful in light of the above information about the seed of God as represented by his only Son, Jesus Christ. Matthew was a Jew who was led by God to write an account of the Gospel to his own people, the Jews. This Gospel is expressly directed to the attention of the Jews, and Matthew quoted from the Old Testament more than either of the other three Gospels. The Jews expected God to establish a kingdom for the Jewish nation, and Matthew uses the term "the kingdom of heaven" thirty-two times whereas the term does not appear once in the other three Gospels. The terms "that which was spoken," "it was spoken," and "that it might be fulfilled which was spoken" are all used many times by Matthew but not by the other Gospel writers. In all, Matthew quotes the Old Testament sixty times, because he knew that his prime readers were the Jews

or Jewish believers in Jesus as God's Messiah, Savior.

III. Jesus had been in the area of north Galilee performing many significant miracles when he came to where Matthew was performing his vocation as a collector of taxes for the Roman government. At Capernaum the Romans had set up a collection point for customs of goods going from and coming into the Palestinian area from Damascus to the north. When Jesus invited Matthew to become his follower, Matthew accepted at once and gave a feast at his home to announce his change of life. Many of his tax collector friends along with Jesus and his disciples were invited, and the Jewish Pharisees noted that Jesus was socializing with "tax collectors and sinners," Matt. 9:9-10; Lk 5:27-29. Matthew was also known as Levi. As significant as Matthew's Gospel is as a portion of God's Word, I believe that the Lord had this disciple in mind for this very assignment from his calling. This Gospel is the "Genesis of the New Covenant" in many respects. Since much of Genesis involves the early genealogy of God's people, the Israelites, so does Matthew's Gospel begin with an accurate genealogy establishing the fact that the Lord Jesus Christ is of the line of Abraham and David. Both are very important, because from Abraham places him in the nation and from David on the throne in the royal line. Matthew's genealogy is that of Joseph, the foster father of Jesus, lineal descendant of David and heir to the throne transmitted to our Lord. Luke ends with Mary, our Lord's mother. In Gen. 5:1 one finds, "This is the book of the generations of Adam," and in Matt. 1:1 is, "The book of the generation of Jesus Christ." Compare these two books with I Cor. 15:22, "For in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all [who trust him] be made alive." In noting this Matthew genealogy it is wise to remember that the people in Jesus' genealogy both women and Gentiles are noted. Also, note that Joseph did not "begat" Jesus, for God was his Father through God's Holy Spirit.

IV. Joseph had chosen a virgin named Mary as his future wife, but before the marriage ceremony Mary became pregnant. An angel told Joseph that she was still a virgin, because her child was sired by God's Holy Spirit. Matthew notes that this happened precisely this way to fulfill the sign promised to the Jews at Isa. 7:14. Joseph did not have sexual intercourse with Mary until after "she had brought forth her firstborn son," vs. 25. Jesus was her first-born, but she and Joseph had at least four half-brothers plus half-sisters of Jesus later, Matt. 13:55-56. Note carefully the communication in vs. 25, "And kept her a virgin until she had brought forth her firstborn son: and she called his name Jesus." (my italics) The assumption that Mary died a virgin, because human sexual activity is inherently against God's will (sinful) is a figment of certain persons' imagination much later, I believe. Human sexual activity as God has ordained it is Godly sanctioned and encouraged, Gen.1:28; 9:1-7; I Cor. 7:1-9. In fact, this virgin birth was a sign of God as a once-in-human-history event. It was made especially to the Jewish nation as a sign when God would enter humanity himself to bear the sins of all who would believe God, Isa. 7:13-14. God was in the Lord Jesus Christ redeeming all who will trust him for eternal, spiritual life, John 3:16; II Cor. 5:17-21.

Feb. 18, 2001

"The Prophets Proved Correct"
Matt. 2

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. We noted in Chap. 1 of Matthew's Gospel that the author was a Jew and that it is apparent that God commissioned him to reveal an explicit relationship between the Old Covenant promises of God and Jesus as the fulfillment of those promises. God promised to send a Messiah who could save people from their rebellion (sin) against their Creator. Mankind's part in the process of that individual, spiritual salvation is to believe God's promise, take him at his Word and live a holy life. Once that trust in God is established, the one who trusts is made an eternal child of God with eternal life assured. Chap. 2 of Matthew is an historical account of how God the Father protected his Son, the Messiah (Savior) during the most vulnerable period of Jesus' early human years. The Jewish nation to whom this Gospel was especially directed could see fulfilled the prophecies of at least four of the Old Covenant writers in this chapter alone, Micah, Hosea, Jeremiah and Isaiah. What an outstanding revelation of God's work in coming directly to earth to save those who will believe!

II. Vs. 1 gives the time and place of God's coming onto the earth and its activities, II Cor. 5:18-19. Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, a village five miles south of Jerusalem. Bethlehem means "the house of bread" and was the home of Elimelech, the father-in-law of Ruth, Ruth 1:1-2. It was here that Ruth (Matt. 1:5) settled with her second husband, Boaz, and also here where Ruth became the ancestress of the family of David. David was associated with Bethlehem throughout his life, I Sam. 16:17-18; 17:12,15; 20:6. The time of Jesus' birth was during the reign of Herod the Great, one of the most dastardly human beings who ever disgraced God's earth. His personality reflected what psychiatrists of today refer to as an amoral disposition, i.e., he demonstrated no sense of right and wrong. His right was whatever, in his opinion, furthered his own physical gain. His ability to advance his own political posture was enhanced, because Augustus and his successors, the Roman Emperors, stood by Herod and his descendants. Herod it was who murdered his own wife of many years and the children she bore him as well when he felt them to be a threat to his political position. He was designated king of the Jews near the end of his procuratorship during 37 to 4 BC. He followed the reign of his father, Antipater, whom Julius Caesar had made procurator of Judea in 47 BC. Matthew also introduces the wise men (Magi) from the east in vs. 1. We should note that the Bible nowhere gives the number of the Magi to be three, nor does the fact that they brought three gifts mean that there were only three Magi. The distance they traveled probably by camel, would indicate that there was a rather large entourage. This entourage could have consisted of scores of individuals in addition to the group of Magi. These Magi demonstrated two prime abilities, astronomy and dream interpretation. They also knew enough Jewish history to realize that the Israeli nation had been and was expecting a special king to come and rule over them. Remember also that the Jews were taken as captives to the east (Babylonia) hundreds of years earlier, and

no doubt the Easterners learned then of the Jews' expectations of the king. The Magi were apparently convinced that such a one was to come, and, further, that a star was to note for them the occasion. The Magi came to Jerusalem and began to ask around town, "Where is he that is born the King of the Jews? for we have seen his star [while we were back] in the east, and are come [here] to worship him," vs. 2. When this entourage came into town asking about another (other than Herod) King of the Jews, he immediately convened the chief priests and scribes of the Jewish people and demanded of them "where the Christ should be born," vs. 4. They knew at once, and quoted Micah 5:2 who had been told by God that Bethlehem was the place. Herod sneaked to the Magi and told them that Bethlehem was the place where they would find the Christ child. Evidently, Herod was especially interested in the timing of the star, because, I believe, he was particularly concerned about the time of Jesus' birth, i.e., how old Jesus was at the time of his (Herod's) inquiry. Herod sneaked around to the Magi and feigned an interest in also worshiping the new King of the Jews. They left Jerusalem and went to Bethlehem observing the motion of the star. The star which they had noted before they had left their homes back east, stood over where the young child was, vs. 9. They rejoiced when they came into his presence, and presented Jesus with gifts of gold (for royalty, I Kings 10:18; Psa. 21:3), frankincense (for a holy, Godly life, Lev. 24:5-9), and Myrrh (associated with death as it was used in embalming, John 19:39). We should be aware that exact timing is not given by Matthew or Luke. Luke relates the visit of the shepherds to see Jesus immediately after his birth, because he was still in the animal stall (manger), Lk 2:15-20. Matthew does not say that the Magi visited the infant in the stall but in a house, vs. 11. (Many artists' concepts are incorrect!) The Magi were warned in a dream of Herod's real reason for wanting to know the exact location of Jesus. They, therefore, returned to the east in a way where Herod could not arrest them for further information about Jesus' whereabouts.

III. After the Magi left for home, the Lord sent a messenger (angel) to Joseph in a dream saying, "Arise, and take the young child - - to Egypt," vs. 13. This arrangement was to escape Herod's attempt to kill Jesus, and it was also to fulfill the prophet Hosea's prophecy at Hos. 11:1, vs. 15. As God saved Israel as a nation physically from Egypt, in Jesus Christ he was now preparing to offer spiritual (eternal) salvation through his Son. After Herod learned that the Magi had ignored his request to reveal Jesus' location, he had every male child two years of age or younger killed in a circle around the outskirts of the Jerusalem area from Bethlehem to the south to Rama to the north. The sadness and sorrow thus created in the slain children's parents and loved ones were a fulfillment of Jer. 31:15, vs. 18. When Herod the Great died, the Lord's angel told Joseph in a dream to return to north Israel, the Galilee area, but not to Judea where Herod the Great's son, Archelaus, had succeeded to the throne of Israel. Joseph chose the village of Nazareth where Jesus grew up. This village fulfilled the prophecies of Judges 13:5; Isa. 11:1,10, 53:2-3; Psa. 22:6; vs. 23. To understand the "root" idea in these prophecies, one must know that the Hebrew word for Nazareth is Netzer, meaning "branch" or "shoot" [of a plant, shrub, or tree], or, figuratively, "of little significance," John 1:46. That truth is why Joseph chose Nazareth, for no one would consider that place to be the home of Israel's new King, our Lord!

Feb. 25, 2001

"The Forerunner Arrives"
Matt. 3

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. Recall that Matthew's Gospel (the Good News of God to mankind) was written for and directed toward the Jewish nation especially. Since that was true, it was not necessary for Matthew to establish a basis for John the Immerser's role as it related to the Messiah who had finally arrived from God. The Jews knew of the promise of God recorded in his prophet Malachi at 4:4-5. There God assured his people, the Israelites, that a day was coming when the earth would burn as an oven, Mal. 3:1; 4:1 (See also II Pet. 3:7,10.). However, before that day comes, (We learned of "that day" in our study of Isaiah, Daniel and The Revelation.), God promised to send a person like Elijah (I Kings 18:40; Lk 1:17) who would prepare the way for God's judgment. All that remained when John the Immerser and Jesus the Savior (Messiah) appeared upon the earthly scene, was for the Jewish nation to accept them as God's promise for mankind's spiritual salvation. Let us leap ahead in Matthew's Gospel to Chap. 11:7-15 where the Lord indicates definitely that John the Immerser was the forerunner of the Messiah's (Jesus') arrival on earth, "and if you [the Jews] will receive it [the person of John the Immerser], this is Elias (Elijah), which was for to come," Matt. 11:14.

II. During the period while Jesus was growing up (Matt. 2:23), Matthew states, "In those days came John the Immerser, proclaiming in the wilderness of Judea and saying, 'Repent you, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,'" i.e., the kingdom God promised you Jews is ready to be established, vss. 1-2. To tie the activity of John the Immerser to God's promise of the Lord's coming, Matthew quotes Isaiah who prophesied of John's assignment, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Prepare you the way of [for] the Lord, make his paths straight,'" Isa. 40:3, vs. 3. The Bible relates some details of John's choices regarding personal habits and public activities. His garments were made of rough camel's hair with a wide leather belt around his waist. He ate what was available in the desert area where he worked, locusts and honey from wild bees. Locusts (grasshoppers) are still eaten by some Arabs in the Middle East. Often they are cooked in butter which gives them a mild, less wild or gamey flavor. Wild bees lived in holes in rocks (Deut. 32:13), in hollow tree trunks (I Sam. 14:26), and even in carcasses of dead animals (Jud. 14:8). Some Bible students also allow that the honey could have been a sweet sap which oozed from certain fig or palm trees. John was a young man at this time, because he was about six months older than Jesus (Lk 1:24,26). Further, John was murdered by Herod before our Lord was crucified for mankind's [all who will believe] spiritual, eternal life. Jesus was crucified at about age thirty-three, about 28 AD, I believe.

III. John's message that people should repent of their sins was taken very seriously as is evidenced by the variety of those who came to be immersed by the evangelist. They came from Jerusalem, all of Judea and all along the banks of the Jordan. They openly confessed their sins including many of those Jews of the sects of

the Pharisees and Sadducees, vs.7. John was very blunt with these especially (just like Elijah!) by telling them, "O brood of snakes (vipers), who hath warned you to escape the coming wrath?" (vs.7) He called those seeking immersion henceforth to conduct their affairs to reflect activities worthy of better lives than they were admitting. He emphasized that their being offspring of Abraham was not, of itself, enough to please God. John equated stones with simply being from Abraham's seed. [One must be born from above, John 3:3, by trusting God's only Son and Savior (Messiah), John 3:14-17. Only then would they be right with God and able to live holy, acceptable-to-God lives, John 3:18-21; 6:44-51.] Mankind's need for a Savior (Messiah) and an abiding Holy Spirit (Comforter, John 14:26) is what John the Immerser is proclaiming when he says, "And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees," vs.10. For a fuller explanation of what God is doing through Jesus Christ as proclaimed by John the Immerser in Matt. 3:10, see Rom. 11:11-36. By accepting Jesus as Savior one is born from above and sealed by God's Holy Spirit as God's forever child with a desire to please his or her heavenly Father, John 10:27-30; II Cor. 1:21-22; Eph. 1:7-14. John the Immerser could very well not have fully understood the full implications of the message God had commissioned him to proclaim, for recall John's problem of understanding at Lk 11:19-20. Here John, Jesus' half-cousin according to the flesh and proclaimer of Jesus' being the Messiah (John 1:29), wants further confirmation from the Lord himself that Jesus is, in fact, God's Messiah. This act of John has always seemed strange to me, but at that time John was in prison awaiting decapitation by Herod, Mk 6:17-29; Lk 3:19-20. This prison was east of the Dead Sea, far from the center of most of the Jewish population which John the Immerser loved. This long isolation no doubt caused him much mental anguish and probably gave him cause to want an updated affirmation of Jesus as the Messiah.

IV. Along with the repentance required in John's message was that another messenger from God was about to become known who was far superior to himself. John was immersing repenters over on the east side of the Jordan River near the south end of Lake Galilee one day when he looked at those coming for immersion, and noted Jesus among those coming forward. He told those nearby, "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world. This is he of whom I said, 'After me cometh a man which is preferred before me, for he was before me,'" John 1:29-30. John the Immerser went on to say that as he immersed Jesus, after Jesus had insisted upon being immersed although John had protested doing so, John saw God's Spirit descend from heaven like a dove and remaining upon Jesus. This experience was an indication to John that, although he had not known Jesus' office (as Messiah) before (John 1:31,33), he was thereafter convinced that Jesus would immerse individual believers in him (Jesus as the Christ) with God's Holy Spirit whereas John himself was immersing only with water. John the Immerser's conclusion: "And I saw, and testify that this [one, Jesus] is the Son of God," John 1:34. When Jesus finished God's plan of spiritual salvation through his death on the cross, burial, and resurrection, John the Immerser's immersion for repentance no longer pleased God as an indication that an individual had exercised appropriate faith in God's Savior, Jesus Christ, Acts 19:1-7, for God said at Jesus' immersion, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased," vs. 17. (See also Matt. 17:5b, where God said, "hear Jesus [alone]"

I. Immediately following John the Immerser's immersion of our Lord Jesus, the Lord "was led up of the spirit (Holy Spirit) into the wilderness (desert area) to be tempted of the devil," vs. 1. We are not told the reasons for this testing of Jesus, but we can believe that if Jesus were to be completely identified with sinful humanity as he was in being immersed by John in the Jordan, he would need to be as is stated in God's Word at Heb. 4:15-16, tested by the wiles of Satan's influence. This testing was an appropriate training for Jesus as a priest to stand between believers and God the Father, the only necessary priest, king, and judge, Psa. 110:4-6; Zech. 6:12-13; Heb. 5:5-10; 7:14,20-28. (The only priest) If Jesus is to rebuke Satan on our behalf as God's only High Priest, how better to recognize Satan's tactics than to confront the old Deceiver head-on, directly. So, God the Father through his Spirit directed Jesus to go alone out to the desert to be without food for "forty days and forty nights," vs. 2. Remember too, that this man Jesus was the one, final wedge between Satan's ability to control sinful mankind and for them to be free of his (Satan's) influence over God's creation, including the pinnacle of that creation, humanity, Rev. 20:10. Sure enough, when Jesus was weakened (humanly) by the long period without food, old Satan showed up with his first test. Satan's first attempt to destroy Jesus as God's Messiah was to seek to undermine Jesus' identity as God's only begotten Son. Jesus' reaction to Satan's "Iffy" suggestion was to quote Deut. 8:3, "Man shall not live by bread only, but by every word out of the mouth of the Lord," vs. 4. In other words, persons consist of more than a physical, flesh and blood being. They need to heed God's Word regarding their spiritual needs, and those needs can be met only by knowing God's promise in his Word and accepting that promise through faith. A person must, to be complete (whole), be enlightened and recreated by God (from above), John 3:3-8,14-15. Of course Satan knew that, but he thought that it could be possible to break Jesus' (as a human) belief in himself as to who he really was, the true God, the Creator's only begotten Son and Savior. (Note Satan's same tactic in disputing God's eternal nature in humanity at Gen. 2:7,16-17; 3:1-5.) Satan's first test of Jesus gained Satan nothing, because Jesus refused to yield to Satan's appeal to his body's need for physical appetites. One's spirit's (soul's) need takes precedence over one's physical needs.

II. One of Satan's strengths is that he does not give up easily. If he cannot cause one to disbelieve God and therefore not serve him, Satan will come at a person from different directions. The "food thing" (lust of the flesh) did not work so how about Jesus' ability to control his spirit's lust for proving himself to be able to control God by subterfuge. Satan told Jesus by quoting Psa. 91:11-12 that, since you believe that you really are God's only Son, God surely will not permit anything bad to happen to you, so let's go up to the Temple in Jerusalem. There you can force God to take care of you by climbing to the top of the [Herod's] Temple and jumping off. Jesus' answer to Satan to countermand this

spiritual test was to quote Deut. 6:16 where Moses took the glory to himself of bringing much needed water from a rock rather than giving God the glory for bringing forth the water, Numb.20:2-13. Jesus refused to test God in this way. Again, Satan was unable to break Jesus' will. In Satan's last attempt to gain Jesus' loyalty to himself rather than to the heavenly Father, he asked Jesus to view all the nations of the world from the peak of a high mountain. Satan said, "All these things [with their glory] will I give to you, if you will fall down and worship me," vs. 9. Of course Satan was lying about his authority, but he has always been a liar, John 8:44. Jesus quoted Deut. 6:13 to say that only God is to be worshiped, vs. 10. (Compare vs. 10 with Matt. 16:23.) Jesus again did not yield to Satan's psychological test of a person's lust for power over others. Eve was likewise tempted by the same Satan at Gen. 3:5, "- - you shall be as God (equal to God)" if you will take my (Satan's) suggestion and do what God has commanded you not to do (eat of the fruit which will cause you to die [spiritually]). Jesus in not yielding to all of Satan's tests, demonstrated a strength of being and will that set him above and apart from every other human being who has ever or ever will live on earth, I Pet. 2:21-25. Every other person has or will yield to Satan's tests in life, Rom. 3:23; Gal. 3:22. This fact is why God sent Jesus to earth as the Savior of all who will trust him, John 3:16-18. After passing Satan's tests successfully, Jesus is now prepared to begin his service (ministry) as God's Messiah. After this grueling, tempting experience, God sent messengers to meet Jesus' needs, Jam. 4:7.

III. Vs. 12 indicates a lapse in time, probably short, between Jesus' learning that John the Immerser had been cast into prison by Herod (Matt. 14:3) and Jesus' proceeding from his home in Nazareth to Capernaum where he then relocated. Capernaum was a fishing center on the north shore of Galilee. Matthew was careful to note that Jesus was going to Capernaum between Zabulon and Nephthalim precisely to fulfill a prophecy of Isaiah at Isa. 9:1-2 which includes, "The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: and to them which are in the region and shadow of death, light is sprung up." Jesus evidently set up his headquarters at Capernaum, because his neighbors at Nazareth refused to accept Jesus as God's Messiah, Mk 6:1-6. Further, Jesus needed to be among a group of people from whom he could choose those who would join him in spreading the Good News that the kingdom of heaven is now being promoted. So it was, as Jesus walked along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers Peter and Andrew throwing their net in the water as they exercised their vocation. Jesus asked the two to follow him so that the Lord could redirect their interests from catching and selling fish to "fish for people," vs. 19. They immediately left their nets and accepted Jesus' offer to spread the Gospel. After their acceptance, Jesus located two other brothers, James and John. In fact, these two were at this time with their father, Zebedee, helping him mend their nets. The two sons, as Peter and Andrew had done, agreed to leave their father and the fishing business and become disciples of Jesus. Jesus was now planning his activities so that he went all about Galilee (northern Israel) teaching in the synagogues and proclaiming the Good News about God's being ready to establish his kingdom. The King is now here among you! As he taught, Jesus healed thousands of people who were physically and/or mentally ill, multitudes of people from Galilee, Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and east of the Jordan. Next week: what Jesus taught.

I. With Chap. 5 of Matthew's Gospel account, we come to the principles or teachings of our Lord to his disciples, i.e., those who had chosen to be disciplined by the Teacher who had come from God to Israel's people. Following closely the context of Matthew's introduction of these teachings, one discovers (vs. 1) that as Jesus had been out among huge groups of people teaching them about the kingdom of heaven he had been sent to proclaim (Matt. 4:23), he noted that these Jews were in desperate need of a knowledge of their relationship with God the Father and his will for mankind. Therefore, he withdrew, "went up into a mountain," and there his disciples, not the multitudes, came to him for instruction. Apparently, Jesus chose to teach his disciples and thereby prepare them to reach out with his teachings to the multitudes. He did not do this teaching by writing a book but rather divulged God's thoughts orally, "opened his mouth," vs. 2. Why? I believe that Jesus knew that when the Holy Spirit came, he (Holy Spirit) would make known, not only the message itself, but also the meaning which God wanted conveyed, John 14:16-17,25-26; Acts 2:1-4,14-18.

II. To understand Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount" we must keep in mind that its message or teachings are for those who are to be citizens of the kingdom of heaven, those who are led by God's Holy Spirit. No one, I believe, can live by the precepts given in Jesus' teachings without the prompting and power of God himself in the person of his Holy Spirit, John 6:44-45. Not only is that true, but in a world in which Satan is still prince, John 12:31; II Cor. 4:4, God has not yet completely taken Satan away from mankind as he will finally, Rev. 20:10, after he sets up his kingdom, Rev. 20:3. Is this knowledge of God's future plans for his people an excuse for not following God's lead (Jesus' teachings) in our present flesh and blood lives? NO! (See Rom. 6:1-2,14-16; I John 1:8-2:2.) But the Law and Jesus' revealing the intent of that Law to an even higher plane, is to demonstrate that every individual falls short of God's will for us, and therefore, a person has a need for a Savior whom God is providing in Jesus Christ, and a heavenly sustainer, God's Holy Spirit, John 3:16; 14:16-17; 15:10-12; Gal. 3:24-26; Eph. 1:13-14; 4:30-32. A person must place himself or herself under the lordship of God through faith in his only Son, Jesus Christ, and then follow the leadership of God's Holy Spirit to please God, Eph. 2:4-10. Only in this way can one's life please God and produce the "fruit of the Spirit," Gal. 5:22-26. What must one do who abuses his or her relationship with God and who has already become a child of God through personal faith in Jesus Christ, Eph. 4:30? Confess the abuse to God and ask him through Jesus Christ to forgive and strengthen one's spirit against future temptations, I Cor. 10:13. Sinning against God's will after becoming a citizen of God's kingdom, i.e., those bought-with-Jesus'-death are to give an account of their witnessing in this life, II Cor. 5:9-10; I Cor. 3:14-15.

III. There are some Bible students who make the teachings of Jesus in these famous teachings the essence of the Gospel and, in effect,

make their precepts a restoration of the Old Covenant Law to be what one must do under the New Covenant to make one worthy of eternal life. Whereas, in fact, such a proposition takes the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ out of the picture entirely. As we have noted above, eternal, spiritual life with God is solely accomplished through God's love and grace. I believe that no one can say honestly that he or she maintains the spirit of the directions in Jesus' teachings. As we examine these teachings, ask yourself honestly, whether, since you became a child of God through accepting Jesus' righteousness for eternal life through faith in him, you have never failed to follow Jesus' teachings, but have always followed God's Holy Spirit? Remember, these teachings do not outline the plan of salvation but detail the attitudes and actions which will prevail in the Lord's ecclesia when Jesus returns. As a believer, have you ever disobeyed God? If so, confess such to the Lord in faith, and as Jesus told the woman caught in sin, his response to you will be, "Neither do I condemn thee: go and sin no more," John 8:11. Jesus taught with the authority of God, not as those who taught that keeping the Law was mankind's chief responsibility to God, Matt. 7:28-29. Love takes precedence over the Law, in fact, loving is the fulfilling of the Law, John 15:10,12,17; Rom. 13:8-14.

IV. Vss. 3-14 enumerates states of being rather than commandments to do. It is the nature of a member of the kingdom of heaven's very being to express reliance on God's Spirit for direction and strength (poor in ones own spirit, humble); to mourn ones sincere need for final, complete spiritual salvation, Rom. 7:24-25; 8:18-25; I Cor. 15:25-28,54,58; with meekness (yielded to God) comes an inheritance of the earth; a yearning for righteousness will be satisfied; the results of being merciful is to receive mercy; purity of motive (will) produces a vision of God's will; sons of God are the ones who live and present the plan of spiritual peace with God to others; citizens of the kingdom of heaven can expect persecution [in the present world order before Jesus comes to be Lord of his kingdom], to be reviled, and falsely accused for Jesus' sake; but in this age as you are experiencing being despised and rejected by unbelievers, be happy (blessed) and rejoice, for the reward will be great for you as it will be for representatives of God (prophets) before you, I Cor. 3:14-15; Heb. 11:39-40; I Pet. 4:12-14. As citizens of the kingdom of heaven awaiting our reward, we are to be the salt (preservers) of the earth, the light (enlighteners, witnesses) of the world who are to do God's will and thereby glorify our God in heaven, vss. 13-16. We believers are to do God's will because of the love he has demonstrated toward us rather than to keep the rituals of the Law as was the custom and pride of the Scribes and Pharisees, vs. 20. For examples: anger toward another equals (produces) murder; giving for God's work does not give one license to mistreat others; while the Law requires that one not engage in sexual relations with other than ones own spouse, even looking lustfully on other than ones spouse is equal to committing adultery in God's sight; divorcing for other than immorality causes both thereafter to commit adultery; swearing a commitment rather than a simple assertion is unGodly; do not retaliate when mistreated and give whatever is asked, and more; love even your enemies, even as God does; let God be your example, vss. 13-48. No wonder we can be satisfied only by trusting God's love, mercy, grace, and forgiveness! Praise the Lord for John 3:14-17!

Mar. 18, 2001

"Kingdom of Heaven Values"
Matt. 6

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. We noted last week that the Sermon on the Mount is not the Gospel, per se, but the being status and ethical actions and attitudes of kingdom of heaven citizens. The Gospel in a nutshell is stated by Paul in God's Word at I Cor. 15: 1,3-4, "- - - that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures." This Sermon, which is introduced in Matt. 5:1-2 and continues on through Chaps. 6-7, enumerates and expands the attitudes and actions of those who have voluntarily (willed to) accepted God's Good News in and through Jesus Christ. These believers in Jesus Christ have accepted the kingship (authority) of God in Jesus Christ, and are, therefore, citizens of God's kingdom of heaven, a favorite term of Matthew. As citizens of God's kingdom, we believers are sojourners on earth while in our flesh and blood bodies, I Pet. 1:13-21. We wait patiently for Jesus to return and receive us, not simply as the subjects of his kingdom, but as his own very bride, II Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:32; Rev. 19:7-9; 21:2,9. Jesus taught his disciples to have a deeper respect ("for" or "but I say," Matt. 5:17-20; 21-26; 27-28; 31-32; 33-37; 38-42; 43-48) for God's Law than the Jews had traditionally regarded it. Followers of God's Son, Jesus, are to live the spirit of the Law rather than the letter of that Law. Those who truly want to please God in their daily lives are to act from a motivation of love for God and his will rather than simply how to "get by." We believers are fully blest, because God loves us and has given us the desire and ability to return his love, Rom. 5:3-8; I John 4:13-19. The Sermon on the Mount relates the ethical context for living as disciples of Jesus Christ, but without God's Spirit living in and directing our thoughts and activities, there is no dynamo (power) to live as God desires for us. Our holiness depends entirely upon the power of God and our depending thereupon, Rom. 8:1-3,26-28. Our humility is the reasonable result, Gal. 3:23-4:6; Eph. 1:13-14; 2:4-10.

II. We now look at the continuation of Jesus' teaching of the Law of the kingdom of heaven which Christ has promised to return and establish, John 14:3. We should emphasize that presenting the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount as a guide for unbelievers is like attempting to run a pig on gasoline. We who have the guidance of the Holy Spirit have enough trouble with Satan, let alone those who do not have the power of God's Holy Spirit, Rom. 7! If one is trusting oneself to attain the goals of pleasing God, negative results are inevitable. A proper relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ is absolutely necessary for one to be able to practice acceptably citizenship in the kingdom of heaven. Chap. 6 speaks to a kingdom citizen's relationship to God whereas Chap. 5 had to do primarily with God's people in the kingdom relating to one another and the Law's part in directing those relationships. In vs. 1 Jesus speaks of a believer's giving to benefit others needs. The King James term "alms" means today giving money or service to others in Jesus' name. Jesus says here that the motive behind such actions will determine what the reward will be for those so engaged.

If you give to impress upon others how "good" you are, your only reward will be their admiration. Jesus characterizes those who practice such charity as hypocrites. On the other hand, if you serve others because of your love of God, do not feel that you are performing self-made goodness (righteousness). Your faith in God's promise through Jesus made you do it, and therefore, God is glorified. God knows why you do what you do, and will reward you openly if your actions were because of your love of God, vss. 1-4. The same principle is demonstrated in praying. Hypocrites also pray and in so doing seek to impress other persons with their "piety" by repeating over and over publicly their assertions and requests. Also, their rewards will be the admiration of their hearers. Someone has said, "Those prayers don't get through the ceiling!" "God knows what your needs are before you pray," Jesus said, vs. 8, Isa. 65:24. And because he knows, your prayers should be prayed in a place where nobody knows where you are, vs. 6. Jesus instructs believers in him to address God as Father as they pray. (See John 1:12-13 to understand who is so privileged. Only those who are born from above are so designated, John 3:5.) Jesus' model prayer continues: address God with awe, directly; ask that God's lordship be accepted in the spirits of more and more people on earth [so that the appropriate time will come when Jesus will return, Matt. 24:14, to formally establish his kingdom on earth]; ask for daily physical needs; ask for God's forgiveness of your shortcomings equal to your forgiving others; ask for God to lead you around (to bypass) those circumstances which seduce you away from pleasing God; your prayer should recognize that your chief purpose in life is to remember that God's lordship (kingdom) takes precedence over everything else, vs. 33. Note that Jesus emphasizes, by repeating, the importance of forgiving others, vss. 12,14-15. See also I John 4:20-5:5.

III. When kingdom citizens choose to make special arrangements to devote themselves to God's service in a special way, they should not do this in such a way as to impress others. Let it (fasting, for example, and see I Cor. 7:2-5) be between you and God. Jesus told his disciples (kingdom citizens) regarding material possessions that all appropriate investments are made with eternity in mind. Investments made in those things which are temporary only draws ones heart (will) away from eternal (spiritual) values and activities. A kingdom national cannot have two simultaneously prime preferences, for inevitably one will supersede the other, e.g., God and spiritual, eternal concerns, or self and material, temporary things, vs. 24. Your treasure (investments) reflects that which is most important to you. Even daily needs such as food, drink, and clothing are not the most important things in God's kingdom. Your fleshly nature is just that, a part of the natural order, like birds. These creatures of God are supplied their physical needs so why should we believers not consider ourselves who house God's eternal Spirit more important than the lower (without God's eternal nature) animals, I Cor. 3:15-17? If God supplies their temporary needs, is it reasonable to presume that God will neglect his own children? (vs. 32) God even creates inanimate life such as grass and lilies with the abilities to live and survive in glorious splendor, and then die without living beyond their physical existence. But God has made believers (citizens of his kingdom) eternal spirits who will live with him forever, John 11:25-26, and never die (spiritually). Those citizens should hold first precedence for being God's children, and furthering the kingdom, knowing that God will keep his promise to take care of their every temporary, physical need as they do so.

Mar. 25, 2001

"Relating To One Another"
Matt. 7

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. Chap. 7 continues and concludes Jesus' so called "Sermon on the Mount." Recall that in Chap. 5 Jesus' teaching includes the self status (being) of citizens of the kingdom of heaven and their relationship to God's Law, and in Chap. 6 Jesus discusses how his citizens should relate to God. Now in Chap. 7 the Lord gives acceptable behavior as kingdom citizens relate to one another. The "bottom line" in Jesus' teachings is that those who have placed their eternal welfare into Jesus Christ's keeping are different and should, therefore, have different values about every aspect of life. They should have characteristics which indicate different motives, attitudes, and actions, II Cor. 5:14-21; Matt. 7:16a. As God's children through faith in Jesus Christ, we are continually growing and maturing in and through God's grace, Eph. 4:12-32; II Pet. 3:18. In fact, those distinctives which relate an individual to God through Jesus Christ is what is known in Christian theology as "holy," i.e., Godlike, separated, Matt. 5:48; Lk 6:36; II Cor. 6:14-18; Eph. 5:1. The apostle James summarized this holy aspect of a believer's faith activities at Jam. 2:22, "Do you understand that faith was working with his [Abraham's] actions, [in offering to sacrifice his only son, Isaac], and by [such] actions [Abraham] was made complete?" James' conclusion in his discussion of the relationship of one's faith and that faith's evidence is at Jam. 2:26, "For as the body [flesh and blood] without the spirit [God's Holy Spirit] is dead [separated from God spiritually], so faith without works [evidence of acceptance of Jesus and his teachings] is dead [separated from God, spiritually] as well." To understand how James' letter (God's Word) relates to the teachings of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, one must note in James 1:1 his letter is addressed to Jews who were, no doubt, struggling with their new faith in Jesus as God's Messiah and their lifelong dedication to keeping God's Law as the sole basis for pleasing God. Further, note that the principle basis of James' message has to do with the part faith plays in the interaction between believers. Remember we stated above that the Matt. 7 emphasis is how kingdom of heaven citizens relate to each other. James discusses the purpose of temptations (tests) in Jam. 1:1-12; the source of tests in Jam. 1:13-18; true faith and God's Word's place in directing the citizens' daily activities in Jam. 1:19-27; faith's part in equating, in God's sight, believers who are rich, poor, or socially elite in Jam. 2:1-13; as discussed above, faith's part in stimulating and undergirding a believer's following God's will, Jam. 2:14-25; faith's urging kingdom citizens not to use language to cause others to stumble (displease God), Jam. 3:1-12; lastly, faith in Jesus Christ produces humility (Jam. 4:1-12), dependence upon God (Jam. 4:13-5:6), patience as we await Jesus' return for us, (Jam. 5:7-12, and upholding fellow believers in prayer, especially those who err (stray) from exercising true faith in Jesus as the Messiah, Jam. 5:13-20 (and see Rom. 11:14 where Paul also speaks of his special concern for his fellow Jews in the flesh).

II. Now let us return to God's message (Jesus' teaching) in Matt.

7, the conclusion of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. As we learned in Matt. 6:12,14-15, Jesus was very concerned that citizens forgive one another. In vs. 1 he applies the same principle regarding judging one another. God forgives us as we forgive each other, and we escape God's judgment as we do not judge [by law] other kingdom citizens. We relate to God through his mercy and love through our faith in Jesus Christ, not through the keeping of the Law, Rom. 3:19-31. We can, by knowing the actions of fellow believers, see how effective their service is, but not their spiritual condition which is God's prerogative alone. Only God can know ones introspective motives. Many self-righteous persons assess most others worse than self. Such self-righteous ones are rebellious like dogs or swine and are not to be contended with, vs. 6. They are spiritual perverts who insist on putting their own goodness before God's mercy and grace, Jude 4,7,17,20. A citizen of the kingdom of heaven who seeks God's blessings will receive his or her requests with far more wisdom than humanly limited parents give when asked for needs by their own children. God's rule of gold is "Treat others as you would be treated by them," vs. 12, which is the thesis of the Old Covenant. Everyone has two choices, the freedom of trusting Jesus as Savior (John 8:33-36 - the narrow way) or relying upon anything else for spiritual salvation - the broad way. There is one way only which will please God, and that way is to accept Jesus Christ's righteousness, John 3:18; 6:34-40; 10:10; 11:25-26; 14:6; Rom. 3:21-31; 9:30-33.

III. In vss. 15-20 Jesus warns kingdom citizens concerning false messengers who declare themselves to be speaking of God's will and way, prophets. They are really ravenous wolves who are only dressed as sheep. The fruit they bear will identify them, their actions and attitudes. Their actions speak so loudly that their words do not reveal their real hearts and wills. This caution of our Lord continues as a thread through the remainder of the New Covenant, Matt. 24:24; II Cor. 11:13-15; II Tim. 4:3-4; II Pet. 2; I John 4:1; II John 10; Jude; Rev. 2:2. Vss. 21-23 further reveal that many who profess to be allies with Jesus will be fakes. Jesus said, "Not every one who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven," vs. 21. Others will say that they have proclaimed God's plans, even cast out evil spirits, and performed many miracles in the name of Christ, but at the end Jesus will tell them, "I never knew you: depart from me, you who work iniquity," Matt. 13:24-30. As James put it at Jam. 1:22, "But be ye doers of the Word (accept Jesus and his teachings as children), and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves." Vss. 24-27 relate one of Jesus' many parables. Here he teaches that kingdom citizens who live Jesus' teachings are like a wise person who plans his or her house and then builds the home upon a rock (See I Cor. 10:4,13.). After the house is built upon that Rock (See Peter's confession at Matt. 16:15-18 of faith in that Rock, and also Peter's discussion (God's Word) at I Pet. 2:1-10.). When the trials (temptations) of life (rain, floods, and wind) come, the person who is firmly built upon that Rock will withstand those trials. On the other hand, lives built on (sand) other than that Rock will not be acceptable to God the Father. Jesus taught with authority! "On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand; all other ground is sinking sand; my hope is built on nothing less," I Cor. 3:11-17.

Apr. 8, 2001

"Jesus Shows Godly Authority"
Matt. 8

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. No ethical teaching given in human history surpasses Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount in Matt. 5-7. Not only did he proclaim those ethics, but he also lived a life which demonstrated that a human could follow his teachings. So, how could those principles be a demonstration of what God really desired for human beings to follow? That proper relationship between people and their Creator must be certified by the one (Jesus) who gave the ethical teachings, John 5:26-27. The chapter we examine today fully divulges as fact that Jesus had the authority and Godly power to be the sovereign (king) over a kingdom of heaven itself. I believe that when Jesus returns to earth that he will, in fact, organize and rule over a kingdom where he will guide his loyal subjects to follow the principles which he gave in Matt. 5-7. At that time and in that kingdom, all spirits will love to follow the Lord's leading. Satan's influence in today's world makes following the Lord's leading very difficult, Rom. 7; 16:20. In fact, the nearer one follows Jesus' leading (by his Holy Spirit) in his or her daily living, the more opposition and persecution one experiences, Psa. 34:19; Matt. 5:10-12; II Tim. 3:10-17. Jesus himself was hated by the Jewish religious leaders as he practiced God's will, John 8:59; 10:31. Who Jesus was (God's only begotten Son) was proved by his control of the earth's natural laws, forces (John 10:25,32), and, following his teachings, he went about demonstrating his power over physical and spiritual laws. We see ample evidence of this truth in Matt. 8.

II. Immediately after Jesus came down from the mountain where he taught the lessons in Matt. 5-7, great crowds again began following him. A leprous man came up to Jesus and worshiped him by bowing and saying, "Lord, if you want it to be so, you can make me well (whole)." Jesus' response was to touch the leper with his hand and say, "I want your request to be granted, be cured." Immediately the man's leprosy disappeared, and he was as though he had not been diseased. The Lord's position following this exchange appears strange on its surface, for Jesus said, "See you tell no one [do not take the time] what has happened to you, but present yourself immediately to the [Jewish] priest, offering the appropriate gift according to Moses' Law [so that they can know for a fact that you are well and can give to you a true testimony authorizing you to again associate with others.]," Lev. 13-14. Note especially Lev. 13:2-3,44-46 and Lev. 14:11 which include the priest's instructions concerning the detection, isolation, and restoration of a leprous person. This man whom Jesus healed was hilariously happy. Mark reveals that the healed man proclaimed widespread what Jesus had done. Thereafter, Jesus was so inundated by the crowds in the city that he had to go out into the countryside (desert places). Even so, out there people came to him from everywhere in the area, Mk 1:40-45. Jesus' popularity increased rapidly throughout Galilee.

III. Although Jesus found it impractical to stay in Capernaum, he did come into town on occasion. During one such time a Roman

officer in charge of the local armory (one hundred soldiers) approached Jesus and pleaded with him saying, "Lord, my servant [probably his valet] is home in bed paralyzed (with palsy) and in excruciating pain." When Jesus agreed to go to the centurion's quarters and heal the servant, the officer said, "Lord, I am not worth such personal attention. I believe that if you will simply express the desire, my request will be met. I have authority and my word to those under my command is all that is necessary to have my requests completed. [i.e., I trust your authority with God.]," vs. 8-9. This expression of authority by the centurion, I believe, is very important in this interchange. Jesus was astonished (marvelled) by the faith in Jesus' authority over nature by this Roman, Gentile, military commander. What surprised Jesus, in my opinion, is that a Gentile would have faith in his authority when the Jewish leaders were jealous and discounted Jesus as God's Messiah. The Lord said to them who followed him, "To tell the truth (verily), I have not found such profound faith, even among the Jews (Israel)," vs. 10. Jesus' observation goes even further: "Gentiles will be accepted from all over the world and will join Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as people of faith in God's Messiah, while some children [by physical birth] of the kingdom [Israel] will be refused as citizens of God's kingdom and thrown out into outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth," vs. 11-12. The conclusion of Jesus' relating to the centurion was that the Lord told the officer, "Go about your duties, your request will be answered according to your faith [in my authority]," vs. 13. The centurion's servant was cured exactly when Jesus willed it to be so.

IV. After Jesus healed the centurion's servant, he came to the home of Peter, also there in Capernaum, where he learned that Peter's mother-in-law was in bed sick with a fever. Jesus touched her hand, and the fever immediately left her. She then served her visitor's needs (refreshments?). It appears that the word went out around Capernaum that "Jesus was back in town." Later that day many were brought to Jesus for healing who were mentally ill. The Lord simply ordered the evil spirits (demons) from them, and the mentally ill were made whole (cured). Many others who were physically ill came to Jesus and were made well also. Matthew emphasized that these acts of Jesus were done, "That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah [at Isa. 53:4]," vs. 17. Jesus realized that the crowds were so numerous that it became impractical to serve them well. He told his followers (his immediate helpers) to prepare to cross the Sea of Galilee. As they were leaving, a scribe approached him saying that he wanted to follow Jesus as did another disciple who wanted to postpone his discipleship until his aged father had died. Jesus said that, in effect, my time is short, let others care for your father and come, follow me. The Lord then boarded a ship with his helpers to go to the east shore. As they sailed, Jesus, who obviously needed rest, lay down and went to sleep. A violent storm arose, and the fearful ones with him awoke Jesus to declare that they were all in grave danger from the storm. Jesus addressed the storm and told the wind and waves to be calm. They did so. The men were astonished by his authority over natural forces. On the other side of the lake where the Gergesenes lived, they were accosted by two insane men who were living in a cemetery. Jesus commanded the demons in the two to enter a herd of swine. The demons had requested this treatment rather than to be sent to the abyss where evil spirits and Satan live, Lk 8:31; Rev. 20:1-2. Jesus demonstrated his authority over the earth he created, John 1:3; Col. 1:16.

I. Recall that last week Jesus was so depleted by the press of the huge multitudes (Matt. 8:18) that he boarded a boat and sailed across the Sea of Galilee from its west bank and landed on the east bank at a community of the Gergesenes. The Gergesenes begged him to leave their area. Today, at the beginning of the ninth chapter, he takes a boat to return to "his own city" (Capernaum), vs. 1. At Capernaum Jesus was again approached by those who needed healing. In fact, so many people gathered around the home where he lived in Capernaum (Peter's, Matt. 8:14), that some ill patients could not get in his presence for his attention. So it was, that one man afflicted with palsy (was paralyzed) was being carried on a stretcher. The four men who carried him were so determined to see their sick friend healed by Jesus that they opened an entrance in the roof (Mk 2:4), because the intense crowd prevented them from entering at the door. Jesus noted the firm faith of the four friends and said to the paralyzed man, "Son, cheer up, your sins are forgiven," vs. 2, Lk 5:20-26. The scribes and Pharisees who witnessed Jesus' statement to the paralyzed man accused Jesus of blasphemy, because Jesus exercised his authority to forgive the man's sins. The Jewish religious leaders could not deny Jesus' authority, because, when the Lord told him to stand up, take up his stretcher and go home, the man did exactly as he was told, glorifying God all the way, Lk 5:25. We should note the relationship of the sick man's illness (palsy) and Jesus' forgiving his sin. The man's illness could possibly have been caused by a sinful choice or choices which he had made, e.g., advanced syphilis, and I rather believe such was the case. However, all illnesses are not directly attributable to any given person's sins. Such a case is revealed at John 9:3, and today many are made ill because of blood transfusions, etc., and through no personal choice of sinful actions. The blind man whom Jesus healed in John 9 was born blind precisely so "that the works of God could be made evident that Jesus was, in fact, God's Messiah."

II. Note Matthew's (a.k.a. Levi) humility as indicated by the short reference to his own calling by Jesus in vs. 9. The writer of the first Gospel stated simply that Jesus went where he worked as a tax collector for Rome and ask that he become a proclaimer of the Gospel rather than continue as a servant of the Roman Empire. He did, immediately. To celebrate his change in vocations, Matthew invited some of his tax collector friends as well as Jesus and his disciples to a special meal, Mk 2:13-17. Also at the feast were scribes, Pharisees and other sinners whom Matthew had invited. The scribes and Pharisees grumbled to Jesus' disciples, because Jesus had agreed to socialize (eat) with these despiteful Roman tax collectors and other sinners. Jesus said, "Healthy people do not need a doctor, but they that are sick. But you go and learn what this means. I desire mercy and not sacrifice, for I am not here to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance," vs. 13. I believe that Jesus was subtly expressing the need for the Jewish leaders to examine themselves regarding their spiritual condition

before God. In regard to this admonition of Jesus, note the following Scriptures: Hos. 6:6; Mic. 6:6-8; Rom. 3:23; 5:12; Gal. 2:11-21. There were others who noted Jesus' associating with outcasts and otherwise not adhering to Jewish religious customs, e.g., not fasting. Among such were those who were disciples of John the Immerser. John's followers were, in fact, abiding by the Jewish Law in many stringent ways. For example, they fasted often as did the Pharisees, vs. 14, and so John's disciples asked the Lord: "Why the difference?" Jesus' answer revealed the vast difference between God's Old Covenant and his New Covenant in and through his only begotten Son, vss. 15-17; John 1:17-18; Rom. 5:19-21; Gal. 3:23-29. Under the Law fasting was an integral, necessary part of recognizing God's Lordship over his created beings, humanity, but now a new arrangement has been prescribed by God, a New Covenant, a new Sacrifice, Heb. 7:27-28; 8:7-13. Jesus stated the change this way: "No man puts a piece of new [unshrunk] cloth into an old garment, for that [the patch] which is put [sewn] in to replace the worn area takes [pulls away] from the garment, and makes the results worse than before," vs. 16. To emphasize the concept further, Jesus compared the Old with the New Covenants by saying, "Likewise, people do not put new wine in old containers (wineskins), else the old containers will break open [and lose a year's work in the vineyard]. But rather, people use appropriate containers (new wineskins) which will properly allow the wine to go through its normal process in fermenting and becoming good wine," vs. 17.

III. While Jesus was doing the above teaching, a certain ruler of the synagogue, Jairus, came to him and fell down at the Lord's feet in worship. The ruler was distressed, because his twelve-year old daughter was terribly ill. He begged Jesus to come to his house and touch her so that she would live. Jesus agreed to go to Jairus' home and look into the problem. As they went along the way, a huge crowd surged about the Lord. Near Jesus was a woman who had been losing blood for twelve years and had exhausted all of her assets for doctors' services. She managed to squeeze through the crowd and touch the edge of Jesus' garment. Her blood loss stopped immediately, and Jesus realized that her touch had used his power. The embarrassed woman confessed what she had done and how she had been healed at once. Jesus told her that her faith had healed her and that she should rejoice. While he was still speaking to the woman, a messenger from Jairus' home came to say that his daughter had died so there was no reason to bother Jesus further. Jesus assured Jairus, his (Jesus') disciples and the crowd not to fear but continue to believe (in Jesus' authority), Lk 8:49-56. The group who had been with Jairus' daughter derided Jesus when he told them that she would be made alive again. Jesus went into the room with Peter, James, John and the dead girl's parents only. Jesus took the girl by the hand and told her to stand up. Her spirit returned to her, and Jesus asked her parents to feed her. The Lord's popularity intensified even more. He left Jairus' home and along the way healed two blind men and cast an evil spirit from a mute who then was able to speak. The Pharisees then accused Jesus of being an ally of Satan. As Jesus continued his service, his compassion for the masses made him conclude that the people were like a sheep herd with no shepherd to care for them. "The harvest is much needed, pray that God will send forth more laborers," Jesus said to his followers (and us)," vss. 37-38.

I. In this chapter we come to a distinct change of direction in the period of Jesus' three years of serving the people of Israel in person. His message had a twofold content: he was God's King (Messiah) and was therefore ready to fulfill God's promises made in the Old Covenant to establish an eternal kingdom, and, secondly, the ethics which God expected to prevail in that kingdom Jesus had taught. John the Immerser had been the forerunner of Jesus the King's appearing, and they both emphasized that God's kingdom of heaven "is at hand." Jesus had then "gone up onto a mountain" and taught his disciples (followers, students, learners) the attitudes and actions that kingdom of heaven citizens should have and practice as they lived in God's kingdom. After his comprehensive instructions (seminar), he came down from the mountain and performed twelve miracles to demonstrate his authority over the creation which he had made, John 1:1-3, 14-18. Also, Jesus literally healed thousands of people with both physical and mental maladies, but Matthew specifically cites twelve as examples of Jesus' control over natural forces. His creative control was so evident that the Jewish religious leaders accused him of blasphemy, i.e., exercising only God's prerogatives. We learned at the end of Chap. 9 that Jesus, as he "went about the cities and villages teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom," became alarmed at the extent of the people's physical, but especially their spiritual, needs. He noted that the harvest was so plentiful that his disciples should pray that "the Lord of the harvest" should make arrangements for laborers to enter the fields and gather the vast harvest.

II. In Chap. 10 Jesus answered his own prayer which he announced as needed at the end of Chap. 9. And this is the way he answered the prayer: By now he had selected twelve special disciples from among his followers for special assignment. These he called apostles (sent with a unique commission), vs. 2. Five of these Matthew had noted earlier, Peter and Andrew (brothers), James and John (also brothers), Matt.4:18-22, and himself, Matt.9:9. To complete the twelve who were selected, Matthew lists all at vss. 2-4: Simon Peter, Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas, Matthew, Alphaeus' son James, Lebbaeus Thaddaeus, Simon the Canaanite, and the one who later demonstrated his disloyalty by betraying our Lord, Judas Iscariot. To understand fully the change Jesus is making in his strategy at this time, we should examine closely the context of his choice. These twelve were not, with this commission of apostleship, to remain students (disciples), but Jesus authorized them to perform with the same authority he had been demonstrating. "He gave them (the apostles) power against unclean spirits (demons), to cast them out, and to heal all manner of sickness and all manner of disease," vs. 1. This assignment was phenomenal, very unusual. Not only was their new power unique, but such power was to be demonstrated only among the Jews and specifically not among Gentiles or partial Jews, the Samaritans, vs. 5. These twelve apostles were to go exclusively "to the lost sheep of the house of Israel," vs. 6, and to no one else at this time. Many "Christian" sects have

been based upon a wrong interpretation of the contents of this chapter, because they have claimed the power given to these twelve by claiming to be apostles, II Cor. 11:13-15; Rev. 2:2. As followers of Jesus Christ today our assignment is not the same as that given to the twelve apostles for that time and specific purpose, but rather, "Ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth," Acts 1:8. By the time of Acts 1 God's eternal sacrifice had been offered by Jesus himself on the cross, and God the Father had approved the sacrifice by glorifying Jesus' body in the resurrection from physical death. A new Covenant had been constituted, Heb. 8:7,13. Therefore, the later message of Jesus to all his followers was to go worldwide, not just to the Jews, the house of Israel in Galilee and Judea. Jesus himself went into Samaria (John 4:4) later, as well as among the Gentiles (Matt. 15:21-28), but the instructions to the twelve were exclusively for those twelve at that time and for the place given. This fact is especially noted by the envelope formed by the beginning of Jesus' command at Matt. 10:5 and the end of that command at Matt. 11:1.

III. After Jesus had instructed the apostles where and to whom they should go, he told them that everywhere they went they were to proclaim, "The kingdom of heaven has come near," vs. 7. The King is now here! Jesus' commission to the apostles involved the following: do exactly what he had been doing, including "heal the sick, cleanse lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons, as [instructed by the Lord]," vs. 8. On this special commission they were to take no provisions for their material needs but depend upon the generosity of the Jews to whom they were witnessing of the kingdom, vss. 9-10. The rather detailed instructions given the apostles reflect the Jewish social customs of that time. Their itineraries were not fixed, but they were to go randomly through Galilee into all cities and towns. They were not to coerce the people. Upon entering a community, the apostles would inquire as to who might accommodate them during their stay while witnessing concerning the coming of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus assured them that they would meet with opposition. Had they not accused their Teacher of being Beelzebub (in alliance with a heathen god!)?, vs. 25. Those who opposed the spread of the Gospel would find worse judgment against them in "the day of judgment" than those whom God destroyed in Sodom and Gomorrah for practicing homosexuality in Abraham and Lot's day, Gen. 19. Not only would the apostles find individuals against them and their message, but established religious and political authorities would attempt to stop them by beatings with whips. Jesus told them that they should not be concerned about what they should say, because simultaneously they would be prompted by "the Spirit of your Father" what to say. This communication by God through them was evidently a special action of God's Holy Spirit which directed and empowered the prophets and Godly Old Covenant leaders. Those who accepted the apostles' message would be divided from other members of their families. The feelings would be so strong that death could result. The opposition received should not cause them to fear, for this witnessing was God's will. "He that accepts you is accepting me," Jesus told them. God's plan was that the Jews be the first to be offered citizenship in God's kingdom of heaven through faith in Jesus as Messiah, and afterward to everyone who would believe, Acts 11:18; Rom. 3:29; 9:24.

Apr. 29, 2001

"What the Miracles Mean"
Matt. 11

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. Matthew's message (God's Word) which brings us to Chap. 11 has told us that the person Jesus was fathered by God himself (the Holy Spirit) in the womb of one Mary before she married one Joseph. Jesus was the only begotten Son of God the Father to be the long promised Messiah (Savior) whom God had revealed by and through the Hebrew prophets, Isa. 7:14; Matt. 1:22-23. Joseph and Mary settled in Nazareth up north in Galilee where Jesus grew to adulthood with children born afterward to Mary and Joseph, Matt. 2:23; 13:55-56; Mk 6:3. At about age thirty Jesus moved his living place to Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee and began teaching and proclaiming that God's kingdom was then ready to be established. As he went about the area around Capernaum teaching, a group of students (disciples) began going about with him. On an occasion he went up on a mountain side with a number of his students and taught them what God wanted his kingdom citizens to know and practice. This teaching incorporated an explanation of who (their state of being) the citizens would be, how they would relate to God, his Law, and to one another. Jesus then went about the Galileean villages, towns and cities performing acts (miracles) which only God could do, i.e., acts altering the natural (physical) laws which God had built into his creation at the beginning. Through these unique acts Jesus was proving that he was God's Messiah (Savior). The crowds who were following Jesus for instructions grew so numerous that he realized that he could not do all that he needed to do in the time he had. He therefore chose twelve of his disciples to whom he gave special instructions and a unique apostolic commission to help him to spread the message about the forthcoming kingdom of heaven. They were commissioned by Jesus to perform those miracles which he himself had been doing as they proclaimed Jesus' message of the kingdom of heaven. After commissioning and empowering the twelve, he sent them out only to the Jews in Galilee, and specifically not to the Gentiles and Samaritans. The kingdom of heaven was planned at that time for Jewish citizens only, I believe.

II. Chap. 11 begins, "And it happened, when Jesus had finished empowering (commissioning) his twelve disciples [apostles], he left to teach and to proclaim in their [the Jews'] cities." vs. 1. With vs. 2 the scene changes abruptly when Matthew shifts his attention to the prison where John the Immerser was being held by Herod Antipas. John had been in jail for some time since Jesus had heard of the imprisonment just as he began his public proclamation of the kingdom of heaven, Matt. 4:12,17. Solitude and isolation from relatives and friends affects some differently. John who had immersed Jesus in the Jordan just after he (John) told those about him as Jesus was coming to him to be immersed, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world," John 1:29,36. After a long time in prison John began to question whether he had misinterpreted the timing or some other aspects of Jesus' being the Messiah. Was Jesus to come back later and exercise his Messiahship, for instance? Remember what was being said about Jesus by some. Some were saying that he was John the Immerser,

others Elijah, Jeremiah or other of the prophets, Matt. 16:14. At any rate, John wanted an update from Jesus himself about the Lord's position on his being the Messiah from God. He managed to send two of his followers to Jesus to learn what Jesus was doing and Jesus' feeling about the situation at that time. The two messengers reached the Lord at a time when he was openly speaking to the crowds who overheard the messengers from John and Jesus' answer to them. Jesus told them to tell John again (repeat) those things which you have personally witnessed, not only what I am doing but also have commissioned the apostles to do in his (Jesus') name. Here Jesus makes clear that his miraculous acts signify the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, Isa. 29:18; 35:3-6. Further, those who are believers of what Jesus is doing and proclaiming in his message should rejoice, be happy (blessed), Isa. 8:14; 28:16; Rom. 9:33; 10:11. Jesus was reassuring John that, although he (John) was now suffering imprisonment and humility because of his proclaiming God's message about Jesus, he should be confident that what he had done was God's will. God was certainly pleased with John's service, [but the timing of the coming of the kingdom of heaven could change depending upon acceptance of Jesus as Messiah by the "lost sheep of the house of Israel," I believe.], Isa. 61:1-2; Lk 4:16-30; Matt. 10:6.

III. After John's messengers left Jesus to return to Jesus' forerunner in prison, the Lord told the crowd around him his assessment of John the Immerser's contribution in ushering in the coming of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus' opinion of John given to the crowd began with a series of questions. When you went out to hear John in the desert, what did you expect to see? A man who was a run-of-the-mill speaker with a hackneyed message; a suave, natty dresser, or did you visit him to see a true prophet bearing God's true message? Jesus said, "He it is about whom it is written [prophesied by Malachi at Mal. 3:1] - - - truly I tell you John's assignment is greater than every Old Covenant prophet who ever lived, but he is the least as compared with those serving in the kingdom of heaven," vss. 7-12. That is true, because, "all the prophets and the law prophesied until John, and if you will accept it [what I am saying], this one, [John] is Elias (Elijah) which was to come," vss. 13-15; Mal. 4:5. Jesus said that those with "spiritual ears" would understand what he was saying. Further, Jesus said that that generation [of Jews] were like children playing in the street who played dance music, but their playmates would not dance. Or, they "played funeral," and their playmates would not weep. Jesus came eating and drinking and was accused of being a glutton and an (excessive) alcohol consumer. John, on the other hand, came forth in destitute circumstances and was accused of being demon possessed. In effect, both were sent by God, and both were rejected by the people of the cities in Galilee and would not repent (turn to God). Jesus condemned the Jewish inhabitants of Galilee (Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum) for not accepting the offered kingdom of heaven (and its King!). In fact, Jesus said that Sodom (the seat of homosexuality) would not have been destroyed (Gen. 19:5,24,29) had they repented and followed God's will. The Jews were not willing to accept Jesus as God's Messiah (Savior) even though Jesus' miracles proved that he was approved by God, vss. 20-24. Jesus thanked God the Father for revealing him (Jesus) to the humble but concealing him from the "wise" and "prudent." Jesus claimed oneness with God the Father and invited individuals to come to him for spiritual rest and assurance.

May 6, 2001

"Jesus Versus Religious Leaders"
Matt. 12

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. If Jesus in the flesh was God's unique and only supreme representative (I believe he was and is.) among mankind, then it follows rationally that anyone else claiming such representation and who disagrees with Jesus will find the relationship unacceptable. The appearance of the situation given in Matt. 12 and before in Matthew is that Jesus' popularity grew steadily and exponentially from the beginning of his public service which began at Matt. 4:17. Jesus' proclaiming that God was now ready to establish his kingdom of heaven on earth with Jesus as king was interpreted by the Jewish religious leaders as an effrontery on their position directly and thwarted their religious traditions which required their priestly position to be in place, an absolute necessity. The Pharisees in particular felt the severest attack from Jesus' teachings and activities. The Sadducees were out of contention, because they denied the spiritual dimension of mankind's existence. Jesus discounted the Sadducees when they came to him presenting a literal translation of Deut. 25:5 concerning a male sibling's taking a dead brother's wife as his own wife after the brother died. The Sadducees did not believe in the continuation of the human spirit after physical death, and therefore believe that a resurrection is impractical. A person could have too many spouses in the next life! Jesus told the Sadducees that they were misinterpreting the Old Covenant Scriptures and misunderstanding God's power, for, in fact, there will be a resurrection. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are still alive awaiting the resurrection, and God is still their God, Mk 12:18-27; Heb. 11:39-40. The Herodians were allied with the politicians through Herod to Rome. They were to some extent like the "moral majority" which exercised church-government influence beginning in the 1970's in this country. And, of course, there have been "national churches" (churches united with governments) around the globe since Rome claimed the ecclesia as its own beginning in c. 325 AD. The Pharisees believed that they could incorporate Jesus and his influence into their group at the beginning of the Lord's public service. They were meticulous in their keeping of their interpretation of God's Law. They constituted what would be considered today "holier-than-thou" ones because of their self-proclaimed "holiness." They did not believe themselves to be sinful, i.e., sinners. With that attitude, why would they need an humble Savior?

II. The Pharisees' devotion to God's Law was their badge of religious honor, and in Chap. 12 they observed intently Jesus' relationship with their brand of "law keeping." Chap. 12 begins with Jesus' walking through a grain field (like wheat) with his disciples (followers), who were hungry, pulling heads of grain from the stalks and eating them. The spying Pharisees noted Jesus' students "working" on their holy day, the Sabbath. Food preparation was contrary to the Pharisees' belief in how the Jews should observe their Sabbath, and they told Jesus that "his people" were breaking the religious law. Jesus' answer to them was to quote again (Matt. 9:13) Hos. 6:6 where God told the Israelites that he wanted mercy (faithfulness) rather than a ritualistic sacrifice of animals.

Attending regularly church services, tithing, saying "praise the Lord" occasionally, or repeating other religious cliches for others benefit, as important as those things can be, on the other hand, can be made rituals which mean nothing to God. The final observation in Jesus' answer to the Pharisees' admonition concerning Jesus' "Sabbath keeping" was probably what designated, for the Pharisees, an impossible proposition for their ever being able to accept Jesus as an ally. That observation states: "But I say to you that in this place (Temple) is one (Jesus, the Messiah) greater than the Temple, but if you had known what this (Hos. 6:6) means, you would not have condemned the guiltless (Jesus' disciples satisfying their hunger on the Sabbath); For the Son of man (Jesus) is Lord even of the Sabbath Day," vss. 6-8. After this incident, Jesus went into a synagogue where a man (planted by Pharisees?) with a withered hand was attending. The Pharisees asked Jesus whether it is lawful to heal on the Sabbath. Jesus said that they themselves would rescue an animal in distress on the Sabbath so why should a fellow human not be healed on the Sabbath. He healed the man in the synagogue on the Sabbath! (vss. 1-8; I Sam. 21:1-6)

III. The Pharisees went from the synagogue and immediately considered how they could destroy Jesus. The Lord learned of their council and left the area followed by great crowds. Jesus healed them all and told them not to tell others where he was. Matthew notes that this activity by Jesus fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy at Isa. 42:1-4; 49:3. This quote, incidentally, includes reference to the Gentile part in the kingdom of heaven. Following the Pharisees' confrontation with Jesus in the synagogue, a person who was both blind and deaf was brought to Jesus, and the Lord healed him so that he was then able to both see and hear. The Pharisees heard the response of the crowd to the miracles, "Is not this the son of David [Does not Jesus have the qualifications to be the Messiah?]?," vs. 23. The Pharisees heard what the response was and announced that Jesus could heal because he was allied with Beelzebub, the ruler of demons. Jesus' reply relates to a fact which is often attributed to Lincoln, "A house divided against itself shall not stand," vs. 25. Jesus said that if he by Beelzebub controlled demons, by whom did the Pharisees cast them out? [However,] if I cast them out by God's Spirit, then God's kingdom has come to you, vss. 27-28. In other words, if there is a difference in your source and mine, then the results determines the source of power from God the Creator. My power to do so is undeniable, and the Spirit of God is with me. The Pharisees could not deny Jesus' absolute power, because they had witnessed his healing of thousands. (And do not forget Jairus' daughter!) What Jesus says then about their position with Jesus' miracles not demonstrating the power of God's Holy Spirit is very important. In effect, the Pharisees had attributed God's Spirit's actions to another (Beezlebub's, a Philistine idol) which Jesus stated was blasphemy against God's Spirit and eternally unforgivable. Those who killed Jesus could be forgiven (Lk 23:34), but following his glorification after his sacrifice on the cross, it has been the leading of God's Holy Spirit who makes it possible for all people to know how to be made alive spiritually (quicken in spirit). Rejecting the leading of that Spirit to accept Jesus as God's sole spiritual Savior is blasphemy against God's Spirit and is unforgivable. God's Spirit has ever been God's Ghost performing God's will, Gen. 1:2; Matt. 1:20; John 1:1-5,14,17; II Cor. 5:19; Col. 1:13-17. Therefore, Jesus said that to refuse the leading of the Holy Spirit to accept Jesus as Lord and Savior leaves nowhere else to go to satisfy God for eternal life, John 14:6-7; Acts 4:5-12.

May 13, 2001

"The Ecclesia And The Kingdom"
Matt. 13

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. The ecclesia, per se, was not prophesied in the Old Covenant, I believe, because when Jesus came the first time, he, as well as his forerunner, John the Immerser, proclaimed that the kingdom of heaven was at hand (ready). John the Immerser was the promised Elijah whom God promised at Joel 2:28-32; Mal. 4:5; Matt. 11:7-15; Acts 2:14-21, if the Jewish nation would receive Jesus as God's Messiah (Savior). In Chap. 12 we learned with a considerable degree of finality that the Jewish leaders as representatives of the Jewish nation Israel were rejecting God's Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth (and heaven). After the experiences in Chap. 12, I believe, Jesus had reached the conclusion that God's plan for Israel was in need of modification, not because of the lack of God's love for Israel, but because of their refusal of himself (God) in the person of his Son, Jesus the Christ. It is noteworthy to observe that, on this one-of-a-kind occasion, God did not change his position regarding his own relationship to humanity, i.e., he would not overrule mankind's freedom of choice. He did not force or coerce Adam and Eve in their decision to defy God's will by disobeying his will and sinning, thereby separating themselves from God (spiritually), Gen. 2:17; 3:1-6, 22-24. Further, God refused to force the nation Israel to conform to his Law, but let them choose defiance rather than to choose compliance. God even promised through his prophets that he would send a Messiah (Savior) who would be a sacrifice for bringing the Israelites back to himself, Isa. 7:13-14; 53; Matt. 1:22-24. By the time Jesus gave what were mysterious parables in Chap. 13, Jesus the Lord had been born of a virgin, proclaimed the readiness of the kingdom of heaven, outlined the conduct expected in the kingdom, performed actions which only God could perform (miracles), John 3:2, and finally had been rejected by the Jews as God's Messiah to save those very Jews. What then would happen to the kingdom of heaven which John the Immerser and Jesus had proclaimed?

II. At the end of Jesus' conversing with the scribes and Pharisees in Chap. 12, these Jewish leaders asked the Lord for a sign (physical proof removing the need for faith in God). Jesus' answer gives further credence to his persuasion that the Jews had, for all practical purposes, rejected him as their Messiah, because he told them that the only sign they would see would be illustrated by Jonah's experience when swallowed by the fish. The only sign Jesus referred to (his sacrifice and resurrection) was to take place after his absolute rejection by the Jews. In fact, it was at the Jewish leaders' insistence that Rome's representative, Herod Antipas, agreed to Jesus' crucifixion. Still in Chap. 12 Jesus identified as members of his family (spiritual) those who did God's (his real Father) will, i.e., accept him as God's Savior. His physical death was necessary in God's plan for Jesus to become God's Savior, Acts 2:22-24,36. At the beginning of Chap. 13 we find Jesus apparently still pressed constantly by the large crowds. He was living with Peter and his family at Capernaum, and on the same day that his mother, brothers and sisters (from Nazareth) were there to see him, he left

the house and went down by the Sea Of Galilee (to cogitate?). That visit to Peter's house could have been to visit with his family from Nazareth, but the Bible does not tell us that. We are told that he went to the house. The "whole multitude" found Jesus and surged about where he sat on the seashore. The Lord, perhaps to reach more of the people, boarded a ship and went some distance from the shore with the apostles. At this juncture Jesus gave information to the people in parables, because, I believe, he realized that the immediate establishment of the kingdom of heaven on earth had been delayed. The disciples (apostles) recognized the change in Jesus' teaching method at once and asked about the change, vs. 10. Jesus told the apostles, "Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries (hidden truths) of the kingdom of heaven, but to them (the multitudes) it is not given," Jesus said, vs. 11. Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah who prophesied that the Jews would not understand what they were seeing and hearing, Isa. 6:9-10. These parables revealed in coded form the answers to the question asked in the last sentence of Sect. I above of this outline. In other words, Jesus was now, in parables, indicating what would happen to the kingdom of heaven following the rejection of Jesus, the King of the kingdom. Until Jesus returns to earth to establish formally the kingdom of heaven, that kingdom consists of all individuals who accept Jesus as God's Messiah. However, during the calling out of the ecclesia, Jesus is taking unto himself a special people who will be his bride, Rev. 21:2. These parables, then, cover the period between the offer of the kingdom to the Jews and their rejection of Jesus as God's Messiah (King) and Jesus' return to earth to establish his kingdom. The kingdom of heaven is not the same as the ecclesia in the kingdom's entirety, but since Jesus is the husband and Lord of the ecclesia, Jesus is their King as well. Jesus' bride, the ecclesia, consists of all who live and accept Jesus as Savior during the period when God is calling out the ones whom he chooses to be Jesus' bride, John 6:44; Acts 2:39; Eph. 5:25-27,32.

III. I believe that the apostles came to know more fully the parables after the Holy Spirit came, John 14:26; 15:26-27. Now to the parables themselves: Of the nine parables given in Chap. 13, Jesus interprets only two, the sower and the wheat-tares. Terminology in these two give some insight into all nine. Generally, the seed is the Word; the sower is the Son of man (Jesus), vs. 37; the field is the world (peoples); the harvest is the end of the ecclesia period (age); the Lord of the harvest is Jesus; the soil is the will (spirit) of each individual; and the birds represent Satan or his influence. During the ecclesia period the Lord said that it is not the prerogative of believers to judge but to sow the seed (Word), (tares-wheat); the church as an organization will grow, but not all in the organization will be ecclesia members (mustard seed); cults will spring up combining false doctrines with the Gospel toward a final complete apostasy (leaven, II Thes. 2:3; Rev. 3:14-17); Israel is the treasure hidden in the field (the world) which will be found by God at the end time, Rom. 11:1-2,28-33; Jesus Christ left heaven and came to earth where he found people wandering in the wilderness of sin (lost, away from God), but Jesus gave himself that those (the pearl, the ecclesia) who will accept him will live with God eternally; at the end of the ecclesia age, God will cast a net and separate out those who are Jesus' bride and citizens of the kingdom of heaven; the householder is that one who maintains the true Word and rightly divides it, II Tim. 2:15. Jesus, after giving these parables, returned to Nazareth where he was summarily rejected as God's Messiah.

May 20, 2001

"Jesus Meets Human Needs"

Matt. 14

Couples Class

Wendell Alford,

Teacher

I. After Jesus was rejected by his home town of Nazareth, his actions and reputation were spreading to all areas around Galilee, Samaria and even southward into Judea as well as eastward across the Dead Sea. Herod Antipas spent some of his time at the city of Machaerus, inland near the east shore of the Dead Sea. He was a tetrarch (the ruler of a fourth of the eastern region of the Roman Empire) over the area to the east of the Mediterranean Sea. Rome's political purpose for Herod was to keep order (no insurrections) in the area, i.e., keep the population subject to Rome's rule (collect taxes, support the military, etc.). The Herod family was originally from the extreme southern part of the Palestinian area, Idumea, which lay south of the Dead Sea. Herod had reservations about the political threat which John the Immerser could be to the peace, in especially the eastern part of Palestine along the Jordan River. Therefore, rather early in John's public service, Herod had him imprisoned at Machaerus where the Romans had built a castle, a prison and a retreat installation. Herod and his subpoliticians could feel safe there to revel and party. At the time of Matt. 14 John had been murdered by Herod, and when the tetrarch began to hear stories about Jesus, his superstitious, paranoid mind supposed that Jesus was John the Immerser's reincarnation. Matthew (God's Word), with past perfect insight, relates the details of how Herod allowed John to be slaughtered. Apart from the supposed political reason to have John imprisoned, there was also a personal reason. John had publicly, openly criticized Herod's living with his brother's (Philip's) wife, Herodias. John had condemned such an arrangement proclaiming it to be illegal and immoral. Herod would have already had John killed for this reason, but he feared the people who considered John to be God's representative, a prophet. Herod held a birthday party for himself at the castle at Machaerus to which he invited his underlings and their wives. Herodias' daughter was also there and performed a dance which pleased Herod exceedingly. In fact, Herod was so pleased that he promised the daughter, under oath, anything she wished. The daughter consulted her mother Herodias about what to request, and the mother told her to ask that John the Immerser's head be brought on a platter to the party immediately. The drunken Herod regretted the request but felt that he must grant it because of the oath. He sent the executioners to fill the sadistic request. The head, when brought to the daughter, was given to her mother. Herodias, no doubt, gloated over the revenge she was experiencing by eliminating the forerunner of our Savior and Lord. She probably felt that her adulterous activities would no longer be a problem for her! We know better!

II. Now Matthew's Gospel account returns to the activities of Jesus whom superstitious Herod had supposed to be John the Immerser reincarnated. Jesus' first reaction upon hearing of John's death was to depart by ship from the upper west shore of the Sea of Galilee to the east shore by himself, vs. 13. While he was mourning John's departure, the word of his presence spread about the area, and a huge group gathered to be healed and taught about the kingdom

of heaven. Late in the day the apostles and others of his disciples came over to join Jesus. The time of the evening meal came and the huge crowd (perhaps ten to fifteen thousand - there were five thousand adult males) was without food in the arid open countryside. Food could be had only in markets in the villages some distance away. Jesus' disciples suggested that the people be sent away to the villages for food. Jesus said that they need not leave but that the disciples should feed them. Andrew, Peter's brother, located a young fellow who had brought a lunch consisting of five rolls (biscuits?) and two small fish. Jesus asked that the lunch be brought to him and that the multitude be asked to sit on the grass in groups of fifties. When this arrangement had been made, Jesus took the rolls and fish, looked up to heaven, and blessed the lad's lunch. He began handing the food to the disciples to deliver to the thousands, of the bread and fish. After the divinely provided "picnic," Jesus asked his helpers to gather the surplus which had not been consumed, and they gathered twelve baskets which had been left after all had eaten their fill. This evidence of the divinity of Jesus the Messiah was so spectacular and revealing that this event is the only divine miracle of Jesus recorded in all four Gospel accounts, Matt. 14:13-21; Mk 6:31-44; Lk 9:11-17; John 6:1-13.

III. After the activities of Jesus in healing, teaching and providing and distributing food for the thousands, no doubt the Lord was very tired (How truly human he was!). He, therefore, sent his disciples (apostles) back across the Sea of Galilee to the west shore while he had a last word with the crowd before sending them away. Finally, Jesus was able to get away by himself to converse with his heavenly Father, back in heaven. We are not given the thoughts of his prayer, but it could have been for strength and recuperation from the weariness he was experiencing as a human being. With the birthdays we have experienced, we can certainly identify with Jesus in his weariness! During the return across the Sea, the apostles experienced a rather regular occurrence there, a storm was churning waves and blowing against the direction which they were going, westward. The time was during the fourth watch which was from three o'clock in the morning until daybreak. Even at this late hour Jesus, (He must have had a long talk with the Father.), was walking across the Sea perhaps to gain time for his next day's obligation to meet the needs of the people on the west side of the Sea of Galilee. When the apostles saw him approaching the ship, they were afraid, because under the severe weather conditions Jesus appeared to be a ghostly figure. People do not walk on water! Natural, physical laws do not allow such! Jesus sensed their bewilderment and said to them, "Take courage, I am [the one you see]; do not be afraid," vs. 27. Audacious Peter said, "If it is really you, permit me to come to you on the water," vs. 28. Jesus gave him permission, and Peter went over the side of the ship. As Peter began his "water walk," his faith weakened, and he began to sink and pray at the same time. His prayer was appropriate, short, and precisely to the point, "Lord, save me," vs. 30. Jesus stretched forth his hand and answered Peter's prayer. The sea calmed, and the on-board apostles worshiped Jesus as Lord, affirming their belief that truly Jesus is the Son of God. Peter concurred with the other apostles at Matt. 16:16. Next day, on the western shore of Gennesaret, Jesus continued to heal the sick, vss. 34-36.

May 23, 2001

"The Ecclesia And The Kingdom"
Matt. 13

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. The ecclesia, per se, was not prophesied in the Old Covenant, I believe, because when Jesus came the first time, he, as well as his forerunner, John the Immerser, proclaimed that the kingdom of heaven was at hand (ready). John the Immerser was the promised Elijah whom God promised at Joel 2:28-32; Mal. 4:5; Matt. 11:7-15; Acts 2:14-21, if the Jewish nation would receive Jesus as God's Messiah (Savior). In Chap. 12 we learned with a considerable degree of finality that the Jewish leaders as representatives of the Jewish nation Israel were rejecting God's Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth (and heaven). After the experiences in Chap. 12, I believe, Jesus had reached the conclusion that God's plan for Israel was in need of modification, not because of the lack of God's love for Israel, but because of their refusal of himself (God) in the person of his Son, Jesus the Christ. It is noteworthy to observe that, on this one-of-a-kind occasion, God did not change his position regarding his own relationship to humanity, i.e., he would not overrule mankind's freedom of choice. He did not force or coerce Adam and Eve in their decision to defy God's will by disobeying his will and sinning, thereby separating themselves from God (spiritually), Gen. 2:17; 3:1-6, 22-24. Further, God refused to force the nation Israel to conform to his Law, but let them choose defiance rather than to choose compliance. God even promised through his prophets that he would send a Messiah (Savior) who would be a sacrifice for bringing the Israelites back to himself, Isa. 7:13-14; 53; Matt. 1:22-24. By the time Jesus gave what were mysterious parables in Chap. 13, Jesus the Lord had been born of a virgin, proclaimed the readiness of the kingdom of heaven, outlined the conduct expected in the kingdom, performed actions which only God could perform (miracles), John 3:2, and finally had been rejected by the Jews as God's Messiah to save those very Jews. What then would happen to the kingdom of heaven which John the Immerser and Jesus had proclaimed?

II. At the end of Jesus' conversing with the scribes and Pharisees in Chap. 12, these Jewish leaders asked the Lord for a sign (physical proof removing the need for faith in God). Jesus' answer gives further credence to his persuasion that the Jews had, for all practical purposes, rejected him as their Messiah, because he told them that the only sign they would see would be illustrated by Jonah's experience when swallowed by the fish. The only sign Jesus referred to (his sacrifice and resurrection) was to take place after his absolute rejection by the Jews. In fact, it was at the Jewish leaders' insistence that Rome's representative, Herod Antipas, agreed to Jesus' crucifixion. Still in Chap. 12 Jesus identified as members of his family (spiritual) those who did God's (his real Father) will, i.e., accept him as God's Savior. His physical death was necessary in God's plan for Jesus to become God's Savior, Acts 2:22-24,36. At the beginning of Chap. 13 we find Jesus apparently still pressed constantly by the large crowds. He was living with Peter and his family at Capernaum, and on the same day that his mother, brothers and sisters (from Nazareth) were there to see him, he left the house and went down by the Sea Of Galilee (to cogitate?). That visit to Peter's house could have been to visit with his family from Nazareth, but the Bible does not tell us that. We are told

that he went to the house. The "whole multitude" found Jesus and surged about where he sat on the seashore. The Lord, perhaps to reach more of the people, boarded a ship and went some distance from the shore with the apostles. At this juncture Jesus gave information to the people in parables, because, I believe, he realized that the immediate establishment of the kingdom of heaven on earth had been delayed. The disciples (apostles) recognized the change in Jesus' teaching method at once and asked about the change, vs. 10. Jesus told the apostles, "Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries (hidden truths) of the kingdom of heaven, but to them (the multitudes) it is not given," Jesus said, vs. 11. Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah who prophesied that the Jews would not understand what they were seeing and hearing, Isa. 6:9-10. These parables revealed in coded form the answers to the question asked in the last sentence of Sect. I above of this outline. In other words, Jesus was now, in parables, indicating what would happen to the kingdom of heaven following the rejection of Jesus, the King of the kingdom. Until Jesus returns to earth to establish formally the kingdom of heaven, that kingdom consists of all individuals who accept Jesus as God's Messiah. However, during the calling out of the ecclesia, Jesus is taking unto himself a special people who will be his bride, Rev. 21:2. These parables, then, cover the period between the offer of the kingdom to the Jews and their rejection of Jesus as God's Messiah (King) and Jesus' return to earth to establish his kingdom. The kingdom of heaven is not the same as the ecclesia in the kingdom's entirety, but since Jesus is the husband and Lord of the ecclesia, Jesus is their King as well. Jesus' bride, the ecclesia, consists of all who live and accept Jesus as Savior during the period when God is calling out the ones whom he chooses to be Jesus' bride, John 6:44; Acts 2:39; Eph. 5:25-27,32.

III. I believe that the apostles came to know more fully the parables after the Holy Spirit came, John 14:26; 15:26-27. Now to the parables themselves: Of the nine parables given in Chap. 13, Jesus interprets only two, the sower and the wheat-tares. Terminology in these two give some insight into all nine. Generally, the seed is the Word; the sower is the Son of man (Jesus), vs. 37; the field is the world (peoples); the harvest is the end of the ecclesia period (age); the Lord of the harvest is Jesus; the soil is the will (spirit) of each individual; and the birds represent Satan or his influence. During the ecclesia period the Lord said that it is not the prerogative of believers to judge but to sow the seed (Word), (tares-wheat); the church as an organization will grow, but not all in the organization will be ecclesia members (mustard seed); cults will spring up combining false doctrines with the Gospel toward a final complete apostasy (leaven, II Thes. 2:3; Rev. 3:14-17); Israel is the treasure hidden in the field (the world) which will be found by God at the end time, Rom. 11:1-2,28-33; Jesus Christ left heaven and came to earth where he found people wandering in the wilderness of sin (lost, away from God), but Jesus gave himself that those (the pearl, the ecclesia) who will accept him will live with God eternally; at the end of the ecclesia age, God will cast a net and separate out those who are Jesus' bride and citizens of the kingdom of heaven; the householder is that one who maintains the true Word and rightly divides it, II Tim. 2:15. Jesus, after giving these parables, returned to Nazareth where he was summarily rejected as God's Messiah.

June 3, 2001

"Jesus And Jewish Traditions"
Matt. 15

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. In the last three chapters we have seen an abrupt division of the Lord Jesus from the religious leaders of Israel. Today, in Chap. 15, we note that Jesus makes very plain that the Jewish leaders had come to interpret God's Old Covenant to make that Covenant mean in daily living something entirely contrary to what God originally intended. On a one to one basis such a contrast is noted in Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus in John 3, the lesson you studied on April 6 in my absence. On that occasion Nicodemus came to Jesus representing the Sanhedrin to learn what Jesus was all about. Now, in Chap. 15, a contingent of Pharisees and scribes have come all the way from Jerusalem to the desert area where Jesus is teaching and serving the masses to inquire further of Jesus why his position (teaching) was contrary to their own. After all, they thought, they were God's people as descendants of Abraham, and, therefore, as God's people they represented God's position on the earth, John 8:33,39,41,44. The main problem which Jesus pointed out about the Jews' religion was not the Old Testament itself but rather the religious tradition (Torah) which had been accrued and which was considered to have the same authority as the Scriptures themselves. Christianity today has, in my opinion, many professing Christians who have accrued many traditions which are misinterpretations of the original text and intent of the New Testament Scriptures. For example, such elements as an authoritative priesthood hierarchy, purgatory, union of church and political entities, baptismal (spiritual) regeneration, etc. We should keep in mind what God's Word states concerning us Gentiles as relating us to Jews in God's plan at Rom. 11:11-24. We Gentiles can (and I believe some have) fall into the same trap of mongrelizing God's message of the New Covenant to make that Word fit human, selfish ambitions, both as individuals and as organizations. Jesus said of the scribes and Pharisees, "Woe unto you - - - hypocrites, you travel all over to make one convert [to your religious position], and when he is made, you make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves," Matt. 23:13,15. Changing religious traditions to pervert God's message to mankind and leading others into that false position can make Christian missions hollow, worthless, and counterproductive.

II. At the beginning of Chap. 15 the scribes and Pharisees came from Jerusalem to Jesus to learn more of his position. Specifically, the religious leaders ask the Lord, "Why do your followers transgress the tradition of the elders? They do not wash [ceremoniously] their hands when they eat bread." Jesus asked them boldly, "Why do you transgress the commandment of God by your tradition?" The Lord then cited a specific example where their tradition was sidetracking God's will. When Jesus countered their question with another question, he was, in effect, challenging their authority to have changed God's will (message) through their own misinterpreting that message by tradition. Jesus then, following his own question, quotes from Deut. 5:16, the fifth of the ten commandments, "Honor your father and mother," and Exod. 21:15,17, "And he that striketh his father or his mother [or] - - - he that curseth his father or his

mother, shall surely be put to death." In other words, one is to care for his or her parents in need to the point of sacrificing ones own life. That position is God's will, the letter and spirit of God's Law. Now how had the Jewish tradition destroyed the true meaning and practice of God's position regarding offspring and their parents? Vss. 5-6 gives Jesus' statement on how the Law had been changed by Jewish tradition (misinterpretation). The Jewish leaders, following "improvisations" of God's Law by Jewish tradition, had concluded that if a Jew gave to the support of the Temple and those who lived from temple donations, he or she would thereby be excused from supporting their needy parents who really needed the children's material support. Today's application would allow a believer to adopt a priority whereby he or she could take support needed by a parent for daily sustenance and make a donation to the church instead! Jesus labeled this perverted religious priority, hypocrisy and a supplanting of God's will (Word) with an improper religious tradition, vss. 6-7. Jesus said that their policies followed human precepts, not God's, vss. 7-9 and Isa. 29:13. The Lord quoted the latter. I believe that Jesus' position involves what we would call "Common Sense," like removing a stuck ox from a ditch on Sunday.

III. After correcting the position of the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus gathered the crowd about him and expanded upon what he had been telling the Jewish religious leaders. He said to the crowd that the ritual performed as one eats does not make ones spirit right with God, but the innerspirit which ones comments reveal as one talks. (See James 1:26;3:1-12.) The apostles reminded Jesus that his correction of the scribes and Pharisees had offended them, but the Lord said that the Jewish leaders should be left alone, because, "They be blind leaders of the blind [spiritually]," vss. 13-14. Peter wanted a further explanation for himself and the other apostles, and Jesus told the apostles that food is eaten, furnishes the body nourishment, and finally is discharged as worthless feces. However, from ones heart (spirit) proceeds that which pleases or displeases God. Eating with ceremoniously unclean hands does not defile a person's spirit (standing with God), but a human spirit not born from above does, vss. 18-20, and John 3:5-6,18. Following this interlude the Lord and the apostles went westward to the eastern coast of the Mediterranean where a Canaanite woman (a Gentile) approached Jesus and asked him to heal her daughter. Jesus would not even recognize her. The apostles asked the Lord to send her away, and Jesus stated firmly that his mission was exclusively to the lost house of Israel. However, the woman persisted in her request and worshiped him and addressed him as Lord. Jesus again stated his exclusive relation with the Jews. The woman pleaded and begged for "crumbs from the Master's table," and Jesus, because of her ardent faith, healed her daughter. See and study also Lk 18:1-8. The Lord then returned to Galilee where, again, the large crowds were healed of all types of physical maladies. After three days in a desert area without food, the people needed nourishment. As he had done before with the five thousand males and their families, the Lord blessed the available food, this time seven buns and some fish, and four thousand males and their families were fed, with seven baskets of surplus food left over. Jesus then took a ship and returned to Magdala on the west coast of the Sea of Galilee.

June 10, 2001

"Jesus' Final Exam"
Matt. 1 6

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. By Chap. 16 Jesus' period of public proclamation of the kingdom of heaven has reached about two and one-half years. The opposition of the Jewish leaders has gradually intensified and their intentions have reached a practical conclusion: Jesus and his movement must be obliterated, Matt. 12:14. They had been successful in eliminating the person who had been Jesus' forerunner, John the Immerser. Now Jesus, whom the Jewish leaders considered to be John's successor, must likewise be crushed as another who could uproot the organized Jewish religious group. The greatest problem which Jesus had created for the Jews was the attention and growing loyalty of the general population in Galilee and Judea especially, but also, even in the surrounding provinces of Phoenicia, Samaria, Decapolis and Perea. This chapter also presents an episode in which it is possible to interpret the making of a governmental hierarchy of the Christian Church with one monarchical position with dictatorial power. As the concept has developed through the centuries, the organization which this dictator controls has fulfilled Jesus' parable of the wheat and tares, Matt. 13:24-30. This evolutionary process of the "Christian Church" has created a man-made political empire which is contrary to the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ at Matt. 20:20-28; Mk 10:35-45; and Lk 22:24-30. Other such religious organizations have grown up on the world scene which also mix the Good News with "Gentile-type" authority. I believe that the results of what has happened to the childlike faith which Jesus said would characterize a citizen of the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 18:3) has become for many an authoritative intrusion into the initiative of God through the agency of his Holy Spirit, Matt. 12:32-33; John 6:44-45; 14:26. A viable question is: Has not the Gentile treatment of the Gospel made the Church, i.e., Christendom, very much like the Jewish leaders made Israel's faith when Jesus was among mankind as a human, Matt. 15:12-14; Rom. 11:18-24?

II. The Pharisees accompanied by the scribes had come to Jesus at Matt. 12:38 asking Jesus for a physical sign which would assure them that Jesus was the Anointed One. Now in Chap. 16 the Pharisees are with the Saducees, testing Jesus' heavenly authority, approach Jesus and again asked the Lord for a sign. Jesus told them they were hypocrites, for they could predict the weather by the atmospheric conditions (signs) but would not realize what was happening in the area of God's relating to man's condition at that time. The Lord again cited the only sign would be that of Jonah. He said that the people of that generation were wicked and adulterous (serving self rather than God's will, i.e., accepting God's Messiah). His admonition to realize what was happening to mankind and their relation to God should, I believe, give us caution to keep constantly aware of what mankind is doing as they relate to God, especially as a people who profess Jesus as Savior and Lord of life. When the apostles came to Jesus, the Lord apparently still had the incident with the Jewish leaders in mind, for he said to them (the apostles), "Beware of the leaven (yeast) of the Pharisees and Saducees," vs. 6, [for they did not accept Jesus as the Messiah]

III. Jesus and the apostles were at this time up north in the foot hills at Caesarea Philippi, and the Lord gave them an exam containing two questions. First, he asked, "Whom do men [other than the apostles] say that I the Son of man am?," vs. 13. They answered that some were saying John the Immerser, Elijah, Jeremiah, or another of the prophets (reincarnated). The second, and last, question of the exam was, "But whom do you say that I am?," vs. 15. Forward, ever ready to speak for the group, Peter repeated what they all had already proclaimed when Peter was embarrassed by his "walking-on-water" experience at Matt. 14:30, i.e., "Of a truth you are the Son of God," Matt. 14:33. Peter's answer for the group to the second question about Jesus' own person was, "You are the Christ [God's Anointed One], the Son [the only begotten] of the living [Creator] God," vs. 16. Jesus noted that Peter had not conceived his (nor had the others for whom he had spoken) answer by his own reasoning, but that the knowledge had come directly from God himself, vs. 17; Matt. 12:32-33; John 6:44. The apostles through Peter passed the Lord's final examination concerning who Jesus is. The next two verses, 18 and 19, have been as incorrectly interpreted through the centuries as any other ideas in the Scriptures, I believe. These verses are extremely important, because they reveal the foundation upon which Jesus has built and expanded his ecclesia, mentioned here for the first time. Some have interpreted the verses to mean that Jesus' intention was to build his ecclesia upon the person of Peter. Others believe that the ecclesia was to be built upon the faith expressed by the apostles. But, I believe that these both miss the truth that Jesus was revealing although the second is not without some merit and is certainly involved in what Jesus was (and is) revealing. My belief is that Jesus was saying that the base (foundation) upon which the ecclesia would singularly depend was the person of Jesus himself since both of Jesus' questions were about himself. Jesus said, "Peter, you are a chip of rock, but on a bedrock is my ecclesia to rest (depend)," vs. 18. The pathway to hell will be closed to those depending upon the Rock. Jesus' forthcoming death and resurrection proved Jesus' assertion. Peter, after the coming of God's Holy Spirit (Acts 2), understood Jesus to be the foundation Rock of the ecclesia, I Pet. 2:4-10. Paul also understood Jesus to be the Rock upon which the ecclesia rests, I Cor. 3:4-17; 10:4; Eph. 2:20-22. Jesus as the foundation of the ecclesia and God's Rock has been an offense to many through the centuries who have supplanted him by other foundations. I believe if Peter had not been with Jesus in paradise since his mortal separation from the earth, he would have been grieving because of what many have assigned him to have been, the original and continuing foundation of Christendom. Jesus gives the keys to his kingdom to all who make, through faith, Jesus their Savior and Lord. A believer's testimony is the key (Matt. 28:18-20; Acts 1:7 8; I Pet. 2:9) which points to the leading of God's Holy Spirit and God's spiritual promise of eternal life through faith in Jesus, the Rock, (Foundation), of his ecclesia. That promise is given in God's Word (which Jesus also is, John 1:1-2, 14), and that Word is the binder on earth of God's promise, vs. 19. Jesus promised to return in the Glory of God the Father in vss. 27-28. We believers lose our lives for the sake of becoming citizens of the kingdom, citizenship in which, is better than gaining the whole world! (vs. 26)

June 17, 2001

"Jesus Prepares To Return Home"
Matt. 17

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. The time has come for God's only begotten Son to prepare to return home to heaven. He has laid the groundwork for the establishing of the kingdom of heaven on earth. God intended that his Son be the King of that kingdom, but the people, the Israelites, who were to be the original citizens of that kingdom, refused to accept the Creator's King. By now Jesus has come to realize that there will be a delay in the establishing of the kingdom of heaven on earth. In this chapter, Chap. 17, Jesus begins making concrete arrangements to identify what events must take place before he returns to the Father. Although the apostles had been closely associated with Jesus for nearly three years and had properly identified and accepted him as God's Anointed Messiah, the Father God wanted them to have further evidence of the position and stature of Jesus as his Son and Savior. At the end of Chap. 16 Jesus had left the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee and returned to Magdala west of the Sea. Further, the Lord had led the apostles up north to Caesarea Philippi where he examined their position about who he, the Son of man, was (and is). The group of apostles had confessed that Jesus is the Son of man and also the Messiah, the Son of the living God, the God-man.

II. While Jesus and the apostles were up in the foothills of Caesarea Philippi (They had been in that area for about six or eight days.), the Lord took Peter, James and John (James' brother) apart farther up the high mountain. I believe that what happened here fulfills the prophecy of Matt. 16:28, a verse that should be the beginning of Chap. 17, (See also II Pet. 1:15-18.). With just the four of them present, God transfigured his Son before the three apostles, vs. 2. When this transfiguration happened, Jesus' face "did shine as the sun, and his clothing was white as the light." (cf. Acts 26:12-15) Every bit as miraculous as Jesus' change of appearance was the fact that Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus, and the three of them held a conference, "talking with Jesus," vs. 3. How long Jesus conferred with Moses and Elijah we are not told, but we do know that the three discussed Jesus' forthcoming departure (death) which the Lord was about to experience in Jerusalem, Lk 9:30-31. However, when the discussion was finished, the audacious Peter volunteered a suggestion: "Lord it is good for us to be here, and if you approve, let us construct three temples here, one for you [Jesus], one for Moses, and one for Elijah," vs. 4. As Peter was making his ignorant (Lk 9:33b) suggestion, a bright cloud enshrouded them, and God the Father himself spoke out of the cloud, "This [Jesus] is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased: You listen to him [only]," vs. 5. I believe that God was making here a decided change from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant, Heb. 1:1-2. Jesus' person and teachings were to take precedence over the Law given to Moses by God and the messages which he (God) had given by the prophets where there could be a conflict of interpretation. At any rate, no one is equal to God's only begotten Son. Jesus is forever one of a kind. However, we who trust Jesus as God's Savior and Lord look forward to becoming like Jesus in

his transfigured being as promised in God's Word at Rom. 8:22-23; I John 3:1-3. What a glorious day that will be! At the sound of God's voice proclaiming the preeminence of Jesus as Lord, the three apostles fell prostrate on the earth filled with fright. Jesus touched each and told them to arise and not to be frightened. Their eyes had been closed, but they arose and "saw no one but Jesus only," vs. 8. As thy descended from the mountain, Jesus commanded them to tell no one of the event until he (Jesus) had arisen from death, vs. 9. Elijah's appearance, perhaps, prompted the apostles to ask Jesus about Elijah's coming, promised at Mal. 4:5, before the Messiah would "restore all things." Jesus' answer should be examined very carefully, I believe. Vss. 11-13 contain Jesus' answer and their understanding of his answer. Jesus' statement tells more than the apostles understood at that time, I believe. John the Immerser was the fulfillment of God's promise through Malachi if the Jews had accepted Jesus as God's Messiah at the time, Matt. 11:14. However, they did not, and so the "dreadful day of the Lord" did not happen then but was postponed, Rev. 6:12-17. Jesus' answer included, "Elijah truly shall come, and restore all things." But the Jewish leaders "knew him not," and, further, "Likewise also shall the Son of man suffer of them." To understand the further implications of Jesus' answer one should examine Joel 2:28-31; Acts 2:16-21; Isa. 61:1-2a; Lk 4:16-21; Matt. 24:27-31. Jesus states three times in Chap. 17 that he must suffer physical death, vss. 9, 12, 23.

III. Beginning with vs. 14 the three apostles and Jesus had joined the other apostles, returned from the mountains to Galilee, and again were meeting the needs of the multitudes. A certain man approached Jesus and asked the Lord to heal his son of a very serious illness. The Greek text states that he was "moonstruck," probably an epileptic. His muscular coordination (seizure) was so bad at times that he would fall into the water or fire. The man told Jesus that he had asked the disciples to heal his son, but they could not. Jesus later told the apostles privately that their weak faith was the reason for their ineffectiveness. (Vs. 21 is omitted from many early manuscripts. However, the sense there is that much prayer and dedication [spiritual focus] is required when ones faith is exercised.) Jesus said that a mountain can be moved when a believer's faith is anchored in absolute belief. Nothing is impossible! Jesus rebuked the demon from the man's son, and the son became normal immediately. Requests from God must comply with God's will for God to fulfill them, Jam. 4:3. In vs. 24 Jesus and the apostles come back to Capernaum where Peter's home was and where Jesus was living after moving from his home in Nazareth. The local tax collector came to Peter and asked whether Jesus was paying his Temple tax (since he had moved there into Peter's home?). This tax was a tribute which all Jews paid annually to support the Temple and those who were members of the priesthood and who served there. Peter had told the tax collector that Jesus did indeed pay the Temple tax. When Jesus and Peter entered Peter's house, Jesus asked Peter whether the kings of the earth collected taxes from their own citizens or from the citizens of other countries? Jesus said that he (Jesus) would pay the tax so as not to offend, but the Lord said, in effect, as God's King he (Jesus) did not really owe the tax, John 18:36a.

June 24, 2001

"Jesus Prepares To Return Home"

Couples Class

Matt. 17

Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. The time has come for God's only begotten Son to prepare to return home to heaven. He has laid the groundwork for the establishing of the kingdom of heaven on earth. God intended that his Son be the King of that kingdom, but the people, the Israelites, who were to be the original citizens of that kingdom, refused to accept the Creator's King. By now Jesus has come to realize that there will be a delay in the establishing of the kingdom of heaven on earth. In this chapter, Chap. 17, Jesus begins making concrete arrangements to identify what events must take place before he returns to the Father. Although the apostles had been closely associated with Jesus for nearly three years and had properly identified and accepted him as God's Anointed Messiah, the Father God wanted them to have further evidence of the position and stature of Jesus as his Son and Savior. At the end of Chap. 16 Jesus had left the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee and returned to Magdala west of the Sea. Further, the Lord had led the apostles up north to Caesarea Philippi where he examined their position about who he, the Son of man, was (and is). The group of apostles had confessed that Jesus is the Son of man and also the Messiah, the Son of the living God, the God-man.

II. While Jesus and the apostles were up in the foothills of Caesarea Philippi (They had been in that area for about six or eight days.), the Lord took Peter, James and John (James' brother) apart farther up the high mountain. I believe that what happened here fulfills the prophecy of Matt. 16:28, a verse that should be the beginning of Chap. 17, (See also II Pet. 1:15-18.). With just the four of them present, God transfigured his Son before the three apostles, vs. 2. When this transfiguration happened, Jesus' face "did shine as the sun, and his clothing was white as the light." (cf. Acts 26:12-15) Every bit as miraculous as Jesus' change of appearance was the fact that Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus, and the three of them held a conference, "talking with Jesus," vs. 3. How long Jesus conferred with Moses and Elijah we are not told, but we do know that the three discussed Jesus' forthcoming departure (death) which the Lord was about to experience in Jerusalem, Lk 9:30-31. However, when the discussion was finished, the audacious Peter volunteered a suggestion: "Lord it is good for us to be here, and if you approve, let us construct three temples here, one for you [Jesus], one for Moses, and one for Elijah," vs. 4. As Peter was making his ignorant (Lk 9:33b) suggestion, a bright cloud enshrouded them, and God the Father himself spoke out of the cloud, "This [Jesus] is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased: You listen to him [only]," vs. 5. I believe that God was making here a decided change from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant, Heb. 1:1-2. Jesus' person and teachings were to take precedence over the Law given to Moses by God and the messages which he (God) had given by the prophets where there could be a conflict of interpretation. At any rate, no one is equal to God's only begotten Son. Jesus is forever one of a kind. However, we who trust Jesus as God's Savior and Lord look forward to becoming like Jesus in

his transfigured being as promised in God's Word at Rom. 8:22-23; I John 3:1-3. What a glorious day that will be! At the sound of God's voice proclaiming the preeminence of Jesus as Lord, the three apostles fell prostrate on the earth filled with fright. Jesus touched each and told them to arise and not to be frightened. Their eyes had been closed, but they arose and "saw no one but Jesus only," vs. 8. As they descended from the mountain, Jesus commanded them to tell no one of the event until he (Jesus) had arisen from death, vs. 9. Elijah's appearance, perhaps, prompted the apostles to ask Jesus about Elijah's coming, promised at Mal. 4:5, before the Messiah would "restore all things." Jesus' answer should be examined very carefully, I believe. Vss. 11-13 contain Jesus' answer and their understanding of his answer. Jesus' statement tells more than the apostles understood at that time, I believe. John the Immerser was the fulfillment of God's promise through Malachi if the Jews had accepted Jesus as God's Messiah at the time, Matt. 11:14. However, they did not, and so the "dreadful day of the Lord" did not happen then but was postponed, Rev. 6:12-17. Jesus' answer included, "Elijah truly shall come, and restore all things." But the Jewish leaders "knew him not," and, further, "Likewise also shall the Son of man suffer of them." To understand the further implications of Jesus' answer one should examine Joel 2:28-31; Acts 2:16-21; Isa. 61:1-2a; Lk 4:16-21; Matt. 24:27-31. Jesus states three times in Chap. 17 that he must suffer physical death, vss. 9, 12, 23.

III. Beginning with vs. 14 the three apostles and Jesus had joined the other apostles, returned from the mountains to Galilee, and again were meeting the needs of the multitudes. A certain man approached Jesus and asked the Lord to heal his son of a very serious illness. The Greek text states that he was "moonstruck," probably an epileptic. His muscular coordination (seizure) was so bad at times that he would fall into the water or fire. The man told Jesus that he had asked the disciples to heal his son, but they could not. Jesus later told the apostles privately that their weak faith was the reason for their ineffectiveness. (Vs. 21 is omitted from many early manuscripts. However, the sense there is that much prayer and dedication [spiritual focus] is required when one's faith is exercised.) Jesus said that a mountain can be moved when a believer's faith is anchored in absolute belief. Nothing is impossible! Jesus rebuked the demon from the man's son, and the son became normal immediately. Requests from God must comply with God's will for God to fulfill them, Jam. 4:3. In vs. 24 Jesus and the apostles come back to Capernaum where Peter's home was and where Jesus was living after moving from his home in Nazareth. The local tax collector came to Peter and asked whether Jesus was paying his Temple tax (since he had moved there into Peter's home?). This tax was a tribute which all Jews paid annually to support the Temple and those who were members of the priesthood and who served there. Peter had told the tax collector that Jesus did indeed pay the Temple tax. When Jesus and Peter entered Peter's house, Jesus asked Peter whether the kings of the earth collected taxes from their own citizens or from the citizens of other countries? Jesus said that he (Jesus) would pay the tax so as not to offend, but the Lord said, in effect, as God's King he (Jesus) did not really owe the tax, John 18:36a.

I. Jesus had just given instruction to Peter about paying the Temple tax at the end of Chap. 17. Chap. 18 begins by saying that at this same time the apostles came to the Lord and asked him about rank and position in the kingdom of heaven. That question was based upon how men organize themselves in many of the earthly affairs as mankind live their daily lives in politics, the military, business, etc. Who will be the chief potentates in the kingdom of heaven which Jesus has been proclaiming? Who will be the semisovereign underlings of the king? Note that the question regarding taxes mentioned above and which we studied last week at the end of Chap. 17 had to do with who collects taxes from whom. A king does not collect taxes from citizens subject to another king of another kingdom. In that discussion Jesus told Peter that the king of the kingdom of heaven was not expected to pay tribute to the Jewish nation, Israel. We know that Jesus is the king of the kingdom of heaven, and, therefore, he alone can assign rank or position in that kingdom. Jesus answered the question of position or status in his kingdom with a demonstration. Jesus called a small child to himself and gave him prominence in the group, center stage. The Lord then stated that to be a citizen of his kingdom one must be converted (born from above [made spiritually alive] by God's Holy Spirit, John 3:5) as a child before he or she can be a citizen of the kingdom of heaven. We should recall that God's people, the Israelites, from Abraham's demonstration of faith in the living God through most of Samuel's prophecy, never had a king over them. Neighboring nations had kings and the Jewish people demanded of Samuel a king as their neighbors had. The Lord God permitted the Jews to have a king over them even though such an arrangement signified that Israel, in so doing, was rejecting God's direct kingship over them, I Sam. 8:6-9. God told Samuel to reveal to the people the difference a king would make in their kingdom, I Sam. 8:10-22. One qualified to serve the Lord in the kingdom of heaven Jesus said must be as humble as an innocent child, vs. 4. He or she must humble themselves, and the most humble (meek, Matt. 5:5) will be "the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." I believe that vs. 5 substantiates the truth that a child still in its innocence is already in the kingdom, or, as I believe, before reaching the "age of accountability," II Sam. 12:19-23, vs. 10. The "bottom line" is that all kingdom citizens will be completely, directly loyal and subservient to our Lord Jesus Christ. There will be no other prophet, priest, or (spiritual) king, even as the current arrangement is for us believers who are born from above.

II. Immediately after one is born from above, he or she is a spiritual babe in Christ and needs spiritual training and nurturing, I Cor. 3:1; Heb. 5:13; II Pet. 3:18. In vss. 6-10 Jesus instructs those who follow him to be careful how new believers are nurtured, because those who cause these new believers to do contrary to God's will (sin) will be dealt with severely, vs. 6. (This truth is especially true also of those who have not reached the age of accountability.) Note that in vs. 6 when these "little ones" (spiritually)

have grown beyond the age of accountability and "believe in me [Jesus]," they should also be properly trained and nurtured. Whether a person is right with God through faith in Jesus Christ later or in ones innocence, causing them to sin against God has most hurtful consequences. Two weeks ago we discussed Jesus' warning against mongrelizing God's true Gospel with men's traditions. When spiritual babes are taught a hybridized "Gospel," it is extremely difficult for that one to unlearn the false teaching and accept the simplicity of God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ, Matt. 23:15. Jesus uses most dire physical ideas to communicate God's displeasure, such as "sinking with a millstone, cutting off ones feet and hands, or plucking out ones eyes." God is aware of all such influencing of his own to err from God's ways, because his messengers (angels) keep the Lord informed about such sinful activities, vs. 10.

III. With vs. 11 Jesus tells the chief purpose of why the Son of man left his home in heaven to come to earth. That purpose is to save any and all individuals who will come to and trust Jesus as Savior and Lord (Shepherd, Psa. 23:1; John 10:7-18; Heb. 13:20; I Pet. 2:21-25). This parable of Jesus emphasizes the Shepherd's concern over every individual as an individual and not as an insignificant outcast. One could imagine that if a shepherd has ninety-nine sheep, why would he worry about just one who is outside the fold, "is gone astray?" Because every person is important to the Lord. There appears to me to be a difference between the lost sheep in this parable and the lost sheep in Jesus' parable at Lk 15:4-7. In Matthew the lost sheep is out of service in the kingdom while in Luke the lost sheep is out of relationship with God. In Matthew the sheep has strayed, but in Luke the sheep is lost (spiritually).

IV. The last lessons in this chapter have to do with reconciliation of two members of Jesus' bride, the ecclesia, and how many times should such members forgive one another. In the first lesson Jesus outlines the procedure for a member of a local ecclesia who has been trespassed against by another of the same local ecclesia. First, the one transgressed against should approach the transgressor alone for reconciliation. If no reconciliation occurs, the offended one should take with him one or two more members and approach the transgressor the second time. If, again, no reconciliation is attained, the matter should be brought before the local ecclesia at a meeting of the entire body. If the ecclesia cannot convince the transgressor of his error, then he should be considered an outsider, i.e., out of fellowship with the group. This happened in the ecclesia at Corinth as noted at I Cor. 5:4-6. The transgressor was later reinstated to fellowship at II Cor. 2:6-10. If the local ecclesia agrees on a spiritual matter (even a small group, two or three), God the Father will honor such a Holy Spirit led action, vss. 17-20. Peter asked Jesus how many times should a member of the ecclesia forgive another member, seven times? Jesus said that those under the Lordship of Jesus Christ should forgive one another seventy times seven, because God has forgiven each ecclesia member an innumerable number of times against God and one another for Jesus sake, Eph. 4:32.

July 8, 2001

"Jesus Begins Final Trip South"
Matt. 19

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. Please recall that in Chap. 16 Jesus was up north at Caesarea Philippi. There the apostles reconfirmed their belief that Jesus was who he is: the Son of man and the unique Son of God, Matt. 16:13-17. On this occasion Jesus announces for the first time that God will be calling out the ecclesia, Jesus' bride, Matt. 16:18-19. Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone what God had revealed to them, Matt. 16:20. Then, in Chap. 17, following this test of the apostles' position about the person and position of Jesus as God's Messiah, God then made three of the apostles, Peter, James and John, aware of what Jesus would be like following his mortal death and resurrection therefrom later in the kingdom of heaven. Again, at Matt. 17:9 the Lord commanded the three not to divulge the transfiguration experience to anyone until after his resurrection from death. In Matt. 18 Jesus told the apostles about proper humility; about influencing innocent children and new believers in Jesus Christ to sin; about Jesus' main purpose in coming to earth - to provide spiritual salvation for all who will believe; about forgiveness by local ecclesia members who trespass against other members; and about how many times local ecclesia members should forgive one another.

II. The above reviews of the preceding three chapters, 16-18, were given to signify what Matthew (God's Word) is referring to at the opening of Chap. 19, "When Jesus had finished these sayings," vs. 1. Further, we can see the geographic journey Jesus has begun on his final trip to Jerusalem. From the mountain up at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus came back south to Galilee, and, at the beginning of Chap. 19, we are told that Jesus and his company bypassed Samaria (as was the Jewish custom) by going south on the east side (Perea) of the Jordan to Galilee. On this leg of his journey south huge crowds followed the Lord, "and he healed them there," vs. 2. We should have noted by now that the Pharisees were like mosquitoes, for about everywhere Jesus went they appeared. They picked this occasion to present Jesus with a question about marriage and the part divorce should play in it. Their question did not ask whether divorce is right or wrong, but rather whether it is legal for a man to put away his wife for any (every) cause. Jesus' answer used as its basis the original arrangement which God had made for intimacy, procreation and mutual support of a man and a woman, i. e., whether divorce is right or wrong according to God's original will and purpose for his creation, mankind. The reason for a male and female to become exclusively related for such purposes was to separate the new couple from their parents. This separation from the parents was to be so exclusive that the two should be considered, not two people (fleshly speaking), but one (to be considered joined together exclusively). This arrangement was the way God originally planned marriage, and any deviation from that plan was because of mankind's refusal to accept God's will and purpose. That plan, of course, precludes sexual intimacies of a human being with lower animals as well as between persons of the same sex ("God made human-kind male and female from the beginning."), Gen. 1:27; 5:2; Lev.

18:20,22-23; 20:13,15-16; Rom. 1:24-28. When Jesus said, "What God has joined together," he is referring to two aspects of marriage, I believe. First, God considers the male and female together as one fleshly being, and second, he excludes other than male with female human beings. God allows nothing else for marriage, for that is only what God "joins together." The Pharisees were quick to point out that Moses in his law permitted a man to divorce his wife by simply putting his position in writing. Jesus said that that was not God's will from the very beginning, but man refused to obey God's will ("hardness of their hearts") so that Moses' position was one of compromise on man's part, not God's, vs.8. Jesus said that if a spouse divorces his or her spouse, except for breaking the exclusive marriage commitment (sexual intimacy with other than ones own spouse), the one getting a divorce and anyone who engages in sexual activity with the one who gets the divorce is guilty of adultery. Then the disciples asked Jesus whether marriage is a better choice for believers at all. The Lord said that the choice for the believer to marry or not is an individual decision. Some are born without sexual sensitivity; some are castrated by others (many slaves were for forced celibacy); and some choose by self-discipline for different reasons to remain unmarried. However, a believer is free to marry at his or her own volition, because marriage is honorable for all, Prov. 5:18-21; I Cor. 7:2; Heb. 13:4; I Tim. 4:1-5. It is not accidental, I believe, that Jesus, immediately after his discussion of marriage and divorce, brought a little child to himself and said that children [in their innocence] are of the kingdom of heaven.

III. In vss. 16-26 Jesus is approached by a young ruler (of the Sanhedrin?) who wanted to know from the good Teacher what he should do to earn eternal life. The Lord noted that only God is good, and said that the man should keep God's commandments. The man asked, "Which?" Jesus named the last six of the Ten Commandments having to do with peoples' relating to one another. The young man declared that he had kept them all his life, and asked, "Is there something else?" Apparently Jesus knew that he had become rich by improperly relating to God, the breaking of the first four Commandments having to do with his relation to God, Exod. 20:1-11. Jesus told him to sell what he had, give all to the poor, and follow Jesus, i.e., trust everything to Jesus as Savior and Lord, become Jesus' disciple, vs. 21. Accepting God's love in and through his grace in Jesus Christ is what makes anyone pleasing to God the Father, Matt. 17:5. Jesus is Lord, the only begotten Son of the Living God, Psa. 110:1,4-6; Matt. 22:41-46. Accepting Jesus as Savior and Lord is only possible through God's grace, vs. 26; John 6:41-47. It is not possible for anyone (rich or poor) to earn eternal life. Only those who are trusting God's spiritual provision through Jesus Christ can hope for eternal life, being at one with their Creator, i.e., spiritually alive forever. After the apostles witnessed Jesus' conversation with the affluent young man, Peter asked the Lord if their choice of following Jesus as Lord would be rewarded. Jesus answered, "Truthfully, I tell you that you [anyone] who follows [trusts] me will share with me in my glory in the generation [age] to come," vss. 28-29. Many who appear to be great in the world today could be least in the kingdom of heaven when Jesus returns, vs. 30, and many who appear to be least in men's judgment could be great in the Lord's kingdom.

July 15, 2001

"Jesus Nears Jerusalem"

Matt. 20

Couple Class

Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. When we examine the first sixteen verses of Chap. 20, and especially vs. 16, it is obvious that vs. 30 of the preceding chapter should have been made the first verse of Chap. 20. That vs. 30 introduces Jesus' parable of the vineyard workers. In fact, Chap. 20 begins with the conjunctive term "for". Jesus at this time had taught the disciples many aspects of the kingdom of heaven through the use of parables. The Lord began this method of imparting spiritual truths to the apostles in Matthew, Chap. 13, because, in Chap. 12, it became obvious that the Jewish religious leaders were determined to relegate Jesus' spiritual authority to Satan. The Lord at Matt. 12:31-32 proclaimed explicitly that such position was eternally unpardonable. At Matt. 13:10 when the apostles asked about Jesus' change in teaching methods, he told them that, even as Isaiah had prophesied, "[the Jewish leaders, this people] would hear and not understand and also see and not perceive," Isa. 6:9-10. Now in Chap. 20 Jesus and the apostles are about to enter Jerusalem for the last time before the Lord is to be sacrificed for the sins of the world, and Jesus is still teaching about the kingdom of heaven in parables, i.e., to veil the spiritual truth from those who were unwilling to receive that truth.

II. Jesus began this parable, "For the kingdom of heaven is like when a landowner who went out early one morning to hire some workers to work in his vineyard, agreed to pay each worker a denarius (Greek), which the King James translators equated to an English penny, for the day's labor," vss. 1-3. The workers agreed to work for that wage. Evidently, the crew which the landowner was able to hire early (perhaps six o'clock AM) was not sufficient to do what was immediately needed. At nine o'clock the owner saw that other workers were waiting for work in the marketplace so he sent them into the vineyard promising to pay them "whatsoever is right" at quitting time, six o'clock PM. To expedite this seasonal work the owner found other workers at twelve noon, others at three o'clock, and finally others were hired one hour before quitting time, five o'clock, the eleventh hour. At each hiring time the available workers were unable to find employment elsewhere. In other words, they were able and willing to work, but no one had hired them. The landowner at quitting time instructed his steward (paymaster) to call the workers to receive their day's pay "beginning from the last unto the first," vs. 8. The ones who were hired late at five o'clock PM, the eleventh hour, were paid a full penny for an hour's work which was the same pay each worker received regardless of his hiring time, six, nine, twelve, three, or five. Except for the first group hired no worker was promised a given amount for his labor but simply, "whatever is right." I believe that the Lord is the landowner in this parable and that his rewards for workers throughout the ecclesia period will be based upon every worker's faithfulness to his opportunities, not on what men may assess of the labor produced. People's abilities are so varied that only God can know for sure what a reasonable output of their spiritual labor should be. This fact, I believe, is why we are

admonished by Jesus at Matt. 7:1, "Judge not, that you be not judged." Even as the landowner (Jesus) in his parable before us said to those who had been laboring all day in the vineyard, "And when they had received it (the same pay as those who had worked less, as little as one hour), they grumbled against the landowner," vs. 11. Jesus said, in effect, "Friend, I have not wronged you, because I paid you exactly what you agreed to work for. Your opinion (the way you see the situation in retrospect, through "thine evil eye") does not change the agreements, for the vineyard is mine and our agreement was mine to make. Therefore, be on your way," vss. 13-14. I believe also that Jesus is not only referring to individual believers but also to the Jews as a people in their rejection of Jesus as God's Messiah (Savior) as compared to the Gentiles who accepted Jesus as Savior and Lord, Matt. 8:10-12; 15:24; 16:19; Acts 10:9-37,44-48; Rom. 11:11-32.

III. In vss. 17-19 Jesus is very aware of their forthcoming arrival at Jerusalem, and, although the Lord had already told the apostles three times about what was about to happen to himself (Matt. 16:21; 17:9,12), he here gives them a more detailed description of the coming events at Jerusalem. Jesus and the apostles, remember, were on their way southward on the east of the Jordan, and they were now coming upward toward Jerusalem from the east. Jesus told the twelve apostles that he would be betrayed (by one of the twelve he was then addressing, Judas Iscariot) to the Jewish leaders. The Jewish leaders would turn him over to the Gentile (Roman) authority who would mock, scourge and finally crucify him. The Lord at this time assures the twelve that he would rise again from mortal death. I do not believe that the apostles comprehended the full implication of what Jesus had just told them, because shortly thereafter James' and John's mother, wife of Zebedee, approached the Lord worshipfully asked him a question. As Jesus encouraged her to spell out her desire, she asked him for permission for her two sons to sit in places of authority when Jesus had established his kingdom. The result of her request was that Jesus noted the envy expressed by the other ten apostles and told them all, "You know how the Gentiles organize their kingdoms. They designate political leaders (princes) who control those under them. These political great ones exercise authority, but it shall not be so among you. The great ones in the ecclesia, let them be those who serve. The greatest ones will be slaves to the groups. That is the role model which is being performed by the Son of man (himself)," vss. 25-28. This teaching of Jesus took place in Jericho to the west of the Jordan. Here a large crowd gathered around Jesus and his followers. As they walked along the road at Jericho, two blind men sat along side the road and, as Jesus passed, yelled, "O Lord, thou son of David." Some in the crowd told them to be quiet, but they yelled out even louder, "Have mercy on us, O Lord, thou son of David," vss. 30-31. Jesus stopped and asked them what they wanted. "Lord, that our eyes may be opened," vs. 33. With loving compassion, the Lord touched their eyes, and immediately they could see. They both became disciples of Jesus and followed him.

"Living for Jesus a life that is true; striving to please him
in all that I do; Yielding allegiance, glad-hearted and free
This is the pathway of blessing for me!"

July 22, 2001

"Jesus Enters Jerusalem"
Matt. 21

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. In Chap. 20 Jesus and his company were passing through Jericho which is east and slightly north of Jerusalem. At the beginning of Chap. 21 they enter the small village of Bethphage (House of Figs) on the Mount of Olives, a ridge of low mountains east of Jerusalem across the Kidron Valley. The ridge runs about a mile long, north and south. To understand this chapter which details the Lord's kingly entry into Israel's most sacred city, I believe we must have a broader view of this last week of Jesus' flesh-and-blood life as a human, the God-man. The Lord had come to Jerusalem to observe the Jewish celebration of Passover. The Passover was memorialized annually to remember the event in Jewish history when God delivered his people from slavery under the Egyptians. It was this delivery which made the Israelites for the first time a national entity, a unified people. Passover was observed in the Jewish month of Nisan (March-April) from the fourteenth to the twenty-first. Although technically, Passover refers only to the meal of unleavened bread itself, the celebration lasted seven days when our Lord was on earth. So then, Jesus arrived at Jerusalem at the beginning of the seven days, but did not stay overnight in the city until the night of his trial. His nights were spent across the Kidron Valley in the village of Bethany, vs. 17. Matthew's Gospel does not attempt to give a chronological account of Jesus' activities during the week, but all of Chaps. 21-28 tell of the Lord's activities and teachings in and around Jerusalem in those seven days. Jesus' bold assertiveness is an obvious change in our Lord's behavior. He is acting like the King that he is, giving the Jews a last chance to accept him as God the Father had sent him to earth to be. Many refer to Jesus' entry into Jerusalem as detailed in this chapter as "triumphant," but that entry is yet to happen, Zech. 14:1-4; Heb. 9:28. At that time, Jesus' second coming, Zech. 9:9 can be fully applicable. (Matthew only quotes it partially, "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion" and "he is just, and having salvation" are not given in vs. 5.) At any rate, the entries of Jesus into Jerusalem sequentially chronological are not given by Matthew. By combining the accounts of Matthew, Mark, and Luke there appears to be at least three distinct entries of Jesus into Jerusalem from Bethany that week.

II. Chap. 21 records one of Jesus' entries into Jerusalem, but as stated above the real triumphant entry into Jerusalem will happen when Jesus comes the second time. Jesus had made plans for this entry by arranging for a donkey and its foal to be available for him to ride. We must remember that Jesus had very close friends who owned a home across the Kidron in Bethany, a village adjacent to Bethphage and which were both within walking distance of Jerusalem. These friends were Lazarus and his two sisters, Mary and Martha, John 11:1-5. It was in their home that Jesus spent his nights during this week, I believe. With the donkey available, Jesus rode her through the gate into the city. We know that this entry of Jesus was generally known, because "a very great multitude" spread tree branches and straw along the street and quoted Psa.

118:25-26, "Save now (Hosanna), I beseech thee - - Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord - - ." Many of the people in Jerusalem were there from out of town for the Passover. However, "all of the city was moved," and some were asking, "Who is this?" The crowds said, "This is Jesus the prophet of Nazareth of Galilee."

III. Jesus went into the Temple and drove the money exchangers out as he quoted Isa. 56:7 and said, "'My house shall be called the house of prayer for all people,' but you have made it a den of thieves," vs. 13. Jesus healed the blind and lame there, and the children were singing, "Hosanna the son of David," vs. 15. The Jewish religious leaders witnessed all of these things and were very angry. They asked Jesus, in effect I believe, "Do you realize that you are desecrating God's Holy Temple at this most holy time. Even the little children are reacting to you." Jesus answered by quoting Psa. 8:2, "Out of the mouth of babes you have [perfected praise] established strength because of your enemies - - ." The next day as Jesus returned to the city from Bethany, evidently without breakfast, he stopped by a fig tree for figs, but the tree was bare of fruit but full of leaves, "for the time of figs was not yet," Mk 11:13. Jesus expressed disfavor with the tree, and the tree immediately withered away. The apostles were amazed when they heard the Lord say, "No man eat fruit of thee forever." Jesus said in answer to their amazement that faith in God through prayer reveals the will of God. I believe that in the fig tree experience Jesus was expressing with subtlety how the nation of Israel was bearing no fruit for God in his plan for mankind. They had a form of religion through practicing rituals (leaves), but were not living according to God's will in their daily lives (fruit). How does the Church today compare to the Jews during Jesus' first visit to earth? (Rom. 11:21-22; Rev. 3:15-17) While Jesus was in the Temple that day, the chief priests and members of the Sanhedrin came to him and questioned his authority to "carry on" as he was doing. Jesus quieted them by asking them whether John the Immerser's authority was from heaven. They were afraid to say, so Jesus refused to answer their question about his own source of power.

IV. The Lord used the occasion of his authority's being questioned to teach the chief priests and Pharisees two parables against their religious position. Jesus said that a certain man had two sons (I believe Jews and Gentiles) whom he asked to go to work in the father's vineyard. The first one said that he would not go, but later went and worked (Gentiles). The second (Jews), when asked, said, "Sure, I'll go and work," but never went. Jesus asked his hearers who did the will of the father (God). They said the first son did. Jesus told them abruptly that whores and tax collectors heeded John the Immerser's call to change (repent), but they did not. In the second parable, a landowner (God the Father) left his estate for a long time but left tenants (Israel) in charge. At harvest time the landowner sent workers to harvest the crop, but the tenants abused them so that the workers could not do the work. The traveling owner heard of the problem and finally sent his own son (Jesus, the Messiah) to manage the tenants. But the tenants thought that, by killing the son, the estate would then be theirs so they killed the son. Jesus quoted Psa. 118:22 and said, "The kingdom of God shall be taken from you [the Jews] and given to [another, the Gentiles]," vs. 43; Rom. 11:25. The Jewish leaders would have taken Jesus then, but they feared the people.

July 29, 2001

"A Parable And Conflict"
Matt. 22

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. This chapter begins with Jesus' third parable, interrupted from the two at the end of Chap. 21 only by the Pharisees and the chief priests who understood themselves to be directly implicated in Jesus' parables. These Jewish leaders were seeking ways to incarcerate the Lord, but they feared the people. Jesus spoke to them a third parable relating these leaders to the kingdom of heaven and to Jesus as king of that kingdom. A king (God the Father) is preparing a feast for his son's (Jesus', God's only begotten) forthcoming wedding. The king did not want to be embarrassed by a low turnout to the feast, and he, therefore, sent his servants early to invite those whom he wanted to attend. The monarch went ahead and planned for the wedding feast, including the killing of his choice beef cattle for barbecuing. Now, the king again with the preparation all made, sent his servants through the kingdom to invite his subjects to the feast. They not only refused to come, but made fun of the king and continued their daily activities, farming and businesses. Some of those invited even spoke spitefully of the king. Others even killed the king's representatives. When the king learned about his being treated so spitefully, he called out the military, sent them throughout the kingdom, and burned their cities. When those who were most appropriate to attend the feast were destroyed, the king sent his militia out and forced anyone they could find, to come to the feast. Some who showed up were good, i.e., they knew and cared enough to dress appropriately. However, when the hall was full of guests and the sovereign king came in, he noted a guest in the hall who had not bothered to dress appropriately. The king personally approached the person and said, "Friend, why have you come here without proper attire?" The person was speechless! The person was seized, bound, and thrown into the dungeon. Jesus' conclusion was "that many are called, but few are chosen." The message, I believe, of the parable is that God had sent prophets and his apostles (Lk 10:1-24) consistently to his people, the Jews, but they would not heed his messengers and now are rejecting his son (Matt. 20:16). The events are now under way to honor his son at a wedding of the son to his ecclesia (Rev. 19:7-10), but the Jewish nation is, even with the wedding preparation about to be complete (John 17:4-5), again rejecting God's gracious invitation to do God's will. That will is that each person put on the proper garment, faith in the righteousness of God's mercy and grace through his Son, Jesus, God's Messiah, Isa. 64:6; Matt. 5:20; Rom. 3:21-31; 13:10; Eph. 2:8-10; Rev. 3:5; 7:9,13-14.

II. After this third parable which Jesus related against the Jewish leaders in their presence, all of these leaders assembled to decide how to "entangle him in his teaching," vs. 15. The Pharisees spear-headed this concerted effort against our Lord, and they first sent the Herodians with their followers to Jesus and said, "We understand you to be a true teacher from God and are not afraid to say things which could offend anyone." Therefore, is it right for us Jews to have to pay taxes to support the Romans (Caesar)? Jesus was not fooled by the evil intent of their question, and answered, "Why

do you tempt me, you hypocrites?" Jesus knew that the Herodians' real "religion" was a loyalty to Herod and his political position. Jesus asked them for a coin with which they paid taxes. They brought him a denarius (penny), and the Lord asked them whose picture and name are on the coin. They answered, "Caesar's." Jesus said, "Pay, therefore, to Caesar the things which are his, and unto God the things which are God's," vs. 21. The Herodians were amazed that he would allow that the Jews owed both support of the Roman government (roads, military protection, etc.) and support of God's work (Temple, priests, etc.). They gave up trying to trick Jesus, vs. 22.

III. Immediately after the Herodians "took a swing" at Jesus, the Sadducees' turn came next. They were an antitradition denomination of the Jews, and were, for the most part, well-to-do and quite concerned about their being of the "upper" class. Their "religion" had become influenced by Greek philosophy to become "this life" centered, materialistic. They did not believe in any afterlife. They approached Jesus with feigned respect, calling him, "Teacher, Teacher," and quoting the Law of Moses. They proposed an example in which a man who had six brothers married a woman and then died. According to Moses' Law (Deut. 25:5-6), the Sadducees reminded the Lord, one of the dead man's brothers is required to marry his brother's widow. Now, the "shrewd" Sadducees told Jesus that every one of the seven brothers died, and each one of the brothers had dutifully married the same woman who herself then died. The Sadducees then presented the Lord with this "dilemma," "[Ah ha!], after the resurrection, whose wife shall she be of the seven, for all had her [as wife]?" No doubt all the Sadducees gathered around our Lord closely with their arms folded across their chests, daring him to answer their "impossible" query. I believe that Jesus (the Lord of the Universe) looked them deep within their eyes and said calmly, in effect, "You have posed a situation which demonstrates your ignorance. First, you do not understand the Scriptures, and, secondly, you do not understand the power of God [the Father], for after people are resurrected, they will not marry nor will they be marriageable. Human beings will be, after the resurrection, of a different nature (I Cor. 15:37) such as God's angels (messengers) are in heaven. The Scripture makes this fact about the life after physical death known where God spoke to you [by Moses at Exod. 3:4-6] 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' God is not the God of the dead [All three had long since been physically dead when God spoke this to Moses.], but of the living," vss. 29-32. By the end of Jesus' reply to the Sadducees, they and those around them were astonished at the Lord's teaching. A lawyer of the Pharisees then asked Jesus which commandment in the Law is greatest [first]. Jesus said that loving God completely is the first, and loving ones neighbor is second, because on these two all the others are based. In fact, the second is really dependent upon the first. Jesus then asked the Pharisees a question: "Whose son is the Messiah?" They answered, "David's." [If this is true, then], "How does David in the spirit [led by God's Holy Spirit] call him [the Messiah], 'Lord?'" (Psa. 110:1) David said, "The Lord said to my Lord, 'You sit on my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.' If David called him [the Messiah] 'Lord,' how is it that the Lord is David's son?" They could not answer, and that ended the Jewish leaders' conspiracy through questions. Now they wanted Jesus' death.

MANY ARE CALLED BUT FEW ARE CHOSEN
Matt. 22:14

Following is a discussion of Jesus' statement, "many are called, but few are chosen" at Matt. 22:14. Jesus had said earlier at Matt. 19:30, "But many that are first shall be last, and the last shall be first." At Matt. 20:16 Jesus said, "So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called but few chosen." (italics-WA) The "calling" and "choosing" are intricately tied together in Jesus' mind, I believe, as he did at Matt. 20:16 with "last" and "first." The substance of the two concepts has to do with the sequential timing of the "calling" and "choosing" as Jesus did at Matt. 20:16. I believe that the first two quotes (Matt. 19:30 and Matt. 20:16) of Jesus are more particularly clarified in the parable in Matt. 22:1-14 concerning the King (God the Father) and his Son (Jesus, God's Messiah). That fact is repeated as the conclusion of Jesus' parable in Chap. 22:1-14. Jesus said in that parable that God is literally refusing to have his Son ignored, and, therefore, he will create a group, Jesus' bride the ecclesia to include all Jews and Gentiles who will accept God's grace and mercy alone through faith in his Son Jesus the Savior.

This problem bothered Paul immensely, I believe. As far as we need to know, God's Holy Spirit explained this problem of Jews vs. Gentiles to Paul who then gave the answer (God's) to us in his Word at Rom. 11.

In summary, God's will has been and is being proclaimed throughout the earth, but all who hear the truth in Christ, though called, will not be chosen. They will be chosen only on God's terms: total dependence upon righteousness in Jesus Christ's sacrifice, Matt.13:30; Rom. 9:30-33. The Jews wanted to earn God's favor as have and do many since Jesus' resurrection and God's sending of his Holy Spirit. Many of the latter have interpreted God's Word to mean that their own goodness (or of someone else) must be combined with Jesus' sacrifice to make them ready to please God. The Jews were the first to make this mistake and the Gentiles will be the second to make this same mistake. In turn the Jews will be the ones to be reconciled to God (as a people) the last time, Rev. 7:1-10, and the Gentiles will be the last to turn away (as a people) from God's will a second time, Rom. 1:18-32; 11:18-22; Rev. 3:14-17.

I believe that it is very easy to confuse individuals with the Jews or Gentiles as peoples. As humanity (all peoples on the earth) God has put all individuals in the same category that he "might have mercy upon all," Rom. 11:32. One must confess that he or she cannot comprehend God's position with ones meager mental ability. Neither did Paul, but he did believe that God is in absolute control of his creation, Rom. 11:33-36. So do I, "many are called, but few are chosen," Matt. 22:14.

The above is why I elected to relate "called" and "chosen" to Matt. 22:14 instead of to Matt. 19:30 and Matt. 20:16.

July 29, 01; Wendell Alford; Teacher

Aug. 5, 2001

"Woe To The Religious Leaders"
Matt. 23

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. Jesus had been teaching the multitudes for many months about the nature of the kingdom of heaven in parables. Now the Lord is in Jerusalem for the last Passover during which he is to be sacrificed for our sins, and he confronts the Jewish religious leaders directly in Chaps. 21-22, again in parables. As he did so, the Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians, chief priests, and elders knew that the thrust of Jesus' teaching was against how they were conducting their religious duties before the peoples of Israel. At the beginning of Chap. 23 Jesus addresses the large crowd and the apostles in and around the Temple. The Jewish religious leaders were no longer directly speaking to Jesus and attempting to cause him to betray himself in public, Matt. 22:46, because they could not. Jesus said, "The scribes (professional interpreters of the Law, the letter not the spirit) and Pharisees (legalists and political religionists) are the people in authority according to Moses' Law. Therefore, you should do what they say [for they quote God's Word], but do not follow their actions as role models. They prescribe life styles and customs which they present to you as God's will for you, but they themselves do not even attempt to comply with the same rules they are laying down for you. They are hypocrites as they associate with you, and their actions in public belie the thoughts and goals of their spirits. They dress in what is generally understood to be holy clothing making them appear to be God's representatives, examples for others to replicate. They assume places of prestige at public religious meetings, making sure that they occupy places reserved for notables. They make sure that their presence is known out in the market places so as to give "religious commoners" an opportunity to address them as 'Teacher, Teacher.'" Jesus then in an aside to his apostles, I believe, said, "Do not allow others to call you 'Leader,' for only one is to be your Leader [Teacher] who is the Messiah. All of you are to consider yourselves brothers [equals]. Neither should you consider any man to represent God for you on earth, for there is only one God, your heavenly Father. There is to be none among you to represent God's Lordship, for only one is your Lord, even the Messiah. In fact, the ones of my followers who are to be considered outstanding shall be those who serve others. Further, if one of you "lords it" over the others, he shall be humbled. Self-discipline which produces humility will demonstrate true leadership," Matt. 20:25-28.

II. At vs. 13 Jesus turns his attention directly to the scribes and Pharisees. As he does so, I believe, his admonitions are begun with the negative term, "Woe," as Isaiah warned the Israelites in Chap. 5 of his prophecy. There Isaiah presents a parable which Jesus reiterates in his parable at Matt. 21:33-46. Compare Isa. 5:1-2 with Matt. 21:33. After Isaiah sets the stage for his parable, he addresses the inhabitants of Jerusalem in particular and the citizens of Judah in general. In that same chapter, 5, the prophet Isaiah proclaims six "Woes," vss. 8,11,18,20, 21, and 22. At that time God told the Israelites through Isaiah: Not to cause the farms

to overproduce; not to engage in a continual "party spirit," revelry; not to let vanity (evil) control them without believing that God will recompense their choice of evil; not to call evil good and good evil; not to over value themselves through pride, i.e., consider themselves wise when they are not; and not to occupy positions of leadership and engage, at the same time, in alcohol and bribery. The conclusion which Isaiah reaches is in Isa. 5:25, "therefore is the anger of the Lord kindled against his people," because "they have despised the Word of the Holy One of Israel," Isa. 5:24. This feeling of conviction when precipitated by the death of King Uzziah after a long reign (fifty-two years), caused Isaiah to heed God's call to say, "Woe is me, for I am undone - - Here am I, send me," Isa. 6:5,8. And God said, "Go, and tell this people [the Jews], 'Hear you indeed, but understand not, and see you indeed, but perceive not,'" Isa. 6:9.

III. Jesus was a prophet, priest and king as he dwelt among men. He is still the priest and spiritual king of us believers. In Matt. 23:13-36 the Lord pronounces eight "Woes" upon the same people as Isaiah did in the six in his prophecy, God's people, the Jews. In both instances, it is noteworthy that God's condemnation is especially directed to the religious leaders. Jesus' woes come in Matt. 23:13,14,15,16,23,25,27, and 29. Jesus condemned the scribes and Pharisees because: 1) They hid (shut up) the kingdom of heaven from those they led as well as staying out themselves; 2) They gained profit from the needy (widows) while parading about as pious religious leaders (prayed long prayers); 3) They were ardent missionaries over land and seas to make proselytes to their own religious position, but when they are made, they (the proselytes) are "twofold more a child of hell (away from God) than yourselves;" 4) They were spiritually blind and taught that taking an oath regarding the Temple (God's house) or the altar (God's throne) was not binding (did not have to be paid), but swearing by the tangible items, gold or other gifts, was binding (an emphasis on materialism and the religious leaders' ability to profit thereby); 5) They created a false priority insofar as what is spiritually more important by tithing insignificant herbs and glossing over the weightier requirements of the Law such as judgment, mercy, and faith. The scribes and Pharisees neglected the more important legal requirements, but raising money was emphasized. They were "straining at a gnat [away from their food] and gobbling down a camel" while setting their spiritual priorities! 6) They made themselves appear good publicly, but practiced self indulgence privately; 7) They primped themselves meticulously on their exterior as one would a grave site, but on the inside their spirits were like decayed flesh and broken bones, corrupt; and 8) They claimed that they would have been allies of the past prophets who were tortured and slain by the adversaries of God, but by their (the scribes and Pharisees) actions they are, in truth, offsprings of the killers of the prophets, John 8:41-47. The Jews (as a people) of this generation (the ecclesia age) will continue to contradict the will of God. Jesus then felt sorry for Jerusalem, because it was there where Jewish leadership had killed the prophets. Jesus said that he had lovingly brooded long over the Jews and would have gathered them together as chicks under his wings, but they were rebellious, and still are. Jesus said, "Your house [Temple] is being left desolate to you. You shall not see [understand] me until [I come again to earth]. Then you will call me, 'Lord,'" vss. 38-39; Rev. 7:1-8.

Aug. 12, 2001

"Jesus As Prophet"
Matt. 24

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. Last week in the outline at ¶ III the first sentence was, "Jesus was a prophet, priest and king as he dwelt among men." In Matt. 24-25 the Lord exercises his position as a prophet. Jesus and the apostles had just been in the Temple where he had been condemning the scribes and Pharisees for misleading the Israelites in eight (woes) different ways. Jesus was no doubt weary after his long day of confronting the false position of the Jewish leaders. He left the Temple and was joined by the apostles, and they pointed out the grandeur of the large Temple complex which Herod the Great had first announced to the Jewish people at the Passover in 19 or 20 BC. His intention was to restore the Temple on the site where the great Temple of Solomon had stood, near the city of David. Herod had built the Temple to gain the favor of the Jews whose tranquillity brought favor to Herod from the Roman Empire under whom he held political power. The total project of building the Temple began after a long period of amassing the materials. By 16 BC Herod had finished the sanctuary, the holy of holies, and the surrounding porch. In about 9 BC the court and cloisters were finished along with the bridge between the south cloister and the upper city. The magnificence of the structures was breathtaking, especially when the bright sun shone on its huge white marble walls, colonnades, and ten elaborate gateways. The Temple had been under construction for forty-six years in Jesus' time on earth, John 2:20. Herod the Great died in 4 BC, but his son, Antipas, continued the construction of the complex. The entire complex was finally finished in AD 64 under Herod Agrippa II.

II. I believe that Jesus and the apostles were perhaps across the Kidron Valley from where the Temple area could be viewed in its panoramic splendor, Mk 13:3. As the Lord and the apostles looked back across the valley from the Mount of Olives at the magnificent buildings, one of the apostles said, "Teacher, note how significant the Temple and accompanying buildings are!" Jesus prophesied, "Observe these great buildings. There shall not one stone be left upon another that shall not be thrown down." Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked Jesus questions about events which would occur relating to these prophetic times. Specifically their questions were: 1) When shall these things be? (stones thrown down); 2) What shall be the sign of your coming?; and 3) What sign will be given to indicate the end of the world (age - [ecclesia period])?" The first question had to do with the destruction of the Temple, "stone by stone." Luke describes the fulfillment of this prophecy at Lk 21: 20-24. Jerusalem is to be surrounded by strong military forces. Matthew does not elaborate upon this soon coming destruction of the Temple, because his Gospel emphasizes the kingdom of heaven, which we have learned through over two thousand years of history, was postponed until God had selected a bride (the ecclesia) for his Son, Jesus the Messiah. Recall that Jesus had said at Matt. 23:39 that the Jewish people would not understand what was happening until his second coming. Then they will proclaim Jesus as their Savior (Messiah), Rev. 7:1-8. The armies which fulfilled Jesus'

prophecy were those of the Roman general Titus, some forty years later, who finished the destruction of the Temple on August 9, AD 70. A Mohammedan mosque now stands on the old temple site and has since AD 691. This mosque is called today the Dome of the Rock, because it sits on the huge rock where Abraham took Isaac for sacrifice, Mount Moriah, Gen. 22. Muslims believe that Mohammed ascended to heaven from that rock, and that Abraham took Ishmael there for sacrifice rather than Isaac. No wonder Jesus wept over the site!

III. In vss. 4-26 Jesus answers question three concerning the end of the ecclesia age (world order) which ends with the short period of cosmic upheaval spoken of by Daniel, vs. 15; Dan. 9:27; 11:31; 12:11. During this end period there will be spiritual bedlam upon the earth, because the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit (the ecclesia) will have been removed from the earth, II Thes. 2:6-8; Rev. 4. The Jews will be especially upset and confused, because many false messiahs (prophets) will present themselves as God's Savior. In fact, many will be deceived, for evil will prevail, vs. 12; Rev. 6:12-17. Jesus refers to these events as the "great tribulation," vs. 21 which will be without precedence from the earth's creation until forever. The period of this tribulation will be so severe it will take a special intervention of God Almighty to salvage any human life at all, vs. 22. This intervention will be exercised on behalf of his chosen ones, the Jews, vs. 22; Rom. 11:25-26; Rev. 7:1-8. At the end of the answer to question three, Jesus gives another warning that many will claim to be prophets of God, even to be the Messiah himself, but they will be false. How will the real Messiah be manifested? Jesus answers question two of the apostles, "What shall be the sign of your coming [back to earth]?" In vss. 27-31 Jesus prophesies that his appearance will be cosmic. His presence will illuminate the entire earth (Dan. 7:13-14) which will be in a different state immediately following the tribulation, vs. 29. As the Lord appears, the peoples of the earth will be saddened, because a new King has come to establish a new world order. Jesus shall reign one thousand years, Rev. 20:3. The ecclesia will be the bride of Christ during this period in the new Jerusalem, Rev. 21:2, and will reign with Jesus, our Lord, Rev. 5:10.

IV. Beginning with vs. 32 Jesus gives a parable and follow up illustrations, after having answered the apostles' three questions noted above. His parable stresses the uncertainty of the exact timing of the occurrence of the fulfillment of the three questions, "all these things," vs. 33. But when the world order shows the trends toward their fulfillment the soon end is as sure as a fig tree's indicating spring when its leaves sprout from their buds. We believers will be aware of the nearness of our Lord's return, Lk 21:28; I Thes. 5:1-11; Heb. 10:24-25. The world's population just before the return of Christ will feel that all is well, I Thes. 5:23. All believers will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air, those who have died physically and those still alive physically, I Cor. 15:51-58; I Thes. 4:13-18. Just as this event is happening, the world's peoples will be pursuing regular routines as they were when Noah and his family boarded the Ark, vss. 38-44. The wise servant is not hypocritical but serves the Lord as a witness to God's love through faith in God's Son (Word), vs. 35; vss. 45-51. He will come suddenly, Rev. 3:11; 22:7,12.

Aug. 20, 2001

"Jesus' Prophecy Continues"
Matt. 2 5

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. Chap. 25 continues Jesus' prophetic teachings about the end of the ecclesia age and his return for his bride. In fact, there is no break between Chaps. 24 and 25 in what has become known as the Olivet Discourse, because at Matt. 24:3 we are told that these teachings were taught to the apostles privately, "as he sat upon the Mount of Olives." Recall that these teachings were prompted by questions asked Jesus by the apostles. We should not lose the drama of these lessons, because Chaps. 24 and 25 was the last time the Lord had to relate calmly to his beloved followers and close associates of the last three years. Even at this most somber of times for God's Son, Jesus the Christ, the Lord taught in parables. The first parable lesson involved ten virgins and the second had to do with God's investments in the followers whom the Lord was about to leave alone physically with only his Holy Spirit to teach, inspire, correct, and motivate to do God's will. During this period, the seventieth week of Daniel's prophecy, the kingdom of heaven on earth will be delayed while the Lord Jesus' bride, the ecclesia, is called out by God's Spirit from the earth's population, Dan. 9:26-27; John 6:41-47,65; Rom. 9:18-24,30-33.

II. The first parable in this chapter is introduced as a similitude of the kingdom of heaven as were the parables of Jesus beginning with Matthew Chap. 13 onward. Remember it was at that time (Matt. 13:10-17) that Jesus could see that his physical life (at the hands of the Jewish leaders) could be taken before his assignment by God the Father was completed, John 17:1-5. "The kingdom of heaven shall be likened to ten virgins [young unmarried maidens], who took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom," Jesus said, vs. 1. There are obviously three main factors in this parable: 1) the ten unmarried ladies (denoted "virgins" because they had never been married and hence had never engaged in sexual intimacies with a male); 2) their ten oil lamps for use while waiting for the bridegroom; and 3) the bridegroom himself. A mystery in the parable is that the bride is not mentioned at all. I believe that her omission is because the bridegroom (Christ Jesus) is to be away during the time (Daniel's seventieth week noted above) while the bride, the ecclesia, is being called out by God's Holy Spirit. When the bridegroom returns with his bride, all believers, there will be some wise and some foolish on earth who experience his return. We follow the parable: All ten virgins were equipped with lamps filled with oil as the evening approached. The five wise ones, who planned ahead, brought vessels containing extra oil realizing that the period from dusk until the expected arrival of the bridegroom with his bride could empty the lamps' supply of oil. The five foolish virgins, however, took no extra oil. The custom of that time was that the wedding took place at the bride's parents' home. Invitations were many times limited. After the wedding the groom brought his new bride, usually on a litter, to the couple's new house. On this journey his attendants and guests accompanied the couple with much happiness and glee. But midnight can be a dark time and those attendants and guests needed lights to make

the travel safely. Along rocky and rutted, overcrowded passages at such a time, they needed individual lights. The foolish virgins, with no extra oil, failed to enjoy the occasion. I believe that when Jesus returns for his bride, all who are or have trusted God's promise to make them spiritually alive through his grace in Jesus Christ will be taken from the earth to heaven where the wedding will take place. It is during this time (Rev. 4-5) that the great tribulation will begin on earth, Matt. 24:21-22. The ten virgins are, I believe, a reference to the nation Israel. Some of the Jews will be wise and others foolish in accepting or not accepting Jesus as God's Messiah (Savior), Rev. 7:1-8. Many Gentiles will likewise turn to the Lord at that time, Rev. 7:9-17. As stated above the marriage of Jesus and his bride will occur in heaven, but a wedding feast will follow on earth, Matt. 22:2-14; 25:10; Rev. 19:7-10, at the beginning of the Lord's thousand-year kingdom of heaven on earth, Rev. 20:4. In the meantime, all are to watch and be alert, for the day and hour are known only to God the Father, Matt. 24:36,42; vs. 13.

III. After cautioning his disciples of the necessity for the peoples of the earth to be constantly aware that his, the Lord's, return is continually imminent, Jesus immediately tells another parable. The King James version begins the new parable with, "For the kingdom of heaven is as a man traveling into a far country, who called his servants, and delivered unto them his goods," vs. 14. However, the "kingdom of heaven" phrase is in italics meaning that that phrase is not in the original manuscript but added interpretively. A better translation would be, "For it is as though a man going abroad called his slaves and delivered his goods to them." In other words, this parable is another way of saying essentially the same as the preceding parable. The chief difference is in the emphasis of watchfulness in the virgin parable and the emphasis of service in the talents parable. Constant faithfulness is common to both. Jesus said that when the man with goods decided to travel abroad, he apportioned his goods to three of his servants (slaves). To one he entrusted five talents (money), to another three talents, and to another, one talent. The first two invested those dollars given to them and doubled the owner's money. However, the slave given one talent stored it away in the earth and blamed his concept of the owner's austerity with his not having taken a chance with investing the talent. The owner (the Lord) took the one talent and gave it to the ten-talent slave, but the owner condemned the unfaithful one-talent slave. Following this parable, Jesus told the apostles what would happen to the nations of the earth when he returns in his glory as King of all the earth. Those who have served Jesus as Lord will be separated from those who have not, but neither will understand how they have been or have not been of service to the Lord. He designates the serving ones as sheep and the unerving ones as goats. I believe that this judgment will be upon all nations of the earth "when the Son of man shall come in his glory," and the Jews (Jesus' brothers according to the flesh, Rom. 9:5) become God's evangelists throughout the earth, Rev. 7:1-8. However, the law of faith (love) is our guide throughout our lives as well, Matt. 7:12; 22:40; Rom. 3:21-31; 13:10. Our faithfulness in service will also be added to our accounts as individual believers, I Cor. 3:11-15.

Aug. 26, 2001

"Our Lord Is Betrayed"
Matt. 26

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

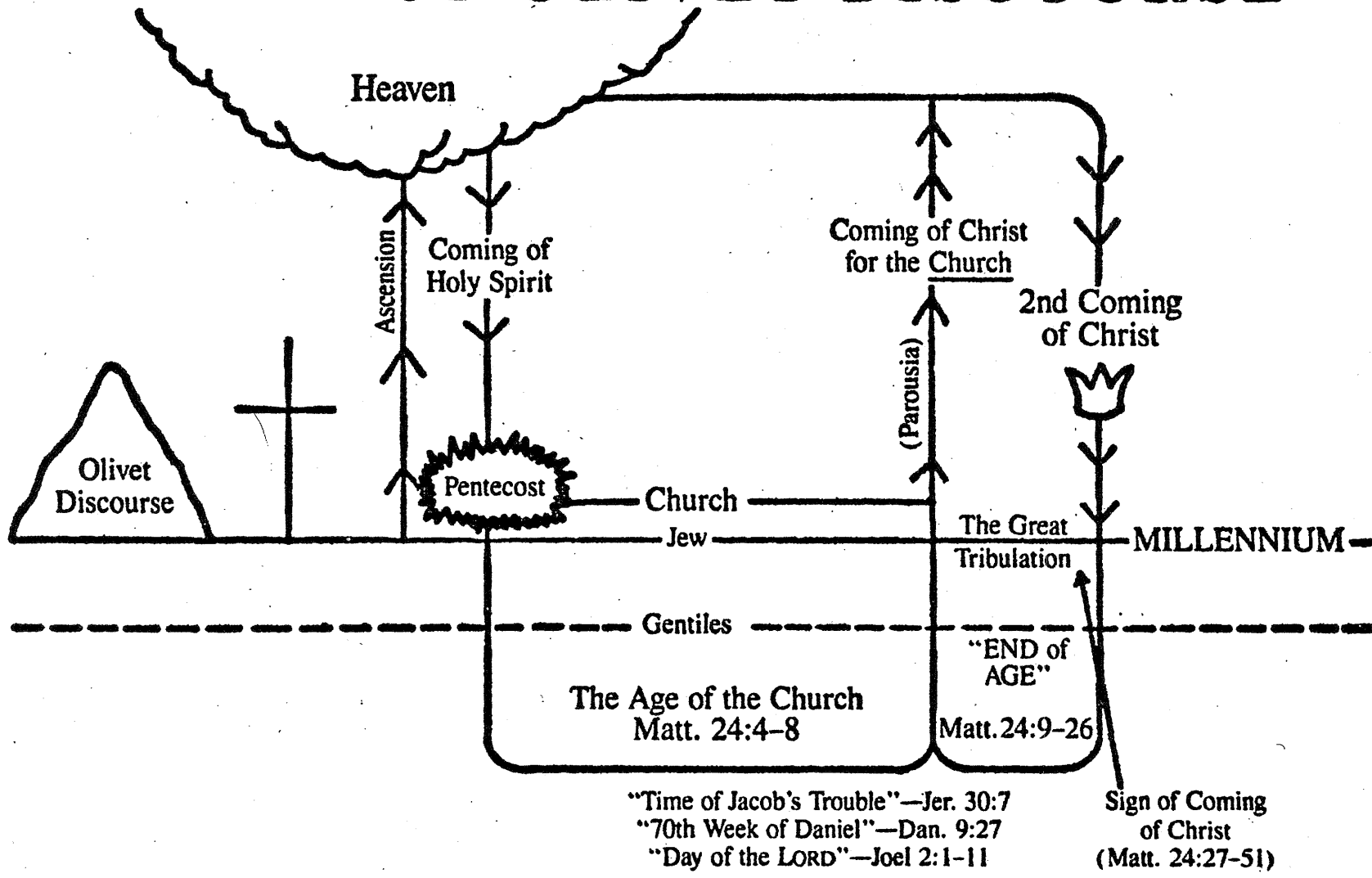
I. The longest chapter in Matthew's Gospel account begins on Tuesday, our April 4, for Jesus said, "- - after two days is the feast of the Passover, and the Son of man is betrayed to be crucified," vss. 1-2. Therefore, the Lord and the apostles ate the first Lord's Supper on Thursday evening, April (Nisan) 6. During these same two days the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders (Sanhedrin) were called into special conference by Caiaphas the high priest at his palace. In their minds and hearts Jesus was religiously guilty of blatant blasphemy and worthy only of death. They also agreed that Jesus should not be slain on the feast day of the Passover lest the people become riotous, vss. 3-5. It was God's plan that his Son be sacrificed on the feast day as "the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world (John 1:29,36), the [sacrificial] Lamb of God." After Jesus had finished the last instructions in the Olivet seminar while answering the apostles' questions concerning the future (all these things), the Lord began making final plans for his death on the cross for our sins. He spent a large portion of these last days over in Bethany at the home of Simon the leper, vs. 6. Simon's leprosy had probably been cured earlier by the Lord Jesus. A strong possibility is that Simon the leper was the father of Mary, Martha and Lazarus, or the husband (who had died) of Martha, because the home was Martha's, Lk 10:38. John in his Gospel account (12:3) tells us that it was, in fact, Mary, Martha's and Lazarus' sister, who anointed Jesus for burial during Jesus' last Passover week. Judas Iscariot voiced the impression (the other eleven agreed) that the expensive perfume should have been sold to help care for the poor. The Lord said that Mary should be commended throughout history for her perception of what was happening to God's Messiah. Some Bible students question whether John 12:1-11 and Matt. 26:6-13 are of the same event. I believe that they are, based upon the fact that the chief priests "took counsel that they might put Lazarus also to death [with Jesus]," John 12:10. Note also that John (God's Word) states that this event happened during the Passover time, John 12:1, and the day before one of Jesus' entries into Jerusalem that week from Bethany, John 12:12.

II. For some reason, known only to God the Father I believe, Judas Iscariot chose to betray our Lord at this time to the chief priests for thirty pieces of silver. We are hard put to believe anyone would do the dastardly act which Judas performed against the Lord of all creation. We do know that Zechariah prophesied that the shepherd of Israel would be betrayed for thirty pieces of silver, Zech. 11:12-13. While Judas was consorting with the Jewish leaders to betray Jesus, Jesus told the apostles where he had made arrangements with a certain man to have his apostles prepare for the Passover meal at his house in a large upstairs room. It was there, when the Passover meal time came on Thursday evening, that Jesus instituted his Lord's Supper. At the beginning of the Passover meal, Jesus said, "Truthfully I tell you that one of you (the twelve) shall betray me," vs. 21. Eleven of the apostles asked Jesus, "Lord,

is it I?" But Judas asked Jesus, "Teacher, is it I?" The Lord answered Judas, "You have said it, [as it is]," vs. 25. The other eleven apparently did not hear or did not understand what Jesus said to Judas. As Jesus instituted his Supper while they were observing the Passover, he took some of the unleavened bread, broke it, and gave it to the apostles saying, "Take, eat; this [represents] my body," vs. 26. The Lord then took the cup, thanked the Father, and gave it to them saying, "Drink from it, all of you, for this [represents] my blood of the new testament [covenant], which is shed for many [all who will believe] for the forgiveness of sins," vss. 27-28. Jesus then said that this would be the last time that he would partake of fruit of the vine until he returns and establishes the Father's kingdom. They then sang a hymn [probably Psa. 111-118, the Hallel (Hallelujah)], and went out to the Mount of Olives. I believe that Judas Iscariot left the group before the Lord's Supper was instituted but while they were still eating the Passover meal. Jesus told the apostles that all of them would be offended because of him (Jesus) that very night and quoted Zech. 13:7, which prophet I noted at Chap. 11:12-13 above concerning Judas' thirty pieces of silver. Peter, ever the other apostles' "mouth-piece" and a "self-starter," said, "Though I should die with thee, yet will I not deny thee." "Likewise also said all the disciples," vss. 34-35. Jesus told Peter that he would deny him three times before the rooster crowed that morning, vs. 34.

III. They reached a place on the Mount of Olives known as "Gethsemane" at this time. The Lord told eight of the apostles to stay there and keep a watch while he went farther (over there). He took with him Peter, James, and John and told the three that he was sorely grieved and deeply distressed. He said that they should stop there and keep watch while he talked with the Father. After a few more paces, Jesus, God's Son who had never, once, disobeyed God's perfect will, literally fell on his face and asked the Father that if spiritual reconciliation for mankind could be accomplished another way, do it. However, your will, my position is, should take precedence over my (human) will. (Jesus was both human and divine, II Cor. 5:19.) After praying, Jesus returned to the three apostles and chided Peter, because they were not watching, but were sleeping. After Jesus' third prayer time, he returned to the three and told them to sleep awhile for soon his time would come to be delivered into the hands of sinners by the "betraye[r]." Soon Jesus told them to get up, because he (Judas Iscariot) is nearby. Even while Jesus was speaking Judas came up to the Lord and performed his prearranged signal to notify the Jewish religious leaders' representatives. He kissed our Lord to betray him and told the mob to seize him and hold him fast. Peter grabbed a sword and cut off an ear of one of the mob. Jesus told them that he could overcome their power easily but that he would go willingly. As he did so, he was fulfilling God's Word, Isa. 53:7. At that time every apostle forsook Jesus and fled. The Lord was taken by the mob to Caiaphas where two false witnesses testified against him. Caiaphas then placed Jesus under oath and asked him directly, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of God?" The entire group of Jewish religious leaders agreed that Jesus who said, "The answer to your question is 'Yes,'" vs. 64, should be put to death. (Note the parallel terminology at vs. 25 and here at vs. 64 which both mean, "It is as you say.") They blindfolded him, spat upon him, struck him with their fists and open hands, and played games with our God. Outside, Peter denied three times that he even knew the Lord, and the rooster crowed. Peter wept bitterly in repentance. Judas Iscariot never repented.

CHART OF OLIVET DISCOURSE



"Time of Jacob's Trouble"—Jer. 30:7
 "70th Week of Daniel"—Dan. 9:27
 "Day of the LORD"—Joel 2:1-11

Sign of Coming
 of Christ
 (Matt. 24:27-51)

I. Our Lord had been awake all night following the instituting of his Supper, praying in Gethsemane, being betrayed by Judas Iscariot, forcibly being brought before the high priest Caiaphas, and being abandoned by all of the apostles. At daybreak (while the rooster was crowing) the chief priests and elders (Sanhedrin) voted to recommend that Jesus should be put to death for religious blasphemy, Matt. 26:63-66. Knowing that the Jewish religious tribunal could not, under their own authority, murder Jesus, they bound him and delivered him to the Roman governor Pontius Pilate. At this time Judas Iscariot realized that his plan to force Jesus' hand (to become a political king, I believe) immediately felt sorry for what he had failed to accomplish. He tried to rescind his part in the betrayal of Jesus by returning the thirty pieces of silver to the Sanhedrin, but they refused to return the money to the Temple treasury. Rather, they took the money which Judas had contemptuously thrown down in the Temple, and purchased a potter's field where strangers (our homeless) could be buried, vss. 3-7; Psa. 41:9; Acts 1:16-20.

II. When Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin brought Jesus to Pilate, they began to accuse him of, not religious blasphemy, but political treason. They said, "We found this fellow perverting the nation [treasonous], forbidding [encouraging us not] to pay taxes, claiming he himself to be king," Lk 23:1-2. Pilate asked Jesus, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Thou sayest it [It is as you say.]," Lk 23:3. Evidently, Pilate did not take Jesus' answer seriously, for the Roman governor said to the Jewish leaders and their crowd, "I find no fault in this man," Lk 23:4. When the crowd realized that Pilate was not cooperating with their recommendation, they declared, "He is stirring up the people, teaching throughout all Jewry from way up in Galilee all the way down here in Judea." Luke's Gospel account tells us that Pilate seized upon Jesus' having lived up in Galilee to refer our Lord to the governor of Galilee, Herod, who happened to be in Jerusalem for the Passover. Herod would not condemn Jesus, but sent him back to Pilate. Pilate really did not want to crucify our Lord, and finally he devised a plan which he thought would persuade the crowd to agree to his release. A custom had developed whereby the Roman authority could acquit a criminal at the Feast of the Passover. A notorious criminal who was well known for treason and other crimes was chosen by Pilate to be paired with Jesus as a choice for the crowd to make, i.e., they could choose either Jesus or Barabbas for freedom. After Pilate had assumed his official role as supreme judge (sat down on the official judgment seat), he received a note from his superstitious wife indicating that Jesus was just and should not be condemned to death. Pilate had already put the choice before the crowd and was waiting for their answer. The Jewish leaders mingled among the crowd urging them to call for Jesus' death and to release Barabbas, vs. 20. When Pilate gave the final choice to the mob, they called for the release of Barabbas and the crucifixion of our Lord. The governor of Judea understood the envy of the Jewish

leaders, Matt. 21:38; vs. 18, so he asked for specific evils which Jesus had done to justify crucifixion. The mob was not interested in specifics nor reason, but cried out together, "Let him be crucified!" In fact, Pilate could not prevail against the mob and proceeded openly to perform the ritual of washing his hands, signifying that he would not personally accept the taking of the blood of innocent Jesus. The mob of Jews declared, "His blood be upon us, and our children," vs. 25; Acts 2:22-23,36. (My italics - WA) At this juncture Pilate released Barabbas, scourged (flogged, whipped) the Lord, and put the Messiah (Savior) under his troops who took him to the governor's headquarters (the Praetorium) for immediate crucifixion.

III. In the hands of the governor's private military guard (Roman soldiers), Jesus was stripped nude and then clothed with a mock scarlet (for royalty) robe. They placed a mock crown of twisted vines upon his head and forced him to hold a mock scepter (a piece of reed) in his hand. They mockingly bowed before him in snappy military courtesy and said, "Hail, king of the Jews!" The soldiers then took the reed and hit him upon the head with it and spat upon him. After tiring of their game, they put his own clothes back on him and led him away to the place of crucifixion, Golgotha. The long night without rest, the physical abuse, and sorrow for the sins of God's creation, mankind, made Jesus unable to carry the cross to the "place of a skull." The soldiers conscripted a Cyrenean, Simon, to carry Jesus' cross. While preparing Jesus to hang on the cross, they offered him vinegar and gall mixed, but after tasting it, he would not drink. Matthew simply states, "They crucified him," without giving minute details. To fulfill Psa. 22:18 the soldiers took his pieces of clothing and gambled to see who would receive Jesus' garments. While watching Jesus slowly die on the cross, they put a sign over the Lord stating, "his accusation," "This is Jesus the king of the Jews." The Jewish leaders stood around the cross and, along with the two thieves on crosses on either side of Jesus, chided him for trusting the God whose Son he claimed to be. (One of the thieves recanted before dying, Lk 23:40-43.) Jesus quoted the twenty-second Psalm, and some thought he was calling for Elijah to come and save him, vss. 46-47. Jesus, God's Word states, "yielded up his [own] spirit," vs. 50. Several signs accompanied Jesus' death (from about 12:00 noon until 3:00 o'clock): the Temple veil tore from top to bottom; an earthquake occurred; big boulders split open; and finally, graves of many Old Testament saints were opened, they were raised from death, and went into Jerusalem where they appeared to many. The captain in charge of the "crucifixion detail" and his men realized from these signs that, "Truly this was [I say, 'Is.'] the Son of God," vs. 54. Many of the women who had accompanied and cared for Jesus from Galilee watched around the cross area. Two rich men, Joseph of Arimathaea and Nicodemus (John 3), prepared Jesus' body for burial and buried him in Joseph's newly prepared tomb. The tomb was sealed and guarded with Pilate's permission as requested by the Jewish leaders. Pilate told them to use their own guards, which they did. Therefore, the Sanhedrin members and Pharisees satisfied themselves that no one could steal Jesus' body from the tomb, vss. 62-66, "So they went and made the grave secure, sealing the stone and posting a guard."

Sep. 9, 2001

"The Temporary Tomb"
Matt. 28

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. Before daybreak on the first day of the week (our Sunday), Mary Magdalene whom Jesus had healed of a mental illness (Lk 8:2) went to Jesus' tomb and was later joined by another Mary, the mother of James and Joses, and Salome. The three had come to anoint Jesus with sweet spices, Mk 16:1. So that the women could get in, an earthquake had occurred and an angel had rolled the sealing stone from the tomb entrance. While all three women were at the tomb, an angel sat on the removed stone. God's messenger (the angel) had a striking appearance, for "his countenance was like snow," vs. 3. Evidently, the special guards which the Sanhedrin had insisted on staying at the grave, saw the angel first at this time and heard what the angel said. He said flatly that Jesus was not in the tomb. Legally Jesus' absence assured their being killed for their dereliction of duty, i.e., to guard Jesus' body. God's representative (the angel) invited the three women into the tomb to see for themselves that Jesus had kept his promise to rise from physical death which he had experienced, but I do not believe that they went inside. Further, the angel had told Mary Magdalene during her earlier visit to "go quickly and tell Jesus' apostles that he is risen from the dead." He promised that Jesus would meet the apostles up on a certain mountain in Galilee. The three women left the grave with mixed emotions, "fear and great joy," vs. 8.

II. The three women did exactly what the angel had instructed them to do, made their way to where the apostles were. As they were rushing along, they had an experience which was more exciting than examining the temporary tomb where Jesus had lain: Jesus himself met them with a greeting, "Rejoice," vs. 9. In John's Gospel at 20:11-18 we learn considerably more details about this event. The timing of the occurrence is best understood when information is taken from all four Gospels. I believe that the two Marys and Salome arrived at the tomb first when one angel was sitting on the stone outside the sepulcher. He gave the instruction noted above, and Mary Magdalene left immediately and found Peter and John, writer of the fourth Gospel. The other women were looking elsewhere for the other apostles. On her return to the tomb Mary Magdalene met Jesus along the way. The Lord told her at that time not to touch his person but to go (as the angel had instructed her) and inform all the apostles, John 20:17. After finding and telling Peter and John the Good News, she returned to the tomb, stooped and looked inside where she saw the angel which she had seen before, accompanied by a second angel, one at the place where Jesus' head had lain and the other at the foot end. At this time Peter and John arrived, and Peter rushed inside where he saw all the garments which had been wrapped around Jesus when he was buried. After the two apostles had gone, Mary Magdalene turned from the tomb and saw a man whom she thought to be the groundsman (gardener) and asked whether he had seen Jesus. The man asked her why she was weeping. She did not recognize the man's voice until he called her name, "Mary," John 20:16. He was JESUS! This time she fell at his feet and embraced them, vs. 9. The Lord repeated his instruction to take

the message to all the apostles. The only understandable reason why Jesus did not want Mary Magdalene to touch him when they first met and, later at their second meeting, allowed Mary to embrace his feet is, I believe, that Jesus in that short time had been to the Father and returned. In a solely physical world this would be impossible, but by the God who created everything that exists, whatever he wills is possible, Matt. 19:26; Mk 14:36; Lk 18:27.

III. We have noted earlier that there was a rather close alliance between the Roman political authority in the Jerusalem area and the Jewish religious leadership. Both Pilate and Herod were very careful not to anger the Caesar in Rome regarding the local peace and quiet. In fact, we learn from the secular history of that time that the Jews, just about forty years following Jesus' crucifixion, and as the Lord had predicted, lost Jerusalem when the city was destroyed by General Titus beginning on the Passover in AD 70. I mention this situation again here, because of what happened to the soldiers who guarded Jesus' tomb during the three days between his burial and Mary Magdalene's appearance at the tomb before daylight on the Jewish first day of the week following Jesus' crucifixion. Matthew (God's Word) tells us that when the guards who were guarding Jesus' grave saw God's angel, they "became as dead men [fainted]," vs. 4. In other words, they were physically neutralized, helpless in performing their charge. They reported their experience to the Jewish leaders who convened the Sanhedrin to decide what should be done. They decided to bribe the guards with a large amount of money to lie to their commander by telling him that they were unable to keep awake and that some of Jesus' followers had sneaked in and stole Jesus' body! This preposterous lie would put the soldiers in grave jeopardy, but the Jewish leaders assured the guards that if Pilate learned what had happened and presented any problems, they, the Sanhedrin, would "take care of the situation," vss. 11-14. The soldiers took the bribe and their lie became the official position of the Jewish leadership and remained so to the time of Matthew's writing of his Gospel, and beyond. The truth, according to God's Word, is that Jesus was seen by many following his resurrection from physical death. Jesus met the eleven apostles on the mountain up in Galilee where he had told them he would go. Some of them worshiped him, but some were hesitant to do so. Jesus told the apostles there that his Lordship had now been established since God had declared "all power to be Jesus' both in heaven and on earth." Further, he commanded them to go (therefore, because he was now king with all power) to all earthly nations and teach everyone to observe Jesus' teachings. Everyone who believes is to be immersed in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost (Spirit), vss. 18-20. In Acts we are told that, before his ascension, Jesus specifically charged his apostles that they should stay in Jerusalem to await the Holy Spirit's coming which Jesus had promised, John 14:16,26; Acts 1:3-7. After the coming of the Holy Spirit, "believers are to be witnesses of the Good News of Jesus [coming restoration of the Kingdom of Israel] as God's Messiah (Savior)". The believers' testimony is to be witnessed with the power of God's Holy Spirit "in Jerusalem, all Judaea, in Samaria, and unto the uttermost parts of the earth," Acts 1:8.

Sep. 23, 2001

"The Sins of Nations"
Isaiah 1-2

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. We turn today from God's last message to his creatures, human-kind, through his Son, Jesus Christ, to Isaiah who was a prophet of God and a superior witness of God's promise of judgment and final salvation of those who will trust him, John 3:16; Heb. 1:1-3. Some have emphasized the coincidence of the fact that Isaiah's sixty-six chapters divide substantively into two divisions; the first thirty-nine chapters of God's judgment roughly parallel the thirty-nine books of the Old Covenant; and the last twenty-seven chapters, beginning with Chapter 40, project God's love and forgiveness through a Servant who must suffer in the process of bringing spiritual salvation to trusters of God's plan. The last twenty-seven chapters are representative of the number of books in the New Covenant. The Israelites through whom God chose to bring his spiritual Son to the world as a human being, were rebellious during the entire Old Covenant period. They then rejected God's Son, the Messiah (Savior), when God revealed the New Covenant, Heb. 8:7-13. There is little dispute about the authorship of the first thirty-nine chapters of Isaiah, and 1:1 states explicitly that Isaiah, the son of Amoz (not Amos), is setting forth [God's] vision concerning Jerusalem and Judah during the time of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. However, there are many Bible scholars who refute as fact that Isaiah authored Chapters 40-66, because the events related in the last section occurred after Isaiah's death. The supposition is that God would not have revealed so much information to Isaiah before the events happened. My position is that one of the elements in prophecy is foretelling events by God for the solace and enlightenment of those who trusted their Creator, Jehovah God, during the Old Covenant period and God the Father through his Son, Jesus Christ, since God's institution of the New Covenant. I believe that Isaiah wrote Chapters 1-39 during the most active period of his prophesying from about 740-700 BC and Chapters 40-66 near the end of his life, about 681 BC. That his prophecy covers events beyond his death does not negatively aggravate my sense of God's revelation to his people, for, after all, Isa. 53 foretells explicit information about God's Savior who was incarnated as a human hundreds of years later. Furthermore, John in his Gospel gives credit to Isaiah for Isa. 6:6-9 (John 12:40-41) and Isa. 53:1 (John 12:37-38). Note that here at one place in his Gospel, John credits Isaiah with having given information in the early and late portions of Isaiah's prophecy. There are other instances in the New Covenant where the entire prophecy is attributed to Isaiah also. I believe these instances to be more than just "literary licenses."

II. Prophets were of a particular calling of God which began formally during the time of Samuel, I Sam. 19:19-20; II Kings 2:3,5,7. The prophet's assignment was to speak to the people and their leaders for God. There are sixteen prophets' works given in the Old Covenant. They communicated current information relating to God's will while the priests practiced rites and ceremonies which primarily reminded and encouraged people to remember God's past blessings. Isaiah is considered by many to have been and still is the most important

prophet of the Old Covenant period. His prophecy stands at the beginning of the prophetic books although there are prophecies in Moses's Pentateuch, the historical books, and the poetic books. For instance, the Psalms are replete with some of the most beautiful and sad foresights of our Lord Jesus. Isaiah was reared in an aristocratic home and was married to a prophetess who bore him two sons, Isa. 8:3. As all prophets were, Isaiah's popularity went from up to down and vice versa, depending upon whether the people's reaction to God's message was positive or negative. (Note Heb. 11:37.)

III. Isaiah served as God's prophet while the nation was divided into two kingdoms, Israel in the north and Judah in the south. The northern area had woefully sinned against God's will including claiming other gods (idols) as their divine strength. The Northern Kingdom fell to the Assyrians during Isaiah's period of prophecy in 722 BC. The Southern Kingdom, Judah where Jerusalem was located and where Isaiah prophesied, perverted social justice especially with regard to the treatment of the poor. They also turned from God to idols and looked to heathen nations for military strength rather than national strength from their God. Although Isaiah was a prophet to Judah, his message was likewise pertinent to Israel to the north. In Isaiah "Israel" sometimes refers to both nations and at other times simply to the Northern Kingdom.

IV. Isaiah in 1:2 of his long prophecy begins at once to denounce the Israelites as children whom God has reared but who have rebelled against him. He states that the Israelites have less regard for God's leadership in their lives than do oxen for their owners or donkeys their masters. The nation is sinful, burdened with iniquity, creators of evildoers, provokers of their God to anger, and have reversed their willingness to follow God's will. What good is Godly correction? They are mentally and emotionally corrupt from head to foot with open sores, wounds, and bruises which are neither dressed nor treated with healing ointment. Strangers have pilfered their land, left it desolate, burned their cities, and now, in effect, rule their activities. Zion itself, which was once David's bastion of military might, had become like a country lodge surrounded by a vegetable garden with no ability to defend God's people. The land is rampant with idols which they had made with their hands and now worship as God. God despises their sacrifices and accounts them as the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah who have ignored God's will for them as human beings (made in God's likeness). God through Isaiah pleads with the people to "come let us reason together - - - [I will cleanse your sinful natures.] - - - if you will be willing and obedient." Political leaders among them were accepting bribes and not providing justice for the fatherless and widows. In Chap. 2 Isaiah then foretells a future time of peace ("swords into plowshares") during which God will strictly "judge among the nations." God will abolish all idols, and the "day of the Lord," vs. 2:12, will come to pass when mankind's pride and haughtiness will be no more. There will be universal reverence and respect for God's will.

Rise, God, Judge thou the earth in might; this wicked earth redress.

For thou art he who shall by right the nations all possess.

Sep. 30, 2001

"Wrath, Then Grace"
Isaiah 3-4

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. An amazing wonder to me are the events of the last half of the last century, and how thereby God's plan of the ages is being developed. In the years just following WW II a very unique happening in the Dead Sea area of southern Israel unearthed many scrolls of Old Covenant Scriptures. The language of the scrolls consists of both Hebrew and Aramaic. A Bedoin's accidental discovery of a cave containing some of the scrolls between 1945 and 1947 was the first of what proved to be numerous finds. In 1947 the scrolls were taken to Jerusalem and sold, some to the Hebrew University there and some to the Syrian Orthodox Archbishop. The latter were bought in the United States and taken to Israel where they were published. In 1952 an additional ten caves were found nearby containing several complete scrolls. These caves overlooked a valley called Wadi Qumran. A large portion of the Qumran texts are manuscripts of the Old Covenant. In fact, every book of the Old Covenant except Esther is represented by at least a few fragments. Two manuscripts of Isaiah were among the scrolls found in the first cave. One of the Isaiah manuscripts is incomplete, but the other, which contains the entire book from beginning to end, is both the most complete and one of the oldest of all the manuscripts. It was made in the second century BC and very likely before the Qumran community was established. These manuscripts, though some are fragmentary, are very important, because they give communication from God of an undisputed correctness as much as 1000 years older than the best manuscripts otherwise preserved. They demonstrate a remarkable accuracy related closely to that of the Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation that was the Old Covenant used at the time our Lord was on earth in the flesh. In Jerusalem today the nation of Israel has built a rather elaborate building which is named "The Shrine of the Book." "The Book" is, of course, the Jewish Bible, the Old Covenant, and much emphasis is given to the manuscripts above discussed. My reason for emphasizing the Dead Sea scrolls is that they contain an early, undisputed copy of the complete text of Isaiah where the Messiah's coming to earth as a servant is conveyed forcefully in a dramatic way. Isaiah, as we stated last week, is a message of the need for Israel to repent and become humble before their [and our] Creator God. The discovery of the scrolls could very well be one of God's methods of directing the Jews of today to the Messiah of God, Jesus of Nazareth.

II. Other events happening now are calling attention to God's complete control (as contrasted with mankind's meager knowledge and limited control) of God's creation. On July 16, 1994 the largest planet in our solar system was to be hit by fragmented comet parts which began flying into Jupiter. The first chunk of the twenty-one fragments struck Jupiter's surface at 3:28 PM EDST on a Saturday. The fragments continued pelting Jupiter through six earth days. The impacts at 60 kilometers per second churned Jupiter's cloud bands, producing fireballs the size of Texas, and formed clouds that encircled the gaseous giant for months. A planetary scientist for NASA considered this event to be a phenomenal happening, and

the U.S.A. satellite Galileo was reprogrammed to observe the occasion. Already speeding toward Jupiter for a rendezvous the next year, Galileo had the best view of the collisions. A space scientist at the Lowell Observatory in Flagstaff, Arizona states that this happens only once in many lifetimes, and only now has mankind had the ability to observe the details, or even to know what is happening of this magnitude. The Hubble Space Telescope after being repaired, enabled scientists to learn of the Jupiter encounter. Each of the 21 chunks of the comet exploded with a force greater than all the nuclear weapons on earth, and together (all 21) they packed a million-megaton punch - 50 million times more powerful than the bomb dropped on Hiroshima. If such a comet of this size hit the earth's surface, it would explode instantaneously, altering the earth's climate and devastating human civilization (Matt. 24:21-22), because Jupiter's mass is about 320 times that of the earth. Our living quarters, earth, is indeed a fragile piece of God's property. The only refuge that is absolutely sure is faith in God's Son, Jesus Christ.

III. In Chaps. 3 and 4 Isaiah continues his scathing prophecy condemning Jerusalem and Judah. The Lord of Hosts will take the inhabitants' most basic needs, food and drink. Further, he will kill the leaders of the city and nation including the armies (army officers), judges, prophets, elders, businessmen, lawyers, magicians, and politicians. Israel's kings will exercise infantile leadership with the result being internal fightings, neighbor against neighbor, youngsters against their elders (authority), unlawful people reacting against those who honor and respect social order, II Tim. 3:1-4. When that time comes, inequity of material possessions will cause those of less means deliberately to unsettle the social order. Israel's government will be terribly ineffective, because the Jewish citizens unashamedly boast that their sins were like those of Sodom, 3:9. The catastrophic, inevitable result would be that they had literally doomed themselves. Their barns were full of stolen grain, stolen from poor peasant farmers. Their guilt was obvious simply by observing the expressions on their faces. Israel's leaders were like the women who had no training or experience in political or military affairs. Since the women had no responsibility in leadership roles, their time and efforts were used in displaying vain attitudes and actions. The Jewish women were haughty, turning their noses up in the air, wearing noisy jewelry on their ankles, and eyeing men with come-hither glances as they roved about publicly. Isaiah prophesies that their heads will receive scabs for headbands, that their total array of fine accessories will become nought, including their scarves, ankle chains, headbands, earrings, perfumes, rings, party clothes, negligees, capes, ornate combs, purses, mirrors, lingerie, and veils. They will come to shame and disgrace, and their husbands will be killed in battle. Because of the losses in battle, the male-female imbalance will be so disproportionate that seven women will compete for each man for companionship. Finally however, the Lord will save his people, Rom. 11:13-36. Jerusalem itself will be called holy, because the Lord himself will have washed away the sins of his people. God through judgment will purify his holy place, Jerusalem, so that no more will blood be spilt there.

Sep. 30, 2001

Christian Tithing

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

In the New Testament neither Jesus our Savior and Lord, nor one of his apostles commanded any believer in Jesus to tithe as a basis for supporting the activities of members of the Ecclesia, called out ones by God's Holy Spirit to be the Bride of Jesus Christ. In the Old Testament Law, tithing was the method instituted by God to support the priesthood and religious activities of Israel, Gen. 14:20; Lk 11:37-44; 18:9-14; Heb. 7:5-9. In the two Luke passages Jesus mentioned tithing in a negative way. The Jewish leaders were to have, in good faith, supported the spirit of God's Law in tithing their wealth. However, Jesus presented their tithing as a sham and for public view only. They purported to demonstrate what the widow's mite did in truth.

The writer of Hebrews (God's Word) gives an Old Covenant prospective, context, and purpose for the institution of Old Testament tithing. In that discussion Jesus becomes the High Priest to receive the monetary expression of believers' love for our Lord. Note in Paul's letter at 16:1-4 to the Corinthian believers, God's Word states that the collections, both in Galatia and there in Corinth, for Jerusalem believers, were to be proportionate to "as God had prospered them," "on the Lord's Day," and was to include "every one of you." At this point tithing would have been a very appropriate place in God's written Word to introduce tithing as a proper, proportionate factor. Giving out of a true love of the Lord for his grace and forgiveness would have been a tithe for some, more or less for others, for, as the widow's mite demonstrates, what is left after giving is more important to the Lord than what is given. A tithe of a millionaire leaves the tither in much better financial condition than the tithe of a believer with a twenty-five thousand dollar income.

A believer's financial support of the work of the Ecclesia today is, in my opinion, better related by the sentiments in the attached pamphlet than proposing legal tithing as a way "God has prospered a believer."

Oct. 7, 2001

"Israel Ineffective, Isaiah Called"
Isaiah 5-6

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. Chap. 5 is a poem and, as such, is filled with figurative language. I believe the "wellbeloveds" and "beloved" in vs. 1 refer to the Lord, even Jesus Christ, God's Messiah, Savior. The "vineyard" first mentioned in vs. 1 also is the nation of Israel, including both kingdoms, Israel and Judah. Isaiah then outlines what God did with the Israelites and how they reacted to his leadership. God arranged for his dear people to be placed (planted) in a well-traveled place on the earth, "a very fruitful hill." Between three continents they were promised territory beginning with Abraham. Abraham was promised the area at age seventy-five, because he believed God and acted upon that belief, Gen. 12:1-4; 15:6; Gal. 3:6-18; Heb. 11:8-10; Jam. 2:17-24. That belief made Abraham right with God (righteous). Isaiah tells us that God prepared the place where he planted the vineyard (Israel) very well. He cleared the ground by removing the rocks and boulders, placed a fence around it, planted choice vines, and built a winepress in the vineyard. The vines were properly cultivated, fertilized, and pruned, but the harvest produced wild, unusable grapes, vs. 2. God then confronts the Israelites with the question: "As you compare my laws given to you and how you have received them, what could I have done better to have ensured a harvest of usable grapes? Because you have not followed my prescription for your own benefit, I will remove the fence, stop weeding, pruning, and cultivating the vineyard, because I sought judgment and righteousness but received oppression instead," vss. 5-7.

II. Beginning with vs. 8 Isaiah lists six woes which the Israelites have (and are) producing, and which have displeased God Almighty. 1) The well-to-do bought large estates for privacy and prestige. The punishment for such greed will be that they will not be able to maintain or even to own such palacial mansions and vast acreages. The land will fail to produce a gallon of grape juice per acre, and ten bushels of seed will yield only one bushel of grain. 2) Many of these prosperous landholders liked to party from early in the morning until late at night. They consumed alcohol all day, listened to live bands, and, in their drunken stupor, gave no thought for God's concern for the poor and less fortunate among them. Isaiah could see the political fall of the people and their being taken into exile. Hell will have to be enlarged to receive the multitude of the haughty and proud. The holy, just, and good Lord God is exalted and seeks righteousness from his people. 3) Only doom can be expected for those who are proud and boast about their disobeying God's will for them. They openly sin and dare God to do anything about their rebellion! Let us see what God can do about our doing what displeases him, they boast! 4) A sure curse is the destiny for those who reverse true moral decisions. Some declare what is evil to be good and good to be evil, and what is dark to be light, and what is light to be dark, and bitter to be sweet while sweet is bitter. 5) God is displeased with those who attempt to set themselves as right in contrast to what God has plainly communicated to humankind [through his Word], Jer. 10:14; Rom. 1:22; 12:16b.

A human being cannot within himself or herself know or decide what is right or wrong. He or she cannot manage life's affairs which are pleasing to God apart from God's supervision, Joel 2:28-29; Acts 2:16-18; I Cor. 3:16-21a. 6) Finally, Isaiah condemns those who boast about how much alcohol they can "hold," those who accept bribes instead of rendering justice, those who jail innocent ones to cover guilty friends' crimes. After pronouncing the six woes on the Israelites, Isaiah reminds them that God will allow devastation to come upon them, and Jerusalem's inhabitants will be taken from their beloved city which will be occupied by strangers along with the nation as well.

III. In Chap. 6 Isaiah gives a first person account of his being commissioned by God to prophesy to the Israelites. The commission came at a very traumatic time in Israel's history. King Uzziah's father had been murdered when Uzziah was only sixteen years of age in 810 BC. After the murder of Amaziah, Uzziah was chosen by the people to occupy the vacant throne. During most of his long reign of fifty-two years, until 758 BC, Uzziah lived in the fear of God and showed himself to be a wise, active and pious ruler. He never deserted the worship of the true God, and was much influenced by the prophet Zechariah, II Chron. 26:1-15. Isaiah was about thirty years old when Uzziah died of leprosy, and, of course, had known no one else as the supreme political leader of Judah throughout his entire thirty years. THE KING WAS DEAD! The event was so devastating to Isaiah that, in his profound sorrow, he looked to God for strength and stability. God did not disappoint the young man, for in a heavenly vision Isaiah was permitted to see the Lord of all universes sitting upon his seat of authority. God was on an exalted throne with a long robe which filled the entire dwelling place (Temple of God). God's attendants were celestial beings each with three pairs of wings. With one pair of wings they covered their faces motivated by humility; with one pair the feet were covered out of respect; and with one pair they flew about. When Isaiah observed the majesty and holiness of his Creator God, he at once recognized his own unworthiness in such an overwhelming presence. With this deep feeling of unworthiness, Isaiah saw one of the angelic seraphims take a live (hot) coal from the altar before God, touch the prophet's lips, and thereby purge Isaiah's sins making him innocent before God. The Lord asked in Isaiah's presence concerning who would be willing to represent the Lord in Israel. Isaiah volunteered immediately. "Here I am, send me," he said. God did send Isaiah to the Israelites to tell them what they must do to please the Lord. But with the commission God revealed a strange truth to him: Although Isaiah would announce God's truth to them, the Israelites would not hear and understand nor see and comprehend, Matt. 13:10-17. In other words, the people were beyond hearing and would continue to sin against God until Israel was completely destroyed (cease to be a nation). Only a remnant would survive as a stump for further growth later, Rom. 11:5-12, 33-36.

"O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? Or who hath been his counsellor?

Oct. 14, 2001

"The Lord's Sign"
Isaiah 7-8

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. Please remember that we learned in Isaiah 1:1 that Isaiah's vision concerned, for an historical period, the reigns of Uzziah (who died in Chap. 6), Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, all kings of Judah, the southern kingdom where Jerusalem was the capital. Chap. 7 begins with the events during the reign of Ahaz, son of Jotham. Jotham was the principal administrator of Judah when his father, Uzziah, was suffering his terminal illness, leprosy. He succeeded to the throne in 758 BC at the age of twenty-five and reigned for sixteen years in Jerusalem (until 742 BC). He was a contemporary of Pekah, king of the northern kingdom, Israel. Pekah ruled Israel for about thirty years from 759 to 730 BC. At age twenty Ahaz followed Jotham to the throne of Judah and reigned until 726 BC, for a total of sixteen years. Note that Ahaz in Judah and Pekah in Israel had an overlap in kingships for several years. In fact, Pekah in Israel reigned through most of the time of both Jotham and Ahaz's reigns in Judah. At this same time Rezin was king of Damascus (Syria). Rezin attacked Jotham during the latter part of his (Jotham's) reign (II Kings 15:37-38). However, his chief war was with Ahaz. Rezin collaborated with Pekah, king of Israel against Judah! When Ahaz became king of Judah, Rezin and Pekah had recently formed a league (treaty) against Judah, and they proceeded to lay siege to Jerusalem. The allies, Israel and Damascus, failed in their attack, but they did inflict a most severe injury on Judah by capturing Elath, a flourishing port on the Red Sea. Simultaneously the Philistines invaded the west and south of Judah, II Kings 16; II Chron. 28. Both Israel (Pekah) and Syria (Rezin) were angry with Judah (Ahaz), because the two former kings had requested that the latter join them in defeating Assyria (Tiglath-pileser) to the northeast. Ahaz refused to join them, and consequently Pekah and Rezin set out to take Judah, set up a puppet king, and then conquer Assyria as a combined force. Ahaz, frightened, appealed directly to Tiglath-pileser of Assyria, and Assyria won over Israel (northern kingdom) and Syria in 722 BC which was Israel's final fall as a nation. Now, even though Ahaz had won against the two enemies, Israel and Syria, he feared Assyria, his new ally. Immediately he began making gestures toward Egypt for help against Assyria. What a complicated mess! Spiritually speaking, Ahaz was the worst king that Judah ever had. He actually made molten images for Baalim, burnt incense in Hinnon Valley (on the west side of the city of Jerusalem), and even burned children in sacrifice to the fire god Molech, the god of the heathen whom the people of Israel drove from Palestine after returning back from Egypt under Moses and Joshua. He also sacrificed and burned incense on all the hills around the countryside where he had built worship places and idols identified with pagan gods, II Chron 28:1-4, 19-27.

II. In vs. 3 of Chap. 7 in the midst of this political conglomerate, the Lord took the initiative through the prophet Isaiah. The Lord told Isaiah to visit with Judah's unGodly king Ahaz and to bring with him during the visit, Isaiah's son, Shearjashub (which means "has encamped in," i.e., "our present situation is only temporary.")

Isaiah was to meet with Ahaz at the end of the conduit (watermain) leading out of the upper pool (reservoir or water tank) which was reached by a road leading up to the fuller's field. (There textile workers fullled or scoured, cleaned and thickened cloth, to remove grease from it. Fuller's earth was also used in dyeing or changing tints of fabrics.) The fuller's field was chosen, because in the time of Isaiah, conversation there could be heard by many people who gathered around the elevation ringing the cavities from which fuller's earth had been mined and removed, II Kings 18:17,26. Of course, when two important people like the king (Ahaz) and the prophet (Isaiah) meet, there certainly would be a large audience to hear what was said. The Lord's message to Ahaz was, "Listen carefully and rest calmly, because though Rezin (Syrian king) and Pekah (Israel's king), "the two tails [stubs] of these smoking firebrands," vs. 4, have combined to attack you and set up a puppet king, such a puny effort will fail, vs. 6. The Lord told Ahaz to request a sign for assurance that such would happen, but Ahaz refused to ask for a sign. But the Lord gave a sign anyway, not to Ahaz, but to the entire house of David, vss. 13-14. The Lord said, "You [Ahaz], not only are you satisfied to exhaust the patience of my prophet [Isaiah], but do you think that you are enough to exhaust the Lord's patience as well?! Therefore, the Lord himself shall give you [house of David] a sign: Observe closely, a virgin shall conceive, bear a son and shall call his name Immanuel [God with us]," Matt. 1:22-25. There has been and is much controversy about vs. 14, but since Jesus the Christ is related to this vs. in Matthew's Gospel so explicitly, I have no problem in accepting as fact that the Lord through Isaiah was promising the Israelites (the offspring of Jacob, Gen. 28:13-15; 32:28) that indeed a virgin (Mary was eventually chosen.) would conceive and bear a son who would be called Joshua (Jesus, Savior), because he would be God and man (Immanuel). Without that Savior the entire world and all its inhabitants would be without any hope whatsoever.

III. In Chap. 8 the Lord instructs Isaiah to make a scroll and write in it concerning a promised second son to be born to Isaiah and his prophetess wife. This second son's name is to be Mahershalalhashbaz (which means "speed the spoil, hasten the booty," i.e., "the faster the successful war [turmoil] is fought, the sooner will be the receipt of what has been taken [by the winner]). The Lord continues by revealing that Assyria will be coming in war to overthrow all the Israelites all the way to the Mediterranean Sea. No matter how many surrounding nations Israel counsels with, such alliances will fail to save their beloved land. Even pronouncing that "God is with us" will not secure the future of Israel, vs. 10. A confederacy of nations is not pleasing their Lord God, but Israel's blasphemy against God is their refusal to respect the stone which God will lay as a chief cornerstone for God's spiritual salvation for all believers in his plan, vs. 14-15, Psa. 118:22-23; Matt. 21:42-46. Note carefully vs. 18, for the Lord there very plainly states that his directing the nation Israel's affairs is to be a sign for the world to know God's timetable for his plan for all humanity. Following the Lord's warning against the belief that there is safety in confederating with other nations, he warns the Israelites (and us) against putting ones trust in familiar spirits, vs.19; Lev. 19:31; I Sam. 28:7-9. The time is coming when looking to the earth will cause Israel to curse their leader and God himself, but their vision will then look to God in truth and receive mercy!

Oct. 21, 2001

"Relief From God's Judgment"
Isaiah 9-10

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. Chap. 9 continues the theme introduced at the end of Chap. 8. The Israelites will be in despair and without earthly hope even though they declare that God is with them. At Matt. 10:31-35 Jesus made the information clear that if anyone (He was talking to the Jews, for see Matt. 10:5-6 where he began this instruction.) accepted him as the Messiah (Savior), they need not fear. Isaiah in 9:1 repeats the idea associated with the name of his first son, Shearjashub, i.e., that Israel's time of despair will not continue forever. Their hopelessness, however, continues until even today, and will until the beginning of "that day," Isa. 2:12,17,19-21; Matt. 24:21, 29-30; I Thess. 5:2-4,11. Isaiah's prophecy abruptly changes to give a glimpse down the stream of time to the Christian Era when God brings about a drastic change in his relation with his beloved people, Israel. Matt. 4:12-17 relates this passage, vs. 1, to the beginning of Jesus' pronouncement of his service as God's Messiah to redeem those who would believe in him. He began by declaring, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near (at hand)." Isaiah states that that Good News is to begin there in Zebulun and Naphtali and then beyond Jordan to the nations (Gentiles). The entire earth will hear of God's glory, the Good News of God's spiritual salvation through his Son, Jesus Christ, Acts 1:6-11. The people who had been walking in darkness will see a great light, Rom. 16:25-26; Col. 1:25-27. Israel which has continued as a people in the earth, though scattered and without joy or spiritual satisfaction, will again rejoice and be also great. Before they accept Jesus as God, many Gentiles will have accepted God's love and forgiveness through Jesus Christ. After this "time of the Gentiles" (Rom. 11:25-32), God will break the chains of Israel's bondage (self-righteous and not depending upon God's mercy in Jesus Christ, Rom. 9:30-10:4). And who will be the one who will eventually break Israel's chains? They will finally recognize that for them [too] a child was born, a son [of God] God has given (sacrificed), and this Son God the Father has made to be Ruler over all, both Jews and Gentiles, Acts 15:9; Rom. 10:12. What a glorious day, for the nation Israel will declare that Jesus is indeed, Wonderful, Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace, Jn 14:5-7; Rom. 11:26. Jesus will reign forever, because God's desire (zeal, dedication) is that Jesus be so honored, respected, and worshiped, vs. 7. Israel will, however, continue to be trodden down by every people on earth until God begins "that day." God will continue his punishment of Israel for a long while, because they boast of their own righteousness apart from God's plan of redemption through his mercy and grace alone. The Jews' religious leaders take the lead in this refusal to accept God's Messiah (Savior), Jesus Christ. Their prophets lie and lead the Jews as a nation down ruinous paths. During this long period, God does not take his hand of judgment from them, because they are evil and self-destructive (eating their own flesh (children), vs. 20.

II. In Chap. 10 Isaiah returns to Israel's lack of social justice

which relate to the woes of Chap. 5. He decries the judges who do not render fairness to all citizens, to legislators who enact laws which discriminate against the poor, the widows and orphans. The prophet asks the questions: What will Israel do when God allows the severe period of desolation to subject the nation to the invasion of foreign forces? (See Matt. 24:15,21,27-31.) In this awful day, to whom will the Jews turn for help, to escape that which appears to be sudden, sure annihilation? Where will their material possessions be secure? [The events noted in this portion of Isaiah's prophecy are, in my view, to happen in the immediate future (through Assyria and Babylon) as well as at the second visit of Jesus to earth, at the beginning of "that day."] In vs. 4 Isaiah states that when the Assyrians sweep over the Palestinian area, God will not help them and relieve them from either being taken prisoners or slain in the defensive battle. Even this experience will not satisfy the Lord's anger caused by their continuing disrespect for God's will for them, and his hand of judgment is still against the nation of Israel. In fact, Assyria is to be the instrument for implementing God's anger against the Jewish nation, vs. 5. (See also a parallel situation regarding Joseph's revelation of God's intention in treatment by his envious brothers, Gen. 50:19-21.) Assyria will boast about their prowess in overtaking Israel and Judah, because the Assyrians do not realize that it is not their strength that gives them victory, but God's doing. Their victory is God's punishment for the godless Jewish nation which is hypocritical and unwilling to obey their Lord. They are to be beaten, taken as prisoners, doomed, damned, plundered, and trampled like mud in the street. Assyria will consider her victory over the Lord's people to be a stepping-stone to take over the whole world. [I believe that this attitude was not only held by the Assyrians, but will also be the motivation of the Evil One who is made known in II Thes. 2:3-8,16-17.] When God's use of Assyria is finished, God will punish them for what they have done to his people, vs. 12. The Assyrians will boast that their own power and wisdom won over God's people, broke down the strongholds, destroyed the people, and gathered for themselves Israel's and Judah's treasures. "We are great," they will say, "we are without a peer to subjugate us to their bidding!" But the Lord's position is that the Assyrians are like an axe which boasts itself as greater than the wielder of the axe itself. God promises to send a plague among the Assyrian military personnel making them weak and ineffective. In a single night their number will be so decimated that even a child will be able to count them, vs. 19; II Kings 19:32-36. Again in vs. 20 the prophet reveals that the Israelites, both of Israel and of Judah, will have a remnant who will trust the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, and who will not fear their enemies. Israel as a nation will be numerous, but only a few of them will be left and the rest integrated among those who do not claim to be associated with the Lord. Then the Lord, the Mighty One, will cut down the enemies of God's people, i.e., God's people who trust him and not their own strength. The enemies of God's people will fall as though they were axed by woodsmen in the cedars of Lebanon. As Isaac Watts puts God's reign: Jesus shall reign whe-'er the sun does his successive journeys run. His kingdom spread from shore to shore, 'till moons shall wax and wane no more.

Nov. 4, 2001

"The King and the Kingdom"
Isaiah 11-12

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. After assuring the Jewish nation that, although the Assyrians would defeat them, a remnant of the nation of Israel would thereafter return to the land promised to Abraham and his posterity. Beginning in Chap. 11 Isaiah is led of God to give attention to the one who will establish and administer the future kingdom which God will bring into being. In vs. 1 God promises through Isaiah that a "rod" or shoot will come forth from the "stem" or of the stock (lineage) of Jesse. A branch is to bear fruit (produce an offspring) out of the family of Jesse. It is interesting that Jesse is given here as the forefather of Jesus' humanity rather than the renown King David. Jesse (Heb., yishay, which means "uncertain") was the son of Obed who came from the family of Perez (also Pharez), one of Judah's twin sons by his daughter-in-law, Tamar (Thamer, KJV), Gen. 38:29. See in Matt. 1:3 where Tamar is listed in the genealogy of Jesus, the Messiah, our Lord. It is also noteworthy that Matthew begins his genealogy with Abraham rather than Jesse or even David. By doing so he includes both Rahab (the harlot) as the mother of Boaz (Booz, KJV) and Ruth (a Moabite or nonJew) as the mother of Obed who was Jesse's father and David's grandfather. Jesus was to be God's singularly chosen human being to be totally filled and completely controlled by God's Holy Spirit. Jesus is God (God was his Father), but he was altogether human, one who could be identified from a genealogical background with any human being, Acts 10:25-48. So, Isaiah's choosing Jesse rather than the great King David had, in my opinion, considerable relevance to God's New Covenant and Kingdom of God with Jesus as its King.

II. In 11:2 Isaiah stresses that the offspring of Jesse will be so permeated by God's will, the Spirit of God will control (rest upon) him that his every thought, desire and action will be those of God himself. He will be understanding, wise, able to counsel, powerful (Jesus' miraculous ability proved this to all except those who refused to make Jesus God's King rather than David, Matt. 12:22-25,42; 22:41-46.), and his fear (reverance or awe) of his Lord Father. Jesus' ability to judge will not be based upon what appears on the surface (outwardly), contrived evidence, or secondhand information. He will truly comprehend how the rich become wealthy by exploiting those who are without means to eke out even their basic needs. These wicked oppressors the new King will slay with the words of knowledge and wisdom. When this Godly King establishes his new kingdom, peace will be absolute. Wolves will lie down to sleep in the same proximity of innocent, defenseless lambs. Swift, voracious leopards will live together peaceably with the kids of goats. Old leo the lion will then not devour the delicious, fat cattle, and even the calves will comingle with the "king of beasts." Not only will there be ultimate peace among all the earth's animals (including mankind), but the carnivores such as lions will become vegetarians so that lions will munch grass like cows. Peace will be so in Jesus' Kingdom of God that infants will play with venomous snake eggs while the parent snakes observe the play without needed fear by the infants or the snakes. In fact, God's knowledge will

be so well known and practiced by all citizens and creatures that no hurt or destruction will happen to anyone or anything, Rom. 8:18-22,28,31. Keep in mind, however, that these conditions prevail only in the presence of, and because of, that offspring of Jesse, the coming King, Jesus, God's Messiah (Savior). And when is this glorious period to be experienced by those who hear and heed God's Good news? In vss. 10 and 11 Isaiah refers to that period as being "that day," the same reference mentioned previously in 2:2,12,17, (See 2:12-21 for "that day's" beginning.), 20; 3:7,18; 4:1,2; 7:18, 20,21,23; 9:14; 10:17,20,27. Please note that in 11:1 Isaiah does not refer to the coming forth of the Branch from Jesse as happening in "that day" during that reign of earth-wide peace, but that that root of Jesse will become an ensign (bearer of the standard of God's kingdom) from the Middle East to the rest of the world. During the period of the spreading of God's Good News (of the coming day of peace), the root of Jesse will take a rest, and that rest will be a glorious one, vss. 10-11. Then following that Gospel period, look at vs. 12, for there God's word to Isaiah is that the nations of the earth will take actions that will cause the "outcasts" of Israelites (all the Jews of the diaspora) to be gathered again (vs. 11, "a second time") to the land promised them (by God to Abraham). The Ephraimites (Egyptians through Joseph's two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, who were adopted by Jacob, in effect, through his blessing Joseph in his final blessings of all his [Jacob's] twelve sons) were considered a special people by Israel. Joseph had married an Egyptian, and, therefore, Manasseh and Ephraim were one-half Egyptian. These two sons of Joseph were so highly regarded by the Israelites that two of the geographic areas were assigned to them along with the other tribes when the entire people occupied Palestine after their Egyptian slavery experience of about 430 years, Exod. 12:40; Acts 7:6; Gal. 3:17. And why am I giving so much attention to the Egyptians here? Egypt, during Jimmie Carter's presidency, was the first of the Near Eastern countries to curtail ("the envy also of Ephraim shall depart," vs. 13) its envy toward Israel under Anwar Sadat. Highways will be used to bring the Jews from every direction back to the land promised to Abraham and his descendants after him, Gen. 13:14-18.

III. In Chap. 12 Isaiah again turns to the Kingdom of God's Messiah (the Kingdom of God), and where he again labels its period as "in that day." At that time the Jews (and we believers in Jesus also) will say, "O Lord, I will praise thee: thou wast angry with me, thine anger is turned away, and thou comfortedst me," vs. 1. This the Jews will proclaim, I believe, when they at the end of the horrible tribulation recognize as a nation or people for the first time that our Lord Jesus has been their true Lord all these millennia. "Behold," they will say (as each of us did when we first recognized Jesus as the forgiver of our sins and the Lord of our lives), "God is my salvation [through Jesus]; I will trust and not be afraid: for the Lord Jehovah is my strength and my song; he also is become my [emphases mine - WA] salvation, " vs. 2. "Sing unto the Lord; for he hath done excellent things: this is known in all the earth. Cry out and shout, thou inhabitant of Zion; great is the Holy One of Israel in the midst of thee," vss. 5-6.

November 11, 2001

"The Judgment of Babylon"
Isaiah 13-14

Couples Classs
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. Chap. 13 begins a series of judgments on nine nations which surrounded the Judah-Israel area. This series includes Isaiah's prophecy as we have it organized in Chaps. 13-23. The King James translators refer to these judgments as "burdens," and the Hebrew means literally a load heavy to be borne. Not only had these nine nations sinned against God, but a part of their sin was their sinning against his people the Jews, Gen. 12:1-4; 22:16-18. A panoramic view of Biblical history indicates that God chose Abraham and his descendants through Isaac, Jacob and Judah to be an evangelistic people to practice God's will, and, further, to influence through example and proclamation all other peoples of the earth. It is likewise apparent that the Jews failed by their own volition and actions, but instead, rebelled against God's plan for them, let alone influence others on God's behalf. But, although the Jews failed God, God has not forgotten his promise to Abraham's posterity through Judah, Deut. 7:8; 10:12-15; Rom. 11:25-32. That arrangement prevailed through God's First Covenant, and now we believers relate to God through his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, in God's last covenant with mankind, the Second Covenant, Heb. 1:1-3; 8:7-13. However, if we as a people (believers or trusters in Jesus as Savior) do not continue to influence others for God by example and proclamation, we too will be severed from God's Second Covenant, Rom. 11:18-24. One of the mysteries of the Bible is that God not only evaluates the spiritual welfare of each individual, but he also judges the spiritual (their relationship to keeping God's will) of nations (the political and cultural groupings of the earth's peoples), Matt. 25:31-46. This phenomenon is discussed particularly by Isaiah in his prophecy in Chaps. 13-23. The prophet gave attention to Judah and Israel in Chaps. 1-12.

II. Historical records vouch for the fact that Babylon did conquer Palestine, including what had been both Israel and Judah. Of course, Israel fell to Assyria under Salmaneser in about 722 BC when Hoshea was its last king, II Kings 17:5-14. Judah remained a nation through the reign of Zedekiah in 586 BC. Judah's capital, Jerusalem, was taken and destroyed by Babylon under Nebuchanezzar at that time, and all of the leading politicians, professionals and artisans were taken as captives back to Babylon, Jer. 39:5-10. Later, when the Babylonians were defeated by the Persians under Cyrus, the Jews were permitted to return to Jerusalem in 536 BC and even to rebuild the Temple, II Chron. 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1-4; 6:16-18. It is evident from the Biblical account that the Jews underwent severe hardships under the Babylon Empire. Perhaps the most disheartening element in the captivity was the removal of the mainstream Jewish population from the seat of their religion, Jerusalem. A real concern of theirs was whether Jehovah God would be with them in Babylon, or would he remain in Jerusalem? Should they be content with their lives in Babylon and resolve to live normal lives, or should they rebel against Babylon and try to escape? Jeremiah was a prophet of God to Israel at this time, and he told them by letter to lead normal lives and feel settled, Jer. 29:4-13. In fact, God looked

upon Nebuchadnezzar as being his (God's) servant, Jer. 25:9, in placing his people in captivity.

III. Isaiah in Chap. 13 condemns Babylon for its evil and sinful ways against God's people, the Jews. However, there can be no doubt that two occurrences are intended in this Chap. Isaiah, the son of Amoz, is told to go to a high mountain to yell and motion to the multitudes to come from the whole earth to witness the Lord's coming destruction. Notify all the people that the day of the Lord is now ready and that a wide destruction is about to begin. The evidence of the coming catastrophe will cause people's knees to tremble; their hearts will melt, and fear will seize their innermost beings. They will experience physical pain as severe as that which grips an expectant mother as uterine contractions occur in the delivery of her child. Their amazement will be so pronounced that their faces will become ashen. This day of the Lord will see the Lord dispensing wrath in his fierce anger. He will make the earth desolate by destroying the sinners then living. Isaiah then (vs. 10) indicates what will happen which causes such consternation and turmoil among all the earth's inhabitants. The stars will no longer shine; the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not shine. These deviances in the activities of the natural elements are recorded elsewhere in Scripture, Joel 2:30-32; Zeph. 1:14-17; Matt. 24:24-30; Acts 2:19-20; Rev. 6:12-17. Note that in vs. 11 the Lord is saying that at this time he will "punish the world for their evil, and the wicked for their iniquity; and I will cause the arrogancy of the proud to cease, and will lay low the haughtiness of the tyrants." The heavenly order will be shaken, and the earth will not follow its circumscribed orbit as the Lord demonstrates his wrath in "the day of his fierce anger," vs. 13. Then note that in vss. 17-22 the immediate historical pertinence of Isaiah's prophecy becomes evident. [I believe that, in order to understand the double meaning (to happen twice) of the message concerning the tribulation, Matthew noted at the end of 24:15, (where Jesus quoted Dan. 9:24-27), "whoso readeth, let him understand." WA]

IV. In Chap. 14 the Lord announces that eventually he will show mercy toward Israel and that strangers (Gentiles) will be joined with them, vs. 1. Then Satan who has had ambition through the ages to usurp God's power will be dethroned forever, Rev. 20:10. The people of Assyria and Babylon are easily identified with this rebellious spirit against the authority of God Almighty. Babel means "confusion" in Hebrew, and Babylon is the Greek form of the word. The city of Babylon was a very old city, and its physical destruction as promised by Isaiah was realized by Cyrus in 539 BC under Darius. Jer. 51:37 also attests to Babylon's destruction as does Isaiah at 13:22. Babylon has come to be a term referring to confusing loyalty to Jehovah God with Satanic influence. Originally called Shiner (country between the two rivers), the inhabitants there built a tower which they believed would unite them (make them equal) to God, Gen. 11:4; Rev. 16:19; 17:5; 18:10. The spiritual confusion is finally eliminated at Rev. 18:21-24. My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness; I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus' name.

November 18, 2001

"The Judgment of Moab"
Isaiah 15-16

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. In Chaps. 15-16 Isaiah, after shining God's light upon Israel and Babylon, now turns to another of Israel's neighbors, Moab. Geographically Moab was a rich nation in the location where the nation of Jordan is located in 2001, lying north and south from Syria down to the south end of the Dead Sea (today's Jordan also continues on farther south to the Gulf of Aqaba). The major portion of John the Immerser's teaching and proclamation took place in the area east of the Jordan River, the area of old southern Moab. The people of Moab began within a peculiar circumstance. Abraham and Lot, son of Haran (Abraham's brother) and Abraham's nephew, had been down in Egypt but had later returned to Bethel in Palestine. There the two who were rich as herdsmen were over-grazing the immediate area. Abraham told Lot that he could choose between Canaan on the west of the Jordan or the land to the east of the Jordan. Lot chose the rich plain on the east, and so, Abraham stayed in Canaan. In the area where Lot chose were located several kingdoms, including Sodom and Gomorah. Lot lived in Sodom near Gomorah. In a war between the several nations there, Lot was taken captive along with all his possessions. Abraham came over and rescued Lot and afterward the sinful Sodom and Gomorah were destroyed by God because of their sinful lifestyles (homosexuality), Gen 19:5,24. As Lot and his family were fleeing from the fire and brimstone which God used to destroy the two sinful cities, Lot's wife was killed (turned into a pillar of salt because of her reluctance to leave the area). Lot then took his two daughters and left Zoar on the plain, went up to the mountains, and lived in a cave with the two daughters for safety, Gen. 19:28-38. One of the sons whom Lot sired at that site was named Moab from whom the Moabite nation came.

II. Following the leadership of Moses and Joshua after the Egyptian slavery experience, God appointed what were known as judges among the tribes of Israel. The last judge was Samuel, last because the Jews demanded a king (like the heathen nations) rather than retain the theocracy wherein God ruled directly through the judges and priests. During the period (c. 1250 BC) of the fifth recorded judge of Israel, Gideon, there occurred a severe famine in southern Israel. Unable to feed his family a man named Elimelech who lived at Bethlehem, took his family and belongings across the Jordan River and emigrated into the land of Moab. Elimelech, along with his wife Naomi and their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, lived in Moab for ten years. While there Elimelech and the two sons died leaving Naomi alone with her two Moabite daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth. Naomi learned that the drought had ended in Israel so she decided to return to her old home in Bethlehem. Naomi assumed that the two daughters-in-law would remain in Moab, but both wanted to go with her. In the process of leaving, Orpah changed her mind and stayed, but Ruth begged, "Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee; for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God," Ruth 1:14-18. They returned together to Bethlehem where Ruth married a kinsman of Naomi, Boaz. Ruth, the

Moabites delivered a son of Boaz named Obed who became the father of Jesse, the father of King David, Matt. 1:5-6. Jesus, our Lord, knew all of the above, and it is no wonder that he agreed to heal an ill Gentile, Matt. 15:21-28, and in John 4:3-26, Jesus communed with an adulterous Samaritan woman (a human mongrel according to Jewish tradition) who had sneaked to a well for needed water. Jesus was an offspring of a Moabite who had declared, "- - - and thy God [shall be] my God."

III. Isaiah in Chap. 15 portrays a vital contrast of Moab of the Old Covenant with the extended love of God through Jesus Christ, the Savior of God's New Covenant, John 3:16; Heb. 1:1-8. One of the miraculous aspects of human history is the unusual change in various of mankind's relating to their Creator. God has never nor will he ever change, but people do change in their concern for pleasing Almighty God. There was a time when God simply gave the Gentiles up because of their insistence upon doing contrary to God's plan for humanity, Rom. 1:24-32 (homosexuality, etc.). However, through Jesus Christ God demonstrated unprecedented love and grace. Through God's only begotten Son now anyone can know God's forgiveness. Isaiah stated clearly that under the Old Covenant the Moabites were to be destroyed. The land would become deserted waste and unable to support human physical life. Moab in the early biblical period was a thriving agricultural and stock supporting land. Remember that Israel had had periods of drought and a severe lack of life support. The Bible states that the Israelites during Jacob's life were required to escape to Egypt for sustenance. Also, as noted above, during the period of the judges the Bethlehem-Jerusalem area became so arid that crops would not grow, forcing the inhabitants to flee to Moab where food was plentiful. In fact, the abundance could have been one factor in the proud and haughty attitude of the Moabites, 15:5 and 16:6. In the midst of Isaiah's prediction of Moab's destruction because of its judgment by God (burden, 15:1), the prophet reveals God's future mercy through the righteous judging of an offspring of David, 16:5; Acts 15. The Moabites were a religious people as indicated in 15:2, but when they went to worship their pagan gods, there was no satisfaction in their worship. Also, in 15:2, notice is made of their having a place of worship on Mount Nebo where Moses was permitted to see the land promised to him and the Israelites by God through a covenant made with Abraham. Worshipping false gods will cause the fields to languish and their vines to wither, though they be watered with bitter tears. The summer fruits will not mature, and the normal fall harvests will not take place. The gladness and joy which accompany a plentiful field will not be experienced. When the time comes for the treading out of the grapes for wine, there will be no singing or chanting to the stomping of the feet. The Moabites' bowels will growl for lack of food therein. Again, because of this further judgment, a revival of idolatrous worship will not bring about any solution to the problem, Gen. 6:3. The Lord, through Isaiah, foretells that the remainder of the Moabites will be very meager, and even those who survive will be feeble. There is no Moabite nation, as such, in existence today, but there are many people who worship other than God the Father and Jesus His Son and expect eternal life, Matt. 7:21-23; John 14:6; Rom. 9:30-33; II Tim. 3:1-5.

Nov. 25, 2001 "Judgments on Syria, Israel and Beyond" Couples Class
Isaiah 17-18

Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. Damascus, capital of Syria, in early biblical history was a city which later designated the entire area lying to the northeast of Palestine (Syria). The Hebrew word used for the area is "Aram" which literally means "high," and properly defined the great mass of that high tableland which, rising with sudden abruptness from the Jordan and the shore of Lake Gennesaret, stretches, at an elevation of no less than 2000 feet above sea level, to the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. At Num. 23:7 Aram is noted as the land to which Balak, the king of Moab, sent for the seer (prophet) Balaam to curse Israel so that Moab could defeat Israel in battle. (On this occasion Balaam's donkey spoke with a human voice against the seer's attempt to contradict the Lord's will.) Mesopotamia also refers to this same general area as in Gen. 24:10 where Abraham sent his servant to bring back to Canaan a wife for Isaac. Abraham did so because it was to Haran in Mesopotamia where he and his father, Terah, had moved first from Ur where the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers join before flowing into what is now the Persian Gulf. Aram, Mesopotamia, Damascus, and Syria all name the same general geographic area at different historical periods. Today the nation which occupies most of this land is Syria, and the western most portion is the Golan Heights which was taken by Israel from Syria in 1967. However, a portion of eastern Syria in Isaiah's time could be part of what is today Iraq. The first mention of Damascus as a city in an inscription is dated in the 16th century BC, Gen. 14:14-15. It claims to be the oldest continuously occupied city site in the world (other cities make similar claims), and is now the capital of Syria. In ancient times Damascus was widely known as a caravan center. The city was captured and plundered many times, by Assyria, Babylonia, Israel under David (II Sam. 8:5-7), Rome (Pompey in 64 BC), and the Turks in 1516 AD. Remember also that our brother, Paul, was converted there and proclaimed the Gospel thereafter, Acts 9:1-25.

II. Interspersed in the judgment of Damascus is a warning to Ephraim which means many things throughout the Scriptures. Ephraim is a city (town) in II Chron. 13:19 and John 11:54; a tribe of Israel at Num. 1:33 (this tribe was named to honor Joseph's second son, Gen. 41:50-52); a person, i.e., Joseph's son; a mountain range east of the Jordan River at II Sam. 18:6 where a notable forest grew and where the fatal battle was fought between the armies of David and of his son Absalom; Ephraim is used to refer to the ten tribes of Israel (the northern kingdom), Hos. 5:9,13; and, lastly, to Israel to include all Jews in the messianic lineage from Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Judah, Jer. 31:9-10. I believe that the Ephraim in Isaiah 17 speaks of and to the northern kingdom which, at the time Isaiah wrote his prophecy, allied with other nations against their kinsmen, the nation Judah to their south.

III. In our consideration for today, another nation is judged for its sins, and especially its sin against God's people, the Jews. (Refer again to Gen. 12:1-4 where God covenanted with Abraham to

bless those who blessed Abraham and his descendants and curse those who cursed the patriarch and his descendants.) Ethiopia was condemned by Isaiah in this passage. That nation (people) is Cush in Hebrew and occupied an area primarily in northeast Africa, but secondarily a number of Cushites were integrated in northern Palestine and eastward all the way to the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, II Sam. 18:32-33. The Cushites were so named, because they were descendants of Cush who was a son of Ham. Recall that Ham was a son of Noah and therefore a brother of Shem and Japheth, Gen. 10:1,6. (Cush also had a brother named Canaan for whom the Land of Canaan was named.) The Jews were descendants of Shem as were all the Semites.

IV. We come now to consideration of Isaiah's prophecy against Damascus (Syria) and Ephraim (Samaria or northern kingdom of Israel), as well as Ethiopia. In Chap. 17 Isaiah pronounces God's dislike for the deeds of Damascus and Samaria, and what bad things will happen to them as a result of God's displeasure. The judgment (burden) will be the destruction of the capital of the empire of Syria, Dasmascus. The capital is to be utterly destroyed, become "a ruinous heap." Also other cities of Aram will be forsaken by their inhabitants, and become as open country again where animals will graze and have no one to kill them for meat or raise them for fur. At the same time the fortress (safe place) which Ephraim has been will no longer be true. In other words, Israel's glory will be curtailed at the same time Syria falls. (Assyria accomplished this prediction in the short term.) Even Jacob's glory will be as one whose body has become ill so that severe weight loss has occurred. Grain fields will be so poor that a harvester will pick one kernal here and another kernal there by hand. The grapes will be so sparse that gleaning will not be done. Olive trees will have two or three olives on each tree at the very top of the most fruitful branches. During this catastrophic period a citizen of Israel will long for a proper relationship with Jehovah God, their Maker, but only a remnant will truly seek God rather than worship idols. The nations of the world will eventually seek to destroy Israel's land, but God will rebuke those nations for the sake of his covenant people. Those nations will fly powerless through the air like chaff during winnowing time, or like a weed tumbling across the prairie powered by a whirlwind. The final day of judgment for both Israel and the nations who have persecuted her will begin with much trouble, but the dawn will see Israel's redemption, Rom. 11:25-26.

V. Chap. 18 singles out a woe for the land beyond Ethiopia (Cush), i.e., "beyond the rivers [thereof]." These lands (nations) who send ambassadors across the waters to a nation [Israel] whose land was divided and "trodden down." I believe that, although Ethiopia is used here as an example of a nation that has exploited and mistreated the people of Israel and their land, all of the earth's peoples will be so judged. There is not only an exploitation of Israel but also other sins committed which accompany those deeds that dishonor God's will on earth. Undoubtedly, the principle which we have noted before in Isaiah is true in Chaps. 17-18, i.e., although there was an immediate fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, there will be a like fulfillment when such conditions prevail again.

December 2, 2001

"The Judgment of Egypt"
Isaiah 19-20

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. The people of Egypt before the Arab conquest in the 7th century AD spoke the Copt language. The word "Copt" is the westernized form of Arabic qubt and Greek aigyptios, and the Greek term signified the language and people of Egypt before the 7th century AD. The ancient people of Egypt were descendants of Noah's son, Ham. As we noted, Ham had two sons, Cush and Canaan (there were two other sons, Mizraim and P(h)ut), Gen. 10:6; I Chron. 1:8. Egypt was a nation, as such, before Israel, because Israel, in essence, became a national entity (people) while under bondage in the land of Egypt. Under Moses and Joshua the Israelites went back to the land which God promised to Abraham and his descendants. There the nation of Israel, under God's power, attained a geographic area which completed what we usually associate with a constituted nation. The Bible identifies Egypt as an area populated by Ham's descendants, Psa. 78:51; 105:23,27. Although Israel was late as compared with Egypt in becoming a full-blown nation, God's people beginning with Abraham were related in various ways with Egypt. God told Abraham that his descendants would serve and be afflicted by a people for four hundred years, Gen. 15:13-18. That people turned out to be the Egyptians. At that same time God promised Abraham that his descendants were given "this land, from the river of Egypt (Nile) unto the great river, the river Eupharates."

II. Perhaps the most intimate and close relationship between an Israelite and an Egyptian was at the request of Sarah, Abraham's wife. Sarah was barren after she and Abraham had been married for many years (c. 13), and Sarah could not stand a household without children any longer. Her solution appears very strange to us who have been born from above, led and empowered by God's Holy Spirit. Shortly after Abraham left Haran in Aram for Canaan land in the area of Bethel and Ai, his family experienced a famine which forced him to go down into Egypt for relief, Gen. 12::4,8-13:3. Abraham left Egypt very rich in cattle, silver, gold, and, apparently in servants. Among his servants was a young Egyptian maiden named Hagar who became Sarah's personal maid, Gen. 16:1. Sarah begged her husband Abraham to engage in sexual intercourse with this personal maid, Hagar, in order to bring a child to the household. Abraham complied with Sarah's wishes and a son, Ishmael, was born as a result. This episode made Abraham the father of a son who was one-half Egyptian. Well, Sarah, even before the child was born, despised the one who was carrying the child, and with whom she herself had requested her own husband to mate. Sarah's hatred caused her to "deal harshly with her (Hagar) until the personal maid fled into the wilderness toward Shur," Gen. 16:2-6. The Lord sent a messenger to tell Hagar to return to Sarah and do her bidding. The angel promised Hagar that she would have a son, and, further, he would "be a wild man; his hand will be against every man, and every man's hand against him," Gen. 16:12. The promise also indicated that Ishmael's descendants would "not be numbered for multitude," Gen. 16:7-12. Ishmael did become a hunter and fathered twelve sons with "a wife out of the land of Egypt," Gen. 20:21. Abraham was grieved

later when Sarah insisted that Hagar leave the household when Ishmael was about seventeen years old. Hagar took her son Ishmael eastward to Paran, toward Egypt, in the northern Sinai Peninsula, and found for him the Egyptian wife who bore him the twelve sons, Gen. 25:12-15. The religion of Islam founded by Mohammed (c.570-632 AD) grew primarily out of the descendants of Ishmael (Arabs).

III. With the above background in mind, we now look at Isaiah's prophecies concerning Egypt. It is well again to refer to the over 400 years which the family of Jacob and his descendants lived in Egypt to become a people of about one and one-half million strong. Also, Jesus, our Lord, was taken to Egypt for his personal safety as an infant. But during the intertestamental period between Malachi and Matthew, Israel suffered grievously at the hand of Egypt. Before Isaiah's day and just after the children of Israel had returned to the promised land, two of their kings, Ahaz and Hezekiah, made an alliance with Egypt against Assyria (Damascus) and found her to be an unreliable ally. Isaiah in Chap. 19 announces at the outset that Egypt's chief sin against God was idolatry. It was no happenstance that the plagues brought against Egypt by God to persuade the Egyptian leader to permit the Israelites to leave Egypt. The Egyptians had considered many creatures and things to be their gods, including the bull, the frog, the scarab (a bug), the fish, many varieties of birds, the sun, the River Nile, etc. Although raw idolatry is passe in Egypt, the ignorance and superstition of the Moslem religion is the dominant religious persuasion. As Isaiah prophesied, Egypt today is far less affluent than it was in Isaiah's time. The delta of the Nile afforded much rich soil for crops such as papyrus which was one of Egypt's chief exports. Today Isaiah's prophecy has obviously been mostly fulfilled. Egypt is in dire circumstance financially. In fact, beginning at 19:16 the term "in that day" appears six times in the chapter which announces the end time. At that time that glorious nation (Egypt) will be "like unto women," i.e., weak and fearful because of the Lord's shaking of the land. Many historians believe that the "alter of the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt," is the Ark of the Covenant which has been lost for many centuries. In 19:21-25 a positive attitude by the Lord toward Egypt appears which causes me to believe that the "sign for a witness" is the symbol of Jesus' sacrifice, the cross. At Acts 2:10 when God's Holy Spirit founded the beginning of the working of believers in Jesus as God the Father's Messiah (Savior), representatives from Egypt were there to witness God's miracle through Christ. The witness for Christ began in Egypt and believers became established where such notables as Athanasius, Origen and Augustine were produced. In that day there will be open communication and trust among Egypt, Assyria, and Israel. Israel will be the throne of the Lord's authority, and even though the Lord will smite Egypt, Egypt will respond to the Lord's love and be healed, 19:22. The Egyptians and Assyrians will be blessed by the Lord. Now Chap. 20 reverts to the time of Isaiah's immediate concerns, except for reference to the three year period during which Isaiah was to walk to and fro naked as a sign and wonder to both Egypt's and Ethiopia's shame. They both (as will Israel) realize that alliances with other peoples rather than with Jehovah God are in vain. The first three years of the awful tribulation period will suffice as a wake-up signal for both countries. (Note the return to "in that day" in 20:6.)

Dec. 9, 2001

"Judgment on Jerusalem and Neighbors"
Isaiah 21-22

Couples Class
Wendell Alford
Teacher

I. Remember that Isaiah prophesied for a long time, during the reign of four kings of Judah or about sixty years (758-698 BC). It is probably for this reason that the prophet returns to the opposition to God's will by the Babylonians (note Chaps. 13-14). Although Babylon is not mentioned by name until vs. 9, the context indicates that "the desert (plain) by the sea" referred to is Babylon. The judgment coming on Babylon is promised "as whirlwinds from the south, comes from the desert [Negev], from a terrible land." The language in 21:2 is repetitive to give emphasis to the awfulness of what will happen to Babylon. The distressful vision which was declared to Isaiah was: "the treacherous dealer dealeth treacherously, and the spoiler spoileth." Then Isaiah announces who will be the spoilers, the Medes and Persia (Elam). Isaiah's reaction to the terrible-ness of what he sees in store for Babylon is a pain in his lower abdomen (like a woman in childbirth); hearing and seeing the calamity in the vision brought distress and dismay; his heart wavered; and nighttime rest and solitude became dreaded fear. God told Isaiah to warn the Babylonians to cease from their sumptuous living (banqueting) and rise up to don warring garb and instruments. Put up a watch-tower and man it with someone with keen eyesight, for the enemy is coming! The watchman was employed, but grew weary from what he thought was an unnecessary assignment. And then, suddenly, the defeating armies arrived just as God's judgment had been foretold by Isaiah, the prophet of God. This prophecy was accomplished by the founder of the Persian Empire, Cyrus, and who also beat the Medianites in 559 BC, II Chron. 36:22-23; Dan. 6:28. The livid account of the banquet (Isa. 21:5) and Belshazzar's (Babylon's) defeat are outlined in Dan. 5 where the Babylonians are referred to as Chaldeans (Cushites). Note the later date of these events as compared to Isaiah's time (Isaiah's prophecy in 758-698 BC and Belshazzar's banquet in 538 BC). [Again, let's consider the multiple application of the fall of Babylon in its historical context. Isaiah states plainly in 21:9 that, "Babylon is fallen, is fallen; and all the graven images of her gods he hath broken unto the ground." According to Dan. 5:30-31 this defeat (falling of Babylon) took place by the slaying of Belshazzar on the very night of the banquet by Darius, the Mede. Now, note at the very end of the apostolic creation of the New Covenant message from God Almighty (through Jesus Christ, God's only begotten Son) what John, the apostle as a prisoner on the Isle of Patmos, penned in Rev. 16:19; 17:5-6, 17-18; 18:7-10, 20-24; 19:2-3. I believe that the Babylon to which John (God's Word) refers to is certainly not the ancient Babylon, but the city of Rome, for it was Rome's political power that had imprisoned John on Patmos for his witness concerning Jesus as God's Savior (Rev. 1:9), who had martyred God's Apostles and many other witnesses for the same reason, and which sat upon seven hills, Rev. 17:9. The nucleus of the ancient city of Rome lay on seven hills on the left bank (west) of the Tiber River. Romans also sportily watched in glee as some of the first believers in Jesus were run out into arenas for lions to mutilate and devour while the same arenas were illumined by those "outlaw" believers who had been

clothed in inflammable garments, soaked in tar and pitch, tied to poles, and lit for the occasion! I believe that God can forget sins confessed in Jesus' name (Eph. 4:32), but the last Babylon's (Rome's) sin will be remembered by God, Gen. 18:20-21; Rev. 16:19; 18:5. Isaiah prophesies the destruction (fall) of Babylon, but God's word through John the apostle plainly tells us who are led by God's Holy Spirit that there is another Babylon, Rome, which is, just at the end time, to be completely destroyed because of her grievous sins against God. This destruction is to come in a single day by fire, Rev. 18:8. Is Rome still in existence today which has brought much and continuous reproach to God's people through the millennia since Jesus died for our sins? [I believe so, II Thes. 2:7. - WA]

II. Isaiah, beginning at 21:11 and through vs. 17, condemns Dumah and Arabia. Dumah was a son of Ishmael, Gen. 25:12-15; I Chron. 1:29-31, and therefore the name of the principal place or district inhabited by that tribe. The area is the northern portion of the Arabian Peninsula, and the Ishmaelites were later joined by the family and descendants of Esau, Jacob's twin brother. In Chap. 22 Isaiah's judgment again turns to Jerusalem. The holy city is portrayed as eating, drinking and making merriment without realizing that a most terrible time is imminent, at the very door. Vs. 22:14 is revealing in that Isaiah is told that Jerusalem (the Jews as a people, 22:22) will not be forgiven (sins purged) until they die (cease from being what they have been). Note the first vs. of this Chap. along with this vs. 14, and compare with Jesus' words at Mk 8:35 and Matt. 24:16-17. We should rejoice that this Isaiah passage is a part of God's word which the Jews respect and cherish. At the beginning of "in that day" they will understand and embrace Jesus as Lord, I believe, Rom. 11:25-36; Rev. 7:1-17.

III. [As a parenthetical in Isaiah's listing of God's judgments against Judah, Israel and their neighbors, I wonder how God views our nation, the United States of America, and its conforming to the Lord's will. Remember that at the outset of our Isaiah study, we stated that according to Matt. 25:32 nations will be judged by God. While many who helped found our nation were motivated by monetary gain, many came to this portion of the North American continent to follow their individual religious consciousness and to worship God accordingly, instead of by order of national dictates. The bulk of those who came professed Jehovah as their Lord and Jesus as their Savior. On that foundation the nation overthrew its sponsor, Great Britain, and became a nation, as our Declaration of Independence states: to assume national status "as nature's God entitles," and that all men "are created by their Creator - - ." Washington became the first president in 1789 and the first ten amendments to the new constitution were adopted in 1791. The first of these amendments prohibited the congress from establishing any national religion. Today our society has become far more pluralistic than at its beginning, and therefore many American citizens are Jewish (6,024,000), Roman Catholics (62,400,000), Bahai (786,000), Moslems (5,780,000), Buddhists(2,701,000+), Greek Catholics (6,342,000+), Baptists (40,140,000+), Lutherans (8,500,000), Mormons (4,500,

12-9-01

000), Methodists (13,300,000), Pentecostals (10,200,000), et al. According to a late census only 50.8% of American children live in families where both biological parents are present and all children were born after the marriage. Census officials reflect powerful societal trends that cannot be easily reversed: gradual migration from rural to cities and suburbs, growing ranks of working mothers, declining church and community influence, expanding financial (from governmental bodies) assistance to poor households, and greater tolerance of divorce and single parenting. City living provides greater anonymity where there is less societal pressures to remain married. Beginning in the 1960's more and more women were entering the labor market, thereby leaving unwanted marriages financially possible. In 1996, U.S. expenditure for welfare was 37,810,000, and in 2000 the figure had dropped to 32,333,000. On June 4, 2001 the national debt was \$5,807,500,000,000, and each citizen's share was \$20,353. During the 12 mos. ending in March, 1998 there were 2,244,000 marriages and 1,135,000 divorces. The researcher who gave me this marriage-divorce ratio indicated that this ratio has been decreasing for the past 3½ years, but suggested that an unknown factor is "live-ins" who are not legally coveted in marriage. March 18, 1963 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that it is unlawful to recite the Lord's Prayer or Bible verses in public schools. In March of 1984 the U.S. Senate rejected permission to have prayer in the public schools. In 1992 the next president of the U.S. was elected by 43% of the votes cast. One of his promises during the campaign was that homosexuals would be given minority status in the armed forces, i.e., their choice of sexual activity (Biblically contrary to God's will for mankind) is equivalent to the pigment differences of any person's skin. Fortunately, the new president's promise was defeated in the U.S. Legislature. In January of 1973 the U.S. Supreme Court made abortion legal (had the nation's official blessing) in this country thus overturning laws in 46 states in the union. There were 1,598,000 legal abortions in the U.S. in 1988 for 58,192,000 women ages 15-44 (latest data findable). The Housing and Urban Development personnel are threatening groups (two, 1994) of U.S. citizens with fines and jail terms for objecting to public housing being located in certain neighborhoods for homeless persons who are mentally ill, drug addicts, alcoholics, and patients with AIDS. It is HUD's position that it has the legal prerogative to apply the 1988 Fair Housing Amendments Act which prohibits housing rights to the disabled. They interpret "federally disabled persons" to include the mentally ill, alcoholics, drug addicts, and AIDS sufferers and therefore legally protected as disabled persons. When our nation was founded and for many years thereafter, God blessed it so that it became the most powerful military nation the world has until now ever known. During that early period, the majority of U.S. citizens trusted Jehovah God and his Son for strength. They had a spiritual stamina and moral drive as a nation, spiritual leadership and proudly so, and God evidently blessed the nation's efforts and aspirations. When the Russian Empire fell around 1990, the U.S. became the world's only "super power." Would Isaiah as God's prophet have a burden (judgment) for us today? I believe that he would.- WA]

Dec. 16, 2001

"Tyre and the Tribulation"
Isaiah 23-24

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. Isaiah in Chap. 23 turns from judgment against Babylon, Dumah, Arabia, and Jerusalem to the maritime area of Phoenicia on the east coast of the Mediterranean Sea, particularly the city of Tyre. That area today is in the nation of Lebanon which lies adjacent to the northern boundary of Israel. Tyre and Sidon are located in the southern half of Lebanon, and Beirut and Tripoli in the northern half. All four cities are coastal and are involved in seagoing commerce. (Jesus referred to both Tyre and Sidon at Matt. 11:21-22, indicating that the people there would have responded positively to his message if they had had the same opportunity as the people of Israel. At Mk 7:24-30 Jesus went to Tyre and healed a Greek Syrophoenician (Gentile) woman's daughter who was mentally ill.) When the Israelites came from Egypt to the promised land, the various tribes were assigned geographical areas. The northwestern most area which included Tyre was assigned to the tribe of Asher, and Josh. 11:8 tells of its capture. However, during the capture and occupation of Canaan, not all of the natives were exterminated. This fact is evident when the period of judges is examined. In fact, during David's and Solomon's reigns, the people of the Tyre-Sidon area were allied with the Israelites and furnished much labor and building materials for building the Temple and houses in Jerusalem, II Sam. 5:11-12; I Kings 7:13-14; I Chron. 14:1; II Chron. 2:3, 7-18. The chief tactic of the Israelites in overpowering the Canaanites was "divide and conquer." Among peoples who were primarily clans in organization, this method of integration was most successful.

II. A word should be said about the important contribution which the ancient Tyre area people made to subsequent human civil concerns. Written language as we know it today is based on an evolutionary process of written communication to which the Phoenicians made an early and significant contribution. Most language historians agree that the Semitic (offspring of Shem) component of the Phoenicians took the Hebrew alphabet, which in the beginning did not have alphabetic representatives of the vowel sounds, and completed essentially the alphabet we have today, i.e., the Phoenicians were the originators of our modern day alphabet. That contribution to human communication is very important. This arrangement for people, not only to converse on a temporary basis (voice and gesture), but also to make permanent, ideas (in writing) for subsequent generations to know, is an earthly factor that only the Creator, Jehovah, could have brought to pass. We believers cannot overemphasize our ability to retain information in permanent form since the Good News itself in written form has been codified and made the personification of our Lord Jesus. John's Gospel begins by equating Jesus as God the Father's communication to all mankind. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God," John 1:1. Here Jesus is equated to God, and to the Greeks unknown Divinity, the Logos. The Greeks knew about God but did not know him personally as is evident at Acts 17:16-34 when Paul witnessed in Athens on his second journey as

a missionary. Incidentally, it was at Tyre where Paul was warned by the believers there not to return to Jerusalem, Acts 21:2-6.

III. Isaiah identifies Tyre as a center of trade and commerce, for from there and to there many ships exchanged the goods and peoples from north Africa and south Europe as well as lands to the east, e.g., India and Persia. In 23:3 Isaiah refers to Tyre and Sidon as the "[Wal]mart of nations" with ships sailing to Tarshish and Cyprus (Chittim) like Egypt. Much grain from fertile river valleys found its way through the port of Tyre to arid lands where grain was not available, but where metal ores and other products were. At 23:13 Isaiah makes reference to a very important historical fact about Tyre. An acknowledged historical fact is that the Assyrians in their conquering probes from Assyria all the way across Israel to the shores of the great Mediterranean Sea, came to the village of Tyre and attacked it. At that time it was located on a small offshore island to which fresh water had to be brought from the mainland for human consumption. (The Hebrew name for Tyre was Tsar which means "rock.") The city is now on a rocky peninsula and also overflows onto the mainland, not as strong today as when the Assyrians under Shalmaneser besieged it and sought to make it a military stronghold. Later, the great Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, swept into Tyre with an enormous military force. This overthrow is detailed in Ezek. 26 where the dust from the horses and chariots covered the people and their homes. A part of Ezek. 26 speaks of the utter destruction of Tyre as does the last chapter of Isaiah which we are considering today, Chap. 24. Tyre's destruction is given by Isaiah as a time that one can only associate with the awful beginning of "the Day of the Lord." This fact is indicated in 24:1 where Isaiah makes plain that the judgment which he is about to reiterate (for see earlier at Isa. 13 concerning the absolute destruction of Babylon during the day of the Lord, vs. 6 and 9) against Babylon (See also Rev. 18:2 which we discussed last Sunday.) is also applicable to Tyre. At this time the Lord will "make the earth empty, make it waste, turn it upside down, and scatter the [earth's] inhabitants." All people will be in the same circumstance: people-priest, slave-owner, maid-mistress, buyer-seller, lender-borrower, and creditor-debtor. The pride of the proud will be extinguished so that there will be no basis for haughtiness. The reason for this absolute and final judgment of Jehovah God is because the entire earth is defiled by all of the earth's people's ignoring God's instructions bearing God's will for them; they have broken God's eternal covenant (agreement) with mankind, vs. 5. The "city of confusion is broken down," vs. 10. Even though the whole earth has "heard songs, even [purportedly] glory to the righteous," Isaiah declares those songs to be without value, "the treacherous dealers have dealt treacherously; yea, the treacherous dealers have dealt very treacherously." [emphasis mine - WA] Those who try to flee to a place of safety and away from the destruction will find no place to hide, [but for trusters in Jesus as Savior see: Lk 21:25-28; I Thess. 5:1-11; I Cor. 15:51-58, in that order, please.]

A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing
Our helper He, amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing.
Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also.
The body they may kill; God's truth abideth still;
His kingdom is forever, [and trusters in Jesus are citizens.]

Dec. 16, 2001
Supplement

"Tyre and the Tribulation"
Isaiah 23-24

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

The eleven "burdens" or judgments, of Isaiah (God's prophet) on the nations in the Middle East, Isa. 13-23; Matt. 25:31-46.

A. Babylon (Isa. 13:1) denotes false or mixed religions, idolatry. The tenth of the Ten Commandments is "Thou shalt not covet" which states that one should not want what belongs to another, or serve amassing material possessions. Materialism is idolatry, Exod. 20:17; Col. 3:5.

B. Palestine (Isa. 14:29) denotes religious faith which has been ritualized and no longer a true or vital faith, Rev. 3:14-17.

C. Moab (Isa. 15:1) denotes "formal" religion with a form of godliness but denying its real power, II Tim. 3:1-5.

D. Damascus (Isa. 17:1) denotes compromise, Col. 2:8-16.

E. Ethiopia (Isa. 18:1) denotes taking God's Word to other nations, missions, Matt. 28:18-20.

F. Egypt (Isa. 19:1) denotes the world and all of its physical attributes, Matt. 16:26; John 10:22-30; 17:9,14,20.

G. Persia, the later Babylon, (Isa. 21:1) denotes effluent wealth, abundance of property, and love of luxury, Jas. 2:1-3.

H. Edom or Duma (Isa. 21:11) denotes fleshly lust, Rom. 1:24-28; Gal. 5:19-21; I John 2:15-17.

I. Arabia (Isa. 21:13) denotes war for settling disagreements and thereby establishing peace. Real peace is through spiritual peace found in faith in God's Son, Jesus Christ, i.e., doing God's will, Jas. 4:1-5.

J. Valley of Vision, Jerusalem, (Isa. 22:1) denotes the reliance upon governmental or political power to solve the world's problems, Lk. 23:4,20-14.

K. Tyre (Isa. 23:1) denotes commercialism, corporate activities who handle massive goods and huge amounts of money, Rev. 18:2-3.

An afterthought: In examining Israel's neighbors one can see their struggle to follow the instructions of a perfect, righteous, loving Creator God. As believers in God's Son and trusting the guidance of God's Holy Spirit, we can see the wisdom of God in providing for us His marvelous, unexplainable grace, Rom. 11:25-36. The world would be a wonderful place to live if God's Good News, the Gospel, were embraced and practiced by every world citizen. But, as we know, and as Israel has experienced, such is a real struggle even for us who trust our Lord Jesus, Rom. 7:1-25. Matt. 28:18-20 is so important!!!

Dec. 30, 2001

"The Kingdom of God"
Isaiah 25-27

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. After declaring God's wrath in Chap. 24 where utter destruction of the world system is prophesied, Isaiah then, in Chaps. 25-27, gives attention to the Day of the Lord after the initial tribulation period. These three chapters correspond roughly to Rev. 19-22 whereas the first 18 chapters of Rev. are details of several passages in Isaiah such as Isaiah 24, cf. Isa. 13:6 and 24:21-23 with Rev. 6:15-17. Now compare Isa. 25:8 with Rev. 21:4, and note that the two prophecies are substantially foretelling the same period, "in that day" or "the day of the Lord." Chaps. 25-27 give evidence of God's kingship in the earth immediately following the tribulation period. There are those who define God as love alone and therefore incapable of such severe destruction as noted in Isaiah and Revelation, but they are simply discounting the awfulness of mankind's sin as they have and are disregarding the holy God's will for them. God hates what mankind's sin has done to make people miserable and unhappy. God is jealous to have people again please him by abiding completely in his instruction and will, Exod. 20:5; Deut. 4:24; Nahum 1:2-7; John 14:15-21. For the believers in and trusters of Jesus as Savior, the only way to evade God's wrath is by confessing his or her sins to God and relying completely upon God's grace through Jesus Christ, I John 1:8-2:2,12, for the forgiveness of those sins. (See also Prov. 3:11-12;13:24; I Cor. 3:15-17; Heb. 12:5-11.)

II. It appears strange after the terrible time of trouble depicted in Chap. 24 that the wonderful praise should be given in the glorious exultation of God so poetically expressed in Chap. 25 of Isaiah. Here is praise to God for deliverance, a song of sheer delight. As Isaiah viewed the majestic kingdom of God coming on earth, his heart was full to overflowing, for God is revealing to the prophet the culmination of the Creator's promise, even to Adam and Eve after they disobeyed God in the paradise of Eden, Gen. 3:15. God is hereby being praised and worshiped for his faithfulness after so many millennia, I Thes. 5:20,24. (For evidence of God's trustworthiness as compared to mankind's see Psa. 116:11; 118:7-8.) After the tribulation, all will be changed so that cities will not need walls and military protection, 25:2,12, and the entire earth's population will glorify Jehovah God, the Creator. Weeping will be very evident during God's purging of the earth, but when the morning comes, there will be joy, Psa. 30:5. God will supply every person's need with pleasant things in boundless supply, 25:6. During the long period (Rev. 20:2-5), there will be no sorrow, death, or rebuke, because the Lord himself has declared such to be truth, 25:8 and I Cor. 15:54,57-58. The earth's people will gladly, openly proclaim that the God of Abraham and Father of our Savior, God's only begotten Son, Jesus, is who they profess him to be. "This is the [true] Lord; we have waited for him, we will be glad and rejoice in his salvation," 25:9, "in that day." After thousands of years while the Jews have omitted God's Savior (God's Anointed One) from their attempt to worship Jehovah, they now sing praises to God's Christ, Jesus, 26:1. God's salvation through Jesus will be the only protection needed or available. During the long night the Jews desired

to see God's salvation, but refused to accept Jesus for who he is, 26:9,13. However, during the time of great trouble (the tribulation) Israel will be in excruciating anguish (as in childbirth) and realize that their seeking to please God through the law has been in vain, 26:18. Late in Chap. 26 God reveals a deep mystery to Isaiah in vs. 19. Dead people will "wake and sing" as though they had not been separated from others. The earth will literally "cast them out" even though they have "dwell[ed] in the dust," cf. Ezek. 37:3-14; Rom. 11:25-32. Only the eternal, wise God could reveal such!

III. While the phrase "in that day" appears only once each in Chaps. 25 and 26, it appears four times in Chap. 27 at vss. 1,2,12, and 13. To me this phrase is synonymous with "the day of the Lord" and refers to the return of Jesus Christ to earth to cleanse the planet and establish his promised kingdom of God. [John the Baptiser proclaimed when Jesus came to earth the first time: "Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven (of God) is at hand," Matt. 3:2. I believe that God could have established the kingdom that is yet to come if the Jews had accepted Jesus when he first came, but they did violence to God's plan at that time, Matt. 11:7-19.] But note in 27:1 of Isaiah, the prophet reveals that God will in that day "slay the dragon" who has enticed mankind to do contrary to God's will. This arrangement will create an absolutely new climate for the people of God. In Rev. 20:2-6 the apostle John is told by God that same message which was told to Isaiah earlier, Isa. 27:1. Satan will be bound (neutralized) so far as people's actions and attitudes are concerned for a long period (1000 years). Then before Satan's final severance from mankind's activities, he will be loosed again for a period. Following that period Satan will be "cast into the lake of fire and brimstone - - - and shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever," Rev. 20:10. The Lord himself will dwell in the very presence of his people (us and all who trust Jesus), Rev. 21:22-27; 22:3-5.

IV. In 27:2-4 Isaiah uses the figure of a vineyard to contrast with the same figure he first used in Chap. 5. Remember that there God refers to Israel as "my beloved" whom he placed in a fertile field after preparing the land for a bountiful harvest. But Israel did not respond positively to God's preparation and plan. God asked the question: "What could have been done more to my vineyard [Israel], that I have not done in it? Wherefore, when I looked that it should bring forth grapes, brought it forth wild grapes?" (Isa. 5:4) Isaiah then outlined a list of woes which indicated that Israel was untrue to the Lord's will. Jesus could very well have had these passages in Isaiah in his mind when he told the apostles the parable of the vineyard. The vineyard [now all who are led of God's Spirit] needs workers, and it makes no difference when one decides to work there. God will give eternal life to the early Israelites under the Old Covenant who had faith (in the promised Messiah) as well as those who exercise faith in Jesus as Savior during this period of grace, John 1:7; Matt. 20:1-19. No matter if the first or last (Jews or Gentiles) faith in God through Jesus makes one a citizen of God's heavenly kingdom with eternal life. In fact, the mystery of Isa. 27 is that God will bring Israel back to himself, Rom. 11:25-32. We trusters in Jesus are to remember what Jesus said, "I am the vine, ye are the branches and can do nothing apart from me."