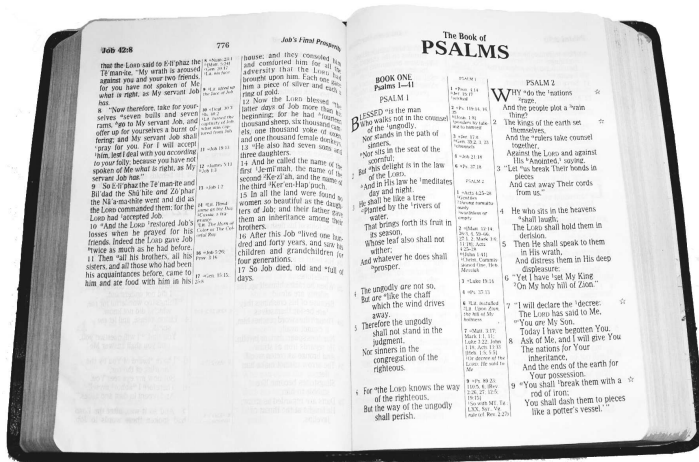


PILGRIM BIBLE NOTES

God's holy Word simply explained and applied



February 2021

Bible readings from the Gospel of Luke chapters 3 to 8

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The word of God came to John ... in the wilderness

Jesus was probably born towards the end of 5 BC (the calendar has been changed since those times, hence the date of Christ's birth being 'Before Christ'). Herod the Great, who plotted to murder the infant Christ, died in 4 BC. After his death, his kingdom was divided. The names of the rulers over this divided kingdom at the time when John the Baptist began his ministry are given in verse 1. The Roman emperor is also named as well as the high priests Annas and Caiaphas. Annas had been deposed long before, but he was still functioning with the official high priest, Caiaphas (2).

John began his ministry at a bleak time in Israel's history. The nation had not had a prophet for 400 years. Pontius Pilate, Herod and the high priests were evil men. J.C. Ryle observes, 'Let us learn never to despair about the cause of God's truth, however black and unfavourable its prospects may appear. At the very time when things seem hopeless, God may be preparing a mighty deliverance ... The darkest hour of the night is often that which precedes the day. Let us beware of slacking our hands from any work of God, because of the wickedness of the times, or the number and power of our adversaries' (EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS ON LUKE, vol.1, page 84).

The Lord Jesus was about thirty years of age when he began his public ministry (23). John the Baptist began preaching shortly before (William Hendriksen suggests about six months earlier, probably AD 26). The work of John the Baptist in preparing the way for Jesus was prophesied in the Old Testament (4–6; cp. Isaiah 40:3–5). John had a message from God: *The word of God came to John ... in the wilderness* (2; cp. 1:80). He preached *a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins* (3). We live in difficult and uncertain times and many of our evangelical churches struggle without pastors. There is a desperate need for leaders who are full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, men who are zealous for Christ, to preach the gospel and to plant churches. **Let us pray that the Word of God will come to many people and that the Lord will raise up pastors and evangelists.**

Bear fruits worthy of repentance

John preached powerfully and fearlessly to great crowds, among whom were Pharisees and Sadducees. The Pharisees prided themselves on their religious zeal, and the Sadducees denied the resurrection of the dead. They were religious, but lost! John was forthright in his preaching, saying, *‘Brood of vipers! Who has warned you to flee from the wrath to come?’* (7; cp. Matthew 3:6).

What were the themes of John’s preaching? He preached concerning the wrath of God, judgment and the necessity of repentance for the remission of sins (3,7,10). These vital doctrines are missing from many professed evangelical pulpits today. Ryle writes, ‘Let us never be ashamed to avow our firm belief, that there is a *wrath to come* for the impenitent, and that it is possible for a man to be lost as well as to be saved. To be silent on the subject is positive treachery to men’s souls. It only encourages them to persevere in wickedness, and fosters in their minds the devil’s old delusion, “Ye shall not surely die”’ (EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS ON LUKE, vol.1, page 90).

John told those who came to be baptized that they were not to rely on their Jewish pedigree for salvation. They must *‘bear fruits worthy of repentance’* (8). Repentance is a radical change of mind and heart which changes the direction of our lives. This is seen in John’s response to those who asked, *‘What shall we do then?’* (10–14). He told the crowd that their repentance had to be seen in self-denial, the tax collectors in honesty, and the soldiers in not intimidating others to extort money from them and to be content with their ages. If you say that you have repented of your sin, but continue to lead a sinful, self-centred way of life, your repentance is not real.

Ryle comments, ‘It can never be impressed on our minds too strongly that religious talking and profession are utterly worthless, without religious doing and practice’ (EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS ON LUKE, vol.1, page 91). **Have you truly repented of your sins? Does it show in your life by *fruits worthy of repentance*?**

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire

The powerful preaching of John was having a great effect upon the people and there was an air of expectation among them. They wondered whether John was the promised Messiah but he denied this and told them that there was One coming who was mightier than himself. John baptised with water but he said of Jesus, '*He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire*' (15–16). This prediction of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost (cp. Acts 1:4–8).

There is probably a connection here with Malachi 3:1–3 and thus the Holy Spirit is seen as purging and refining the old way of life to make us holy. Those who refuse the fire of cleansing will ultimately suffer the fire of eternal punishment (17). John's prophecy finds its ultimate fulfilment at the second coming of the Lord Jesus who will then cleanse the earth with fire (2 Peter 3:7,11–13).

Everyone who repents of their sin and trusts in Christ is baptized in the Spirit (Acts 2:38; 1 Corinthians 12:13). The disciples waited for the promise of the Father (Acts 1:4) but we do not need to tarry or agonise for the coming of the Holy Spirit into our lives. We do not have to seek for a 'second blessing' because every believer has the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:9; Galatians 4:6). Those who follow the Lord Jesus and seek to please him will enjoy many blessings. **Let us live as those whose bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19), rather than chasing after blessings.**

John fearlessly rebuked Herod for stealing his brother Philip's wife and for his evil deeds. Herod refused to heed God's messenger and had John thrown into prison (19–20). Herod eventually had John murdered. He silenced God's messenger, but he could not silence his conscience (Mark 6:14–29).

*O Breathe of life, come sweeping through us,
Revive thy church with life and power.
O Breathe of life, come, cleanse renew us
And fit thy church to meet this hour.* (Bessie P. Head)

You are my beloved Son; in you I am well pleased

John baptized people who had repented of their sin (3,8) so why did the Lord Jesus submit to baptism when he is sinless and has no need to repent (Hebrews 4:15; 1 John 3:5)? Baptism is a symbol of identification (believer's baptism sets forth our identification with Christ – Romans 6:3–5). Jesus identified himself with sinful mankind by taking human flesh and this is symbolised in his baptism. God the Father laid our sin upon him and *made him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in him* (2 Corinthians 5:21; cp. Isaiah 53:6). The Lord Jesus also spoke of a baptism and cup of suffering that he had to endure (12:50). His baptism not only symbolised his identification with us, but also his suffering and death to take away our sin.

We see the involvement of the whole Trinity in the baptism of Jesus. As the Son came up from the water, the Holy Spirit descended like a dove upon him and the Father spoke from heaven, '*You are my beloved Son; in you I am well pleased*' (21–22). The Father loves the Son (John 3:35) but did not spare him as he died for sinners (Romans 8:32). We are much aware of our own sinfulness and shortcomings, but if we are saved, we are 'in Christ' and we are clothed in his righteousness. **The Father accepted his perfect sacrifice so that we could be 'accepted in the Beloved' (Ephesians 1:6). Let us rejoice and give thanks for our wonderful salvation.**

The Genealogy of Jesus Christ (Luke 3:23–38)

Most Bible commentators believe that the family tree in these verses is that of Mary. Matthew traces the royal line of Jesus through Joseph (Matthew 1:1), whereas Luke traces his line through Mary. Luke is at pains to point out that Joseph was not the natural father of Jesus: '*being (as was supposed) son of Joseph, the son of Heli.*'

The devil ... departed from him until an opportune time

Following his baptism, the Lord Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan for forty days (1–2). He fasted throughout this time and was much weakened in body through lack of food. Imagine just how great the temptations must have been as he suffered the sustained onslaughts of the devil.

- Satan first tempted Christ to doubt. He said, *‘If you are the Son of God’* (3,9). God the Father had said at his baptism, *‘You are my beloved Son; in you I am well pleased’* (3:22). The devil often assails us with doubts – remember how he questioned the word of God in Eden, *‘Has God indeed said ... ?’* (Genesis 3:1).
- Satan then promised Christ the kingdoms of the world, *‘Therefore, if you will worship before me, all will be yours’* (5–7). Jesus knew that the way to glory was through suffering and death (Philippians 2:5–11). Satan’s promises are false. He promised Eve that if she took the forbidden fruit she would be like God (Genesis 3:5). She soon found this to be a lie. Some false cults believe that we can become as God.
- The devil’s next tactic was to try to make Christ sinfully presume upon God the Father’s care by assuming that he would be rescued by angels if he threw himself from the top of the temple (9–12). Adam and Eve presumed that they would be able to eat the fruit and not die (Genesis 3:1–4). We must never tempt God by sinful presumption.

Satan misused Scripture when he tempted the Lord Jesus who responded by using the Word of God (10–12). False cults often twist the meaning of the Bible to support their heresies (cp. 2 Peter 3:16). How did Jesus respond to the devil? He used the Word of God, quoting from Deuteronomy on each occasion. **You will be stronger in the face of temptation if you know your Bible. You do not have to give in to temptation. You do not have to sin (Romans 6:14).** Satan never gives up, however. – *Now when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time* (13). Satan is patient. He waits for his right moment to get us off our guard. Let us always be vigilant (1 Peter 5:8).

When they heard these things, (they) were filled with wrath

Jesus returned in the power of the Holy Spirit to Galilee where his ministry in the synagogues was acclaimed far and wide (14–15) but he was to encounter strong opposition in his own town of Nazareth. He stood up in the synagogue to read the Scriptures and was handed the scroll containing the prophecy of Isaiah. Turning to chapter 61, verses 1 and 2, he told an expectant congregation that this scripture was being fulfilled before them that very day (16–21). The Lord Jesus was making it quite plain that he was indeed the Messiah promised in those verses. Though the people marvelled at his gracious words, they regarded him only as Joseph's son. They had heard of his miracles at Capernaum and now wanted to see signs before they would be convinced. Jesus answered the proverb that was in their thoughts with another proverb: *'No prophet is accepted in his own country'* (22–24).

The Lord Jesus reminded his hearers that though there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, God sent the prophet to a Gentile widow in Sidon. Moreover, the Syrian army commander Naaman was cleansed from his leprosy during Elisha's time but none of the many lepers in Israel were healed. *Then all those in the synagogue, when they heard these things, were filled with wrath* (28). The very people who had earlier marvelled at the gracious words of Jesus were now filled with indignation and hatred. They attempted to throw Jesus down from a cliff, but he was miraculously preserved (29–30). This was an answer to Satan's earlier temptation (4:9–11). *Jesus went his way* (30). and there is no record in the Gospels of him ever again visiting Nazareth.

The truth of God's sovereignty in his dealings with men upset those who heard Jesus. Why should God by-pass people in Israel and yet have mercy on Gentiles? God's absolute sovereignty in election is plainly taught in Scripture (eg. Romans 9:11–23). **The glorious doctrine of God's free and sovereign grace is scorned by the world and hated by many religious people. Let us proclaim it, rejoice in it, be humbled by it, and praise God for it. Hallelujah!**

They knew that he was the Christ

These verses give an account of a memorable Sabbath in Capernaum. A man was delivered from demon-possession as he heard the Lord Jesus teaching in the synagogue (35) and later Peter's mother-in-law was healed (38–39). At sunset (when the sabbath ended), many sick people were brought to Jesus and he healed them and cast out many demons (40–41). Those who heard Jesus in the synagogue in Capernaum were astonished at the authority of his teaching and at his power over demons (32, 36). The subject of demon-possession attracts controversy but the Bible distinguishes between this and physical illness (40–41). Some modernists such as the late William Barclay deny the reality of demon-possession, ascribing it to primitive superstition (eg. DAILY STUDY BIBLE, GOSPEL OF MATTHEW, volume 1, pages 327–329). On the other hand, there are extreme charismatics who teach that most of the problems in the lives of Christians are caused by demons and they spend much time casting these imaginary demons out of their followers. We must beware of both extremes.

The demon in the man was terrified of Jesus and recognised him as *'the Holy One of God'* (34). Other demons also acknowledged him as the Son of God *for they knew that he was the Christ* (41). They knew the Messiah when they met him but most of the religious people who heard him did not believe. Satan and his evil spirits are powerful, but the Lord Jesus is even more powerful. The astonished people said, *'He commands the unclean spirits, and they come out'* (36). **Our great Saviour who dwells within us is far greater than Satan's army. To him be all the glory!**

Jesus went to a deserted place the following day but the crowds found him and tried to make him stay with them. Jesus said to them, 'I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also, because for this purpose I have been sent.' He preached throughout the synagogues of Galilee (42–44).

(I can recommend an excellent book on biblical demonology, 'SATAN CAST OUT' by Frederick S. Leahy which is published by Banner of Truth).

From now on you will catch men

Peter, Andrew, James and John were partners in a fishing business (7,10). They had already become followers of the Lord Jesus and had recognised him as the Messiah (cp. John 1:35–51) but they were now called to leave their business interests to follow him. A great crowd pressed about Jesus near to the spot where they were mending their nets and Peter readily allowed Jesus to teach from his boat (1–3). When Jesus had finished teaching, he told Peter to take his boat into deeper water and to let down his net for a catch. Peter protested that they had toiled all night without success but he said, *‘Nevertheless at your word I will let down the net’* (4–5).

Peter was to learn that to trust in Jesus and to obey him brings blessing. The net began to break under the strain of the great catch of fish and James and John were summoned to help land the fish (6–7). Jesus knew where the experienced fishermen should fish because he knows all things and he is in control of all creation. An astonished and awe-struck Peter worshipped Jesus saying, *‘Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!’* (8–9). This was less a request for Jesus to go away than a recognition that he is God (*‘Lord’* – cp. John 20:28; 2 Corinthians 4:5) and a confession of Peter’s own sinfulness.

Jesus reassured Peter, *‘Do not be afraid. From now on you will catch men’* (10). Peter and his partners left their huge catch and their business interests to follow Jesus into full-time service. They had just seen the evidence that Jesus could supply all their needs and that the One who had given them a great harvest of fish would also give them a harvest of souls. We may have toiled for years with little success in the work of the gospel, we may feel inadequate in our attempts to witness to others, but we must remember that God is the Lord of the harvest (Matthew 9:38). **Let us commit our work and witness for the Lord into his loving hands, trust in him and persevere.**

Lord, if you are willing ... I am willing; be cleansed

We saw yesterday that the Lord Jesus has power over creation because he is God. The leper acknowledged this when he worshipped him and confessed his confidence in Christ's ability to heal him (12; cp. Matthew 8:2). He may have been uncertain about the Lord's willingness to heal him, however. He asked, '*Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.*' Leprosy was much feared in those times because it was incurable and sufferers were isolated to prevent it spreading. Jesus was moved with compassion for the man and touched him (13; cp. Mark 1:41). As soon as he said, '*I am willing; be cleansed,*' the man was healed.

Every person born into this world is afflicted by a plague far worse than leprosy. This plague is far more serious and universal than any Corona virus. The most developed psychology and all manner of theories and therapies have failed to cure it. I refer to the plague of sin which will, if not cured, lead to eternal separation from God. **If you are not a Christian, perhaps you may wonder if he is willing to forgive you. If you come to him, he will never turn you away (John 6:37).**

Jesus told the man not to tell anyone of this miracle apart from showing himself to the priest (for ritual cleansing and confirmation that the disease had been cured so that he could return to normal life – 14; cp. Leviticus 14:1–32). In his zeal the man disobeyed the Lord and spread the news of his healing. As a result Jesus was restricted in his ministry by huge crowds and for a time was unable to go into the cities (Mark 1: 45). We must beware of an uncontrolled zeal which hinders rather than advances the work of the gospel. We often suffer from the opposite problem however. We are silent when we should be witnessing.

The Lord Jesus had a very busy and tiring ministry but he was never too busy to pray (16; cp. 6:12; 9:28–29). If he needed to spend time in prayer, how much more should we pray every day? **Prayer is a low priority for many of us and we are the poorer for it. We have a God who is more willing to hear us than we are to pray.**

When he saw their faith

The Lord Jesus came again to Capernaum where a great crowd, including scribes and Pharisees, thronged the house in which he was staying (17; cp. Mark 2:1–2). Four men brought a paralysed man to him for healing but they could not get near to him because of the crowd. These resourceful men took the paralytic up an outside stairway to the roof of the house. They opened up the roof and lowered the paralytic on his mattress. *When he saw their faith*, Jesus spoke to the man, forgave his sins and healed him (20,25).

The scribes and the Pharisees rightly recognised that when Jesus told the man that his sins were forgiven, he was also asserting his deity. They thought that Jesus was blaspheming because God alone can forgive sins. He knew what they were thinking (he also knows our thoughts) and he rebuked them (21–23). The Bible plainly teaches that the Lord Jesus is God, but many cults deny this. The title ‘*Son of Man*’ also speaks of deity (24; cp. Matthew 26:64–65; Daniel 7:13–14). After the man was healed, they were all amazed, and they glorified God and were filled with fear, saying, ‘*We have seen strange things today!*’ (26).

The four men recognised that their paralysed friend had a great physical need. When they brought him to Jesus, an even greater need was met – his sins were forgiven. *When he saw their faith* which was not put off by seeming obstacles (the crowd thronging the house), he rewarded that faith. It was a faith that persevered despite apparent setbacks. *Without faith it is impossible to please him* (Hebrews 11:6). What kind of faith does God see in you? Do you have the faith that perseveres in prayer for your loved ones and friends who do not know the Lord? **Let us look on obstacles as an opportunity to prove the faithfulness of God.**

*Doubt sees the obstacle, Faith sees the way,
Doubt sees a long dark night, Faith sees the day,
Doubt dreads to take a step, Faith soars on high.
Doubt thunders, ‘Who believes?’ Faith answers, ‘I.’*

He left all, rose up, and followed him

Levi is the same person as the Gospel writer Matthew (cp. Matthew 9:9). Tax collectors were hated and despised because they worked for the Romans who occupied their country. They also had a well-deserved reputation for being dishonest and corrupt. As long as they collected an agreed amount of tax for the Roman authorities, they could overcharge and keep the surplus for themselves. The tax payer had no right of appeal against the tax collector's levy. The scribes and Pharisees put them on the same level as the worst of sinners and wrote them off as far as salvation was concerned (30).

The Lord Jesus called Matthew, one of these social outcasts, to follow him and to be one of those most closely associated with him. His other name, Levi, means 'attached'. The tribe of Levi was attached to God in a special way, being set aside for the service of God. They provided the priests and teachers of God's law and others involved in the service and ritual of the temple. Matthew Levi had not attached himself to the Lord's work but to serve the heathen Romans. Can you imagine his amazement to hear the great teacher, the holy Son of God, saying to him, *'Follow me'*?

Matthew *left all, rose up, and followed him* (28). He gave up a comfortable living to become attached to the Lord Jesus. He was not a secret believer but gave a great feast to which he invited many other tax collectors where he introduced them to his Saviour (29). **Are you glad to own Jesus as your Lord before your friends and colleagues at work? Do you earnestly desire and pray for their salvation?**

No one is beyond the reach of God's mercy. Christianity is for sinners, but the churlish, self-righteous Pharisees did not recognise their own spiritual need. Jesus told them, *'I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance'* (30–32). He does not call the righteous because there are no righteous people (Romans 3:10). We are all sinners and he calls us to repentance. How is it with you?

Why do the disciples of John fast ... but yours eat and drink?

Some of the disciples of John the Baptist saw the happiness and feasting at the house of Matthew but were puzzled that the disciples of Jesus did not fast. They asked Jesus, *‘Why do the disciples of John fast often and make prayers, and likewise those of the Pharisees, but yours eat and drink?’* (33). He replied that fasting was inappropriate for his disciples, comparing his presence on earth with a wedding feast (a Jewish wedding in Bible times was a very festive time). The couple who were married did not go away for a honeymoon but stayed at home. An open house was kept and the bridegroom and his bride were treated like royalty as their closest friends shared all the joy and feasting of the week. These close friends were called ‘the children of the bridechamber’ (translated here as *‘the friends of the bridegroom’*).

The Lord Jesus was comparing himself to the bridegroom and his disciples to the bridegroom’s friends. How could they fast and mourn? They were with the almighty Son of God. They were seeing corrupt tax officials like Matthew coming to faith in Christ and their lives completely transformed. There was daily rejoicing over sinners repenting. The Lord Jesus then spoke of the time that he would be taken away: *‘But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them; then they will fast in those days’* (35). William Hendriksen points out that this was a prediction of his death on the cross.

Jesus said that a new cloth patch would soon pull away from an old garment as it shrank in the wash. New wine would burst an old wineskin as it fermented because the old wineskin could not stretch like a new one (36–39). When a person is saved by grace, the old life is not patched up with good works. He is a new creation in Christ and the old things have passed away (2 Corinthians 5:17). The garments of the old life are replaced with the garments of salvation (Isaiah 61:10). **The new wine of salvation must be poured into the new strong wineskins of joyful thanksgiving and sacrificial service which glorifies God.**

The Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath

The scribes and Pharisees made Sabbath-keeping a great burden and misery by adding many rules and regulations to the command of Scripture. They were very quick to criticise the disciples for plucking ears of corn on the Sabbath in order to feed themselves (1–2). The Lord Jesus came to the defence of his disciples and reminded their accusers that David had once done an unlawful thing by eating the showbread (3–4; cp. 1 Samuel 21:1–6).

The Lord Jesus taught that human need must be met on the Sabbath just as it is on any other day (14:1–6). The Sabbath was made for man (Mark 2:27), not to be a burden but a blessing. Jesus reminded them, *‘The Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath’* (5).

When Jesus went into the synagogue to teach on another Sabbath, *and a man was there whose right hand was withered*. The scribes and Pharisees watched him closely, wondering whether he would heal the man so that they could accuse him of Sabbath-breaking (6–7). Jesus knew their thoughts and challenged them to say whether it was lawful or not to heal and to do good on the Sabbath (8–9). The wicked scribes and Pharisees had no compassion for the handicapped man and were filled with rage when Jesus healed him (10). They were very rigid in their interpretation of the law and yet they plotted to do evil to the Lord Jesus on the Sabbath (11)!

‘The Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath’ (5). **Is Jesus the Lord of your Sabbaths? If he is, the Lord’s Day should be the highlight of your week.** You are able to rest from your daily work to be free to worship God with his people, to do good and to show compassion to those in need.

*A Sabbath well spent brings a week of content
And strength for the trials of tomorrow;
But a Sabbath profaned, whate’er may be gained
Is a certain forerunner of sorrow.*

He called his disciples to him; and from them he chose twelve

After spending a night in prayer, the Lord Jesus *called his disciples to him; and from them he chose twelve whom he also named apostles* (12–13). He had many disciples but these men were to be his constant companions, to be prepared for the task of preaching the gospel far and wide after his death and resurrection. They were distinguished from other disciples in being named as apostles (those who have been sent out or commissioned).

Christ's apostles were special but we are all called to be disciples (cp. Acts 9:19,36; 11:26). A disciple puts into practice the teachings of Christ (Matthew 28:19–20). Hendriksen comments, 'A disciple is a pupil, a learner. He is, however, more than a "bookworm", or even than a "student". Rather, he is an adherent, a follower. Between him and his Master there exists — at least should exist — a close personal fellowship' (COMMENTARY ON LUKE, page 327). Is it obvious to those who know you that you are a disciple of Christ?

Why did the Lord Jesus choose Judas Iscariot to be one of his disciples? He knows all things and he knew that Judas was a thief (John 12:4–6) and the one who would betray him. The Bible does not answer this question. Judas preached the gospel and healed the sick (Matthew 10:1–4) but he was not a true believer. It is a sombre fact that even in the best of churches there may be those who appear to belong to the Lord, but who deceive themselves and others (cp. Matthew 7:21–23). **We cannot deceive God. Let us examine our own hearts before the Lord (see 2 Corinthians 13:5).**

Vast crowds came to hear the Lord Jesus and to be healed of their diseases, including those tormented by evil spirits (16–19). Notice that he *healed them all* (19). How different this is from today's charismatic evangelists who make great claims. Their healing miracles are so thin on the ground that they make Christ appear to be a failure. Do not pay attention to them, their teaching regarding healing is far from biblical.

Your reward is great in heaven

Some Bible commentators (eg. Hendriksen) believe that the remaining verses of this chapter are a shorter report of the Sermon on the Mount (see Matthew chapters 5 to 7). Others (eg. Ryle) are convinced that this is an entirely different sermon. In these verses there are four blessings contrasted by four woes. You may wonder how poverty, hunger, sorrow and persecution, the very things that men seek to avoid, can be a blessing. They are not a blessing for the ungodly but when suffered by the Christian *for the Son of Man's sake*, they lead to great blessing and Jesus promises, '*Your reward is great in heaven*' (22–23). **How can the things which most men struggle to obtain – riches, abundance of food, pleasure and popularity – be a curse? They are a curse if we refuse to follow Christ for fear of losing them.**

Let Bishop J.C. Ryle challenge us: 'The state of life which our Lord blesses, the world cordially dislikes. The people to whom our Lord says, "Woe unto you" are the very people whom the world admires, praises, and imitates. This is an awful fact. It ought to raise within us great searching of heart. Let us leave the whole passage with honest self-inquiry and self-examination. Let us ask ourselves what we think of the wonderful declarations that it contains. Can we subscribe to what our Lord says? Are we of one mind with him? Do we really believe that poverty and persecution, endured for Christ's sake, are positive blessings? Do we really believe that riches and worldly enjoyment, and popularity among men, when sought for more than salvation, or preferred in the least to the praise of God, are a positive curse? Do we really think that the favour of Christ with trouble and the world's ill word, is better worth having than money, and merriment, and a good name among men, without Christ? These are most serious questions, and deserve a most serious answer. The passage before us is eminently one which tests the reality of our Christianity' (EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS ON LUKE, volume 1, pages 179–180).

Love your enemies

The scribes and Pharisees had distorted God's command, '*You shall love your neighbour*' (Leviticus 19:18) to mean that we should hate our enemies. The Bible teaches no such thing. The Jews had narrowed down the meaning of neighbour to those whom they loved (cp. 10:28–37). Jesus cut right across such thinking when he said, '*Love your enemies*' (27). This is one of the most difficult commands to keep especially when it is professing Christians who hate us or harm us. Satan is spoiling their lives and we must overcome their evil with good (Romans 12:20–21). If they are not believers, remember that they are enslaved by Satan, lost and bound for hell. Love has won many a hostile sinner to Christ. Our attitude to others must not be determined by what they are or what they do to us.

How should we show our love to our enemies? We must do good to those who hate us, bless those who curse us, pray for those who persecute us (27–28). To be slapped on the cheek was a great insult which could be punished by a very heavy fine. Jesus is not telling us to invite further suffering but to respond to insults by being gracious (29). In New Testament times a court was not able to deprive a person of his cloak as payment for a fine (the cloak was also used as a blanket at night). Jesus said that we should not insist on our rights: '*Do not withhold your tunic either*' (29). **There is much talk today of standing on our rights but Jesus calls us to self-denial when we are wronged.** Did you turn the other cheek the last time you were wronged?

Verse 31 sets out 'the golden rule': '*And just as you want men to do to you, you also do to them likewise.*' If we only love those who love us, we are no different to the ungodly (32–33). We must not give to obtain but be like our heavenly Father who shows his goodness, kindness and mercy every day, even to his enemies ('*the unthankful and the evil*'; 34–36). If we take seriously 'the golden rule' and live by it, God will be glorified, and we will know much blessing in our lives.

Judge not, and you shall not be judged

One of the most misunderstood verses in the Bible is *Judge not, and you shall not be judged* (37). It has been quoted as an excuse to turn a blind eye to wickedness or to avoid church discipline but we must not tolerate wickedness or false teaching (43–45; cp. Matthew 7:15–20). We must use our judgment and test the spirits (1 John 4:1), comparing what we are taught with the teaching of Scripture. It does not mean that we are not to think or to have an opinion. The apostle Paul reminded the Corinthian church, *‘He who is spiritual judges all things’* (1 Corinthians 2:15). We must support church discipline against those who are sexually immoral (1 Corinthians chapter 5) and we must lovingly seek their restoration (Galatians 6:1).

What then is the meaning of verse 37? It warns against having a critical and a censorious spirit and tells us that we must be prepared to forgive those who have wronged us. God will treat us as we treat others (38). We must not become ‘Christian Pharisees’. It is very easy to find fault with other believers especially when they are weak in those things where we imagine ourselves to be strong. The Lord Jesus uses a humorous illustration – the hypocrite sees a speck of dirt in his brother’s eye and wants to remove it, while having a plank of wood in his own eye (41–42).

No Christian is perfect. We all have our faults and some stick out in our lives like great planks. **We must not be irritating busybodies, putting everyone else right. We have enough to do in watching our own lives, and repenting of our own sins.** Jesus said, *‘A good tree does not bear bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. For every tree is known by its own fruit’* (43–44). The fruit of our lips shows what kind of fruit we are bearing (45). If we truly love the Lord and belong to him our words will be wholesome and kind. We must be *kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ also forgave us* (Ephesians 4:32).

Whoever comes to me, and hears my sayings, and does them

The parable of the two builders challenges us to consider the kind of foundation on which we are building our lives. The houses in the parable may have been constructed with the same materials and been similar in appearance, but their foundations were different. The floods came and the storms battered the houses. The house built on earth without a foundation collapsed, but the house with deep foundations, built on the rock, stood firm.

What is the point of this parable? The Lord Jesus is warning us that if we call him our Lord but do not obey him, the outcome will prove disastrous for us. It is not good enough to say that we believe the Bible from cover to cover, or to listen to good preaching, unless we obey his Word. There is an easy type of Christianity which makes no demands for commitment to a life of discipleship though it pays lip service to the teaching of Scripture. It attracts many but it leads to hell and not to heaven. Jesus said, *‘Why do you call me “Lord, Lord”, and do not do the things which I say?’* (46; cp. James 1:22). If our Christianity is real, it will show in our lives by our obedience to the Word of God.

There are many people who profess faith in Christ. They attend church regularly, hear God’s Word, and they read the Bible. They appear to be Christians but they do not take God’s word seriously nor do they obey it! In John Bunyan’s great classic, *THE PILGRIM’S PROGRESS*, we meet a character named Talkative. ‘He talketh of prayer, of repentance, of faith, and of the new birth; but he knows but only to talk of them.’

Jesus said, *‘Whoever comes to me, and hears my sayings, and does them ... is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid the foundation on the rock’* (47). If we do not obey the teaching of the Lord Jesus, our religion will not stand the test in difficult times. We will be like the foolish man who built on the wrong foundation and lost everything when the storms came. *‘And the ruin of that house was great.’* He heard the word but did nothing (49). **Are you building your life on the solid foundation of love and obedience to Christ?**

Great faith

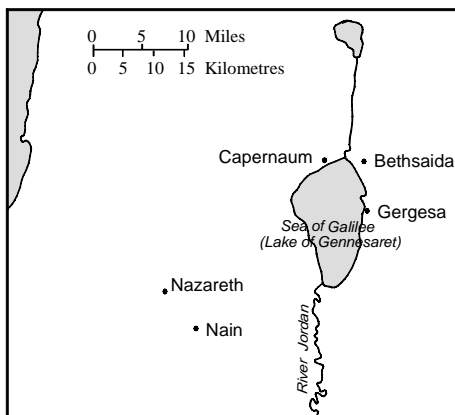
When Jesus came to Capernaum, he was met with a desperate and urgent request from a Roman centurion (an officer who commanded one hundred soldiers). The centurion in today's reading was different from most Romans – he was loved and highly regarded by the Jews for his benevolence towards them (1–5; Cornelius was another highly regarded centurion, Acts 10:1–2). He was desperate to obtain help for his servant (Greek = 'slave') who was dying, and *when he heard about Jesus he sent elders of the Jews to him, pleading with him to come and heal his servant* (3). Though the man was an army officer, he was very humble. The Jews commended him to Jesus as one worthy to have his request granted. He did not have such a high opinion of himself. He said, however, in his message to the Lord Jesus, *'I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof'* (4–6).

The centurion was not only humble but also had great faith. His message was, *'Say the word, and my servant will be healed'* (7). As a man under the authority of the emperor, his word was obeyed; he recognised that Jesus was under a greater authority (of God the Father) and that he had authority to heal sickness at a word. He had no doubt that his servant would be healed at the command of Jesus (8). Jesus marvelled at him and said to the crowd, *'I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!'* (9). The only other occasion where we read that Jesus marvelled is on account of the unbelief of the people of Nazareth (Mark 6:6). When the messengers arrived back at the centurion's house, they found that the servant had recovered.

Faith is more than saying, 'I believe'. It is taking God at his word and trusting him to do what he says he will do. *Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen* (Hebrews 11:1, English Standard Version). **Great faith and great humility go together. Are they evident in your life?**

When the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her

The day after he had healed the centurion's servant, Jesus went to Nain, some twenty-five miles south-west of Capernaum. A large crowd was following him by the time he reached the gate of city. They were met by another large crowd who were following a weeping widow in a funeral procession.



The widow had lost her only son and *when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her* (13). Jesus does not change. Our trials, troubles and tears do not go unnoticed. He is still full of compassion for us; the Christian is never alone in suffering (Hebrews 4:15). We have a wonderful Saviour and Friend!

The Lord Jesus told the widow not to weep and he touched the open coffin as the procession halted. He said to the lifeless body, '*Young man, I say to you, arise*' (14). Jesus did not need to pray to God for the raising of the dead because he is God (the title, '*Lord*' in verse 13 also indicates his deity). He has power over sickness, over demons and over death. The young man sat up and the Lord Jesus presented him to his mother. She discovered the greatness and kindness of our precious Saviour on that memorable day.

The crowds were awe-struck and they glorified God, acknowledging Jesus as a great prophet, saying, '*God has visited his people*' (15–16). **When God visits us, hopelessness and despair give way to hope and joy. When he comes to us, things are never the same again. Do you really know the Lord Jesus in your life and experience?**

Blessed is he who is not offended because of me

There is all the difference in the world between the doubts that beset a troubled believer and the cynical, stubborn doubt of those with closed minds who refuse to listen to the Word of God. The Pharisees and lawyers (experts in the Jewish religion) were among the cynical doubters who rejected the Word of God (30).

John the Baptist had condemned Herod Antipas for his adultery and was thrown into prison (3:19–20; cp. Mark 6:17–18). He then began to have doubts even though he had heard about the wonderful works of Jesus. He sent two of his disciples to Jesus to ask, ‘*Are you the Coming One, or do we look for another?*’ (18–20). John had affirmed the greatness of the Lord Jesus and had heard the voice from heaven saying, ‘*You are my beloved Son; in you I am well pleased*’ (3:16,22). John’s doubt was not the doubt of a scoffer but of a godly man puzzled at God’s dealings with him. Why had the Lord allowed his ministry to be cut short, leaving him to languish in prison, if Jesus were indeed the Messiah he had proclaimed? He may also have expected Jesus to purge the nation of its wickedness and hypocrisy (cp. 3:7–9).

John’s two disciples then saw for themselves the mighty power of Christ over sickness and demons. He told them to tell John about the things that they had heard and seen (21–22). He said to them, ‘*Blessed is he who is not offended because of me*’ (23; the Greek verb means ‘to be stumbled’). Jesus was very kind and tender in his assessment of his disheartened servant. John was greater than all the Old Testament prophets and yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he (24–28). This does not mean that John was not a saved man, but that the least in the kingdom were more privileged because they were seeing the wonderful effects of the Messiah’s ministry (cp. 10:23–24). Are you perplexed by dark doubts or despair because of some perplexing trial? Do not be offended with the Lord for his dealings with you. He promises, ‘*Blessed is he who is not offended because of me.*’ **You may not be able to trace the ways of God, but do trust him. He is wise and kind and he will never fail you.**

A friend of tax collectors and sinners

Those who responded to John's message of repentance and were baptised, *justified God* (29). This means that they believed his preaching and vindicated God's righteous requirements by submitting to John's baptism. The scribes and Pharisees *rejected the counsel of God* by refusing to be baptised by John (30). Jesus compared his generation to children playing in the market places. One group wanted to play weddings but the others wanted to play funerals and there was no agreement between the two groups. Jesus likened this childish behaviour to the petty attitude of those who opposed both John the Baptist and himself. They opposed John because his ministry was too severe and they condemned Jesus because he attended feasts. They falsely accused him of being a glutton and a drunkard.

J.C. Ryle comments, 'The plain truth is that the natural heart of man hates God. The carnal mind is enmity against God. It dislikes his law, his gospel, and his people. It will always find some excuse for not believing and obeying. The doctrine of repentance is too strict for it! The doctrine of faith and grace is too easy for it! John the Baptist goes too much out of the world! Jesus Christ goes too much into the world! And so the heart of man excuses itself for sitting still in its sins. — All this must not surprise us' (EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS ON LUKE, volume 1, Pages 229–230).

Jesus befriended those considered the dregs of society when they turned from their sin to follow him. He was called '*a friend of tax collectors and sinners*' (31–34). The enemies of Jesus implied that Jesus was condoning sin, but that was not true. He offers forgiveness to the worst of sinners if they will repent and trust in him (cp. 1 Timothy 1:15). The wisdom of John the Baptist and Jesus was justified by the changed lives of those who followed them (35). **Do you know the Lord Jesus as your friend and Saviour?**

But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little

Though the Pharisees were generally hostile to Jesus, some did invite him to eat with them (36; 11:37). Some were glad of an opportunity to watch him closely in the hope of finding fault with him (cp. 14:1). While Jesus was at the home of Simon the Pharisee, a woman described as a sinner because of her shameful lifestyle, came into the house and lavished her affection on him. Simon was immediately critical of Jesus, thinking to himself, that if Jesus had been a prophet, he would have known that this woman was a sinner and not have allowed her to touch him (37–39). Jesus knew what he was thinking and told him a parable of two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii (about eighteen months' wages), the other fifty (almost two months' wages) but their creditor freely forgave them. Jesus asked Simon which of the debtors would have the greater love for their creditor. He answered, *'I suppose the one to whom he forgave more'* (43).

Jesus then applied the parable to Simon who had not extended to him the customary courtesy given to guests – provision of water to wash one's feet, the welcome kiss (cp. Romans 16:16) or oil to rub into his sun-dried skin. By contrast, the sinful woman had been lavish in showing her affection for him because she had been forgiven much. Jesus reminded the Pharisee, *'But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little'* (47). He then turned to the woman and said to her, *'Your sins are forgiven ... your faith has saved you, go in peace'* (48–50).

The Pharisees recognised that by offering forgiveness of sins, Jesus was claiming to be God (49). They did not have true faith but trusted in their own supposed goodness to save them (cp. 18:9). They did not consider themselves to be in need of forgiveness. It is only when we see ourselves as guilty, lost and helpless sinners, that we will cast ourselves on Christ for mercy (cp. 18:13). When we understand that we have been forgiven much, we will love much. **Do others know that you love the Lord? Is it seen in your lifestyle, in your work for God, in your enthusiasm to be at the prayer-meeting, in the giving of your time and money to the Lord's work?**

Who provided for him from their substance

The Lord Jesus had a very busy and exhausting ministry, preaching and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God to every city and village of Galilee (1). He was accompanied by the twelve disciples and certain women *who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities ... and many others who provided for him from their substance*. One of these women was Mary Magdalene *out of whom had come seven demons* (2). The story that Mary had been a prostitute is without any foundation and there is no valid reason for linking her with the sinful woman we read about in chapter 7.

Mary and the other women had been in the grip of evil spirits but had been set free by the Lord Jesus. Some of them were undoubtedly wealthy and they were so profoundly grateful to him that they *provided for him from their substance* (3). Jesus could have miraculously provided food or money to support himself and the disciples (cp. 9:10–17; Matthew 17:27) but he chose to use human means for this purpose. **We enjoy great joy and blessing when we give generously to the Lord and if he did not use human means for the support of the work of God's kingdom, we would be denied this blessing.**

These women gladly provided for him from their own money and faithfully followed him. They did not deny him nor desert him when he was arrested and crucified like most of the disciples of Christ, but were with him to the end (23:55–56; Mark 15:40–41). It was Mary Magdalene to whom the risen Lord first appeared (Mark 16:9).

You may wonder how you can provide for the Lord from your substance, especially if your resources are limited. Are you concerned for fellow-believers in their need? Do you have compassion on them? Remember the words of Jesus, *'Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me'* (Matthew 25:40).

Then the devil comes and takes away the word out of their hearts

A great multitude came to hear the Lord Jesus and he spoke to them by a parable (4). Parables have been described as ‘earthly stories with a heavenly meaning’. John Blanchard points out that ‘those who treat parables as no more than interesting stories will end up with nothing but interesting stories!’ (LOOK THROUGH LUKE, page 44, published by Henry Walter). We may think that the Lord Jesus used parables to make his message clearer to his hearers. This was not so. Parables conceal the mysteries of the kingdom of God which need to be explained. Spiritual truths are mysteries which cannot be known unless God gives us the gift of understanding (9–10). If God is opening our eyes to understand his word when we read it or hear it preached, we should be humbled and full of gratitude to him.

In the parable of the sower the crucial factor is not the seed, but the ground in which the seed is sown. In this parable *the seed is the word of God* (11). The different kinds of ground on which the seed falls represent the human heart. In the work of the gospel we experience disappointments as well as encouragements. This parable helps us to understand why this is so.

Have you ever invited someone to come to an evangelistic service? They come and hear the word of God which is powerfully and convincingly preached. You feel that your friend must be convinced, but they turn out to be quite unmoved. They then show no further interest in the gospel and you are very disappointed. What is the explanation? They are *‘those by the wayside’*. They hear the word of God, *then the devil comes and takes away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved* (5,12).

The devil hates the word of God. He not only snatches away the word of God from the hearts of many sinners, but also from many Christians. If you are not profiting from the Word of God, is it because the Bible is not faithfully and persuasively preached in your church? Or is it because of the state of your heart?

Having heard the word with a noble and good heart

Have you known people who profess Christ to be their Saviour and show real joy? They appear to be very keen and become involved in the activities of their local church. They begin to share their faith with others, then suddenly they go away from the church and their Christian friends. What has happened to them? The word of God has fallen on rock. *The ones on the rock are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, who believe for a while and in the time of temptation (testing) fall away* (6,13).

They appear to have spiritual life but there is no depth and their profession of faith soon evaporates when trouble comes (13). They thought that following Christ would banish trouble from their lives. They expected happiness and peace which would not be spoiled by trials. They never knew what it was to deny themselves and to take up their cross daily and to follow Christ. They did not realise that we are called to suffer for the Lord (cp. 9:23–24; Philippians 1:29–30). Their faith was shallow. The word fell on rock.

Thorny ground hearers have a worldly heart that chokes the Word of God so that it becomes unfruitful (7, 14). I grieve over those who once were keen, but who are now cold and indifferent to Christ. Some who were fellow-pastors are now far away from the Lord and in the world, some falling into grievous sin. *They are choked with cares, riches, and the pleasures of life.* Are they just backslidden? If they are backslidden, they will surely repent and return to the Lord. If they die without repentance, they are apostate – never truly saved – lost for ever. How solemn the warning of this parable!

Some who hear the word of God give us much joy and encouragement. *They are those who, having heard the word with a noble and good heart, keep it and bear fruit with patience* (8,15). They bear fruit in the most testing conditions because the word has fallen on good ground. **What kind of ground does your heart provide for the word of God?** *He who has ears to hear, let him hear!* (8).

Therefore take heed how you hear

In his next parable (16–18), the Lord Jesus said that no one lights a lamp to cover it up or to hide it. Spiritual knowledge and understanding bring great responsibility. Our Christianity must be practised and seen in our lives; it must not be hidden from those who are in darkness and lack spiritual light (16–17; cp. Matthew 5:14–16). Jesus tells us to take heed how we hear the word of God (18). J.C. Ryle reminds us of three rules for hearing God’s word (EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS ON LUKE, volume 1, Pages 258):

- We must hear with faith, believing implicitly that every Word of God is true (cp. Hebrews 4:2).
- We must hear with reverence, remembering constantly that the Bible is the Word of God (cp. 1 Thessalonians 2:13).
- We must hear with prayer, seeking God’s blessing on the Word before and after we read it or hear it preached.

If we neglect what God gives to us, we will lose it, but when we eagerly hear the word with a determination to obey it, God will bless us and add to us (18). *Therefore take heed how you hear* (18). **How do you hear the word of God?**

Some people who are ignorant of Scripture believe that Mary was a perpetual virgin. Her children are mentioned here and are named elsewhere (Matthew 13:55–56). Why did the mother and brothers of Jesus come to see him? It may be that they were concerned for him and wanted to protect him from those who said, ‘*He is out of his mind*’ (Mark 3:21,31). Jesus indicated that those *who hear the word of God and do it* are his mother and his brothers (19–21). **He was not despising Mary, but teaching that a spiritual relationship to him is far more important than our natural relationships.** Obedience to God’s word is a good indication that we belong to him. *My mother and my brothers are these who hear the word of God and do it* (21).

Where is your faith?

The Lord Jesus fell asleep as he and the disciples sailed across the Sea of Galilee. J.C. Ryle comments, ‘To be weary of working for God is sinful, but to be wearied and worn in doing God’s work is no sin at all. Jesus himself was weary, and Jesus slept’ (EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS ON LUKE, volume 1, page 262).

The Sea (lake) of Galilee is about thirteen miles long and up to seven miles wide. It lies about seven hundred feet below the level of the Mediterranean. When cool currents of air sweep down from the surrounding hills, they collide with the warm air above the sea, whipping up fierce winds. A fierce storm arose which threatened to capsize their boat. Though some of the disciples were experienced fishermen, they were terrified and roused their sleeping Master (23–24). He rebuked the storm and there was a calm. The Lord Jesus asked the disciples, ‘*Where is your faith?*’ They had already seen him perform astounding miracles and they had experienced his care for them; how could they imagine that he would fail them now? He is not just a man, he is almighty God. The disciples’ fear of the storm turned to a fear inspired by awe – ‘*Who can this be? For he commands even the winds and water, and they obey him!*’ (25).

If we know the Lord, we have experienced his goodness to us and his power in our lives. We are often like the disciples, however, and we soon forget these things when the storms and trials of the Christian life disturb us. **Is the Lord saying to you, ‘Where is your faith?’**

*Begone, unbelief;
My Saviour is near,
And for my relief
Will surely appear:
By prayer let me wrestle,
And he will perform;
With Christ in the vessel,
I smile at the storm*

(John Newton)