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FOR YOUR EDIFICATION AND ENJOYMENT

Scripture Research, Inc., (SRI) is delighted to place before your eyes the following three articles for your spiritual consumption. Two of these articles are authored by names you are no doubt familiar with, as they have written on other subjects which have appeared in earlier issues of *Scripture Research*. The third writer you may not recognize, so I will take this time to introduce him to you. This student of the Word resides in the small town of Henrietta, Texas, located in the northern part of that state. He answers to the name of Dr. Ron McRay. We at SRI welcome him and his contributions to our journal, and look forward to reading his article, *Performing for Men, Not God* (p. 13), which is based on the Matthew, chapter 23:4, context. Ron loves the Word of God and is a dedicated student and prolific writer. He also writes articles for his website (<eschatologyreview.com>), which is dedicated to exegetical studies of the Scriptures. This particular short study was selected because it compliments and provides more input on the previous article written by Dr. Timothy Conklin, *The Tradition of The Elders*.

Having introduced the name of Dr. Conklin (Tim) to you, allow me the opportunity of speaking a bit more about him and the relationship he has with SRI. In early 2013, SRI's Board of Directors invited Tim to serve as an adviser to our organization, for he brings a plethora of wisdom, insights and knowledge to us, skills very attuned to our needs. Tim has had both pulpit and academic (both intellectual and experiential) expertise as he served for several years as the Academic Dean of Grace Bible College located in Grand Rapids , Michigan.

Tim's article, identified in the first paragraph, provides us with identification of some of the legalistic practices were becoming part of ritualistic Judaism in the 400-silent-years period between the Testaments and which confronted the Lord Jesus during His pre-Calvary ministry.

Dr. Arthur C. Custance is no stranger to SRI and to the pages of *Scripture Research*. This article, *Hebrews 6:1-6, Falling Away...from Salvation?*, is a direct quotation taken from his book, *The Sovereignty of Grace* (pp. 214-223). Its message is sorely needed by today's believers who overtly express having a saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus and yet fail to realize the depth and magnitude of His grace and, further, of His "keeping grace," and who need to read and study this article and apply its truth to their doubting minds.

We are delighted to have been granted permission to publish this article from Dr. Gary Chiang, currently the Director of The Arthur C. Custance Centre for Science and Christianity, located in Hamilton, Canada (website <www.custance.org>, email, doorway.publications@gmail.com). Thank you, Dr. Chiang.

Speaking for our Board of Directors, Scripture Research, Inc, we hope you enjoy the articles which are just ahead.

Charles W. Asbell, Pres.
Scripture Research, Inc.

THE TRADITION OF THE ELDERS

A CLOSE LOOK AT MARK 7:1-23

by

Dr. Timothy F. Conklin

Tradition is a powerful factor in human experience. Tradition continues a way of thinking or behaving or doing something that has been practiced by a group of people or society for a long time. Tradition passes on information, beliefs and customs from one generation to another, resulting in continuity of attitudes and customs. Sometimes traditions are harmless or neutral and have little impact on belief and well being. However, some traditions are based on false or improper assumptions, and their continuation leads to dangerous and disastrous conclusions. In the following Bible passage, Jesus Christ addresses this latter kind of tradition.

7:1) The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus, 2) and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. 3) (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a *ceremonial* washing, holding to the *tradition* of the elders. 4) When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe *many other traditions*, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.)

This passage relates to us that a group of Pharisees and teachers of the law came to encounter Jesus. Specifying that these men have come "**from Jerusalem**" gives them a certain prestige as top-

Scripture quotations are from the KJV.

flight functionaries of the religious status quo. They are a committee of prestigious superiors from Judaism's religious hierarchy.

Apparently—based on their confrontational approach and hostile query—they are an official and elite delegation from Judaism's religio-political leadership in the Jewish capital. Their assignment seems to be to provoke Jesus and to discredit Him in the eyes of his followers. We know from an earlier passage in Mark that these self-acclaimed authorities had already determined to do their best to ruin Jesus.

The Pharisees went forth, and straightway took counsel with the Herodians against him, how they might destroy him. (Mark 3:6)

The reference to “*the tradition of the elders*” was a largely oral tradition about Jewish civil and ceremonial law and legends handed down by noted rabbis beginning after the Babylonian captivity about 600 B.C. These "traditions" were continued and collected after Christ until at least 200 A.D. Thereafter they were compiled into what is now known as the Mishnah and Talmud. This authoritative collection of exegetical material—which finally came to be a compendium of about 2.5 million words!—was formulated into two parts:

- *haggada* – expansive expositions, illustrative anecdotes, stories and clever parables about passages in the historical and prophetic books of the Old Testament.
- *halacha* — rules and jurisprudence arrived at by subtle and complicated reasoning which sought to regulate personal behavior and conduct down to the smallest details (for example they would not eat an egg that was laid on Saturday).

This growing repository of social and religious practices was constructed by astute Jewish rabbis giving their opinions and teachings . . . not by Divine revelation like the text of the Old Testament. It is regarding these complements and supplements to

the Scripture to which Jesus refers here.

The practices and behaviors set forth in these traditions were considered mandatory—to be observed by every person in Judaism—and were sometimes called "the fence." The idea behind these authoritative and binding rules being a fence was that if one did not cross this behavioral barrier, one would then never come close to transgressing the actual 613 divinely revealed laws of the Old Testament. Through the years with the contributions of many teachers—some with less insight than others—"**the tradition**" became a burdensome body of doctrine difficult to comprehend, often contradictory and impossible to maintain.

As you might imagine, such cumulative traditional assertions and opinions represent a massive collection of definition and interpretation and intense regulation. The heart of the problem was that for Israel "**the tradition of the elders**" became more important, more binding, and more authoritative than the Scriptures!

An Example of the Rabbinic Tradition

Exodus 16:29 Let no man go out of his place on the Sabbath day.

The words of this Bible text were an instruction to the people of Israel during the time they wandered in the wilderness and as they went out to gather the manna that fell from heaven. On the day before the Sabbath, God provided a double portion of manna, but he provided none on the Sabbath. The people were told they must not go out on that day.

The Christian scholar Leon Morris has noted:

In later generations, deeply pious teachers believed there was something about this command that had a more permanent sense. So they interpreted this passage to mean that one must not go out of a house on the Sabbath carrying a burden of any sort whatsoever.

But what if one wished to do a good deed on the Sabbath, such as making a gift to the poor? The Mishnaic tractate *Shabbat* begins with a situation where a householder wants to give something to a poor person on the Sabbath. If the householder stood inside his house and put his gift outside, or if the poor person, standing outside, reached inside and took up the gift [from a place inside the house], in either case there was a transgression: A person had carried something out of a house on the Sabbath.

But if the poor man stood outside and reached his hand inside and if the householder then placed his gift into the poor man's hand, the poor man could withdraw his hand and neither had transgressed. Likewise, if the householder stood inside and held his hand containing the gift outside so that the poor man, standing outside, could simply receive the gift [from the householder's hand], there was no transgression. Neither man had carried the burden across the line.

If you apply this sort of convoluted reasoning and commentary to the entire Old Testament and allow for generations of additional, alternative commentary well, then you have what is being dealt with in Mark 7; "**the tradition of the elders.**"

v. 5 So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, "Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with defiled hands?"

Understand, this query is not about being sanitary. The "washing" referred to was a strictly prescribed *traditional* and *ceremonial* procedure to ritually cleanse one from defilement. We read of the same ritualistic practices in Hebrew 6:2 and 9:10 ("the doctrine of baptisms" and "divers washings"). Defilement was considered to have come from touching a Gentile or something belonging to a Gentile, or contact with some other ceremonial contaminant. It is vitally important to understand, however, that the laws in the Old Testament book of Leviticus required no such cere-

monial washing as described here and demanded by the Pharisees.

Here is an example of how this ritual washing was commonly observed. It was necessary to wash both hands in a complicated process before every meal and in between courses. The water for washing had to be taken from large stone jars which had been kept "clean" so that the water itself was kept "clean." Such water could be used for no other purpose. The hands were to be held with the fingers pointed upwards and water was poured over them, having to run down to at least the wrist. Then, while the hands were wet, each had to be cleansed, technically with "the fist" of the other, by the joint action of rubbing the palm over the fist. But the water itself was now unclean, so the hands were then held downwards and fresh water poured over them once again so that it began at the wrists and ran off the end of the fingers.

With this in mind, the Jerusalem delegation charges Jesus himself with teaching his disciples to actively disregard what they believed to be a sacred rabbinic tradition. In other words, what the disciples were doing was because they were indeed the followers of Jesus. In all fairness, Jesus really is the source of his disciples' rule-breaking of mere religious tradition.

The claim leveled against Jesus is actually quite weighty. Perhaps an individual transgression might be overlooked, but for a "teacher" to proactively advocate to his followers a transgression of the instruction of venerable rabbis as a matter of principle . . . that is a serious consideration.

v. 6 Jesus replied, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written:

'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. v. 7) They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.'

'You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.'

v.9 And he continued, "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!"

The question Jesus now poses to his questioners is the exact counterpart of his opponents' question to him. Jesus is in effect saying, "I own up to my responsibilities; will you accept the responsibilities which belong to you?" Jesus insists the Pharisees and Scribes must take ownership that they themselves are personally responsible for the traditions they embrace and force on others—they cannot hide behind the notion they are merely following the advice of their elders and leading rabbis. They cannot evade responsibility by claiming others compelled them to do what they do.

In quoting Isaiah (29:13), Jesus seeks to make the Pharisees realize they were demanding observances not required by Scripture, rather than looking to what God had revealed in the Old Testament which provided specific instruction about God's demands. By concentrating on and emphasizing trivial humanly-derived ideas that men like themselves had invented, the Pharisees were missing the essential, divinely revealed truth.

Still, Jesus does not deflect the charge of ignoring religious traditionalism. His position is that he is simply following the pure teaching of the revealed Word of God. And what a tremendous statement of challenge from Jesus to his opponents - **"You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions."** By substituting the precepts of men for the Word of God, Jesus tells them they were hypocrites.

In the next verse Jesus presses harder on this issue of responsibility and its consequences.

v. 10 For Moses said, "Honor your father and mother;" and, "Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death."

v. 11 But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is Corban (that is, devoted to God), 12) then you no longer let them do anything for their father or mother. 13) Thus you nullify the Word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that."

Honoring father and mother is the divinely given 5th commandment. But the Pharisees' "**tradition**" had established a rule which grossly violated this Divine commandment.

Rabbinical teaching allowed that one could withhold material help and support from a needy parent by declaring that what would be required for such a need had been vowed to God through the Temple as a sacred gift. Such a pledge was called "*corban*."

This vow and pledged gift was held to have precedence over all other claims. However, what was considered binding was not the actual gift, but the promise or the pledge: *corban*. The gift could be given at a later time, even on one's death bed ... and perhaps never given at all.

By declaring something of value *corban*, a son is telling his parent(s) he has decided to give (prospectively) as an offering to God—via the Jerusalem Temple system controlled by the Jewish religious leaders—a measure of value which the parents might have expected would be given to them in their old age. Hypocritically, the son is vowing away what might have been used to support his parents in their time of special need.

It is important to appreciate that the Jerusalem Temple had become a lucrative economic system operated by the Pharisees, the High Priest and other Jewish leaders. A very great deal of money was made by a relatively few privileged people in this enterprise. But this Temple system put a woeful burden upon the people.

When we take into account the substantial gifts to the Temple treasury and other religious levies, the total Temple income is likely to be three-quarters or more of Roman-Herodian taxes. If in addition we add the funds raised by the not inconsiderable number of Pharisees, we see the size of Jewish taxation. It may have been equal to the Roman-Herodian taxes: 20 percent or more of one's annual income — combined, this is fully 40 percent plus! (Alan Storkey, *Jesus and Politics*, p. 216)

In response to this outrageous subterfuge, Jesus is not saying, "Despite your tradition you break the law of God." He is saying, "Because of your tradition you break the law of God!"

With profound simplicity and a clear exposition of the revealed Word of God, Jesus has shamed and silenced his adversaries by showing the contradiction between their traditions and the infallible truth of Scripture. So, having put the Pharisees and their ilk in their place in front of His disciples and the crowds by unmasking these false teachers and showing them to be hypocrites, Jesus turns to the common people.

v. 14 Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. 15) nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them."

Jesus explains that personal defilement is not physical, but moral and spiritual. Jesus seeks to stress the essential priority of making things right from the inside out, not from the outside in. External religious practices and ceremonies can never cleanse a person on the inside. Here is Jesus' clear assertion of truth.

v. 17 After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. v. 18) "Are you so dull?" he asked. "Don't you see that nothing that enters a person from the outside can defile them? v.19) For it doesn't go into their heart but into their stomach, and then out of the body." (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.)

v. 20) He went on: "What comes out of a person is what defiles them. v. 21) For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, v. 22) adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. v. 23) All these evils come from inside and defile a person."

Jesus dealt first with the Pharisees, then the crowds, then the disciples. The Pharisees were Israel's key religious leaders in

Jesus' day. They were among the most highly regarded men of their time. They were the best human religion (in this case, Judaism) could produce. Jesus condemned them. In the parallel account of this same confrontation in Matthew 15, Jesus is brilliantly clear about his assessment of all such religious teachers:

Then came his disciples, and said unto him, “Knowest thou that the Pharisees were offended, after they heard this saying?” But he answered and said, “Every plant which my heavenly Father hath not planted, shall be rooted up. Let them alone: they be blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch.” (Matthew 15:1-14)

With great mercy and compassion, Jesus points the people away from the hypocritical, false teaching of ceremonial, ritualistic religion and towards the true teaching of the Scripture.

All external human efforts to please God are always vain and profitless. It is utter delusion to believe sinful people can cleanse the defilement of their heart by scrupulous observance of mere traditions. Specifically, what Jesus is rejecting is the system which has made such acts themselves an end in itself – a religious system which equates ritualistic acts with holiness and cleanliness before God.

Remember what Isaiah said long before regarding Israel's unfaithfulness and unbelief...

These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is based on merely human rules they have been taught. (Isaiah 29:13)

- Love of tradition MORE than love for God leads to false religion.
- False religion leads to self-righteousness.
- Self-righteousness leads to hell...
- ... because the only possible basis for our justification

before God is Christ's righteousness, not our own.

Jesus is not here differentiating between an internal and an external form of piety. Jesus is pointing out that humankind are altogether impure because of indwelling sin, brought about by the fall of Adam ("in Adam all die," 1 Corinthians 15:22; see Romans 5:12). We are all tainted and defiled deep inside. If people were only impure externally, then perhaps all that would be required would be keeping oneself from the world's impurities. But this is precisely the wrong approach! Wickedness has its origin in our innermost being. We need cleansing and washing from within, and that is something only God can do through the gospel of his Son.

Although this biblical passage we have been examining in Mark 7 has historical and particular application to the nation Israel during the incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ in the first century, there is nonetheless a lasting principle here quite applicable today. Those ancient religious traditions among the Jews which Christ so severely condemned are virtually mirrored in Christian churches today. An undue and unbending emphasis on so-called sacred Christian traditions are just as erroneous and grievous as those in this passage: things like water baptism in its several modes of practice, rites of confirmation and church membership, the orders and liturgies of Christian services, the days and dates of Christian celebrations. Even activities like attending church faithfully, reading the Bible fervently, praying eloquently, contributing money generously, singing praise songs passionately, witnessing for Christ regularly – all these and more are just man-made external *traditions* and have no meaningful value in effecting any inner personal righteousness with God.

Paul, Jesus Christ's apostle to the Gentiles, echoed this same teaching.

You observe days, and months, and times, and years. I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labor in vain.
(Galatians 4:10-11)

The apostle says so clearly in Galatians 3:16:

but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.

Religious rituals, ceremonies, practices—*traditions*—do not, cannot make a person just and righteous before God. Only the Lord Jesus Christ can do that.

We are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags. (Isaiah 64:6)

God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and has committed unto us the word of reconciliation. Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God. For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him. (2 Corinthians 5:21)

The Bible tells us the only thing that truly matters in the issue of being cleansed from the contamination of sin is the radical change of heart in a person brought about by the grace of God as one wholeheartedly believes in the perfect gift of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

After that the kindness and love of God our Savior toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost; which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior. (Titus 3:4-6)

For by grace are you saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God. (Ephesians 3:8)

*Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD:
though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow;
though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.*
(Isaiah 1:18)

WHITER THAN SNOW (by James Nicholson)

1. Lord Jesus, I long to be perfectly whole;
I want Thee forever to live in my soul;
Break down every idol, cast out every foe—
Now wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

Refrain: *Whiter than snow, yes, whiter than snow,
Now wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow*

2. Lord Jesus, let nothing unholy remain,
Apply Thine own blood and extract every stain;
To get this blest cleansing, I all things forego—
Now wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
3. Lord Jesus, look down from Thy throne in the skies,
And help me to make a complete sacrifice;
I give up myself, and whatever I know—
Now wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
4. The blessing by faith, I receive from above;
Oh, glory! my soul is made perfect in love;
My prayer has prevailed, and this moment I know,
The blood is applied, I am whiter than snow.

Performing For Men, Not God

by

Ron McRay

Matthew 23:3....

...therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things and do not do them.

This is a straight-forward verse and means exactly what it says without explanation. The Jewish leaders said what the Law declared but would not do it themselves. Yahshua said to do what they said, but do not follow their works.

Matthew 23:4....

They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger.

"They" are the **Jewish** leaders. What do they do? The first thing that they do is to bind (look at that word very closely) a task, service or very grievous burdens on others. As the King James Version points out, the Greek word shows that the Judahite leaders placed services which were grievous to be borne, or oppressive in nature. Whether they were friendly or hostile is not the point of Yahshua, but that they **imposed** those services on the mass population, just like some churches impose singing with musical instruments while others with only vocal singing (and both are bound whether one or neither is made **necessary** with YHWH). "Men" means either male or female. But the Jews would never move that service with one of their smallest fingers. The word "not" here means "an absolute negative - no or not." The phrase "they themselves will" move or stir what they themselves had

bindings on people other than themselves.

Matthew 23:5...

But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men; for they broaden their phylacteries and lengthen the tassels of their garments.

Yahshua was beginning to get very personal with the disciples and the unbelievers with very strong language! In the phrase that covers the first six Greek words, the Jewish leaders performed and perceived only to be seen of human men and women, not YHWH. The hypocritical leaders widened their phylacteries. What is one of those things?

Most people do not understand that term even if they have looked at the word many times. Actually this term alluded to what they called a guard-case. The leaders had them and called them phylacteries. They were strips of cloth on which they had Scripture texts. But they wanted more attention from men, so they enlarged the decorative fringe or tassel. The phrase "*of their garments*" are not in the Greek Scriptures but were added to enhance the idea so that our modern audience could understand. It is somewhat like the pulpit-people who turn their collars backward to distinguish all of the people from the leader, and Yahshua condemned it. But the teaching of Yahshua gets even more severe in the next few verses.

Hebrews 6:1-6 Falling Away ... from Salvation?*

by

Dr. Arthur C. Custance

*It is impossible for those who were once enlightened,
and have tasted of the heavenly gift,
and were made partakers of the Holy Spirit
. . . if they should fall away,
to renew them again unto repentance.*

To understand this warning we need some knowledge of the background of those to whom these words were addressed. And it is important first of all to understand what it meant to a Jew at that time to "believe in Jesus Christ." For this passage has particular reference to "the doctrine of Christ" (Hebrews 6:1), or, as this would be understood by Jewish people, "the doctrine of *the Messiah*" (the definite article being present in the original Greek).

On many occasions during the Lord's earthly ministry we learn that people who called themselves or who are referred to as disciples or believers not infrequently became offended at his words and walked no more with him. It is almost certain that some of these who were once "believers" became his most bitter enemies. What then was meant by this word *believer* in such a context?

It should be realized that the identity of the Lord Jesus presented a number of real problems to the Jewish people. The Lord Himself acknowledged that the intense hatred which finally built up against

* Excerpt from *The Sovereignty of Grace* by Arthur C. Custance, "The Perseverance of the Saints" (pp. 214-223).

confusion as to his identity. When Jesus on the cross said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34), it was not merely an expression of supreme charitableness; there was an element of truth in it. They did not know what they were doing. Their action was not only morally wrong, it was also a profound *mistake*. Peter, under inspiration, acknowledged this as part of the truth when he said, "And now, brethren, I realize that through ignorance ye did it, as did your rulers" (Acts 3:17). And Paul likewise in 1 Corinthians 2:7,8 said: "We speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world unto our glory which none of the princes of this world knew: for had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. As we have seen already, even the Jewish authorities admitted when it was too late that they had made a mistake. This prompted them to desire Pilate to make doubly sure that the tomb was sealed "lest his disciples come by night and steal Him away and say unto the people, 'He is risen from the dead': so the last error shall be worse than the first" (Matthew 27:64). This does not excuse them, because their real reason for having the Lord crucified was that they hated Him. Even so, it does show that coupled to their hatred of Him for personal reasons was a genuine doubt about Him on messianic grounds.

From their study of Old Testament prophecies, the Jews had concluded that when the Messiah came He would free them from all their enemies (Luke 1:71). At that moment their most oppressive enemy was the Roman authority. All other oppressors, except the Egyptian Pharaohs, had been Semitic like themselves. The Roman oppressors were Gentiles, the lowest of all people in their estimation. The Messiah was to come as a Conquering King, setting the people free from the invaders of their land and liberating their glorious capital city, at the same time bringing healing and prosperity to the whole nation. But in the background, less distinct and less dramatic, one was to come whom they identified as the Suffering Servant, a mediator between themselves and Jehovah; one who would die for their sin (Isaiah 53), die for the nation (John 11:50), being "cut off, but not for himself"

If a single Person was to fulfill both roles, it was difficult to reconcile how the King could also be the Suffering Servant; how the one who conquered could also be the one so abused as to be scarcely recognizable (Isaiah 53:2-4). It seemed impossible the One who was to lead their armies to victory and set them at the head of the nations, sitting in glory upon the throne of David forever, could be the One who was to be "brought as a lamb to the slaughter" (Isaiah 53:7). Were there, then, really two separate Saviors: A Lamb who would "save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21) and a Lion who would deliver the nation from its enemies (Luke 1:71)?

The secret, of course, lay in the resurrection. But the Old Testament had attached remarkably little importance to the fact of resurrection and it was not therefore a solution to which the Jews were likely look. Indeed there are only a few intimations with respect to Messiah that the resurrection would play a vital role in his ministry. For example, Psalm 16:10 ("Thou wilt not leave my soul in hell") seems to be a reference to the Messiah; but an even less specific passage in Isaiah 53:10 ("He shall prolong his days") does not seem to have been recognized at all. Yet the resurrection of the Lord was the missing key and, as though to emphasize this in prospect, the Lord Himself increasingly made reference to the fact that after three days He would rise again. But his words were lost even upon his closest disciples, because they shared the traditional biblical wisdom of their own day. In point of fact, of course, Messiah was to be both the Lamb of God and the Conquering King, fulfilling the two roles perfectly by dying as the Lamb and rising again to become the King.

When John came preaching, he was sent to prepare the people for their King and for the coming Kingdom. This was his identifiable mission. In this role the Jewish people as a whole visualized him as fulfilling the position of the forerunner of the Messiah. When John suddenly appeared in the wilderness, the people were excited and full of hopeful expectation. The nation's

servitude under the Roman heel would surely soon be at an end, and they flocked to hear him and to ask what they must do to qual-

ify for a place in the victory parade. This was really their motive: not repentance and sorrow for their sins, but eagerness to be on the winning side. Evidently John himself did not at first actually know the identity of the Messiah. He heard the call to prepare the way, but he had not yet any certainty as to who the Messiah was. It seems unlikely that he could have anticipated that the Messiah was none other than a relative of his, his own mother being Mary's cousin. He may in fact have had little if anything to do with Jesus since very early childhood, thirty years before. Thus as he watched day by day while the people came out of the city to hear him preach and to be ceremonially cleansed by baptism, he one day received a message from God that the *Suffering Servant* was about to come to him for public identification. Perhaps he was surprised at this since the one he was really expecting and hoping for was not a Suffering Servant, but the Messiah. Yet John obediently adjusted his natural expectations and accepted the new reality. When the time came, he unhesitatingly identified the One whom he had looked for as the Messiah as, in fact, the Lamb of God instead (John 1:29,36).

In later months, when John found himself in prison, he had time to reflect upon what was happening as he observed the Lord's mighty acts and saw the majesty of his Person. He seems to have begun to wonder whether Jesus Christ might not also be the Messiah. Could Messiah and the Suffering Servant be one and the same individual?

So John sent a message to Jesus from prison: "Art thou He that should come [i.e., the Messiah] or do we look for another?" (Matthew 11:3). The Lord sent word back to him that he should be reassured by the miracles of healing—the sight of the blind was restored, the lame were walking, the deaf were hearing, and even the dead were raised, all of which were clearly hallmarks of the Messiah according to Isaiah 35:3-6. And I think we must assume that John, like many of his contemporaries, believed on the Lord Jesus in this sense, even though he may have wondered why he himself was not at once set free from his imprisonment.

Meanwhile the Jewish authorities and great numbers of the common people had been struggling with the same problem, trying

to make up their minds. There were all kinds of divisions among them, as is clear from many passages such as John 7:43; 9:16; 10:19. Moreover, many of the rulers "believed" also, including Nicodemus—in *this sense* (John 3:2; 12:42). One might say that this kind of faith was more like wishful thinking than firm conviction. Could this man, seemingly so meek and gentle, and often completely "retiring," really be the stuff of a Messiah who would successfully challenge the authority of Rome? Yet they were all impressed both by the regality of his presence and by his miraculous powers. Even the claims which He made for Himself were so stupendous that it seemed doubtful any ordinary man would dare to make them. Everywhere He went He was fulfilling messianic promises of healing, and the people swung back and forth between conviction and doubt, never quite able to make up their minds and dreading the consequences of making a mistake.

Preconceived ideas of what Messiah would be like proved a serious barrier to recognition, for they were colored almost entirely by ambition for power, not by any desire for holiness. The Jewish leaders genuinely imagined that they themselves would form Messiah's inner circle, but here his inner circle was composed of unlearned and ignorant men drawn almost entirely from the wrong strata of religious society.

In short, at one moment the Jewish authorities "believed" He was the Messiah and the next moment they doubted whether He could possibly be. They were both divided among themselves and within their own hearts. And, as is often the case, they were remarkably handicapped by ignorance of the Scriptures and of the circumstances surrounding the Lord's background, about which they were in a good position to be knowledgeable. Had they taken the trouble to inquire, the Temple records would have told them that Jesus was not a Galilean but a Judean from Bethlehem, and of the lineage of David through both Mary and Joseph. Yet in John 7:52 they disqualified Him by assuming He was from Galilee, and at the same time demonstrated their ignorance of the facts of history by suggesting that Galilee was the one place from which one should not expect a great prophet to arise. But in point of fact

prophet to the Gentiles, were both from Galilee. Nicodemus beautifully illustrates the genuine confusion which existed in the minds of many of the Jewish religious leaders at that time.

Consequently, it is very important to understand that when we are told "many of the Jews believed on Him," they were not necessarily exercising *saving faith**, but *messianic faith*, confident that their dreams of national liberation were about to be realized in the Person of Jesus Christ.

**EXCURSUS.* It was possible for a Jew to express such faith that he would be accepted into the fellowship by the believers and even be baptized as a Christian, and yet that man's faith was not a *saving* faith. This seems to be true of Simon who is sometimes called Magus (being one of the Eastern Magi) and sometimes Magnus (after the Vulgate rendering of Acts 8:9). According to Acts 8:9-24, this man's profession of faith was accepted by Philip and the Christians of Samaria. And he was baptized as a believer. Whether Simon was a Jew or not, he was certainly living amongst Jews in Samaria and, like the Jews, was greatly impressed with signs and wonders. The word denoting Simon's amazement at the "signs" which accompanied Philip's ministry is the same word which is used to express the amazement of the Samaritan's at Simon's sorcery. It tells us something about the nature of his "faith."

Subsequently, when Peter came to confirm the believers by the laying on of hands and when these believers experienced a special outpouring of the Holy Spirit (as was normal at that point in the Church's development), Simon at once tried to buy from Peter rights to the same power. Peter's response was immediate: "Thy money perish with thee Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter: for thy heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent therefore of this thy wickedness.... For I perceive that thou art in the gall of bitterness and the bond of iniquity" (vv. 20-23).

for forgiveness, but an entreating of Peter to act on his behalf. It seems almost certain from those circumstances that, though Simon had faith, it was not a *saving* faith. He had the same kind of faith that many of the Lord's earlier followers had who later turned entirely against Him. The writer of Hebrews 10:39 may well have had this in mind when he wrote, "Not of them who draw back unto perdition; but of them that believe to the saving of the soul."

Above all, Jesus' refusal to challenge the Roman authorities while at the same time advising the Jews to pay their taxes completely baffled their sense of propriety. Could this possibly be Messiah? What had looked promising developed into a more serious situation when it appeared that it was really the authority of the Jewish leaders that was about to be overthrown. As his miracles increased in magnitude, climaxing with the raising of Lazarus and the general acclaim of the common people which followed, it was felt the time had come to settle the issue once for all. The simplest course was to turn Him over to the Romans as a captive. If He then vindicated his messiahship by some mighty act leading to Rome's destruction, there would be no question as to his identity, and their own position would be securer. If He allowed Himself to be taken and shamed before his own disciples and before the nation, the claims He had been making would clearly be invalidated, especially if they could get Him crucified. Any other kind of death might turn Him into a martyr and make a hero of Him. Crucifixion would demonstrate publicly that He was not merely repudiated of men but cursed of God (Galatians 3:13) and therefore totally disqualified as Messiah.

And it worked out as the Jewish authorities planned. He was seized by the Romans, disgraced by public trial, mercilessly abused by a mob of soldiers—and all this entirely without the slightest resistance. His presentation before the people by Pilate, shamed, disfigured, ridiculed and apparently helpless, must have struck the people like a thunderbolt. The greater our expectations,

the more devastating is the shattering of them. Even his own circle of personal friends was demoralized in utter amazement at the

sudden turn of events. Their faith in Him as the promised Messiah collapsed.

After the "tragedy" was all over, the two disciples on the way to Emmaus summed up the general feeling of all the disciples when they said, "We trusted that it had been He which should redeem Israel" (Luke 24:21). This was their faith, and it had been shattered by events. Pragmatic Peter said simply, "I go fishing" (John 21:3), and his companions in disillusionment said, "We also go with thee." It was the end of a dream.

It is true that the Jewish authorities had engineered it all, and they had achieved his repudiation, which was precisely what they intended. Yet there are indications that they were as disappointed in the success of their own plans as the common people were disappointed in the failure of theirs. The common people really had believed Jesus was truly the Messiah, and when He had ridden into Jerusalem in a manner precisely fulfilling the predictions of Zechariah 9:9, their excitement had been intense. "All the world" seemed to have gone with Him (John 12:19), and no doubt the Romans were as disturbed by it all as were the religious authorities themselves, though for a different reason.

We know only too well the rest of the seeming tragedy and the unforeseen triumph which followed the resurrection. But though his triumph was public enough in the sense that thousands of Jews became *true* believers in Him as the Lamb and were wonderfully saved, yet it was not a public triumph in a national sense, for Israel remained officially unconvinced of his identity as Messiah. Pride would not allow them to admit their appalling error publicly, though there were undoubtedly great numbers among the officials who had witnessed his miracles and had joined in the general acclaim only to find their hopes dashed in the events of the crucifixion. These now witnessed the joy and exultation of thousands whose faith had suddenly been re-established and who were turning their world upside down, daily flooding the Temple

precincts with their manifestations of joy. Yet the hated Romans were still there, still masters of the land, still exacting from them

onerous taxes and many demeaning services. What did it all signify? Meanwhile, though the disciples were telling the people that the old sacrificial system was at an end, the religious authorities had repaired or replaced the rent veil of the Temple, and the whole elaborate system had once again been restored and was going exactly as before.

How was it all to be reconciled? Was this man really the Messiah or not. And their daily disputations and arguments, which apparently continued for years until the Romans finally destroyed the city and the Temple in A.D. 70, left many of the Jews half-believing, half-doubting, never certain of their own position, still having no personal faith in the Lord Jesus as Savior. Their "doctrine" was not about a Savior at all, but about a Messiah. It was a "doctrine of the Messiah" (Hebrews 6:1) which absorbed their attention, and it did not pertain to the matter of personal salvation for the individual (Hebrews 6:9).

Whoever wrote the Epistle to the Hebrews addressed himself to this problem. "Therefore," he wrote, "leaving the question relating to the doctrine about the Messiah, let us go on to perfection of repentance from dead works and of faith towards God," that is, of *saving faith*. It was quite possible for these believers to stop short, even after many of them had personally experienced the wonders of the Lord's active ministry among them by being themselves healed, a ministry which was a foretaste of what would happen when the Kingdom of God was finally established, a demonstration of "the powers of the age to come" (Hebrews 6:5). As persecution began to cull their ranks and many were called upon to suffer the consequences of premature defiance of Roman authority, these one-time messianic believers, persisting in their half-faith by returning to the Temple sacrifices and separating themselves from true believers in Jerusalem, had in effect rejoined the screaming crowds who had demanded the Lord's crucifixion in the first place. They were crucifying the Lord a second time (Hebrews 6:6). Such Jewish "believers," while say-

ing they believed the Lord Jesus to be the Messiah after all, yet resorted once again to the old sacrificial system and thus

demonstrated their lack of any saving faith and of any true comprehension of the role the Lord Jesus had played as the Lamb of God. It was these who were now by this Epistle being warned not to make this fatal mistake, but to abandon the old sacrificial system altogether and to cast themselves upon the Lord alone for their personal salvation. This is the burden of verses 9-12:

Beloved, we are persuaded better things of you, and *things that accompany salvation* [i.e., not just messianic promises], though we thus speak. For God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labor of love which ye have showed toward his name, in that ye have ministered to the saints and do minister. And we desire that every one of you do show the same diligence to the full assurance of hope to the end: that ye be not slothful but followers of them who through the faith and patience inherit the promises.

And the alternative? In the nature of the case there is only one alternative—"a certain fearful looking for judgment." If after experiencing all these things and concluding that the Lord is truly Israel's Messiah, they should now refuse this work as a personal Savior also, there simply remains no more sacrifice for sins (Hebrews 10:27), and they are hopelessly lost. There is no other destiny except certain judgment (Hebrews 10:27). Messianic faith is in vain unless they also have a saving faith.

This is the background of this ominous passage which has caused so many saints to tremble, needlessly fearing that their salvation might be in jeopardy. In actual fact, a passage such as this one, having specific reference to Hebrew "believers" rather than to Gentiles, and specifically addressing itself to a rather unique and soon to be ended situation, cannot be safely applied with the same force outside of the circumstances which occasion its writing. It belongs to us now as an essential part of the Word of God to complete our understanding of a particular situation, but it

must be read and understood in the context of its intention. It has to be remembered that the Jewish People of that day expressed two

rather different kinds of faith, faith in a national Messiah and faith in a personal Savior. Mary rejoiced in God her personal Savior (Luke 1:47), while Zacharias rejoiced in a national Savior (Luke 1:71). John in prison undoubtedly recognized the fulfillment of Isaiah 53. What he needed to be assured about was the fulfillment of Isaiah 35. The disciples, and Peter in particular, saw the Lord as the Messiah: "Thou art the Messiah" (Matthew 16:13-16,21,22). Of this they were sure at that time. The Jewish authorities were not so sure: "Art thou then the Messiah?" (Mark 14:61).

We must therefore distinguish between the faith which had messiahship as its object and the more personal faith which had as its object the work of the Suffering Servant. The messianic issue was constantly to the fore in everyone's mind as witnessed, for example, by the events of John 4:25-42, where the nub of the controversy was not, "Is this man a Savior?" but, "Is this indeed the Messiah?" (v. 42). And this was the object of the faith expressed in verses 39-41.

On the way to Emmaus this truth comes out very clearly when the two travelers so specifically express their shattered hope that Jesus might have been the national Messiah, "He who should have redeemed Israel" (Luke 24:21). The Lord had responded by saying, "Ought not the Messiah to have suffered these things before entering into his glory?" (Luke 24:26). Perhaps, because they did not recognize their need of a personal Savior, a need which required that one should suffer death in their place, what happened to Messiah was totally beyond them. They were still missing the key, his bodily resurrection. Reconciling what seemed to be two mutually exclusive roles, that of the Lamb and that of the Conquering King, was the basic problem facing every Israelite. Even the prophets themselves had the same problem (1 Peter 1:9-11):

Receiving the objective of your faith, even the salvation of your souls. Of which salvation the prophets have inquired and searched diligently, who prophesied of the grace that

should come unto you: searching what, or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signifying,

when it testified *beforehand the sufferings of Messiah, and the glory which should follow.*

Paul's concern when preaching to the Jewish people was to provide a key to this reconciliation (Acts 17:3): "Opening and alleging that Messiah must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead; and that this Jesus, whom I preached unto you, is Messiah." It is all of a piece: a believer in Israel was not necessarily a believer in the sense in which we use the term today, yet in many cases there were true believers in the terms of reference under which the Lord presented Himself to them as the hope of Israel. Yet this was only half of the belief that was essential to personal salvation, and the Epistle to the Hebrews was concerned with providing the grounds for encouraging that faith to progress to perfection. Such half-believers were unsaved, and those who went part way and turned back were not fit for the Kingdom of God (Luke 9:62). This seems clearly to be the explanation of the seeds which fell by the wayside and at first responded with enthusiasm, as many of the Jews did, but afterwards were offended or frightened away. John puts the matter thus: "If they *had* been of us they would have continued with us" (1 John 2:19). They did not persevere to the end, and they were not saved.

I believe we witness even today something analogous. There are many whose lives are chaotic, powerless, and meaningless. We present to them a Lord who will straighten everything out, and in their desperation they are at once encouraged to look to Him for help. The question of a personal Savior from the *penalty* of sin never enters this kind of Gospel message. It is not "look to the Savior for forgiveness and restoration to the family of God whom you have outraged by your disobedience" but "take Him on board as the perfect Captain and make your life a success." This message offers a kind of "Gentile Messiah" rather than a personal Savior; accordingly, the initial response results in a marvelous sense of relief. But later, things don't work out precisely as anticipated and "the sow that was

washed turned back to its wallowing" (2 Peter 2:22). It happens again and again. It is a tragedy. The true child of God has quite

another experience. We, too, get dirty and need cleansing daily, a fact which implies in some measure a return to our former wallowings. But there is this vital difference, as the Lord said to Peter:

“If I wash thee not, thou has no part with Me.” Simon Peter saith unto him, “Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head.” Jesus saith unto him, “He that is washed needeth not save to wash his feet, but is every whit clean: and ye are clean” (John 13:8-10).

The all-over washing we receive in Him is "once for all." It is only that our daily walk soils our feet. Only our feet need cleansing every day if we walk in his fellowship unbrokenly. For the rest, we are clean in his sight—forever, in this sense eternally sanctified (Hebrews 10:14). It is important today, as it was when the Epistle to the Hebrews was written, not to make the mistake of presenting the Savior to be accepted as Lord before we have presented the Lord to be accepted as Savior.