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Funeral Sermon Delivered at the Victory Service for

John H. Lau

October 27, 2015 – Messiah Lutheran Church, Eau Claire, WI

God Gave His Word to His Messenger

I. It was His plan

II. It was His call

III. It was His message

Pastor Bruce Naumann, Speaker

Jeremiah 1:3-9 – It came also in the days of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah, until the end of the eleventh year of Zedekiah the son of Josiah, king of Judah, until the carrying away of Jerusalem captive in the fifth month. Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; Before you were born I sanctified you; I ordained you a prophet to the nations. Then said I: “Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I cannot speak, for I am a youth.” But the LORD said to me: “Do not say, ‘I am a youth,’ For you shall go to all to whom I send you, And whatever I command you, you shall speak. Do not be afraid of their faces, For I am with you to deliver you,” says the LORD. Then the LORD put forth His hand and touched my mouth, and the LORD said to me: “Behold, I have put My words in your mouth.

In the name of Christ Jesus, dear family and friends of our departed brother, and especially on this day his wife Dorothy, his son Jonathan, and his daughter Kathryn,

I.

Someone who is skilled in the art of language in speaking, writing, and editing is sometimes called a *wordsmith*. The man whose deliverance we celebrate today certainly was that. He gave a lifetime of skilled service in the public ministry in speaking, writing, teaching, and publishing. Yet for all that, when it came to the core concepts of his subject matter and the content of what he was called upon to say and write as a pastor, professor, and author ... John Lau had nothing original to say!

When I tell you that Professor Lau had nothing original to say, I do so with great admiration, and with thanksgiving to God. For the LORD our God is the one who gave this man to us as a teacher, but not as a teacher of the words of John Lau. Rather, he was given to us as a teacher of the Word of God.

I have here today a standard form used here at Messiah Lutheran Church to record member information. This one was filled out by John Lau. Along with biographical and family information, it has at the bottom an entry in the section entitled “funeral suggestions or requests.” It reads:

“A text that has great meaning for me is Jeremiah 1:4-9. Not that I consider myself a prophet, but how important is the fact that God gives the Word to His messengers!”

As he indicated, John Lau did not consider himself to be a prophet, at least in the sense that Jeremiah was. Yet, as we compare the two, I think you will agree that certain similarities are unmistakable.

As a young man, the Lord sent Jeremiah as a prophet to His chosen people of Judah, to warn them of their imminent fall to the army of Babylon. It was a daunting task – one that no reasonable man would seek out. Yet it was revealed to Jeremiah that it was *the LORD’s* own plan for him to do this work, a plan that He had set in place before the prophet was even born. God said in verse 5 of our text,

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; Before you were born I sanctified you; I ordained you a prophet to the nations.”

This was no spur-of-the-moment decision on God’s part, but rather His intention since before the prophet was even conceived.

John H. Lau was born on May 8, 1926. The plans for his future as a messenger of God were not made by him, nor by his parents, but rather by the Lord Himself, long before this messenger was ever born. He was sanctified, that is, set apart for God’s holy purposes, long before he was even conceived. His personal story is that which is traced, step by step, by the Apostle Paul in Romans 8:29-30:

“For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.”

It's was God's own plan and decree to draw John Lau through the Holy Spirit working in His Word to faith in Christ as his Savior from sin. It was for this reason that Prof. Lau was able to sing, with heartfelt conviction, the word of the hymn with which we began our service today:

“Jesus Thy blood and righteousness

My beauty are, my glorious dress.

Midst flaming worlds in these arrayed

With joy shall I lift up my head!” TLH 371:1

II.

Not only was it the Lord's plan to sanctify His messenger to be His own. It was also His call to ordain him, that is, to select him for a particular calling and mission, long before he was ever conceived.

In Jeremiah's case, the Lord did not go to a crowd of the men of Judah and ask for volunteers to proclaim His Word. No, in eternity He had made a plan, and in time it was He who made the call to his chosen messenger.

It happened in the same way in John Lau's case. He was prepared for his calling by an early lifetime of Christian education, first at his mother's and father's knees. It continued in his secondary schooling at Northwestern Academy in Mobridge, SD, and at Northwestern College in Watertown, SD. He received his seminary training at Bethany College in Mankato, MN and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in Mequon, WI. His ordination into the public ministry, which formalized the Lord's call from eternity, took place at St. Phillip's Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, MN in 1952. Then, after serving several congregations in the Wisconsin Synod, John Lau's life and that of Jeremiah intersected yet again, as we read in verses 6-8,

Then said I: “Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I cannot speak, for I am a youth.” But the LORD said to me: “Do not say, ‘I am a youth,’ For you shall go to all to whom I send you, And whatever I command you, you shall speak. Do not be afraid of their faces, For I am with you to deliver you,” says the LORD.

Jeremiah felt woefully under-qualified for the task before him. He knew that he would face fierce opposition when proclaiming God's judgment against the faithless people of Judah, and that he would fulfill his mission only at great personal cost. But the LORD gave courage to His messenger, promising that He would be with the prophet in every endeavor.

That same promise and that same courage were needed by John Lau when he was moved, as a matter of conviction concerning the clear Word of God, to leave his fellowship in the Wisconsin Synod. He did so with a heavy heart, and at great personal sacrifice, but with the determination that obedience to God's Word was of first importance. He and his family sought out membership in the newly-formed Church of the Lutheran Confession. In the early years it was necessary for him to find secular employment, in addition to serving his flock. And again, it was neither John Lau's plan nor his own act of calling, but the LORD's.

And so it continued. It was the Lord who called John Lau to teach at Immanuel Lutheran High School, College, and Seminary in Eau Claire. He served as God's messenger in this capacity for 32 years, the last 8 of which he also served as ILC's President.

As one of his former students, I speak today for many hundreds like me. We all are profoundly grateful to . . . *the LORD*. We are grateful for His plan to send Jesus as our Savior. We are grateful for His call to faith in Christ as our LORD. In addition, we are grateful for this: that for so many years God's Word was delivered to us in its truth and purity by the LORD's messenger, John Lau. For he was a man who preached, wrote, and taught – not his own thoughts and ideas – but rather *the Lord's* message.

III.

Please note once more the way in which the Lord directed the ministry of the prophet Jeremiah,

Then the LORD put forth His hand and touched my mouth, and the LORD said to me: "Behold, I have put My words in your mouth."

Jeremiah faithfully delivered what had been entrusted to him, namely, the very words of the LORD of heaven and earth . . . and so did John Lau. How many sermons did he preach? How many class hours did he prepare and deliver? How many articles did he author himself, or prepare the work of others for publication? And while most of us here today are aware of his work in his capacity as a called servant of the Word, we dare not forget the leadership he exercised in his personal life as a devoted husband and father. He faithfully led his dear wife and children in the same clear truths of the Scriptures, and his example continues on even now both with them and the next generations. They are the ones who will miss him the most.

In all these things, Prof. Lau knew very well that of himself he was a helpless sinner, desperately in need of God's forgiving grace in Christ. Yet he also knew that he was redeemed, at great cost, through Jesus' death in his place. He knew himself to be an inheritor of life, as God's free gift -- a blessing he enjoys now in the presence of the LORD. While living here among us, in his own humble way he knew himself to be simply a messenger of God's Word. The LORD Himself put the His words in John Lau's mouth, through the Holy Scriptures. He gave our dearly departed the firm conviction that each word of the Bible was given by inspiration of God, and that the Scripture cannot be broken.

Through these Scriptures the LORD had saved Prof. Lau personally. Using him as His messenger the LORD saved others, and trained his students to proclaim the same saving message to many more. For that we give thanks to the LORD this day.

I would like to quote once more from John Lau's own instructions for his funeral service:

"A text that has great meaning for me is Jeremiah 1:4-9. Not that I consider myself a prophet, but how important is the fact that God gives the Word to His messengers!"

This is certainly a day for a victory service, for the Word of God in which John Lau trusted has come gloriously true. He is now at the LORD's side, just as it was promised to him in Christ.

Today is also a day for thankful remembrance. For it was the LORD's plan, it was His call, and it was His message through which he blessed so many through this "wordsmith." May we all recognize the LORD's plan, call, and message in our own lives. In that way, as His faithful messengers, we will likewise share in the fulfillment of all His promises in Christ. Amen.

The Obituary of John Herbert Lau

Habakkuk 2:2-4: Then theme and said: “Write the vision and makeon tablets, That he may run who reads it. For the visionfor an appointed time; But at the end it will speak, and it will not lie. Though it tarries, wait for it; Because it will surely come, it will not tarry.”Behold the proud, His soul is not upright in him; But the just shall live by his faith.

On May 8, 1926 the LORD blessed Herbert Lau and his wife Theodora nee John with the gift of a baby boy, John Herbert. He was born in Watertown, South Dakota and brought to faith in the justification obtained by Jesus Christ when he was baptized on May 23 in Goodwin, South Dakota, where his father was pastor. John was the second in a family of two girls and two boys. In his eighth grade, the family moved to Roscoe, South Dakota, where John was confirmed by his father. John attended high school at Northwestern Lutheran Academy in Mobridge, South Dakota. His college years were spent at Northwestern College in Watertown, Wisconsin, where he graduated in 1948. He took his seminary training at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in Thiensville, Wisconsin, and Bethany Lutheran Seminary in Mankato, Minnesota. During this time, he also served for two years as a teacher of music and other subjects at Bethany Lutheran College in Mankato. One of his tasks at Bethany was to establish a school band.

I John 2:12 &14b: I write to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for His name’s sake.I have written to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the wicked one.

from the seminary at Thiensville in 1952, he served at St. Phillip’s Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota for a short time. Here he met a Lutheran school teacher, Dorothy Mueller, who became his wife on June 11, 1954 in Winona, Minnesota. Their marriage was blessed with two children, Jonathan and Kathryn. He then served parishes in Osceola and Onalaska, Wisconsin until 1959. At that time, John became a founding member of the Church of the Lutheran Confession which he continued to serve until his death. After several years of working for the Social Security Department in the Chicago area, while also serving two small Lutheran congregations in the area, John and his family moved to Eau Claire, Wisconsin, in 1965 to join the faculty of Immanuel Lutheran College (high school, college, and seminary) where he remained as a teacher of English, Latin, and other subjects until his retirement in 1997. He served as president of Immanuel Lutheran College from 1989 to 1997.

Psalms 45:1: “My heart is overflowing with a good theme; I recite my composition concerning the King; My tonguepen of a ready writer.”

John had a special gift for writing and joined Habakkuk, John, Jude, David and Job in writing about the Savior Jesus and the precious teachings of His Word. He made use of this gift as writer and editor for the *Journal of Theology* for many years. A number of his writings were later gathered in his book *Apologia*. He served the Church of the Lutheran Confession as Archivist, Vice President and a member of the Board of Education. After his retirement, he continued to serve the fellowship as supply pastor in Florida, New York, Missouri, and other places. He also made a mission trip to France and served on various church committees. He was a member of Wisconsin Association of Foreign Language Teachers, Wisconsin Council of Teachers of English, National Historical Society, and for 50 years an active member of Messiah

Lutheran Church in Eau Claire. The membership that he treasured the most was his inclusion in the Holy Christian Church.

Revelation 14:13: “Then I heard a voice from heaven saying “Write: ‘Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.’ “Yes,” says the Spirit, “that they may rest from their labors, and their works follow them.”

In the last 10 years, John overcame a variety of physical problems until his check-up 10 days ago when it was discovered he had acute leukemia. He was released from the hospital and a few days later died peacefully at home with his wife, daughter and son at his side and the Word of God on his heart and mind. His earthly journey of 89 years, 5 months, and 15 days ended with the great blessing of eternal life. His body was cremated to await the great Resurrection on Judgment Day.

Job 19:23-27: “Oh, that my words were written! Oh, that they were inscribed in a book! That they were engraved on a rock with an iron pen and lead, forever! For I know Redeemer lives, and He shall stand at last on the earth; And after my skin is destroyed, this I know, That in my flesh I shall see God, Whom I shall see for myself, And my eyes shall behold, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!

Two Texts From The Book Of Acts On Conversion

John Lau

ACTS 8:26-38.

Now an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, saying, “Arise and go toward the south along the road which goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” This is desert. So he arose and went. And behold, a man of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under Candace the queen of the Ethiopians, who had charge of all her treasury, and had come to Jerusalem to worship, was returning. And sitting in his chariot, he was reading Isaiah the prophet. Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go near and overtake this chariot.” So Philip ran to him, and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and said, “Do you understand what you are reading?” And he said, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he asked Philip to come up and sit with him. The place in the Scripture which he read was this: “He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; And as a lamb before its shearer is silent, So He opened not His mouth. In His humiliation His justice was taken away, And who will declare His generation? For His life is taken from the earth.” So the eunuch answered Philip and said, “I ask you, of whom does the prophet say this, of himself or of some other man?” Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him. Now as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, “See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?” Then Philip said, “If you believe with all your heart, you may.” And he answered and said, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.” So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him.

When we think back to the early days of the New Testament church, we cannot help being amazed at the marvelous speed at which it grew, especially after Pentecost. After one sermon by Peter, three thousand souls were added to them that believed. And the days following brought astonishing results also, as large numbers were added every day.

This phenomenal growth was due to the work of the Holy Spirit, who thus manifested His power to encourage the little band of believers who had gathered around Jesus during the years of His public ministry. Being filled with the Holy Spirit, those early believers demonstrated a zeal for mission work that stands as an example to all Christians of all time. We must also not overlook the fact that all their work was based firmly on the Holy Scriptures. They won souls for the church, not through their social standing, political influence, or motivational techniques (gimmicks), but solely through the proclamation of the everlasting gospel of Christ.

Today it sometimes seems as though so-called Christians not only discount the gospel as the one way to salvation, but also as the one efficacious means of winning souls. And yet what was true in those apostolic days is true to this day. The method and the means used by those early Christians is still applicable today. The key question of the text in relation to conversion through the proclamation of the gospel is:

DO YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU ARE READING?

God certainly gives the Scriptures to be understood. God wanted the Ethiopian whom Philip was to encounter on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza to understand the Scriptures. How else could one account for the instructions God gave to Philip, to bring this event about? Philip was busy preaching the gospel in Samaria with great success. We may be certain that he had no personal desire to leave such a promising field of mission work. Yet, when the angel brought God's command to go to the desert region south of Jerusalem, Philip put aside whatever hesitation he might naturally have felt and obeyed. And there in the desert, led by the Spirit, Philip met a man of Ethiopia, an important eunuch who had charge of all the treasure of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. This man had come to Jerusalem to worship and was now returning. As he rode along in his chariot, he was improving the time by reading the writings of the prophet Isaiah. Here was a man, then, who was a Jewish proselyte of the gate, who while in Jerusalem had likely obtained a copy of a prophetic scroll and was reading it.

In obedience to the command of the Holy Spirit, Philip ran to the Ethiopian's chariot, and when he heard the man reading, he asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" Can there be any doubt that God was very much interested in this Ethiopian, and that He wanted him to understand the Scriptures? The whole account certainly makes it evident that this was God's intention. He wanted this Ethiopian at this particular time to understand and know the Scriptures. And surely we believe that in a similar way to this day He directs the affairs of men that they may know the Scriptures.

We may see this also from Psalm 119: "Your word is a lamp to my feet And a light to my path" (v. 105). We know what a lamp and a light are used for. The Word of God is to serve as a lamp and a light, but it could not do so if it is not understood. The Bible is not a dark, obscure, and unintelligible book, as some would have us believe.

It is true that we must indeed search for the meaning of some Bible passages, and Scripture itself is the best guide in such a search. Of course, in seeking to understand the Scriptures, we must not become dependent upon our reason. St. Peter warns us, "[N]o prophecy

of Scripture is of any private interpretation" (2 Pet.1:20), which means that human reason dare not be admitted as a guide for Scripture interpretation. On the other hand, we are to accept the simple words of the Bible even if they surpass our reason. Jesus refers to this: "I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and have revealed them to babes" (Matt. 11:25). How this is possible Scripture does not tell us, nor is it necessary for us to know, declares Luther. What the minds of the greatest philosophers cannot grasp, little children may know and believe. We thank God that He has given us a Scripture which can be thus understood.

Only faith in Christ gives the proper understanding of Scripture. The portion of the prophet Isaiah which the Ethiopian was reading was the wonderful 53rd chapter, the gospel of the Old Testament, a prophecy of the suffering and dying Redeemer. Yet the meaning of this chapter escaped the mind of the Ethiopian, for he said, in answer to Philip's question as to whether he understood what he was reading, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" His difficulty was, as he went on to ask, "I ask You, of whom does the prophet say this of himself or of some other man?" As long as this man did not know of Jesus, the meaning of the prophecy was unclear.

Using the chariot as his pulpit, Philip began with Isaiah 53 and presented the Ethiopian with the good news concerning Christ. Then the Scriptures became intelligible to the Ethiopian, especially the verse which had caused him difficulty: "He was led as a sheep to slaughter; And as a lamb before its shearer is silent, So He does not open His mouth. In humiliation His judgment was taken away; Who shall relate His generation? For His life is removed from the earth" (NASB). The Ethiopian now knew that here Isaiah was speaking of Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

There is still much misunderstanding in regard to the meaning of the Old Testament. There are those who see in it nothing but history and law. But Luther was absolutely correct when he said, "Die ganze Schrift treibt Jesum." ["The entire Scripture urges Jesus on us." - ed.] The entire Old Testament contains nothing less than Christ just as does the New Testament. Jesus Himself knew this very well: "And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded unto them [the Emmaus disciples] in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself" (Luke 24:27). Therefore the central figure and theme of the Scriptures is Christ. Where this doctrine is overlooked or rejected, all Scriptures become meaningless and useless. Jesus Christ is the sun from which all else in Scripture receives light.

Christ not only opens Scripture, but by opening Scripture, He opens heaven itself. As the disciples after the first Easter were glad when they saw the Lord, so is joy ours when we see Christ in the Scriptures. The knowledge of Christ removed all doubt from the heart of the Ethiopian, and so it is with all who come to faith on the basis of God's Word.

A true understanding of the Scriptures produces joyful and blessed results. The Ethiopian was not satisfied with a mere knowledge of Christ; he also put his trust in Him. "And as they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch said, 'Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?'" (NASB). No doubt, in his discourse and explanation of the Scriptures, Philip had spoken of the meaning and significance of the sacrament of Holy Baptism as a means

of grace. So the eunuch surely desired Baptism for himself, and as soon as water was available he asked Philip to baptize him. He wanted to be reassured in regard to the forgiveness of his sins through Christ. So this distinguished treasurer of the nation of Ethiopia stops at the side of the water and is baptized by someone who was basically a total stranger to him! His Baptism, as we know, implies a confession of sin, a profession of faith, and an expression of love on the part of the Ethiopian. What a joyful and blessed result of his understanding the Scriptures!

Faith founded on the Bible still produces blessed results. Thinking back to the history of the Lutheran Reformation and the Lutheran Confessions, we know that our spiritual fathers based their teachings and practice on the clear Scriptures. They permitted no man to take the place of the Scriptures, as their authority; on the other hand, when the Scriptures had spoken, that settled the issue. They bowed to the Word of God in all sincerity. Under God, that is the only reason and basis for the existence of the Church of the Lutheran Confession in this our day.

ACTS 9:1-20.

Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" Then the Lord said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads." So he, trembling and astonished, said, "Lord, what do You want me to do?" Then the Lord said to him, "Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." And the men who journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice but seeing no one. Then Saul arose from the ground, and when his eyes were opened he saw no one. But they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank. Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and to him the Lord said in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." So the Lord said to him, "Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for one called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he is praying. And in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias coming in and putting his hand on him, so that he might receive his sight." Then Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he has done to Your saints in Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name." But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake." And Ananias went his way and entered the house; and laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." Immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he received his sight at once; and he arose and was baptized. So when he had received food, he was strengthened. Then Saul spent some days with the disciples at Damascus. Immediately he preached the Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God.

In reading and studying Holy Scripture, one cannot help but note the outspokenness of its language. The Bible calls things by their right names. If the Bible were a book written by men, its language in some instances might even be considered somewhat offensive. However, since it

is entirely the Word of God, men would do far better to heed it, than to find fault with it, or criticize it for being so outspoken.

Our Lord, for instance, in referring to His opponents, the scribes and Pharisees, speaks of them as hypocrites, as fools, as blind guides, as whited sepulchers, as serpents, and as a generation of vipers. These are indeed harsh and severe terms, and yet they truthfully describe the people Jesus was talking about. Coming as they do from the lips of our Lord, such words should be taken as an earnest warning against living and acting as those people did.

But just as Jesus could be and was severe and harsh in His judgments over against those wicked unbelievers, so He was kind and tenderhearted toward those who lament over their sin and turn to Him for mercy and grace. We find that the Bible frequently gives meaningful names and terms to the believers. They are spoken of as though they were a titled nobility. Peter seemingly cannot find enough gracious words to describe Christians, when he says, "You are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people" (1 Pet. 2:9). Verse 13 of the text under consideration uses the term "saints" when mentioning the Christian believers in Jerusalem at the time. What a blessed term to use! We rejoice at the use of it when we confess in the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed: "I believe in the communion of saints."

Naturally, one is led to ask, "How does one become a saint? How is sainthood achieved?" The conversion of Saul gives the opportunity to consider:

ACHIEVING SAINTHOOD.

Achieving sainthood is not the work of man. The beginning verses of the text speak of Saul before he became a saint. One might say of him in this condition that he was nature's child, just as he was born into the world. Saul had heard something about Christ and His word and work, but what a terrible reaction there was in him. "Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem" (NASB). The picture of Saul presented here is not a pleasant one!

Already before this Saul had played a leading role at the stoning of Stephen: "Saul was consenting to his death." And a little later: "As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison" (Acts 8:1,3). His ardor and zeal to persecute the disciples did not abate in the least. He delighted in acting as an official of the Jewish Sanhedrin in rooting out all those who followed Jesus.

What was it that caused him to persecute these poor people? His activity was in reality directed against the Savior and His gospel. His boundless energy, which at a later date made him a great missionary, was at this time directed toward the destruction of Jesus and everything He represented. And Saul was not satisfied to carry on his bloodthirsty persecution in Jerusalem. Rather, he sought and obtained the authority to do the same thing in Damascus, which was about 150 miles away from Jerusalem. In his ruthlessness he wanted to break into the very homes of Christ's followers and drag them away in chains and bonds to Jerusalem's prisons. His conduct reminds us of the madness of the Inquisition. We cannot help having feelings of fear, dread, and revulsion over against Saul!

Yet Saul is but an illustration of the natural condition of every man. For it is the natural condition of man that his attitude, his activity, and all his energies are directed in only one way, and that way is in direct conflict with the Word and Will of God. With all his efforts natural man, like Saul, resists the gospel of Jesus Christ. There is no neutrality, but only bitter opposition. Later, after his conversion, Paul spoke with new awareness: "[T]he carnal mind is enmity against God" (Rom 8:7).

That is still true today. Attacks against Jesus and His Word are being made in our day even as they have been made in the past, and even more vehemently. The church that preaches the simple gospel of Christ is held up to ridicule as old-fashioned and narrow minded. Faithful preachers who still proclaim sin and grace in accordance with the Scriptures are denounced, and there is only a sarcastic sneer for those who are still simple enough to accept and believe in miracles, or in the revelations of God in Scripture.

But we need to recognize that even one who is a disciple of Christ is, by his own nature, an enemy of God and the gospel. After he had become a believer, Paul realized this and stated it very clearly: "For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the wishing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. For the good that I wish, I do not do; but I practice the very evil that I do not wish" (Rom. 7:18-19 NASB). We are speaking of man according to the flesh.

And so it is evident that achieving sainthood is not and cannot be the work of men. Achieving sainthood is the work of God alone. There is a remarkable contrast between the plans of Saul and the plans of Christ. We are fully aware of the purpose Saul had in going to Damascus, and there is nothing in the text to indicate that he began, on his own, to change his mind about his feelings toward Jesus and His followers. Strongly to the contrary, Saul did not change himself; the Lord did it all. The Lord appeared to Saul, and not vice versa! In doing His work, it is the Lord who preached the law to Saul; it is the Lord who told Saul what to do; it is the Lord who sent Ananias to teach and heal and baptize Saul; it is the Lord who set the course of Saul's future life, saying, "[H]e is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel." Throughout, Saul remained strangely passive. What a tremendous contrast between what he had been and what he became! As we hear his quavering plea, "Lord, what do You want me to do?" we ask, Is that the same man who set out to destroy the Church? Surely, he was an entirely different man, and the Lord alone wrought that change.

Just as Saul could do nothing to achieve sainthood, so it is with all men; just as it was God alone who wrought sainthood in Saul, so it is God alone who works sainthood in all Christians. With Luther we confess: "I believe that I cannot, by my own reason or strength, believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him, but the Holy Ghost has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith." Sanctification, as well as redemption, must never be thought of as a 50/50 proposition between God and man. Man's rescue from sin and also his being called to be a believer is not man's work, but God's. "By grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast" (Eph. 2:8-9).

Achieving sainthood has wonderful results. That this is true is plainly evident in the text. The Lord sent a disciple named Ananias to Saul, even though Ananias was at first afraid to go to him because he knew why it was that Saul had originally come to Damascus. However, the Lord persuaded Ananias, as verse 11 points out: "And the Lord said to him, 'Arise . . . and inquire . . . for one called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he is praying.'" Surely Saul had prayed before this; the Pharisees prayed often, and Saul was a Pharisee. But this was now a new person, and now, for the first time, he was praying in a way that was pleasing to the Lord. In achieving sainthood, through the Lord's call, Saul learned to pray -- not any longer in that self-righteous way of the Pharisees, but in the way that Christ taught His disciples. He learned to pray in the name of Jesus and through His merits, not any longer in his own name and through his own merits. He learned to humble himself before the Lord and to pray in the right spirit and in faith. That Saul learned to pray is but one of the wonderful results of achieving sainthood.

Saul had come to Damascus to lay waste the Church, to destroy it. He had wanted to kill the Christians, or at least to make them prisoners and persecute them. Instead, however, the text informs us, "Now for several days he was with the disciples who were at Damascus" (v.19 NASB). Imagine, he actually joined those people whom he had come to persecute and kill! He associated with the believers, those individuals whom before he had so hated and despised!

The high priest had sent Saul with letters to the synagogues of Damascus, and Saul went to those synagogues. But his purpose now was entirely different: "[I]mmediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, 'He is the Son of God'" (v. 20 NASB). And from that moment until the end of his life, Saul was indeed a faithful preacher of the Lord. Instead of hating the gospel, as he formerly had, he now placed his whole life into the service of the gospel. In his letter to the Corinthians he wrote, "I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). In fact, in every way, Saul was now headed in the very opposite direction from which he had come before.

Achieving sainthood, if it is genuine, always has results. Faith in Christ is a living, moving force. It completely changes the direction of life and makes it fruitful in that which is good. May we always bear this in mind and thank God, because "we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10).

The Seven Signs in the Gospel of John:

How Do They Fit into the Evangelist's Plan?

John Klatt

Have you ever looked for a sign from God, perhaps when you were looking for divine guidance when you had a decision to make and were not sure which way to go on it? You wanted God to show you which way would be the best. Not that you were asking God to show you some sign from the heavens; we know it would be presumptuous to ask for something like that. What you wanted was for one door to close and another to open, something to guide you so that you could proceed with the confidence that you were doing what was best.

Matters in which we look for divine guidance are usually important matters. But in the far more important matter of our salvation we do not have to look for signs, for we already have them. We do not have to puzzle over whether to trust in Jesus or in someone or something else. Jesus showed that He is the Son of God and the only Savior by the powerful signs that He did during His three-year ministry. He performed the mighty deeds that the prophets had foretold that the Christ would do. He did things that no one but God Himself could do. These signs are crucial to our faith in Jesus as our Savior. When the disciples of John the Baptist came to Jesus asking if He were the Messiah, He told them, "Go and tell John the things you have seen and heard: that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised . . ." (Luke 7:22). The miracles of Jesus are signs that direct us to Him as the one who was to come; they tell us that we are not to look for another.

The evangelist's plan

When it comes to the plan of the Gospel of John we do not have to speculate, nor do we even have to deduce it from the contents of the work. John states his plan clearly and straightforwardly near the end of his Gospel: "And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name" (20:30, 31).

Signs then are the key to the Gospel of John. The work is constructed around the miraculous signs of Jesus; not a long list of them, but a representative seven leading up to the final decisive sign of His resurrection after giving His life on the cross. His purpose is that all who read of these signs should believe in Jesus and in His name have eternal life.

John's plan and purpose for telling the story of Jesus Christ are no mere human plan and purpose for a work of literature but the Spirit's plan for revealing the Christ and leading sinners to faith in Him as their Savior. Recognizing this let us look at the seven signs in the Gospel of John and consider how they fulfill his stated plan and purpose.

The seven signs

1. Changing water into wine at the wedding in Cana (2:1-11)

The miracle at the Wedding in Cana was the beginning of Jesus' signs; the evangelist tells us that it was the first of them. By telling us this he does away with all legends about miracles that Jesus was supposed to have performed in His youth. It was not until the beginning of His active work as the Christ that Jesus began to use His divine power and to manifest His divine glory. But when the time and occasion were right, Jesus did show His power and glory with a mighty work that could not be denied.

The meaning and purpose of this first of Jesus' miracles is given in the comment of the evangelist at the end of the account: it "**manifested His glory**"; it revealed His divine glory as the Son of God. That glory had been manifested before this when the angel announced His birth to the shepherds and when God caused a star to lead the wise men to Him. But mostly during His childhood and young adulthood His divine glory was hidden beneath His humanity. But now the time had come for that glory to be manifested. This was done already at His baptism where the voice of God the Father was heard identifying Him as the beloved Son and when the Holy Spirit marked Him as the Christ by descending on Him in the form of a dove. Here Jesus'

glory as the Son of God was manifested by His first miracle.

That His divine glory was manifested or revealed means that Jesus was shown to have divine attributes. He was shown to have power; not just human power but power such as only God has. He transformed water into wine. The evangelist in his telling of what took place that day in Cana makes it clear that this is exactly what Jesus did. When there was no wine left to be served to the wedding guests, He instructed the servants to fill the water pots with water. The servants did as they were instructed and filled them to the brim; they completely filled six stone water pots, each of them with a capacity of twenty to thirty gallons. Then Jesus told the servants to take some of what was in the water pots to the master of the feast for him to taste. What he tasted was wine; it was a fact so clear to him that he even commented on the excellent quality of it, even though he had no knowledge of what Jesus had done.

There were witnesses to this miracle. The servants who had filled those water pots—as Jesus had told them to do—knew that they had filled them with nothing but water. They knew that when they took some of that “water” to the master of the feast he identified it as wine. The disciples were witnesses of this miracle; seeing what Jesus had done they believed in Him as the Son of God. The account is a standing rebuke to those who claim to be followers of Jesus and teachers of His word but who are always looking for naturalistic explanations of His miracles, who deny that He simply made the water into wine.

This first of Jesus’ miracles is a sign of His divine power. It shows Him to be the Creator of the universe, the divine Master over all creation. Everything in the world was subject to Him. But there is more to this miracle than the divine power that Jesus so clearly displayed in doing it. Jesus’ glory as the Son of God was manifested here also in the love that He displayed. The love of Jesus for all people shines as brightly in this miracle as the power that made it happen. And when we see what Jesus did here as an act of love we better understand why He should have chosen to do this miracle in this place as His first one. Otherwise it might seem strange to us that Jesus should change water into wine, at all. And it might seem strange to us that He should choose to do this in a place such as Cana, a village so small and obscure that today we are not even sure where it was, except that it was someplace in Galilee. And why at a wedding? But as we look at this miracle, its setting and occasion, it becomes plain that all of this was carefully chosen as the ideal place and occasion for it.

By going to a wedding and bringing His disciples with Him, Jesus shows His willingness to be involved in the ordinary affairs of mankind. He did not stand aloof from people’s everyday lives. He struck up a conversation with the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well. He accepted invitations to dinner. So also here. Jesus associated with the people He came to redeem. He joined them in activities that are not sinful. He showed that there is nothing wrong with celebrating a happy occasion, nor with drinking wine in moderation.

Jesus also honored the institution of marriage by His presence at a wedding. He reminds us that this is God’s own institution. **“Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh”** (Gen. 2:24) was spoken while Adam and Eve still lived in innocence in the Garden of Eden. It is important that this be said in our day when marriage is so much regarded as an unnecessary legal entanglement that mostly just restricts people’s freedom. Jesus approved of marriage and supported it.

Above all, Jesus showed His love for mankind here by His act of generosity and kindness toward the bride and groom. He showed that He is not indifferent to people’s needs, even

simple, everyday needs. It was no small thing to Him that this young couple should run out of wine for their guests. Imagine today a wedding dinner where there wasn't enough food and some of the guests got nothing to eat. Jesus saved the day for the couple. And His gift was so generous that they may have had enough to keep and use for quite a while after.

We should also notice the way that Jesus performed this first miracle and what He said to Mary about it. It appears that this sign of His deity, this manifestation of His glory, was mainly for His disciples. Its purpose was to strengthen and to deepen their faith in Him. But it was not to be a shortcut to His exaltation. The Lord had shown already in His responses to Satan in the wilderness that He could take no such easy road. So also here. But such a thought may have been in Mary's mind when she said to Jesus, **"They have no wine."** It is evident that there was something in her suggestion that Jesus could not go along with when He says, **"Woman, what does your concern have to do with Me? My hour has not yet come."** This was not yet the hour for Him to be glorified as the Redeemer. Only as He neared the cross did He proclaim, **"The hour has come that the Son of Man should be glorified"** (John 12:23). For that hour Jesus would patiently wait. He would do many works that would show His divine power and love. But His greatest act of love would be His willing sacrifice offered in His passion and death.

We have commented about this first of Jesus' miracles at some length because it was the "beginning of signs," "the first of all those miracles in which the Miracle of Miracles gave 'a sign,' and manifested forth His glory—the glory of His Person, the glory of His Purpose, and the glory of His Work" (Edersheim 282). Many other signs were to follow until finally He would bring His work to conclusion with the greatest of all His signs: His resurrection from the dead, the sign that showed Him to be the Son of God with power. But already here at the beginning of signs Jesus' disciples saw His glory and believed in Him. This sign has the same effect on us His disciples today. We see Him at the wedding in Cana and we see that we have in Jesus a Savior who has power and a Savior who cares for us.

Events intervening between the first and second signs: Jesus' nighttime conversation with Nicodemus (3:1-21); John the Baptist's further witness to Jesus as the Christ (3:22-36); Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well (4:1-42); Jesus' return to Galilee where the people receive Him having seen His works while at the feast in Jerusalem (4:43-45).

2. Healing a nobleman's son (4:46-54)

The location of the second of the signs that John records is the same as that of the first: Cana in Galilee, though the person Jesus healed was not present in Cana but miles away in Capernaum. This feature is already a progression from the first sign: it shows that Jesus' power was unlimited by time or space. The nobleman came to Cana to beg Jesus to come back with him to Capernaum and heal his son. But Jesus performed the healing immediately without the necessity of a journey from one place to another. Here is the eternal God made flesh who answers prayer unhindered and unlimited by circumstances of any kind.

The second new feature of this sign as compared with the first is that the miracle of healing took place plainly at Jesus' word. Now surely it was also at Jesus' word in His instructions to the servants that the water was made wine. But here Jesus says to the nobleman,

“Go your way; your son lives.” Upon returning home the nobleman not only finds his son fully recovered but learns that the healing took place at the same time that Jesus had said, “Your son lives.”

Jesus utters a rebuke here aimed not only at the nobleman but at the people generally. It is that they would not believe unless they saw “signs and wonders.” This is the only place in John where we find these two words paired. Jesus deplores the fact that the people were not satisfied to see signs and then look to Jesus in faith and believe His Word; they wanted to see wonders, things that would arouse excitement. And when they heard His Word many of them did not like what He had to say and rejected Him, finding His message of repentance and salvation from sin to be not to their liking.

The evangelist calls this miracle “the second sign that Jesus did when He had come out of Judea into Galilee.” Jesus’ first return to Galilee had been marked by a miracle; this second return likewise. He had done other miracles before this during His time in Judea (2:23; 4:45).

3. Healing the man at the Pool of Bethesda (5:1-15)

The new element connected with this miracle is the response of hostility from the leadership whom John calls “the Jews.” They do not accept the works of Jesus as signs that He is the Son of God and the Christ. They criticize Him for healing a man on the Sabbath. In their case Jesus’ miracle reveals the unbelief and opposition to God that lay hidden in their hearts.

This miracle also shows the contrast between the compassion of Jesus and the indifference of the Jewish leadership. Jesus sees a man who for a long time had been suffering from paralysis and heals him. The leaders see a man carrying his bed on the Sabbath and rebuke him for breaking the Sabbath. They care not at all that a poor man has been relieved of great suffering, nor do they see that the Sabbath was given for a blessing, a day for people to be freed from their burdens. They do not consider that the Father’s working on behalf of His creatures continued on the Sabbath and that the Son’s working must likewise continue (5:17).

In John’s narrative this sign marks the beginning of the hostility toward Jesus that grows and finally leads to the crucifixion. When the man identifies Jesus as the one who healed him the Jews begin to persecute Him. And already here John says of them that they wanted to kill Jesus. They rejected what Jesus said about His relationship to the Father. They did not want a Messiah who called them to repentance and offered them salvation from sin. Therefore, they also rejected the signs of His deity and messianic office. Instead of believing in Jesus they responded to His signs by hardening their hearts against Him.

Events intervening between the third and fourth signs: the Jews want to kill Jesus because He not only healed on the Sabbath but made himself equal with God (5:16-18). Jesus defends and further explains His person and work, saying that His works bear witness of Him, a witness greater than that of John the Baptist (5:19-47).

4. Feeding of the Five Thousand (6:1-15)

Chapter six records that the rejection that Jesus had experienced in Judea He also suffered in Galilee. The people there are excited at seeing the miracle of the loaves and the fish, so much so that they want to take Him by force to make Him king. But when Jesus refuses and tells them that He has not come to be their bread king they go away grumbling. They are taken aback when He says, "I am the bread which came down from heaven" (6:41). Just as in Jerusalem the people in Galilee are mostly not interested in a Messiah come to save them from their sins and give them eternal life.

In the feeding of the five thousand we again see both the divine power of Jesus and His divine compassion. He shows Himself as the true God, the divine maker of all things who provides for the daily needs of His creatures. He does not want them to go hungry but takes steps to give them something to eat. He is able to provide for them no matter how great their number.

John's Gospel omits much of what the Synoptists record, for his account was written later and with knowledge of what they had written. But here John includes a sign recorded by all three of the other evangelists, showing its importance among Jesus' miracles. This was a sign done both in the presence of so many witnesses and benefitting them all.

5. Walking on the sea (6:16-21)

Jesus had gone to be alone after the people had wanted to make Him their king. This was a temptation to depart from the path that led to the cross and to take the easy path to worldly glory, as Satan had tried to direct Him at the beginning of His ministry. But though He required seclusion, Jesus did not depart from His disciples. He was with them even when they could not see Him, still very much aware of their needs and capable of dealing with any danger that threatened them.

This miracle forms a pair with the Feeding of the Five Thousand. Both occur on the same day. Both show Jesus as the Lord of creation. Both also reveal Him as the Savior come to deliver mankind from the dominion of sin and death. With these two signs Jesus deals with the natural world under the curse of sin. In the Garden of Eden there was food in abundance; those who lived there would never know hunger. But outside the garden after the fall, hunger and famine threatened. In the garden all was peaceful and Adam and Eve lived in perfect harmony with the rest of creation. But sin brought a curse on the natural world. Not only did thorns and thistles infest the ground but storms, floods, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions brought death and destruction. Jesus' miracles were signs of deliverance; not just temporary deliverance but complete and final deliverance from sin and death.

Events intervening between the fifth and sixth signs: The multitudes that ate the loaves and fish pursue Jesus. He directs them away from earthly food to Himself as the bread from heaven. Many of His disciples stop following Him. The twelve remain. Opposition to Jesus grows and there is a plot to kill Him. Jesus promises the Holy Spirit. He saves the woman taken in adultery from stoning. Jesus defends His self-witness and predicts His departure. He proclaims, "Before Abraham was, I AM," and His enemies try to stone Him. Jesus escapes from them, for His hour had not yet come.

6. Giving sight to a man born blind (9:1-41)

But Jesus would continue to do the works of the Father. As Jesus passed by He saw a man who was blind from birth. It almost sounds like a chance encounter, but it was far from that, as Jesus reveals in answer to the disciples' foolish question about the reason for the man's congenital condition. Jesus answered that his blindness was not due to the sin of his parents; it was to serve a noble and important purpose: "that the works of God should be revealed in him." With these words Jesus speaks comfort to all who are afflicted with disabilities or diseases. All such afflictions in believers serve the purpose of revealing the works of God. This does not mean, as some claim, that it is God's will to heal all physical afflictions in this life. The works of God include the patience that the Spirit works in those who suffer but who in their suffering continue to glorify God and rejoice in their salvation.

This miracle went beyond the other healings in that here Jesus did not restore health that had been lost, as in the cases of the nobleman's son and the paralyzed man; He gave to the man what he had never had. In his conversation with the Pharisees, the man who had been born blind calls attention to this feature of the miracle: "Since the world began it has been unheard of that anyone opened the eyes of one who was born blind."

The man who received sight also received something even greater. He had recognized that the miracle performed on him had to have been a work from God; on that he insisted when the unbelieving Pharisees questioned him about it. For his boldness in telling the truth the Pharisees cast him out. Hearing about this, Jesus found him and made Himself known to him as the Son of God. The man confessed faith in Him and worshiped Him.

Jesus also taught the symbolic character of this miracle when He said, "For judgment I have come into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may be made blind." Jesus' signs led to faith in some but in others they led to hardening of the heart in unbelief.

In chapter 10 Jesus proclaims that He is the good shepherd who gives His life for the sheep, the Savior who lays down His life that He may take it again. Among those who hear Him there is a division. Some say that He has a demon. Others point out the absurdity of such a verdict about Jesus. "Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?" they ask. The antagonism from the leaders continues to develop. When they find Jesus in the temple at the Feast of Dedication, they surround Him, demanding that He tell them whether He was the Christ. When He proclaims His unity with the Father they again want to stone Him. Jesus again escapes from them and retires to a place by the Jordan where John had baptized. Many come to Him there and believe.

7. Raising Lazarus from the dead (11:1-44)

Then follows the seventh sign, the greatest of them all, a resurrection from the dead. It was not the first such miracle that Jesus had done; there was the young man of Nain and the daughter of Jairus. But the raising of Lazarus has characteristics that set it apart even from those mighty works. When Jesus hears that Lazarus is ill He states the purpose of the illness that it

was not death but that the Son of Man should be glorified through it. He waits until Lazarus has died and then announces what He is intending to do. Lazarus must not only die before Jesus goes to Bethany; he must be dead for four days before Jesus calls him back to life. There must be no question that Jesus has raised a man from the dead.

In His instruction to Martha about the miracle that He was about to perform, Jesus teaches not just that He has the power to raise the dead but that He is the resurrection and the life. He is the Son of God who has life in Himself (5:26). He is the Son of Man who takes away the sin of the world and liberates sinners from death and damnation. He is the one who has the keys of Hades and of Death (Rev. 1:18).

This seventh sign John connects directly with the passion. Many believed in Jesus because of this mighty sign. The chief priests and Pharisees have a meeting to address what they regard as a dangerous situation. They cannot deny the miracles that Jesus has done; they even refer to them as “signs,” in a direct quotation using the same word that the evangelist uses (11:47). Still they rationalize that Jesus must be killed in order to save their “place and nation.” From this point on, plans go forward for Jesus’ arrest, trial, and death by crucifixion. From chapter 12 on, the evangelist relates the events of that final week in Jesus’ ministry.

Questions about the seven signs

Why does John use the word “sign” rather than other words for Jesus’ miracles used elsewhere in the New Testament? The other evangelists mostly relate accounts of Jesus’ miracles without using a particular word to characterize them; the mighty acts of Jesus speak for themselves. In his sermon on Pentecost Peter uses three words to refer to the miraculous works of Jesus, “δυνάμεισι καὶ τέρασι καὶ σημείοις” (Acts 2:22). Δύναμις is a work of power. Τέρας is a work that causes wonder and amazement. The works of Jesus were most certainly works of power that caused wonder and amazement in those who witnessed them. But σημεῖον is “that by which a person or a thing is distinguished from others and is known” (Thayer). The miracles of Jesus distinguished Him from other teachers, even from other true prophets and apostles who performed miracles. They healed and raised the dead by the power of God. Jesus did these things by the power of His own divine Word. Jesus’ works were signs that accredited Him as the Son of God, the Christ sent by the Father for salvation. The evangelist John presents the seven signs to identify Jesus as the Christ so that we may believe in Him and by believing have life in His name.

Why the number seven? Seven is one of the significant numbers in the Bible. It is the combination of three, the number of God, and four, the number of the earth. It appears where God interacts with His creation, beginning with the seven days in Genesis 1 and ending with the final judgment on God’s enemies and final blessing on His children in Revelation. It is not surprising then that the signs in the Fourth Gospel should number seven, for here God is interacting with the fallen world in the incarnate Son for salvation and for judgment.

Why these particular signs out of the many that Jesus did? Every one of Jesus’ miracles was a sign; every one identifies Him as the Son of God and the Messiah. We may not be able to say why these seven were chosen rather than others, of which there were many. But we know

from John's statement at the close of his Gospel that these were recorded for the purpose of bringing those who read them to faith in Jesus. Some of them show Him to be Lord over creation, able to turn water into wine, multiply loaves and fish, and walk on water in the midst of a storm at sea. Some show Him to be the Master over the results of sin in the human body: able to heal deadly illnesses restore strength to long-paralyzed limbs, give sight to eyes that had never seen. All of them show us the love of God in Christ; they reveal the Savior who came to undo what sin had done to this world and especially to mankind.

There is also a progression in this series of seven signs. They begin with Jesus dealing with the concerns of the home and family life: He helps a young couple on their wedding day; He hears and answers the pleas of a distraught father for his dying son. Then Jesus heals a man who had lain paralyzed for thirty-eight years. Next we find Jesus in a public setting alleviating the hunger of more than 5,000 who had come to hear Him. This is followed by a miracle to help the company of His disciples. The last two of the miracles especially reveal Jesus as the Christ who is able to undo the destructive effects of sin on the human heart and soul and to reverse the damage done to man's relationship to God. We see this as Jesus gives sight to a man who had never had it, just as conversion has given spiritual sight to us who never had it. Jesus Himself gives us this understanding of the miracle (9:39). Finally, the raising of Lazarus reveals Jesus as the Savior who had come to conquer death and restore life.

A study of the seven signs again shows us what a precious gift the Spirit has given us in the Fourth Gospel, the glory of which is well stated in the following words:

(John) gives us more of the mystery of that of which the other evangelists gave us only the history. It was necessary that the matters of fact should be first settled, which was done in their declarations of those things which Jesus began both to do and teach (Luke 1:1 Acts 1:1). But, this being done out of the mouth of two or three witnesses, John goes on to perfection (Heb. 6:1), not laying again the foundation, but building upon it, leading us more within the veil. Some of the ancients observe that the other evangelists wrote more of the σωματικα —the bodily things of Christ; but John writes of the πνευματικα —the spiritual things of the gospel, the life and soul of it; therefore, some have called this gospel the key of the evangelists. Here is it that a door is opened in heaven, and the first voice we hear is, Come up hither, come up higher. Some of the ancients, that supposed the four living creatures in John's vision to represent the four evangelists, make John himself to be the flying eagle, so high does he soar, and so clearly does he see into divine and heavenly things. (Henry 489)

John takes the miracles of Christ, refers to them as signs of His divine person and work, and arranges and relates them in such a way as to communicate their profound meaning to work and strengthen faith in Jesus Christ unto eternal salvation.

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An Exegesis of Psalm 90:1-6

Paul Naumann

Translation

A prayer of Moses, the man of God.

¹ *O Lord, a dwelling place You have been for us*

In every generation.

² *Before mountains were born,*

Before You gave birth to earth and world,

Yes, from eternity to eternity,

You are God.

³ *You turn man back to dust,*

And say, "Return, children of men!"

⁴ *For a thousand years in Your eyes are like yesterday when it is past,,*

And a watch in the night.

⁵ *You wash them away;*

A sleep they are.

In the morning they grow up like grass:

⁶ *In the morning it blossoms and grows;*

By evening it withers and dries up.

Overview:

Some psalms are joyful. Many of these cluster around the century mark – Psalm 98, Psalm 100, Psalm 103. These are psalms so exultant and celebratory of God's grace that one feels the joy brimming over in one's heart upon reading them.

Psalm 90 is not one of those psalms. It may be that the last time you read the words of Psalm 90 you read them out loud, standing with others around an open grave. "...*In the morning*

they are like grass which groweth up. In the morning it flourisheth and groweth up; in the evening it is cut down and withereth . . . So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.” These words on the transitory nature of life have long been part of “The Order for Burial of the Dead” in The Lutheran Agenda, (and before that in The Book of Common Prayer, and before that...).

Law is present here in abundance. The psalm reminds us not only that life in its nature is transitory, but also that it is corrupt and sinful. “*Thou has set our iniquities before thee, our secret sins in the light of thy countenance. For all our days are passed away in thy wrath . . .*” (KJV).

Yet sweetest gospel is also present; yes, from the very first line. “*Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations . . . O satisfy us early with thy mercy; that we may rejoice . . . And let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us*” (KJV). Indeed, our gracious God has satisfied us early and often with His abundant grace. It is true that our lives are short and sinful; in a familiar hymn we acknowledge, “*Brief life is here our portion.*” (TLH 448). However, Psalm 90 heartens us with the assurance that, although our lives may be brief, the grace of God in Christ spans the generations and the centuries. *Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, and today, and forever* (Heb. 13:8 KJV)

Superscription and Verses 1-2

תְּפִלָּה לְמֹשֶׁה אִישׁ־הָאֱלֹהִים אֲדֹנָי מֵעֹן אֶתָּה הֵייתָ לָנוּ בְּדָר וּדָר:
בְּטָרָם | הָרִים יֵלְדוּ וְתַחֲוֹלָל אָרֶץ וְתַבֵּל וּמַעֲוֹלָם עַד־עוֹלָם אֶתָּה אֵל:

A prayer of Moses, the man of God.

¹ *O Lord, a dwelling place You have been for us*

In every generation.

² *Before mountains were born,*

Before You gave birth to earth and world,

Yes, from eternity to eternity,

You are God.

תְּפִלָּה common noun feminine singular absolute; (from the root פָּלַל intervene, interpose, pray), ; תְּפִלָּה prayer.

מְעוֹן common noun masculine **dwelling, habitation**

וַתְּחַלְּלֵנִי verb polel waw consec imperfect 2nd person masculine singular (from the root חָלַל)
travail, be in anguish, be pained, dance, whirl, writhe

תֵּבֵל common noun feminine sing absolute; **world.**

עוֹלָם common noun masculine singular absolute; **forever, ever, everlasting, evermore, perpetual**

Remarks:

A few manuscripts and the Septuagint have “מְעוֹן fortress,” for “מְעוֹן dwelling place.” The attestation is not strong, and the meaning is little changed; we reject the variant.

Interestingly, the masorah parva (printed in the side margin of Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensis -- BHS) indicates that the combination of words, “Moses the man of God” occurs five times, including once in this book. In fact, this is incorrect; a close search reveals that the combination actually occurs four times. Unfortunately, this is somewhat symptomatic of the masorah parva in BHS. G.E. Weil, the editor of the masora parva in BHS, took it upon himself to collate and correct the masoretic notes in Codex Leningrad Codex. Where no notes existed, he supplied them by extrapolation, often incorrectly. The resulting marginal notes that appear in BHS are far more numerous than those that actually appear in the margins of the Leningrad Codex upon which it is based. The notes in the codex itself are fairly accurate. The marginal notes that appear in the Aleppo Codex, which has only been available in the last 40 years or so, are absolutely accurate as far as I can tell. I've checked many of them against the Bibleworks database, and never discovered a discrepancy. This goes a long way toward validating the scholarship of the men who produced these codices, especially the masoretes of the ninth and tenth centuries A.D.

Modern higher critical scholars, as may be expected, nearly all dismiss the Mosaic authorship of this psalm, ascribing to it a postexilic date. This is not surprising. What is surprising is that Mitchell Dahood, who is certainly one of the most highly regarded of modern higher critical scholars, breaks from the pack in this case and claims a very ancient date for this psalm, on internal evidence. And indeed the internal evidence connecting this psalm to Israel's sojourn in the wilderness is strong. There are also remarkable similarities between this psalm and Moses' song in Deuteronomy 32, the blessing of Moses in Deuteronomy 33, and other portions of the Pentateuch.

Moses is named in the superscription, and further described as *"the man of God."* Indeed, Moses was a man of God and God's man. He was chosen of God, inspired by God, honored of God, and faithful to God in all his house. In spiritual stature among the Old Testament heroes of faith, perhaps only Abraham stands taller. Certainly Moses, of all men, deserves to be called a “man of God.”

Moses says, *"O Lord, a dwelling place You have been for us in every generation."* The

word **מְעוֹן** means "dwelling place" more so than "fortress" or "place of refuge" (compare Luther, *Zuflucht*). The word is sometimes used to depict the ruins of desolate cities that have become the "dwelling place" of wild animals. Sometimes it designates the Lord's dwelling place, whether in heaven or the temple. But here, as in Psalms 71 and 91, it portrays the Lord as, Himself, a dwelling place for His people. This language would be especially poignant for Israel in the wilderness, for they of all people knew what it was like not to have a physical dwelling place. Moses reminds them that, in the Lord, they and all believers have an established spiritual dwelling place, and that it is more secure than any physical foundation and walls and roof. The point is also emphasized that the Lord wishes to be our *constant* dwelling place, not merely a refuge to run to in time of emergency.

The time element – or rather the timelessness element – is as prominent in this verse as it is in the whole psalm. God is the dwelling place of his people "in every generation." Moses could look back on perhaps a thousand-year record of God's mercy and grace, toward himself, the patriarchs, and the people of God. How much greater is our historical perspective in the 21st century! Unlike Moses, we know the stories of David and Solomon and Isaiah. We have the New Testament, the history of the life and work of our gracious Lord Himself. We can review the lives of the apostles and saints, an Augustine, a Martin Luther, a Chemnitz and a Gerhard, a C. F. W. Walther, an August Pieper and an Edmund Reim. Moses had thousands of generations of evidence to convince him of the long-suffering mercy of God; we have tens of thousands!

"Before mountains were born . . ." Mountains were often considered to be among the first and primary manifestations of God's physical creation. They are the epitome of steadfastness and immobility, ancient and unchanging. But before the mountains were, He is. It was the Lord who gave birth to the mountains, the earth, the universe and all that in them is. *"Yes, from eternity to eternity, you are God."* The word **עוֹלָם** is translated **αἰῶνος** by the Septuagint. That neither term necessarily means eternity or timelessness is shown by the fact that they sometimes refer to conditions that occurred at a definite point in the past. Both words always refer to a very long age or period, either in the past or the future. In many contexts, however, especially when **עוֹלָם** is doubled as here, e.g., and in Psalm 103, it does seem to indicate a period of time that is extended to the point of inconceivability – in other words, forever. I translate "eternity."

Generations come and go, but the Lord remains a secure dwelling place for his believers down through the eons. The writer will now point up the sharpness of the contrast between the eternal God and the fleeting, transitory nature of human life.

Verses 3-4

תָּשָׁב אֱנוֹשׁ עַד־דְּכָא וְתֵאמֶר שׁוּבוּ בְנֵי־אָדָם:

כִּי אֱלֹהֵי שָׁנִים בְּעֵינֶיךָ כִּי־זֶם אַתָּה כִּי יַעֲבֹר וְאַשְׁמֹרֶה בַּלַּיְלָה:

³ *You turn man back to dust,*

And say, "Return, children of men!"

⁴ *For a thousand years in Your eyes are like yesterday when it is past,*

And a watch in the night.

תָּשׁוּב verb hiphil imperfect 2nd person masculine singular (from the root **שׁוּב** **turn, return;**
repent.

דָּבָא common noun masculine singular (from the root **דָּבָא** **crush, pass. be crushed, contrite,**
broken); dust (that which is crushed).

אֶתְמוּל particle adverb; **before, before that time, before time, heretofore, of late, of old,**
these days, time(s) past, yesterday

אֶשְׁמֹרָה common noun feminine singular absolute (from the root **שָׁמַר** **keep, guard);**
night watch.

Remarks:

"*You turn man back to dust.*" The verb **דָּבָא** means to crush, and the noun **דָּבָא** is that which is crushed: *dust*, or *powder*. God promised at the time of the fall that man would return inevitably to the element from which he was taken, the dust of the earth, and generation after generation of men have confirmed this truth. Samuel Smith said, "[M]an . . . is a piece of red clay, that hath in it for a time a living soul which must return to God that gave it; and the body, this piece of earth, return to the earth whence it came: and if we had no Scripture at all to prove this, daily experience before our eyes makes it clear how all men, even the wisest, the strongest, the greatest and the mightiest monarchs and princes in the world, be but miserable men, made of red earth, and who quickly turn again to dust" (Spurgeon 210). Consider how fragile is a pot made of clay – a slight bump, a modest tap and it is shattered. And yet we see in museums ancient clay pots that have survived intact for centuries, even millennia. How much more fragile is man! Every single man who ever lived has returned to dust within a generation of his passing. Not a one survives! Spurgeon (213) repeats a proverb that applies to every human:

Stout and strong to-day,

To-morrow turned to clay.

This day in his bloom,

The next, in the tomb!

"For a thousand years in Your eyes are like yesterday when it is past, and a watch in the night." The psalmist shifts his focus once again from the transitory nature of man to the eternal timelessness of God. A thousand years – how long a time that is for man! How much may be crowded into it: the rise and fall of empires, the glory and obliteration of dynasties, the beginning and the end of elaborate systems of human philosophy, not to mention the countless myriads of events unrecorded by history. To humans, a thousand years is almost identical with an indefinite length of time. But to the Lord it is as nothing, like a day just past.

In Hebrew thought, nights were divided into four watches of three hours each. A person might awake having slept through several of these watches and not even noticed their passing – this is how slight the passage of a thousand years seems to the eternal God! Several commentators pointed out the possible significance of the word "night." Might this not indicate that human affairs in this life are involved in much darkness, many errors, dangers, terrors and sorrows? Indeed, our entire life on this earth is an extended "walk through the valley of the shadow of death." So much the more do we need the gracious dwelling place provided by our eternal and merciful God!

Verses 5-6

זֶרְמַתָּם שֵׁנָה יִהְיוּ בַבֶּקֶר כַּחצִיר יַחֲלֶף:

בַּבֶּקֶר יֵצֵיץ וְחֲלָף לְעֶרֶב יְמוּלֵל וַיִּבֶשׁ:

⁵ *You wash them away;*

A sleep they are.

In the morning they grow up like grass:

⁶ *In the morning it blossoms and grows;*

By evening it withers and dries up.

זֶרְמַתָּם verb qal perfect 2nd person masculine singular, suffix 3rd person masculine plural

from the root זָרַם, **pour forth in floods, flood away**

שֵׁנָה common noun feminine singular (from the root יָשַׁן to sleep); **sleep.**

חֲצִיר common noun masculine singular absolute, prefixed (from the root חָצַר assumed root); **grass.**

יִחַלֶּף verb qal imperfect 3rd person masculine singular (from the root חָלַף **pass on, or away, pass through, change; of grass, come on anew, sprout again**)

יִצְיֵץ verb qal imperfect 3rd person masculine singular (from the root צָוַץ **blossom; shine, sparkle.**)

יִמּוּלֵל verb poel imperfect 3rd person masculine singular (from the root מָלַל **languish, wither, fade**)

וַיְבֹשׁ verb qal waw consec perfect 3rd person masculine (from the root יָבַשׁ **be or become dry, be dried up, make dry, wither**)

Remarks:

Three metaphors are presented in quick succession to illustrate the transitory nature of human life. The first is a flood: *"You wash them away."* The verb יָרַם always indicates a heavy downpour of rain and hail, and the torrential floods that result. In the desert portions of Palestine, dry river beds or wadis can fill with water in the blink of an eye and instantly wash away any object or creature unfortunate enough to lie in the path of the flood. This is just how quickly and completely generations of mankind are removed from the Earth.

And note that they are removed *explicitly by the hand of the Lord!* In our day we endure all sorts of sentimental claptrap about how death is "natural," a part of "the circle of life," etc., as if death were only part of a natural process, something that happens all by itself. Of course nothing could be further from the truth. It is God who controls the lifespan of every man; he shatters the golden bowl, he severs the silver thread. *"I kill, and I make alive"* says the Lord (Deut.32:39).

"A sleep they are." As transitory as a dream is the life of man. Looking back, an entire lifetime can seem like a watch in the night or the blink of an eye.

"In the morning they grow up like grass: in the morning it blossoms and grows; by evening it withers and drives up." Grass is the perfect metaphor for the life of man. The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament (I:315) says, "Because of its ephemeral nature, grass is often used as a symbol of the transitoriness of man's existence: the wicked will soon wither like the grass (Psa 37:2); men are like the grass which flourishes in the morning but fades in the evening (Psa 90:5; cf. Psa 103:15). The fleeting nature of man, which is like that of the grass, is contrasted with the abiding character of God's Word (Isa 40:6-8; cf. Jas 1:10-11)." One commentator put it even more simply: "Here is the history of the grass – *sown, grown, blown, mown, gone!*" (Spurgeon 200, emphasis added). How salutary for us to bear in mind the utter frailty of our own human lives – we are not even cedars or oaks, but only like grass, which is vigorous for a few moments and then cut down and withered.

. . . Such were the thoughts that Moses and his generation, dying in the wilderness, where

led by God to ponder. Law and Gospel; sin and salvation; death and life. Our life in this world flees away, but God – and His eternal grace and mercy toward us in Jesus Christ – lives and endures forever! As we sing in the familiar hymn:

*Frail as summer's flower we flourish,
Blows the wind and it is gone;
But while mortals rise and perish
God endures unchanging on.
Allelujah, allelujah!
Praise the High Eternal One! Amen. (WS2000 742)*

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