

Gospel of Mark Excursus

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ON BEARING FRUIT

What is the fruit the good soil produces? Many have thought of the fruitfulness here being new converts - and tend to measure fruit by numbers of converts. Yet, in Isaiah 5:1-4 there is a parable of the Lord's vineyard that yielded only bad grapes instead of the good grapes he looked for. Isaiah 5:7 interpreted the parable: "The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are the garden of his delight. And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress."

Galatians 5:22-23 describes the fruit of the Spirit. Love joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control are the fruit that God's word works in us by his Spirit. If we limit "fruit" to new disciples won for Christ, we can become like the Pharisees who "travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you [Pharisees] are" (Matthew 23:15). If we will be fruitful in the fruit of the Spirit, God will bring new disciples into his kingdom through us. When we are molded into the image of God's Son, his light will shine through us, and men will glorify God because of us (See Matthew 5:16).

When does this happen? When good, honest hearts hear God's word, accept it, and remain faithful in it. God makes the difference in their lives. This difference does not occur overnight, as Jesus teaches in other parables in this chapter (Mar 4:26-32), but it will occur and fruitfulness is the result.

Fruitfulness occurs when people remain in Christ and he remains in them. It is such people, Jesus said, who show themselves to be his disciples (John 15:8). However, it is those who love one another who show themselves to be his disciples (John 13:34-35). Thus, love for one another is part of the fruit of the gospel.

Fruit, then, may be defined as the character of Christ as seen in his people. Everett Ferguson observes, in his book *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids: William B. Erdmann's Publishing Company, 1996, p. 72) in a chapter describing the nature of the church, "...the 'collective personality' of the church is supplied by Christ."

What makes the church unique in the world is not the form of how it inducts its converts or how it conducts its worship and affairs. Rather, it is the character of Christ seen in them. This is what occurs when the Word of God is preached and bears fruit. Peter speaks of this kind of fruit in his first Epistle.

Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart, for you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.... And this is the word that was preached to you. (1 Peter 1:22-25)

He continues in the next chapter:

Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good. (1 Peter 2:1-3).

Paul also frequently speaks of fruit, not only in his familiar "fruit of the Spirit" list in Galatians 5:22-23, but in numerous other places as well. A few examples follow:

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (*for the fruit of the light* consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with *the fruitless deeds of darkness*, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. (Ephesians 5:8-12)

When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. *What benefit did you reap at that time* from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God [by obeying the teaching to which you were entrusted, i.e., the Word of God - Romans 6:17], *the benefit you reap* leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6:20-23)

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. *It teaches us* to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good. These, then, are the *things you should teach*. Encourage and rebuke with all authority. Do not let anyone despise you. (Titus 2:11-15)

What is an evangelist to teach? Paul here enumerated several things for Titus to teach. He put it more simply to Timothy:

Preach the Word.... For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what they itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry. (2 Timothy 4:2)

By teaching the things Paul enumerated to him, Titus would be teaching the gospel, he would be preaching the Word. When his hearers followed this teaching, the Word of God would bear fruit in their lives.

Of course, Jesus himself had set the tone for this kind of teaching about fruit and fruitfulness. In the Sermon on the Mount he had said,

Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. *By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them* (Matthew 7:15-20)

It was immediately after this that Jesus spoke of those who say "Lord, Lord" but do not do the will of the heavenly Father. Those bad trees are cut down when the Lord rejects them and turns them away from the heavenly kingdom (Matthew 7:21-23).

In John 15:1-14 this idea of fruitfulness is developed. There, under the metaphor of the vine and the branches, Jesus expresses the Father's desire for us to glorify him by bearing much fruit. To this end, the Father not only cuts off branches that bear no fruit, he also prunes fruitful branches that they bear more fruit (vv. 1-2). When we bear much fruit, God is glorified and we show ourselves to be Jesus' disciples (v. 8). Earlier that evening in the upper room at the Last Supper, Jesus had said, "By this all

men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35). Then immediately after saying that much fruit glorifies God and shows we are his disciples, Jesus spoke of remaining in his love, loving each other (even to laying down our lives for one another), and showing we are his friends by obeying him.

What fruit does the Word of God produce? It is the character of Jesus in his people. Without this character, we are not truly his disciples and are cut off. When we have the character, even if it is imperfect, God prunes us with discipline. Hebrews 12:4-11 says the purpose of discipline is sharing the holiness of God, which produces a harvest of righteousness and peace. This is so we will show our Lord's character more fully and completely as we perfect holiness in the fear of the Lord (see 2 Corinthians Mark 7:1 and context), thus bearing much fruit. This happens only as we abide in Christ, he abides in us, and his words abide in us. Otherwise, the Word will be unfruitful.

You Nullify the Word of God by Your Traditions

Tradition handed down from men is not always evil. What is evil is to elevate our traditions above the Word of God.

Tradition builds in at least two ways. One is customary practice. Our congregation has a tradition, long-standing, of meeting for worship at 10:30 AM Sunday mornings. Is there anything wrong with this? Of course not! But what if we were to decide to meet at a different time on Sunday? What if we decided to meet just once, at 6:00 PM? Would that be wrong? I do not think so, but I can almost guarantee that the church would be in an uproar if we did. Some of that uproar would be because we would be giving up something that helps us keep our balance on the roof, but I can almost guarantee that some people would couch their objections in terms of "right" and "wrong" - not in terms of "expedient" and "inexpedient" times for us to gather.

What if, instead of having a Sunday PM meeting at the church building, we decided to meet in several homes for Bible study and fellowship? Again, we would have the same results. Are these times and places of our gatherings tradition that binds us tighter than the Word of God? If so, then maybe our customary practice is becoming a tradition that we fear to break more than we fear to break a direct command of God. I do know of churches where there has been more controversy over something like these than over terminating much of the church's foreign and domestic missionary program.

Another way that tradition builds is through valuing our understandings and conclusions about Scripture too highly. Man's reason and common sense are fallible instruments. Yet, when we Mark study the Scripture we inevitably draw conclusions. They may or may not be valid conclusions. *Yet, we treat them as if they were as certain as the Scriptures God has given us by his inspiration.* Then, we take these conclusions and use them as the premises for additional conclusions. If this is true, then something else follows. Then if that something else is true, we go on... and on... and on... until we are about as far from what the Scripture actually says as the Supreme Court sometimes is from a clear reading of our Constitution! The tragedy is that *each of our conclusions is treated as being as valid as the Scriptures themselves.* Then we expect others to accept and follow our conclusions.

Thomas Campbell, in his *Declaration and Address*, Proposition Six, stated: "...although inferences and deductions from scripture premises, when fairly inferred, may be truly called the doctrine of God's holy word; yet are they not formally binding upon the consciences of Christians farther than they perceive the connection, and evidently see that they are so..." Thus, this early restoration leader declared that the unity of the church, in part, depended on our not expecting others to accept our conclusions farther than they could understand them and see for themselves that this is the teaching of the Scriptures.

This is not always just in our own personal studies either. As a fellowship, we have reached certain "assured positions" that are not directly stated by the Scriptures. But because they are so widely accepted, we dare not question them, for fear of being treated as a heretic.

What are some of these, you ask? I'm afraid to tell you, because I don't want to be treated as a heretic! One such, that is changing somewhat now, is the *known facts* that people who are divorced and remarried before becoming Christians must break their marriage or be "living in adultery." This is nowhere stated in Scripture. It is a conclusion that many have reached based on their interpretation of Scripture. They ignore the fact that divorce was as common in the first century as it is today. And in a very evangelistic church, such as the first century church was, it is inevitable that some people would be converted who had been divorced and remarried prior to becoming Christians. It would seem likely that somewhere in Acts or the Epistles this question would have been addressed if it were necessary for the divorced and remarried convert to separate from the current relationship. Some who hold this position actually go so far beyond the Scriptures that they deny the clear teaching of 1 Corinthians Mark 7:17-28. In v. 27, the expression "loosed from a wife" or "unmarried" is very close kin to the word for divorced.* In this verse, Paul says not to seek a wife if you are in this position, but in v. 28 he says, "If you marry, you have not sinned."

*In 1 Corinthians 7:27, the expression is *λελυσαι απο* (from the words for "to loose" and "from." In Matthew 5:32, the word Jesus uses for *divorce* is *απολυων*, which is formed by making the same word for "from" a prefix for the same word for "loose." In other words, Jesus used a compound word; Paul used the two words from which Jesus' word, translated *divorce*, is compounded.

This is but a single illustration. Many others could be given where we have first accepted a hermeneutical principle (i.e., principle of Biblical interpretation), and then used it to form conclusions that are not clearly stated in the Scripture. Then these are taken farther and farther until some of our "positions" become a yoke that many cannot bear.

For this is the trouble with tradition. It binds us to the past *when the circumstances that may have made those practices expedient have changed*. Thus the church itself becomes a relic of the past instead of the living body of Christ presenting him to the world as it is instead of the world as it used to be.

Before You See the Kingdom Come with Power

Mar 9:1

Three Different Expressions Are Used in the Three Parallel Accounts. They all begin, "I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see..." and continue:

Luke 9:27 "...the kingdom of God."

Matthew 16:28 "...the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

Mar 9:1 "...the kingdom of God come with power."

These three expressions are virtually equivalent descriptions of the same event, though each presents a little different aspect of it.

Luke's expression reminds us of John 3:3 where Nicodemus came to Jesus, who told him no one would see the kingdom of God unless he is born again. This stands in contrast to Luke 17:20-21 where Jesus, when the Pharisees demanded when the kingdom would come, said to them, "The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you." Also think of Romans 14:17, where Paul said, "The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."

Luke's words for "see" and "observation" are different. The first is "properly to *see* (literally or figuratively); by implication to *know*: - be aware, behold, consider, (have) known (-ledge), look (on), perceive, see, be sure, tell, understand,...." *Observation* is "*inspection*, that is, *ocular evidence*: - observation." The kingdom of God is not something that is pointed out as being here or there, "because the kingdom of God is within you." It is perceived, however, by those who are born again. Luke 9:27 and John 3:3 use the same word for *see*, as do Matthew 16:28 and Mar 9:1.

Whereas Luke merely mentions seeing or perceiving the kingdom of God, Matthew and Mark also tell us something about its coming. Matthew 16:28 says they will perceive "the Son of Man coming in his kingdom." Perhaps this comment is reflected in Matthew's account of the question the disciples asked Jesus when he told them the temple would be destroyed (Matthew 24:3). This comment does not, however, refer to Jesus' coming in glory and in judgment at the end of the world - for it would occur during the lifetime of some then present.

Mar 9:1 tells us, not that the Son of Man would come in his kingdom, but that the kingdom of God would come with power. But the coming of the Son of Man in his kingdom and the kingdom of God coming with power are concurrent - unless Matthew or Mark one completely misunderstood and misrepresented what Jesus was saying to his disciples on this occasion!

The Kingdom of God Is Not:

Observable as being "here" or "there."

A matter of what you eat or drink (i.e., following rules & regulations).

Perceived by those who are not born of water & Spirit.

The Kingdom of God:

- Is perceived by those who are born of water & Spirit.
- Comes with power.
- Comes as the Son of Man comes in his kingdom.
- Is within you.
- Is righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.

Two Questions:

- **How Do I Perceive/Experience the Kingdom of God?**
- **What Is the Power with Which the Kingdom Comes?**

Obviously, before I can see the kingdom, I must be born again. It is a spiritual kingdom, not of this world (John 18:36). Hence, it is not seen with eyes of flesh, but with spiritual eyes and perception. This was the basis of Jesus' rebuke of Peter in Mar 8:33 when he said, "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men." In other words, "Peter, you do not see my coming kingdom and glory because you are thinking as men think, not as God thinks!" Jesus had just told the disciples he would be killed and raised again. Peter had said, "Never, Lord. This shall never happen to you!" (Matthew 16:22) Just before this, Peter had confessed Jesus as being the Christ, the Son of God - and Jesus had conferred on him the keys of the kingdom. Yet, Peter could not see the kingdom. He was still seeing with eyes of flesh, not with the spiritual insight that would lead to understanding the kingdom.

For us to see the kingdom, our eyes also need to be opened to the spiritual things of God! When we are born again and become children of God by faith (Galatians 3:26-7), God sends the Holy Spirit into our hearts (Galatians 4:6). We are clothed with Christ. Christ comes to us, as he lives in our hearts by faith as we are strengthened with power through his Spirit in our inner man (Ephesians 3:16-17). And, the resurrection power of the gospel is there for us (Ephesians 1:17-20).

What is the power? It is the power of God for our salvation (cf. Romans 1:16). It is the power to live godly lives in the midst of a crooked and perverse people! It is the power of the gospel itself, the gospel being that Jesus died for our sins, was buried, and was raised again the third day (1 Corinthians Mark 15:1-4).

Does this fit the context of our text? Note this sequence of events and statements by Jesus:

1. Peter confessed Jesus is the Christ of God. (Mar 8:27-30)
2. Jesus told his disciples he would be killed and raised (Mar 8:31-32).
3. Peter rebuked Jesus for saying this (Mar 8:32).
4. Jesus told Peter to get his thinking straightened out (Mar 8:33).
5. Jesus told all the disciples to deny self, take up their cross & follow him (Mar 8:34)
6. Not doing this - trying to save your life - would mean you lose it (Mar 8:35-37).
7. Being ashamed of this (as Peter was) makes Jesus ashamed of us (Mar 8:38).

8. In your lifetime, some of you will see the kingdom come in power (Mar 9:1).

This context begins with who Jesus is and what he is about to do for our salvation. It continues with his dramatic and radical claims on us - self-denial, cross bearing, following him, giving up our lives to save them, giving up all to follow him, accepting him and his teachings without shame or embarrassment. These claims all together mean he is calling on us to die with him. (Luke 9:23 adds that we are to take up the cross daily.) If we will do this, the conclusion is that we see the kingdom come with power - and we will be able to live in this world as God would have us to live. The "resurrection power" of the gospel will be there for us to be able to "walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:1-4).

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESURRECTION

The resurrection is important to us for two reasons: (1) evidence of just who Jesus is as the Son of God and (2) the source of power for living in the character of Jesus today. I believe it is the latter of these that is the more important.

The Resurrection as Evidence

Romans 1:4 says that Jesus *was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead*. It was because *God has raised this Jesus to life* (Acts 2:32) that Peter was able to say *God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ* (Acts 2:36). That the Lord of Life died on the cross would be tragic, except that *it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him* (Acts 2:24).

When Jesus came from the tomb, it proved that he was indeed the Son of God.

But, how can we today know that he really was raised from the dead? How can we know that it is not just a figment of someone's imagination?

Several lines of evidence make his resurrection one of the most certain events of the ancient world. Here is a very brief summary of a few of the reasons we can believe with confidence.

1. **The Empty Tomb.** While modern men have invented various stories that said the tomb of Jesus was not empty, that his tomb has been found and that Christianity was based on a lie, those who were closest to the situation never made such claims. The earliest explanation of the empty tomb was that the disciples came and stole his body while the guard slept (Matthew 28:11-15). In the 1965 book, *The Passover Plot*, Hugh D. Schonfield repeated a version of this story. He said it was all a plot formed by Jesus himself to make it appear he fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies in his death and "resurrection." Just how he could have managed this is not clear. Nor is it clear why the death and resurrection became a part of this "plot," when few (if any) in the First Century believed the Messiah would suffer and be raised from the dead. A crucified Christ would seem to negate the plausibility of the "plot."

Why was the tomb empty? Had the Jewish authorities found that he was in a rich man's tomb and removed the body? If they had, why not produce it when the apostles began preaching Jesus had been raised from the dead? They would have done all in their power to produce his body *if they themselves did not know that the tomb was indeed empty*. Did the women mistake the location of the tomb, and when the gardener(s) tried to explain to them that he was not there, did they just assume these were angels telling them Jesus was risen? And did the apostles then believe these mistakes and go out and establish the church on their own with no divine assistance? That would be even more incredible than to believe God raised Jesus from the dead.

Did the disciples themselves remove the body so they could claim he had risen from the dead? Consider their testimony and its consequences before you jump to that conclusion.

2. **The Testimony of the Apostles.** On Pentecost, Peter declared, *we are all witnesses of the fact* that God raised him from the dead (Acts 2:32). This was a consistent part of the preaching of the early church, especially of the apostles. When some in the

Corinthian church were saying that there is no resurrection from the dead (1 Corinthians Mark 15:12), Paul gave them a list of those who had seen the resurrected Lord:

...he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. (1 Corinthians Mark 15:5-8)

The value of this testimony is strengthened by the fact that none of these apostolic witnesses ever recanted. Even though they suffered greatly for their faith, they all remained true to it. This is amazing, especially in view of their behavior when Jesus was arrested and crucified. They were terrified of the Jews. They ran for their lives. Yet, in a matter of weeks, they were all standing together accusing the Jewish leaders of crucifying the *author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this. (Acts 3:15).*

There can be no doubt by reasonable men who examine the facts of history that these apostles believed Jesus raised from the dead. So how did they all come to have this faith? They said it was because they had seen Jesus alive after his death. They said they had touched him, and he had spoken with them and even eaten with them.

Was all of this a mass hallucination? Some would have us believe it was. Would such a change as came over these men have come from hallucination? Perhaps one person might have such a hallucination, but these men were skeptics. They had to see for themselves. They were all somewhat like Thomas who said he would not believe unless he could put his finger in the wounds in his hands and thrust his hand into the spear wound in his side (John 20:24-28). When Jesus then appeared to him, *Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"*

3. The Existence of the Church.

If Jesus is not risen from the dead, how did the church come into being? On Pentecost, Peter explained, *"exalted to the right hand of God, he [Jesus] has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear"* (Acts 2:33). The things that happened that day were a dramatic testimony to the continued life of Jesus. How could the early church have "invented" itself? There is nothing in the past history of those earliest disciples to show them capable of inventing the church.

In this same vein, the conversion of Saul of Tarsus is a striking proof of the resurrection. How could such a man, as convinced as he was that Jesus was a blasphemer and that his followers deserved death, have made such a dramatic and permanent change of his spiritual orientation if he had not seen Jesus himself on the road to Damascus as he said he had?

4. The Change within His Followers.

While not as objective as the other three evidences listed above, this is still a powerful witness to the reality of his resurrection. It is a testimony weakened by the faithlessness of many who claim to follow him, but do not. But when people walk with him in faith, he continues to empower them with something from beyond that enables them to endure

suffering and to live lives of joyous peace and love in a world characterized by *being hated and hating one another* (see Titus 3:3-7). In this text Paul speaks of the change that the followers of Jesus experience through the *rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior*.

This leads us directly into the most important meaning of the resurrection for us today.

The Resurrection as Power to Live

It was no accident that when Paul spoke of the gospel, he defined it as being that *Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures* (1 Corinthians Mark 15:3-4).

In becoming his disciples, we obey a form of this (cf. Romans 6:17): we die, we are buried, and we are raised again to *live a new life* (Romans 6:3-4). What sort of life is that new life, and how do we live it? This text in Romans continues with some incredible statements – that even most church members simply do not believe. *We should no longer be slaves to sin.... If we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.... The life he lives, he lives to God. In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.... Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness. For sin shall not be your master....* (Romans 6:6-14).

The gospel is for more than the forgiveness of sins, as important as that is. It is also that *we may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desire* (2 Peter 1:4). This escape from corruption is not something that "just happens" to us, for Peter goes on to tell us *for this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness, Knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness and agape love* (2 Peter 1:5-7). In the same way, Paul tells the Philippian church, *therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed... continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to Acts according to his good purpose* (Philippians 2:12-23). As we work our salvation out, God works in us that we not only desire to do his will, but also have the power to Acts in accordance with his purposes. Put simply, as we make every effort to add the Christian graces and to work out our salvation, God works in us the character of Jesus himself.

The power of the gospel for forgiveness of sins is in the cross, but the power to live in newness of life is in the resurrection. Yet today, most of us freely admit sin masters us and believe there is no way we be free of that mastery. However, in the Scriptures we see that, though it is a growth process, real progress in the Christian graces moves us to the point where sin is not the master of our lives. As someone observed, there is a vast difference between "perfectionism" on the one hand and continuing in sin that grace may abound on the other. Neither of these concepts is in the Scripture. Instead, we see in the early disciples a deliberate development of the character of Jesus in their lives through the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead. It is the resurrection power of the gospel working in us that makes this transformation possible, today as well as in the early days of the church.

This is still by God's grace, for we do not transform ourselves. We do make effort, but our obedience is not meritorious, nor is it sufficient to make us like Jesus. Yet, it is as we yield to God obediently that our faith in him brings us grace to live as Jesus lived. This is the resurrection power of the gospel at work in us so that *just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.... united with him in his resurrection* (Romans 6:4-5). This begins with the new birth, where life in the kingdom of God begins. Life in the kingdom of God is life in submission to the rule or reign of God in our lives. As we permit God to rule in us we, progressively, develop a Christ-like heart and soul. This is because of our resurrection with him to this new life where *the old has gone, the new has come!* (2 Corinthians 5:17).