

FOLLOWING JESUS

*An Illustrated Guide to the Places of the Holy Land
According to the Gospel of Mark*

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LIM KAR YONG



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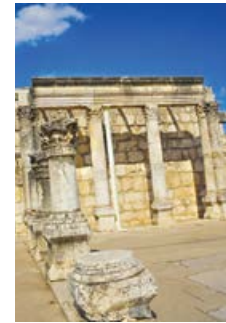
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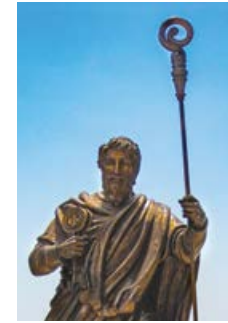
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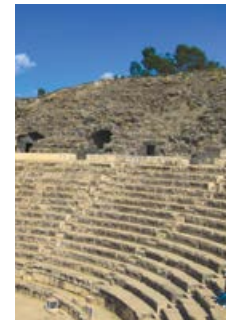
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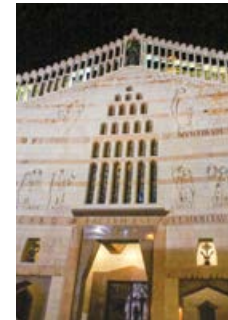
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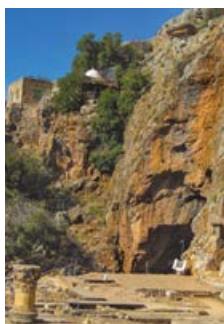
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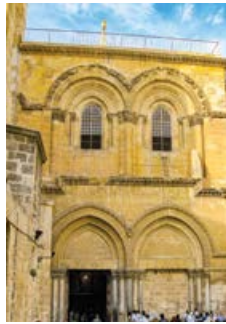
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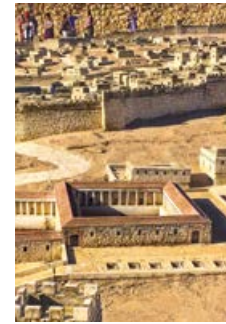
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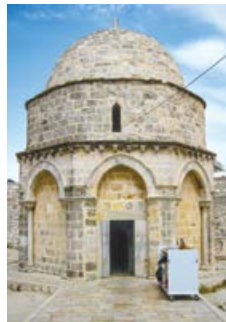
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PREFACE

Since 2007, I have been leading study tours to the biblical lands of Israel, Turkey, and Greece as part of the seminary curriculum and for different Christian groups. Fuelled by my academic interests in the New Testament, archaeology, and the history and background of the Bible, I am always filled with great excitement whenever I visit these biblical sites. Nothing is more stimulating than having the opportunity to read the Scriptures at sites where the events mentioned would most likely have taken place, share devotion and insights from the biblical passages, give lectures in situ, and see the Bible come alive among those who travel with me. We can imagine, visualise, and feel what would have taken place in these sites—imagine for a moment the crowd witnessing Jesus feeding the five thousand, the invalid man lying in front of the temple of Asklepios at the Pool of Bethesda whom Jesus healed, and the people listening to Jesus in the synagogue in Capernaum. Personally, I have gained much spiritual insight as I walked the lands of the Bible and reflected on the events that would have taken place there. Academically, I have had the opportunity to examine and carry out research on some of the inscriptions and archaeological excavations and discoveries of these biblical sites, and these have contributed to some of my academic publications. As a result, visiting the biblical lands has contributed much to my teaching and preaching ministry, not to mention my own spiritual journey.

Over the years, I have developed devotional materials for the various study tours. Many who have been on these trips have found them to be extremely helpful. Because of this, quite a number of people yet to visit the Holy Land have requested that I share my notes and photographs with them. Spiritual directors leading groups to the Holy Land have also asked for guides, ideas, and tools to help them prepare for and lead the trip. Pilgrims going to the Holy Land have also requested for reading materials that could prepare them for the trip. Pilgrims who returned from their trips have also asked for a photographic guide that helps them recollect the various sites visited. Because of these numerous requests, I decided to put together this devotional guide on the Holy Land with photographs and questions for reflection that will hopefully

serve these purposes (and if time permits, I plan to develop similar guides for Greece and Turkey in the future). In addition, I hope that that this book will be a helpful tool for cell groups as well as small groups. For groups that are planning for a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, this book could be used as study material for pre-departure meetings. More photographs of the various sites are available at my website: www.karyonglim.com.

I would like to thank all of those who have been with me on the study tours. Your questions, feedback, and sharing have provided much input for this book. A word of appreciation is also extended to my students who have travelled with me in the study tours. Your reflection papers as part of the academic requirements for the study tours have also provided much input for this book. I would also like to thank the Rt Rev'd Dr Paul Barker, Assistant Bishop for the Anglican Diocese of Melbourne, for reading through the entire manuscript and offering valuable feedback. His sharp eyes detected many typographical and grammatical errors. Special thanks are also due to Alexa Ho for proofreading the manuscript, editing the photographs, and sharing some of her own photographs; Lim Hui Chuan for preparing the maps and illustrations; and Yap Hai Yen for proofreading the manuscript and making available a few photographs. I would also like to thank Seminari Theoloji Malaysia (STM) for accepting this book as part of the STM Series and Armour Publishing for their professional editorial assistance, creative layout design, and timely publication of this book. Finally, my family deserves my deepest appreciation and gratitude for their continuous support, encouragement, and prayers for my ministry.

Rev Dr Lim Kar Yong
SEREMBAN
ASH WEDNESDAY, 2019



INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the Holy Land — or Is It?¹

I have often been asked the following questions during our trips to the Holy Land: What is the significance of the land of Israel for us as Christians today? Is it any more important than any other land, such as Malaysia? Are we still to consider Israel as “the Holy Land”? Viewing the theme of “land” within the story arc of the Bible will help answer these questions.

In the Old Testament

From God’s promise to Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3) onwards, land is an important theme in the Bible. God is sovereign over the whole world as its creator (e.g., Deuteronomy 32:9-10), but he chose to give land to Israel as an “inheritance” (e.g., Deuteronomy 4:21). For Israel, remaining in the land was dependent upon their continued response of obedience to God (e.g., Deuteronomy 4:25-27). In this respect, we can understand the tremendous sense of loss when Israel was sent into exile from their land because of their disobedience. Yet, the exile led to an important insight: even away from the Promised Land, Israel could still remain the people of God (e.g., Ezekiel 11:16) and continue to “seek the welfare of the city” in a foreign land (Jeremiah 29:7). This removal of land as central to the relationship between God and Israel anticipates the sharing of God’s inheritance with those outside Israel (e.g., Ezekiel 47:22-33).

¹ I would like to thank my colleague, Dr Peter Lau, for his permission to reproduce his essay on biblical understanding of land, with slight modifications. This essay originally appeared in the devotional booklet accompanying one of our study tours.



Map of Israel in the time of Jesus highlighting the places corresponding with the chapter numbers in this book.

In the New Testament

When we come to the New Testament, we find that inheriting the physical land of Israel is no longer part of the requirement for our relationship with God. Neither is it part of our inheritance. This follows from the fact that Christians, as the “new creation” (2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15-16), are not a geopolitical entity. We are primarily a spiritual people of God, incorporating all who trust in Jesus, both Jews and non-Jews (Romans 9-11; Galatians 3:28). Indeed, the New Testament does something radical: it relocates the properties of the land to Jesus Christ. Even the temple, where God communes with his people, is now found in Christ (e.g., John 2:19-22)—we meet God in Christ, and Christ tabernacles among us (John 1:14). Paul clearly states that Abraham’s descendants are those with faith in Jesus, not based on one’s ethnicity or one’s physical inheritance of land (Romans 4:13). Hence, as part of the new covenant community, we are not located in one geographical place; we are scattered throughout the world, and Christ is with us to the ends of the earth (Matthew 28:18-20). Furthermore, we all look forward to our final inheritance, which is/will be waiting for us in heaven (1 Peter 1:4).

Why Do We Visit the Holy Land?

Oftentimes, I am asked about the issue of the status of the present-day Israel. Is Israel today the same as the Israel of the Bible? Let us not forget that Israel today is a secular state whilst Israel in the Old Testament was a theocratic nation. So, there are differences. Should we pray for Israel? Yes, pray for Israel just like how we would pray for Malaysia or any country of the world. What about the Jews today? Should we pray for them? Yes, pray for the Jews just like how we would pray for our family, neighbours, and friends.

What about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict? Should we not support Israel in the forming of the nation state of Israel and claiming the land God has promised them as an inheritance? The Palestinian-Israeli conflict is a very complex issue that requires careful and objective assessment, and it is beyond the scope of this book. As I have highlighted above, physical possession of land is no longer part of our covenantal relationship with God. In view of this, I suggest that we do not get entangled with the complexity and controversy of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict that may distract us from the reason why we visit the Holy Land.

So, what does this all mean for our understanding of making a pilgrimage to the modern-day land of Israel? As Christianity is based on historical facts, we still respect and value the land because it is the specific location for God’s story, from the Old Testament through the New Testament. We still visit the land to gain insights into the background of the Bible—its culture, geography,

archaeology, people, and climate. By visiting the Holy Land, we walk, touch, and see the land where Jesus walked, taught, and performed miracles. We visit places associated with the Lord's passion, death, and resurrection. By going on a pilgrimage, we read the Scriptures in situ where we can relive the events recorded in the pages of the Bible right before our eyes, and allow God's word to speak to us powerfully as we pray and reflect on it. To go on a pilgrimage means to encounter God in a fresh way, so that our lives may be changed and transformed to be more Christlike and to affirm our faith as we examine archaeological evidences of the events recorded in the Bible. In faith, we visit the land to witness and perhaps relive in our minds the great story of which we are a part: the story of how God chose to work through a people, and finally a person, in the land of Israel to bring salvation to us and the whole world—Jesus Christ our Saviour. Going on a pilgrimage is a very spiritually-enriching experience. It can broaden the mind as we see the land by listening to stories from both the past and the present. Because of all these reasons, this book is written for those who are planning for a pilgrimage, for those who have been, and for those who have yet to go or could not go for one reason or another. This book, hopefully, will take you on a journey to one of the most visited places on earth.

Many of us visit the Holy Land to follow the footsteps of Jesus, in search of him, and to be closer to him. Yet, this could disappoint us. Jesus never left behind any physical buildings that we could see or touch, unlike Herod the Great who built many monuments. What we see are either ruins, buildings, or churches built by humans on sites to commemorate the events related to the life of Jesus. Yet, this can still be a beautiful and powerful experience for us to pause, reflect, and allow God to speak to us individually and as a group.

Following Jesus Through the Eyes of Mark

In this book, we will follow the narrative in the Gospel of Mark. Of the Four Gospels, why do I choose the Gospel of Mark? First of all, our itinerary typically begins with the visit to the Jordanian sites, including the baptismal site at Bethany Beyond the Jordan. After crossing over to Israel, we head north to visit sites around Galilee, Caesarea Philippi, and Mount Tabor before making our way south to Jerusalem and the Dead Sea where we end our pilgrimage. This itinerary follows the first half of the Gospel of Mark quite closely, where the public ministry of Jesus begins at his baptism, followed by his temptation, and ministry in the region of Galilee, Caesarea Philippi, and his transfiguration (Mark 1-9). In the second half, Mark focuses on Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, his passion, crucifixion, death, and resurrection (Mark 10-16).

Secondly, Mark's narrative is filled with human colour and action. He takes us into the world of the people who lived in the time of Jesus, narrates these events filled with emotions and actions, and highlights the response of the people to the message of the kingdom of God. By following the narrative in Mark, we can sense the urgency of the mission of Jesus in announcing the coming of the kingdom of God and in urging the people to repent and believe in the gospel.

Traditionally, the Gospel of Mark is connected to Peter, one of the original Twelve. His gospel is believed to contain narratives from Peter himself. By focussing on Mark, we are hearing from one of the first eyewitnesses of the ministry of Jesus.

Mark is also widely accepted as the earliest Gospel written, possibly in the late 50s CE. By reading Mark, we are hearing one of the earliest voices of the life and ministry of Jesus. We also reflect on what he is trying to convey to his original readers who were predominantly Gentile followers of Jesus in Rome going through some form of persecution and challenges. There is much we can learn from Mark as we reflect on our own journey of discipleship, especially in Muslim-majority Malaysia.

Finally, most travel guides are written based on the sites in the Holy Land, probably with the exception of Peter Walker's *In the Steps of Jesus*², which is based on the Gospel of Luke. There are good reasons for this as most sites we visit are based on their geographical location, rather than following the flow or chronological narrative in the Bible. However, as pilgrims visiting the Holy Land, it would be good for us to hear and read a particular Gospel, and let this Gospel be our guide throughout the whole journey. With the Gospel of Mark as the primary source for our pilgrimage, we will be able to hear its overall message and what this Gospel is trying to tell us about the life and ministry of Jesus, and what it means for us today as followers of Jesus.

Therefore, let us allow Mark to be our guide as we follow in the steps of Jesus in the land he lived, walked, and taught. Let us hear the message of Jesus afresh. Let us reflect and respond to the call of Jesus bidding us to take up our cross and follow him.

A final note: while the book largely follows the narrative of Mark, sites recounted in other Gospels that are not mentioned in Mark will also be included towards the end of this book. This is because many of us will visit these sites as part of our pilgrimage. Inevitably, some sites not related to the life and ministry of Jesus, such as Caesarea Maritima, Megiddo, Qumran, and Mount Carmel, amongst others, are excluded in this book. However, I hope to include these sites in a follow-up book in the future.

² Peter Walker, *In the Steps of Jesus: An Illustrated Guide to the Places of the Holy Land* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007).

How to Use This Book?

Each chapter of this book focuses on a particular event or place associated with the life of Jesus according to a passage of **Scripture** taken from the Gospel of Mark. A brief description of **The Site** or **The Event** is provided. I have deliberately kept the information in this section to the minimum as detailed descriptions of these are available in many excellent travel guides. This is then followed by commentary on the **Biblical Significance** of the event or place associated with the passage. My aim is to explain the ministry of Jesus in its original context, and to explore if there might be any relation of the site to other passages in the Bible that could add layers of meaning to our understanding. We will cover archaeology, the authenticity of the site, and other evidences and some contemporary challenges to said authenticity. Where relevant, I have also included some writings from Josephus, a 1st-century historian. I have also included writings from some early pilgrims, including the Pilgrim of Bordeaux who kept his travelogue during his visit in 333, Egeria who kept a full diary of her 3-year-long pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 381-384, and the anonymous Pilgrim of Piacenza from Italy who travelled to the Holy Land sometime in the 570s. I included these writings to demonstrate that a pilgrimage has been a spiritual exercise long practised since the early church. As such, our pilgrimage is a continuation of the journey taken by those who years ago wanted to follow in the steps of Jesus. Questions for **Reflection** are then provided for us to reflect on the sites we visit and the passages we read. Finally, a short **Prayer** is offered at the end of the chapter.

Many replicas of the archaeological discoveries mentioned in this book are available for viewing at the Centre for Bible Engagement, Seminari Theoloji Malaysia (for further information, visit www.cbe.stm.edu.my). Additional photographs of the sites covered in this book can be found at my website: www.karyonglim.com.

Most of the chapters in this book can be read within 10-15 minutes, giving pilgrims sufficient time to wander around and explore the sites, take photographs, soak in the ambience and environment, and of course, to meditate, reflect, and pray. May you encounter the risen Lord as you follow in his footsteps.



Chapter 1

What Is the Gospel?

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God... Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

MARK 1:1, 14-15

The Event: The Gospel

The Gospel of Mark, unlike Matthew and Luke, does not begin with the nativity story. Instead, it announces the beginning of the gospel, the good news, with the coming of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. This Son of God is the promised Messiah as proclaimed by John the Baptist. Immediately after this declaration, we encounter an adult Jesus baptised by John and tempted by the devil. Following this, Jesus proceeds to the region of Galilee, proclaiming the gospel by announcing the inauguration of the kingdom of God and calling people to repent and believe in the gospel. Throughout his Gospel, Mark constantly uses the conjunctions “and” and “again”, and the phrase “and immediately” in portraying Jesus as someone constantly on the move, highlighting a sense of urgency that Jesus must proclaim the message of the gospel without wasting any time.

What is this gospel that Jesus announced? For many of us today, the gospel means the salvation of God for humanity accomplished through the death and resurrection of Christ. However, to the hearers in the 1st century, the gospel had a totally different meaning. Beginning with the Imperial Cult where the Roman emperor was venerated as God, the word “gospel” was often used in a religious and political context related to the announcement of the appearance or accession of a ruler to the throne.

According to the Priene Calendar Inscription discovered at Priene, a town in Asia Minor in modern Western Turkey dated about 9 BCE, the word “gospel” is used to describe the birthday of Caesar Augustus (63 BCE–14 CE) as heralding in the beginning of a new era. This inscription claimed that the birthday of “the god Augustus was the beginning of the gospel for the world that came by reason of him” and this gospel announced by the “saviour” in the person of Augustus was his kingdom that brought peace and salvation to his people. As a result, a Roman decree was issued to begin a new calendar system based on the birth of Augustus. During his reign, Augustus initiated an era of peace known as the *Pax Romana* (The Roman Peace), and an altar was dedicated to the Roman goddess of Peace, Pax, known as the *Ara Pacis Augustae* which is now reassembled in the Museum of the Ara Pacis in Rome.

Caesar Augustus was the adopted son of Julius Caesar. Soon after his father passed away in 44 BCE, a comet appeared in the sky and this was interpreted as a sign of the deification of Julius. Augustus made full use of this symbol as a political propaganda by declaring Julius as God (*Divus Iulius*). He minted coins featuring the face of Julius Caesar crowned with a wreath with the words “CAESAR AVGVSTVS” (Caesar Augustus) inscribed on the front of the coin. On the reverse side, a comet with eight rays was shown with the words “DIVVS IVLIVS” (Divine Julius) inscribed on it. Because Julius Caesar was venerated as God, Augustus assumed the title *Divi Filius*, “the Son of God”, and his full name was subsequently known as *Imperator Caesar Divi Filius Augustus* (Emperor Caesar Augustus Son of God).



Museum of Ara Pacis in Rome where the altar for Pax, the Roman goddess of Peace, is housed. The exterior wall depicts the famous Deeds of the Divine Augustus (*Res Gestae Divi Augusti*), highlighting his achievements during his reign from 27 BCE to 14 CE.



The Mausoleum of Augustus located next to the Museum of Ara Pacis, Rome.

Since Caesar Augustus claimed himself to be the saviour, the son of god, and the one who brought peace to the Roman Empire and whose birthday was described as the “gospel”, people who lived in the Roman Empire pledged allegiance to him and worshipped him by declaring, “Caesar is Lord, and there is no other.”

Biblical Significance

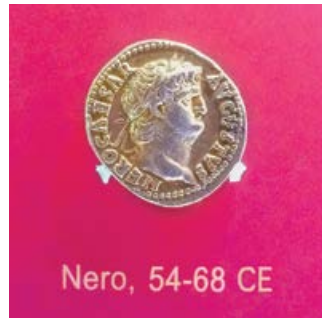


Coins depicting the face of Caesar Augustus at the front and a comet of eight rays on the reverse depicting his father, the Divine Julius, as God. Altes Museum, Berlin.

It is interesting that the very beginning of the Gospel of Mark bears a striking resemblance to the description of the gospel of Caesar Augustus testified in the Priene Calendar Inscription: “The beginning of the good news (gospel) of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1). Mark declares that the true beginning of the gospel is from Jesus Christ who is the Messiah, and not Caesar Augustus, who reigned during the birth of Jesus. Jesus is the true Son of

God and Saviour, not Caesar Augustus. He is the Prince of Peace that brought peace to the world so that humanity could be reconciled with God, and not the *Pax Romana* ushered in by Caesar Augustus. As such, Mark declares that the true gospel is the gospel of Jesus Christ whose birth had been foretold by the prophets, not the birth of Caesar Augustus.

Just by this one verse, Mark the Evangelist has set out to proclaim that Jesus is the true Son of God, the Saviour, and Caesar was not. Mark’s readers in the 1st century were now presented with a clear choice: who would they worship and follow? Jesus the true Son of God, the Saviour; or Caesar the bogus son of god, the self-proclaimed saviour? Which gospel would they believe in—the gospel of Jesus Christ or the gospel of Augustus?



A coin with the face of Nero who reigned from 54-68 CE. Numismatic Museum, Athens.



RES · GESTAE · DIVI · AVGVSTI · QVIBVS · ORBEM · TERRARVM · IMPERIO · POPVLI · ROMANI · SVB · REGNANTE · ME · SVB ·

Reflection

Prayer

“Caesar is Lord, and there is no other.” The readers of Mark who lived during the reign of Nero in Rome, the heart of the Roman Empire, were confronted with the difficult choice of either following and worshipping Jesus or Caesar. We can only imagine how difficult this choice could have been since pledging allegiance to Jesus was a direct denial of acknowledging Caesar as God and vice versa.

1. What about us today? Are there any competing loyalties in our lives that lure us away from being loyal to Jesus and his gospel?
2. When we declare that we have decided to follow Jesus, and there is no turning back, how true is this in our life today?

Almighty God, who gave us the gospel of salvation through your Son, Jesus our Lord: grant that by believing in this gospel, we may be faithful believers as we seek to follow him and deny all other gods in this world; through Jesus Christ, your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.



Chapter 2

The Baptism of Jesus

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he

will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

MARK 1:4-11



View of the Jordan River from Jordan with the baptism site in Israel across the river. The river serves as the international border for Israel and Jordan.

The Sites: Bethany Beyond the Jordan



Overall view of the baptism site at Bethany Beyond the Jordan, with the marble steps leading to the ruins of the Church of the Trinity. At the right edge of the baptism pool is where a small chapel known as the Mantle Chapel once stood, now covered with a roof.

There are two baptism sites regularly visited by pilgrims along the River Jordan (which is also the international border for Israel and Jordan): one on the Israeli side, and the other on the Jordanian side. The traditional site believed to be the biblical Bethany Beyond the Jordan (John 1:28) where John the Baptist lived and Jesus was baptised is located on the Jordanian side of the River. This site, known as Wadi Kharrar, is one of the most important discoveries in biblical archaeology in recent years. Following the peace treaty signed between

Israel and Jordan in 1994, excavations on this site began in 1996. Of significance are the discoveries of churches and baptismal pools dating from the Roman and Byzantine periods which are now regularly visited by pilgrims.

Today, the River Jordan is a tiny river about 13–15 m wide. It flows from the foothills of Mount Hermon in the north (see Chapter 13) into the Sea of Galilee and continues to the Dead Sea in the south.



| Mosaic painting depicting the baptism site during the Byzantine period.

Biblical Significance

Why did Jesus need to undergo baptism? Jesus' baptism signifies that the years of obscurity and preparation had come to an end. Apart from the infancy narratives of Jesus (Matthew 1:18–2:23; Luke 1:26–2:40) and the incident in the temple in Jerusalem at age 12 (Luke 2:41–51), we really do not know much about his early life. For about 30 years, Jesus lived away from the public eye. However, this was about to end at his baptism. The baptism at the River Jordan marks the beginning of the years of Jesus' public ministry. This was confirmed with the heavens being torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on Jesus, with a voice from heaven (Mark 1:11). The voice from heaven not only testified Jesus as the Son of God but also presented to the world the beginning of the ministry of Jesus. It was

after the baptism of Jesus that he announced the coming of the kingdom of God (Mark 1:14–15).

The River Jordan has long been associated with biblical narratives. In the Old Testament, the river was the eastern border of the Promised Land (Deuteronomy 3:17). Moses never crossed this river after leading God's people out



| Ruins of the Byzantine Church of the Trinity.

of Egypt. It was Joshua, Moses' successor, who led the people into the Promised Land by first conquering the city of Jericho. It was by the River Jordan that the people consecrated themselves to the Lord (Joshua 3–4). 12 stones from the middle of the river were placed on the riverbank and erected as a memorial to remind Israel that God's promise for them was being fulfilled, which marked a new beginning in their national life.



| The Mantle Chapel by the edge of the baptism pool. This is believed to be the site where Jesus took off his garment before he entered the water.



| Tel Mar Elias, Elijah's Hill.

Elijah used his cloak to strike the water and passed through the river before he was taken up to heaven. Elisha, left on the eastern side of the river, took up his mentor's cloak and performed the same miracle, and it was said that Elijah's spirit now rested on Elisha. There are also close links between Elijah and John the Baptist. John was considered as Elijah that was to come (Matthew 11:11-15; 17:10-13). Here at the River Jordan, we witness the passing of the mantle from Moses to Joshua, and Elijah to Elisha, and John the Baptist pointed the people to Jesus as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29).

A few years after Elijah's ascension, Naaman was told by Elisha that his leprosy would be cured if he washed himself seven times in the River Jordan (2 Kings 5:1-15). Initially, Naaman protested and dismissed the words of the prophet. After being persuaded by his servants, Naaman obeyed and did what Elisha ordered by dipping himself in the river, and "his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean" (2 Kings 5:14), leading him to confess: "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel" (2 Kings 5:15). The account of the healing of Naaman is significant as it signifies the healing and faith of a Gentile.

Therefore, the River Jordan has rich biblical history: a place to remember the faithfulness of God in fulfilling his promises of giving a land

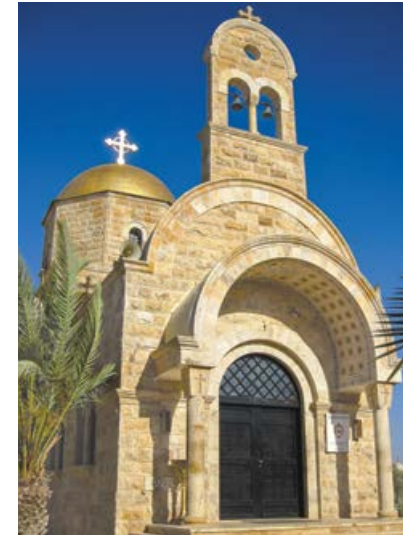
Tel Mar Elias, a hill located in this area, is also believed to be the site where the ascension of Elijah into heaven took place (2 Kings 2:6-12). This is testified by the Pilgrim of Bordeaux in his *Itinerarium Burdigalense* (Itinerary of Bordeaux): "There is a place by the river, a little hill upon the further left bank, from which Elijah was caught up into heaven."



| The site commemorating the ascension of Elijah.

to Israel; a place of new beginnings for the nation of Israel and also for individuals; and a place of healing and inclusion of Gentiles.

It is no coincidence that it was at the River Jordan where John the Baptist was baptising the people to prepare for the coming of the Messiah: "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit" (Mark 1:7-8). John preached a message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, calling the people to consecrate themselves and to prepare themselves for the coming Messiah, just like the Israelites of old consecrated themselves by the river before crossing over the river to claim their Promised Land.



| Greek Orthodox Church of St John the Baptist, Bethany Beyond the Jordan.

Emperor Constantine, who was baptised just before his death in 337, was said to have expressed his regret at not being baptised in the River Jordan. Many pilgrims today, like those of the early church period, are baptised in the river. For those of us who have been baptised, there is an opportunity for us to remember and renew our baptismal vows and rededicate ourselves here.



| Baptismal font by the River Jordan, where we remember our baptism.



As you visit the baptismal site by Jordan River, take this opportunity to pause for a moment and reflect on your own journey of faith.

1. How has your journey of faith been? Do you still remember your baptism/confirmation when you made your public confession of faith? Is this faith still alive and vibrant? Are you still growing in your faith? Or do you feel that you have distanced yourself from the Lord? The commitment you made when you decided to follow Jesus may have faded. If this is so, take a moment to pray and allow the Lord to speak to you.
2. If there is a rededication service being held, you may rededicate your life to God, just like the Israelites of old consecrated themselves here.

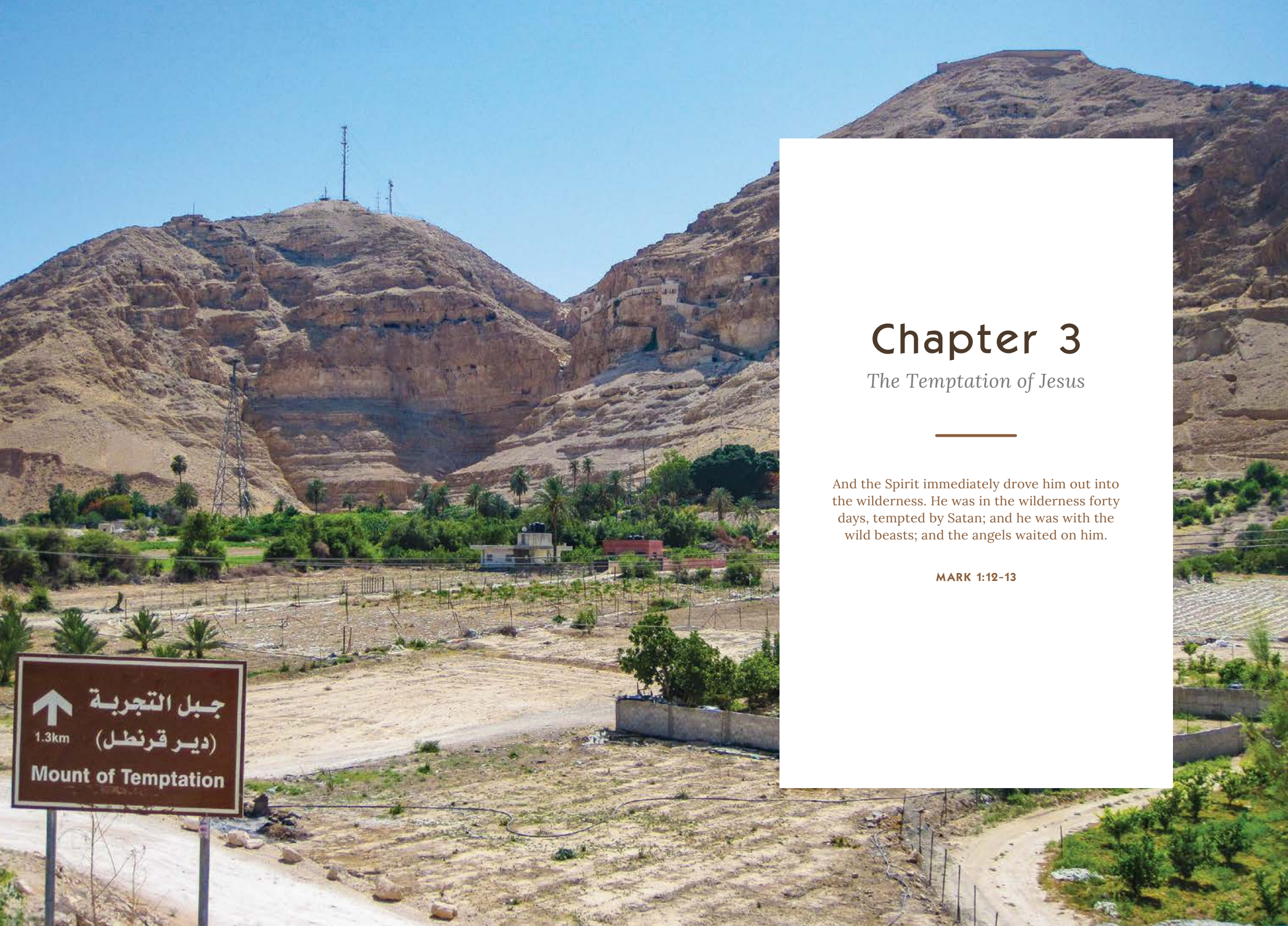
Almighty God, whose Son Jesus our Lord was baptised by the River Jordan in obedience to his calling: grant that we may live a life of surrender and obedience to Christ as we remember our baptism and confirmation, so that our whole spirit and body may be kept blameless at his coming again; through Jesus Christ, your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Chapter 3

The Temptation of Jesus

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

MARK 1:12-13





View of the Mount of Temptation.



Greek Orthodox Monastery of the Temptation, Mount of Temptation.

The Site: Mount of Temptation

The summit of the Mount of Temptation near Jericho is believed to be the place where Satan offered the world to Jesus in return for worshipping him. We cannot be sure of the site as the tradition of linking it to the temptation of Jesus only developed in the 12th century. A monastery belonging to the Greek Orthodox Church, which was reconstructed in the late 19th century, now stands at the site.

The Judean desert was frequently visited during the period of the early church; many pilgrims traversed there for a time of solitude in search of God. As a result, many monasteries were built in the desert where monks dedicated their lives to prayer and studying the Bible in order to know and love God.



Panoramic view of Jericho from the Mount of Temptation.

Monastery of St George, Wadi Qelt

Clinging on to a cliff of Wadi Qelt, a deep and narrow gorge forming part of the Roman route linking Jericho to Jerusalem, is the famous Monastery of St George located in the Judean desert. This beautiful monastery is well-known for its hospitality extended to pilgrims (including women). First established around the 5th century CE, this monastery was destroyed by the Persians in 614 and rebuilt in the 12th century during the Crusader period. However, reconstruction of the monastery was only fully carried out in the 19th century and is now inhabited by Greek Orthodox monks.



| Monastery of St George, Wadi Qelt.

The site of the monastery is believed to be where Elijah stayed on his way to Sinai (1 Kings 19). It is also associated with St Joachim, the father of the Virgin Mary the mother of Jesus. He was believed to be hiding and weeping here for 40 days because of the barrenness of his wife, St Anne, during which an angel announced to him the conception of the Virgin Mary. Many caves can be found in the cliffs of Wadi Qelt in which monks and hermits stayed for centuries.

Many believe Wadi Qelt to be the “valley of the shadow of death” mentioned in Psalm 23, although this cannot be fully ascertained. If the psalmist did have Wadi Qelt or a similar place like it in mind, we can imagine how he felt. There were no green pastures or continuous sources of still waters in Wadi Qelt. What the psalmist saw was the parched landscape with a narrow trail in between the steep cliffs. Yet, in his lived reality, he looked to God, the Shepherd, to provide what he needed. It required great faith for the psalmist to trust that God would provide “green pastures”, “still waters”, “a table before me in the presence of my enemies”, and a cup that “overflows” (Psalm 23:2-5) in the darkest valley. Likewise, in our desperate moments when we are most in need, we can trust that God is with us to provide for us.

Biblical Significance

Mark’s narrative of the temptation of Jesus is the briefest compared to the parallel accounts in Matthew (Matthew 4:1-11) and Luke (Luke 4:1-13). The Judean desert where Jesus went was a lonely and almost uninhabited place. Why did Jesus not begin his public ministry immediately after his baptism but go to the desert instead?

The desert is a place where God has dealt with his people throughout the Old Testament. The Israelites spent 40 years wandering in the Sinai and Negev Deserts from Egypt to the Promised Land. During their years of wandering, they received God’s Law including the Ten Commandments, went through times of testing, and trusted God for his provision of manna (see Deuteronomy 6 and 8). Yet, it was also the time where they rebelled against God by worshipping the golden calf. Years later, the psalmist reminded the Israelites of their disobedience: “O that today you would listen to his voice! Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness, when your ancestors tested me, and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work. For forty years I loathed that generation and said, ‘They are a people whose hearts go astray, and they do not regard my ways.’ Therefore in my anger I swore, ‘They shall not enter my rest.’” (Psalm 95:7-11). There are lessons to be learnt in the desert, the most important one being: trust in God at all times!

The desert was also a place where God spoke to his people. The prophet Isaiah announced his message of comfort to the exiled people (Isaiah 40:1-9). Isaiah saw the new work that God would do in the midst of his people as closely linked to the desert. Here, God promised he would restore his people. In addition, a desert was a place of refuge for David where he hid from King Saul at En Gedi, located to the west of the Dead Sea (1 Samuel 24). For Elijah, the desert was a place of rest and restoration where he heard the still, small voice of God (1 Kings 19:4-15).

Moving on to the New Testament, John the Baptist lived in the wilderness (Luke 1:80) and the voice of God first spoke to him in the desert (Luke 3:1-2). It was in the desert where John began his ministry, calling the people to repent and preparing them for the coming of the Messiah (Mark 1:4-8).

Therefore, it is not a coincidence that after the baptism of Jesus, the Spirit drove Jesus to the desert to be tempted by the evil one (Mark 1:12). One cannot help but to see the juxtaposition between Israel rebelling against God during the 40 years in the wilderness, and Jesus steadfastly obeying God in his 40 days in the desert. Israel failed as a people of God but Jesus proved faithful as a Son. Interestingly, in his temptation in the desert, Jesus cited three times from Deuteronomy (vv. 6:13, 16; 8:3 respectively). This is the very passage Moses instructed the people in the wilderness beyond the Jordan before they entered the Promised Land (v. 1:1).



The Stone of Temptation in the Monastery of the Temptation. It is believed that Jesus prayed here during his 40 days in the wilderness.

Jesus' extended period of fasting and seeking God in the desert subsequently became a pattern for the practices of the early church. The "desert fathers", a term describing the monks of the desert, is a movement started by a monk known as St Anthony the Great (250–356 CE) in Egypt. Wanting to seek God in solitude, St Anthony went to live alone in the desert around 280. Soon, this spiritual practice spread to other parts of the Middle East and became popular, and the movement flourished for about 300 years. These monks were determined to hear God's call, to imitate Christ, and to hunger for God's Spirit in the desert. Some of the writings of the desert fathers survived. One well-known writing is the work by John Moschus known as *The Spiritual Meadow*, written around 615, which gives us a glimpse into the monastic life in the Judean desert. Today, there

are opportunities to visit restored monasteries like St George's at Wadi Qelt or the Monastery of the Temptation at the Mount of Temptation.

For many of us who live hectic lives, a visit to the desert or a solitary place can be a spiritually-refreshing experience. One could visit a monastery, a quiet retreat place, or a secluded resort where silence replaces noise, stillness replaces hurriedness, and a slow rhythm of life fused with prayer and reflection replaces the need to rush from one place to another and be caught in the heavy traffic. Even though a pilgrimage to the Holy Land is often packed with a hectic itinerary, it would still be good for pilgrims to take a few minutes of silence during their visit to each site to pause, contemplate, and pray.



Reflection

Prayer

1. Reflect on the temptation of Jesus in the desert.
 - a) What is the significance of the temptation of Jesus in the desert?
 - b) What is the greatest temptation, if any, in your life at the moment that seems to draw you away from God? What must you do to overcome this temptation?
2. Take a moment to pause and reflect on what made those desert fathers abandon everything and live in the desert.
 - a) Could you ever do what the desert fathers did? Why or why not?
 - b) Have you ever taken a period of extended solitude or silent retreat to be with God (it could be a weekend, or a few days, or even a full 40 days)? If not, plan for one with a spiritual director where you may pause and hear from God, learn to imitate Christ, and hunger for God's Spirit.

Almighty God, whose Son Jesus our Lord was tempted by the devil in the desert and overcame all temptations: give to us strength to face the temptations in our life and courage to overcome them, so that we may be set free from the bondage of our sins, and live the abundant life which you have made known to us in your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.



Chapter 4

Calling of the Disciples

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

MARK 1:16-20