

LETTER 1

(When people refuse to accept you for what you are)

When the day drew near for him to be lifted up, Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make ready for him; but the people would not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem.

Luke 9:51-52

* * *

West of Capharnaum, Border of Samaria
Just before supper, April 28

Dear Disciple, my Friend,

Today is the beginning of my last journey. I'll end up in Jerusalem. There I'll be crucified; there, after my resurrection, I'll have my last words with my disciples before I return to my Father in heaven. Jerusalem's my destiny; there's no turning back. I'm determined to start the process of my final act of love.

I've decided something else, as well. Every now and then, I'll sit down and write you a letter. Not every day, but whenever the Spirit moves me to do so, and whenever I have the time.

Many reasons went into this decision. For one thing, writing helps me pray better. It also focuses my thoughts. It establishes constancy even more firmly in my heart, and gives meaning to my sufferings. As I put my thoughts on paper, I bend ideals back down to earth. By words, the Word of me is once again "made flesh."

I hope these letters will help you; I'm writing with you in mind. You'll know that I feel the same things you feel; I hurt from the same conditions that hurt you. You'll come to understand that I'm not only your Lord and friend. I'm also a "familiar" in your suffering.

There's one more reason I decided to start writing letters. I have a little more time on my hands. Before today, my apostles were always crowding around me, telling me about the experiences of their last adventure, asking me questions about what I had said...things like that. But now I'm left alone much more

than I used to be.

The atmosphere's rather glum. Andrew and Philip are getting supper ready, meager as it is. My apostles are clustered around in their own group on the other side of the fire, arguing among themselves. They're naturally upset. Short on supplies, they'd gone to buy some from a nearby Samaritan town, but were refused.

On previous occasions, they'd be all around me, asking me what to do, where to go next, whether we ought to retaliate. But they're not around me this evening. They're a little afraid of me now. They've been in shock since I told them I must set my face toward Jerusalem to be lifted up.

They understand my statement only in its dreadful aspect: lifted up on the cross. It'll be a long time before they understand that I also mean lifted up from death and then raised up to be with my Father in heaven. It'll be a long time before they understand. They stay with me, but they do so reluctantly now. Gone is the joy they had in my presence, gone the thrill they experienced when they preached in my name. They're restive, anxious, cautious. I can sense it. Their unhappy faces tell the story of their sadness...and my sorrow. They continue with me only because they hope I will change; they hope things will be like they were before. This is my prayer for them—and for you when you're lonely:

Lord God, my Father...look with love upon my disciples, my friends.

Life is not going well for them right now. In addition to their enemies, the friends they counted on seem to be drifting out of their lives. And new friends, new ways of acceptance, are not available. They don't know where to turn. They have no choice but to suffer, to go through it. Let them experience, as fully as they can, the same good resolve I feel to do your will...as I now begin my journey to Jerusalem.

Let them understand (more clearly now, *because they suffer*) that I am with them on their journey. And no matter what might happen—or who might hurt them—they will never have to know complete rejection. Amen.

Love,
Jesus

LETTER 2

(When people try to force you to use force)

As Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem, his disciples, James and John, said: "Lord, command fire to come down from heaven and consume [the unfriendly Samaritans]." But Jesus turned and rebuked them.

Luke 9:54-56

* * *

West of Capernaum, Border of Samaria

After supper, Same day

Dear Disciple, my Friend,

I'm glad I didn't mail my last letter. Something else came up. I want to add this to it. James and John, the sons of Zebedee, are both good men. I'm glad I chose them, but they do have fierce tempers. I've tried to warn them not to get so steamed up about things.

But they haven't changed...not yet. They got so mad at the Samaritans they wanted me to duplicate Elias's display of temper. They wanted me to get dramatic; to stand solemnly with arms outstretched on top of the hill facing town...and to send lightning on the discourteous folk below.

I have been with them so long, and they still don't understand. Love does not use force to make people behave. Love, real love, refuses to threaten, punish, or use coercion of any kind. And I must love. That's why I was born; that's why I have set my face toward Jerusalem. Of course, my decision to love puts me at a disadvantage. The people in that village would have given us all the groceries we wanted, if I had decided to show my power. They wouldn't have taken our money; they would've fawned all over us. If I had just done some mighty deed (like a well-aimed lightning blast consuming the back shed of the corner store!). After such a marvel, they would have done me favors—out of fear.

But I couldn't do it. Fear would have taken away their freedom. Thus, I had no choice; now I must simply suffer their lack of hospitality.

This saddens me so much. You know how it feels. You have friends, too, who keep egging you on with phrases like "They can't do that to you!" or "Give them a piece of your mind!" Or they will say, "Threaten them with this-or-that punishment if they don't shape up."

You know you can't do this. You have to suffer, not only from enemies who treat you harshly, but also (and worse) from friends trying to get you to be as evil as your enemies.

Don't lower yourself by an explosion of vengeful anger. You will be tempted to "get even"...but don't. Love refuses to use force of any kind, no matter how many friends attempt to persuade you otherwise.

When I return to my Father, I'll pray for you, especially during those times when you will be tempted to use violence in any form. This will be my prayer. I've prayed it myself—for myself—tonight. I'll pray it for you when I get to heaven:

Lord God, my Father...look with love upon my disciples, my friends. They have been hurt by people who have treated them unfairly. And they have friends who are advising anger. Those they are close to want them to use force to get their way.

Give them my serenity, Father. Let them feel my peace, even in their agitated state. Let them continue on their journey with only the standard of love to guide them, never with the weapons of war, or terror tactics, or threats of silent treatment.

They could get nailed to the cross for it. I certainly will. But let them see that love is the only way, the only way to life—your life and mine. Amen.

Love,
Jesus

LETTER 3

(When you see that you lack status, popularity, and security)

And it came to pass, as they went on their journey, that a man said to Jesus, "I will follow you wherever you go." But Jesus said to him: "Foxes have dens and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."

Luke 9:58

* * *

The hill country of Judea

Dawn, April 30

Dear Disciple, my Friend,

There was a heavy fog last night, and nobody had a good sleep. As a rule, the seamless garment my mother made me has all the warmth I need. But the wind was hard and the air was damp...and it's all I can do to keep my hands on this cup of coffee.

I feel about as much like writing this letter as I do moving the boulder I'm leaning on. But maybe *because* of my discomfort, and the fact that I don't feel like doing it, maybe this is just the right time for setting down what I have to say.

It's hard to explain, when I let one thought follow another. I could say that I have no doubt about my value, and that I trust completely in God my Father. But after I said this, if I *then* mentioned how difficult it is to feel marginal among my own people and how I suffer from their nonacceptance...you might say, "Well, if you're so sure you're doing the right thing, what difference does anything else make?"

On the other hand, if I begin by saying how sad I felt yesterday, when I complained that I have no security whatever—no sure place even to lay my head!—and then I talk about my certainty that I'm doing the right thing...you might doubt the second part of my statement, too.

But please believe me: both feelings are present to me. I feel both of them at the same time, a real buoyancy in my heart and a real feeling of sadness.

You know how it is. You've already made some decisions that changed your lifestyle. Deep down, you know you were right to take that chance, quit that job for another one, stop associating with that person, or take on that extra responsibility, whatever it was. They were good decisions. You're more whole because of them. Your life is more full.

Still, at the same time, you suffer from such decisions. You don't have the same security you used to have. You don't have the same number of friends. There were many things, enjoyable things, you used to be able to do, and now you can't do them because you lack the time or money. To a degree, you are "out of it." Foxes have their secure places, their snug homes; birds have their "nest eggs." You don't.

And so you suffer. You may still have a place to lay your head. But security (as the worldly spirit wants security) is beyond your reach. The responsibilities you have chosen have cut down your freedom to please yourself.

You also suffer from a lack of popularity. Oh, the people in your life that really count—they love you. But you can't be a part of the social whirl the way some do: for this kind of association demands leisure time, an easy pace, familiarity with new books and movies...and ample charge cards. These aren't available to you.

Never mind. Don't be discouraged because you feel the drain, as well as the rightness, of your decision. I'll be praying for you, always, and especially when thoughts about all those things you lack in life tend to get you down.

When I'm lifted up to heaven, I'll point you out to my Father...and I'll call you my friend:

Lord God, my Father...look with love upon my disciples, my friends. Be extra kind to them when they are tempted to doubt the decisions they have made.

Don't let the tempter get to them...even if their choices make them feel marginal because they have lost some of their status and luxuries.

Don't let them throw away their own nobility. Don't let them ever think they're worthless.

Give them my sense of worth, to add to theirs. Let that be all the security they need. Amen.

Love,
Jesus

LETTER 4

(When success seems to be a long way off)

[As Jesus continued on his journey] the seventy disciples returned with joy, saying: "Lord, even the devils are subject to us in your name." And Jesus said to them, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Behold, I have given you authority...over the power of the enemy; and nothing shall harm you...."

Luke 10:17-24

* * *

The hill country of Judea
Late evening, May 6

Dear Disciple, my Friend,

The fire has died down, and all my disciples are asleep. I can't sleep. In fact, I don't care to. It's my night to keep vigil. After I write this, I'll be off to that high hill, due north of here. I need time to pray to God, my Father.

Before I do, I must tell you how I feel. It's been a thrilling day for me—thrilling and joyful. I had been alone for a couple of days, after I sent my seventy followers, two by two, on their first missionary journey. They were given their pilot test, their first clash with the devil so that they'd know that they can—and must—deliver people from the power of evil.

They returned today, and it was beautiful. I have never seen them so happy, so sure of themselves, so glad to be with me. I was happy, too. Never felt happier. In a flash, I knew that Satan's dominion was over.

Tonight we had a party here in this desert place to celebrate the achievement. What we experienced was something like the joy that happens at the end of a war. But our joy was greater, for a greater war has been won.

In spite of all this, I'm now feeling dejected. Don't be surprised that I've gone from high to low so quickly. You've no doubt done it, too. It's not a matter of inconsistency; it's just that

one truth triggers off another truth. Both are true, but each one produced a different reaction. I rejoice, as I never have before, because victory is assured. My love has triumphed over hatred and division. The work I came to do is an assured success. But my death on the cross will be a terrible ordeal.

To some degree, you know how I feel tonight. When you've determined to start developing good habits—or to stop being controlled by bad ones—you know you're doing the right thing. There is a hunch about it, a presentiment that success will come, thanks to the order you put into your life.

But there are foes, inside yourself as well as outside, that will attack you for it. Maybe you've pledged to stop smoking or overeating, maybe to join Alcoholics Anonymous. Maybe you promised yourself you would pray longer each day, or spend more time with your family; maybe you said a firm no to a sinful habit, or to a group of companions who are dragging you down. As soon as you sense victory, the "losers" inside your soul and outside your body will fight like mad. And you won't feel success nearly as much as you will feel the tugs on your nerve—and nerves—trying to win you back.

Never mind. Keep going no matter how dreadfully your devils attempt to pull you into their power. My power is greater than theirs. If you stay with me, nothing can really harm you.

And remember that I'll stay with you. I'll remind my Father of the times when I also felt the fierce hatred of the adversary, and I'll pray for you this way:

Lord God, my Father...look with love upon my disciples,
my friends.

Comfort them when they are discouraged by the ordeal
of winning, yet not winning.

They are afraid, because the time it takes seems so very,
very long...before they master their emotions and have
success within their grasp. The devil of discouragement,
bad company, and old habits of self-indulgence—all these
keep trying to drag them away from their good resolve.

Let them feel joy in their successes and help them to be
strong. Strengthen them as you strengthened me. Amen.

Love,

Jesus

LETTER 5

(When people keep checking up on you)

And [as he continued on his journey] behold, a certain lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying: "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"... Then the lawyer, wishing to justify himself, said to Jesus: "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers...."

Luke 10:25-36

* * *

Close to the Jericho Road, Judea
After supper, May 9

Dear Disciple, my Friend,

I don't want you to think that I'm always having heavy thoughts. (I do write, as a rule, about what I suffer because I want you to learn from my example how to handle your own trials. But even on this last journey, there are events that have something upbeat to them. I want to share these, too.)

All in all, it's been a good week. I already wrote you about the happy reunion of my disciples. They forgot their gloom of a few weeks back. They could only think of the praise due to the Father and the power of my name.

And something good happened today, too, and I'm really relishing it. On the surface, it may not seem like much of an experience. After all, I've preached the good news under heavy opposition before. But this was different.

This afternoon my enemies sent one of their brilliant prosecuting attorneys to test me. He didn't want to learn the truth; he only wanted to trap me or to make a statement to convince ordinary people I was a fake.

For a moment, he made me very angry and very hurt. All I

want to do is to teach God's truth and do my work of love. Why can't they leave me alone? Why can't they wait and see what I produce in the long run...without putting pressure on me with their caustic questions and their hate-burning eyes?

You know how it feels. Maybe you don't have enemies as relentless as mine, but you have some. They take away your composure. You feel them ready to pounce on you as soon as you make a mistake. It's so frustrating at times; you feel like screaming.

That's how I felt at first. Then I thought, "Wait a second! This is a great opportunity." The best way to get people's attention is to let them eavesdrop on a conversation that doesn't directly involve them. This is especially true if the conversation is a battle of wits.

I talked about love and the sacrifice that love demands. I told the parable of the Good Samaritan, which is one of my best! As I think about it, the story just seemed to pour out of me. My adrenaline was really flowing. Not only were the senses of my disciples perked up; mine were, too.

Think of these things, my disciple, my friend, when you get stuck in similar circumstances. Be flexible. Much good can come out of a bad situation. Love can happen in the midst of hatred and enmity, if you are prepared for the possibilities. Don't just grouse and get grumpy. Turn the situation around. Use your wits and let the Spirit guide you.

Don't worry. My prayers—now, and when I get to heaven—will be with you. Prayers like this:

Lord God, my Father...look with love upon my disciples, my friends. Help them when enemies gang up on them, or when co-workers start checking up on them. These things hurt. I know. I hurt from the same things.

But this is what I ask you, Father: help them not to resort to angry outbursts or moodiness. Help them use these occasions profitably, as challenges to test their love and as opportunities to show love to others.

Let them come alive to the possibilities for growth. Don't let them go dead on us...or others...or on themselves. Amen.

Love,
Jesus

LETTER 6

(When people won't listen to you)

As Jesus continued on his journey to Jerusalem, he entered a village...and a woman named Martha received him into her house. She had a sister called Mary who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving....And the Lord said to her: "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needed. Mary has chosen the good portion...."

Luke 10:38-42

* * *

Village of Bethany, Judea
11:00 PM, May 21

Dear Disciple, my Friend,

It's very late as I write this. I've had a long day and a stimulating evening. I want to get this off to you while the experience is still fresh in my mind.

I've been busy helping people, curing them, preaching the good news to them. I needed to unwind...just to "be"...with two of my friends. Talking to close friends is different from talking to the crowd, or even to my disciples. With them, I have to be thinking of everything: to make sure I say the right things and not too much at once. With friends like Martha and Mary, I just spill out what's in my heart.

You know how it is. You have people you can relax and simply be yourself with. With them, you can let the words come out just the way they will. It's good to have such friends, especially after weeks of working hard and being careful about what you say and do.

That's how I felt this afternoon. I didn't care what I had for supper. What I wanted to do was take off my sandals, sit in an easy chair and tell two sympathetic people how tired I feel and how I fear the future, when I finally get to Jerusalem. How will I handle it? Will the hatred of my enemies scandalize my disci-

ples? Will anyone stick up for me or take my side? I wanted to talk about these things, and I needed their support. I guess I just wanted to be assured that they cared enough to sit down and listen.

Mary did. Martha didn't. She was too busy, too distracted. I know she was doing it for me, but no matter what I said to her, she wanted to feel right about herself before she could relax. I told her I'd be happy with just a bowl of leftover soup and some bread. But she wouldn't allow it. She even tried to make her sister get up and fuss over the big meal, too. It's hard when your close friends put demands on you like that. Martha didn't realize that she was forcing me to suppress my needs so that her need to be a good hostess could be fulfilled. But she was.

You know people like Martha, people who have to feel good about themselves and get everything "right" according to their own needs before they'll permit themselves—or you—to be comfortable. Know that this is also part of the passion. You can't change certain people; you can't force them to forego their compulsions and eccentricities. You live with it. You love them patiently—and you keep going. (Remember, you aren't perfect either. You have your own eccentricities!)

Two things I want to say before I seal this. There are both "Marthas" and "Marys" in your life. Be glad for those who have good ears...and be patient with those who are too busy. And remember, always, that I'm with you. I'm one of your "Mary friends." Like her, I'm never too busy to sit down and listen to the concerns of your heart.

Indeed, when I'm lifted up in glory, this is the prayer I'll pray to my Father...Our Father:

Lord God, my Father...look with love upon my disciples, my friends. Give them my strength when people they have hoped to get support from are too distracted by their own pursuits to take time off—who are too busy with their own bothering to bother with them.

Father, cheer them up with the presence of my Spirit. Let them talk to me. Assure them that I understand, and I want to listen...and I will give them my wholehearted attention. Amen.

Love,
Jesus

LETTER 7

(When people spread scandal about you)

Now [as Jesus continued on his journey] he was casting out a demon that [had made a man] dumb. ... When the demon had gone out, the dumb man spoke. And the people marveled. But some of them said, "He casts out demons by Beelzebub, the prince of demons!"

Luke 11:14-15

* * *

Hill country, North of Judea
Just before supper, June 1

Dear Disciple, my Friend,

Believe it or not, I wasn't planning to write about the psychological passion I endured today. I did—and I will—suffer from the malice of my enemies. They have many tricks, but just one strategy: they keep trying to ruin the good I do by mounting a whispering campaign against me.

But by now they have no more surprises. I take it for granted that they'll try to turn my good deeds into mean intentions. The reason they do this is because they themselves are mean. They perform their religious duties for selfish reasons. And so, they think all kindness is manipulative...as theirs is.

Today's confrontation is a case in point. I healed a man who had no power of speech. The ordinary people marveled. When I expel a devil who's made a man mute, I must be more powerful than the devil. Only God has such power. Therefore, I must be from God.

Obvious! But not to my enemies. They claim I cure maladies because I get my power from the "boss devil," Beelzebub. Ridiculous, of course, but my apostles were really shocked. They're suffering deeply because of my battles with all these influential people.

Because of their reaction, it occurred to me that you, too, will suffer some of your deepest hurts for the same reason. After all, your life is linked with mine. You, too, will be taunted by those who attack you for your faith. You'll discover that some people who don't go to church any more feel they must be defensive about it and label you a pious fraud because you do.

Others yet will interpret the good you do as a ploy of pride, or a desire to be in the limelight. They will say, for instance, that you're kind to people only because you want to get on their good side so that, later on, you can manipulate them for your own selfish purposes. Things like that.

Never mind. There will always be such people in your world. Develop a thicker skin. This is what I just told my apostles; that's what I'm telling you.

Don't let people get you down. Remember, I'm on your side, encouraging you. I'll continue to do so—for you, and for all who suffer like you.

When I'm with my Father, I'll look at you and notice your downcast face...and I'll pray:

Lord God, my Father...give courage and consolation to my disciples, my friends.

They hurt from the malice of their enemies. They feel they don't deserve such hatred...when they, for their part, are only trying to do good. Also, they feel the sting of those who try to destroy their faith with clever arguments and biting sarcasm.

Let them remember me, when they get down...how I suffered in the same way. The servant can't expect to be greater than the master.

Send them my Spirit who will tell them so. And give them a tougher skin toward enemies...and a softer heart toward us. Amen.

Love,
Jesus

LETTER 8

(When people treat you superficially)

[Continuing on his journey, Jesus was preaching to the people. Just before he finished] a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him: "Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts you sucked!" But Jesus said: "Blessed, rather, are those that hear the word of God and keep it."

Luke 11:27-28

* * *

Near ruins of the ancient Moabites
After supper, June 8

Dear Disciple, my Friend,

It's been a good week, all in all, and yet I feel sad. The sadness is nothing specific; can't put my finger on it. But I can't snap my fingers to take it away, either. It just hangs in there!

And there's no focus to it. All future time is placed into one draught of bitter wine...and I must drink it until the world ends. It's the most universal frustrating sorrow of them all. "Frustrating" because I can't do anything about it.

All these woeiful conjectures have been sparked by an incident that, of itself, was almost inconsequential. There was a woman in the crowd this afternoon who shouted me a blessing that the whole crowd heard. No doubt, it was supposed to be encouraging; but it was all wrong.

Oh, she meant well. God will bless her for blessing me. But she didn't (or couldn't) understand what I was saying. She simply heard me speak, and thought I was agreeable...and then thought how happy my mother must be because I grew up in such a way that would make any mother proud.

She never "heard" me at all. The challenge of my words, the revelation of God's stupendous love, the work I must do before I triumph over evil—all this went right past her.

There's nothing I can do about it. My words can't penetrate the surface. I'll be forever typecast as a "nice man" who said "nice things" (to make his mother proud). She listened half-distractedly

and then probably went off to be half-heartedly impressed by other nice things said by somebody else.

For all time...for so many people...I'll be typecast this way. That woman in the crowd is representative of those who consider money and meetings more important than anything I say...those for whom Christmas is a day for the family get-together...and those for whom my Easter (the very conquering of death!) serves as the occasion for showing off new clothes. For many people, I won't be the means of their salvation; I'll only be the reason for a few holidays throughout the year!

The Pharisees are refreshing by comparison! Even if they're my enemies, at least I've made them think. It's the slouchers who sadden me the most, those who think they like me, but for all the wrong reasons. They haven't understood my claim to be God's only Son.

Pardon me for going on like this, but I have to get these things off my chest. Tonight, I have to believe you'll take this letter seriously (and read between the lines) so I can revive my hope that there are individuals who'll be more than superficial in their understanding of me.

You know what I mean. You, too, have been hurt by inconsiderate and superficial people. They ask, "How are you?" but they don't really want to know. You'll feel the sting when something important needs to be said—and passionately needs to be understood—but friends are too preoccupied to hear it.

I'll hurt, but write a letter to me, the same way I'm writing to you. It helps. And know that I'll always be with you—even in the dull throbb of your incommunicable pain:

Lord God, my Father...pay attention to my disciples, my friends. Nobody else seems to. Their best qualities and their noblest thoughts go unattended and unremarked.

Discouragement can set in, unless they are nourished by acceptance. We know how important they are. Help them to know it, too. And even if their whole world won't, or can't listen seriously to them...we can, and want to...and we do. Let them be sure of this. Amen.

Love,

Jesus

LETTER 9

(When you realize that even your friends may desert you)

[As he continued on his journey] Jesus said to his disciples, "I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have no more they can do to you.... I tell you, all who acknowledge me, I will also acknowledge before the angels of God, but those who deny me... will be denied before the angels of God."

Luke 12:4-9

* * *

Back in Judea
Late morning, June 9

Dear Disciple, my Friend,

I almost regret what I wrote you yesterday about the Pharisees being refreshing compared to superficial people. That idea opened up a floodgate of sadness.

Let me tell you how my thought process went to work: I began to wonder which kind of rejection was really worse: the relentless animosity of the Pharisees or the amiable disinterest of my superficial listeners.

The Pharisees have all the power. They have a weapon that causes people to shake in their boots. They wield their threats like a club. All they have to do is point the finger of blame, and the accused person will be kicked out of the synagogue. This is a heavy threat, even to the irreligious. "Expelled from the synagogue" means more than excluded from religious worship. It means being rejected by society and all the benefits that accrue to it. People who acknowledge me are being threatened this way. If they follow me, they won't be able to pray with their families, sell property, or even go to the market for shopping. They'll be ostracized; they'll be "social lepers."

Some won't be able to endure such punishment. That's what Satan tried to warn me about when he tempted me in the desert. The world is ruled by control, not by love. Yet I must love. I must not allow myself or any of my disciples to "control" others.

This makes me a person who is not "with it." That's why some disciples who want so much to be accepted by society will leave me, and I'll miss them.

You've no doubt felt the same way. Some of your best decisions are prompted by your love for me, but you need courage to stand by them. Your enemies will hate you for them. And you'll be flattered for being my disciple.

Then some of your friends will fear the flaunting. They'll realize that they've become less socially acceptable because they associate with you. They will also want to disown you. Some already have, and this hurts.

Never mind. Love, real love, is proven by courage and patient endurance. Your greatest sorrows will come when you painfully watch fair-weather friends show you their backs as soon as your friendship forces them to make sacrifices.

But I'll be with you, and I always have been. Even in your pain, try to feel the spirit of my prayer for you:

Lord God, my Father...look with love upon my disciples, my friends. They are true friends. I know it now, for they keep my law of love, even as they are rejected.

Yet they want life to be easy and secure, just like everybody else. They don't always want to be battling against the way the world does things. They know the power they could have, if only they gave vent to angry outbursts or threats of silent treatment.

But they refuse such shabby weapons. Their way is one of patience, love, and trust. And so they sometimes feel marginal. When they are in such straits, let them go to the friends they still have, and come to us—and come to know what friends are for. Amen.

Love,
Jesus

LETTER 10

(When people are too selfish to care about you)

[As Jesus continued on his journey] someone said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." But Jesus said to him, "Who appointed me a judge or arbitrator for you?" And he said to all, "Take heed and beware of greed; for a person's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."

Luke 12:13-21

* * *

Galilee, Near the brownstone caves
Early evening, June 16

Dear Disciple, my Friend,

We have just finished supper and my disciples are cleaning up. They're really good men. Without my saying anything, they knew I wanted to be left alone for a while. I have to think things out and spend time, much time in prayer with my Father. But first a word to you.

It hit me again today; it laid such a load of sorrow on me. I probably wouldn't have even paid attention—it would not have mattered much—if I were not going to Jerusalem to be lifted up.

But I am going. And I wonder what my work will mean. Will all I do make any difference to anybody? That young man who interrupted me this afternoon, wanting me to give him leverage in his family quarrel about money, he's like the woman I met a few days ago. Both represent so many millions of people who'll come after them.

The woman was only superficial, but this man was mean and manipulative. He didn't listen to me. It meant nothing that I challenged him to have a change of heart, to stop being so selfish and money-grubbing, to shape up and turn his life to one of loving service. All my teaching flew right past him. He was looking out only for himself. He wanted to use me; he wanted to change the heart of somebody else, so he could be richer and happier.

You know how it feels to suffer like this, to be exploited by friends and acquaintances. They don't care about you or about any real relationship with you. They just want to use you: to get more money for themselves, or have an audience so that they can air their gripes, or get you to be on their side in their never-ending family squabbles!

They want you to do something for them so that they can make other people more pliable to their selfish wishes.

Never mind. You can't change them. They'll always think everybody else should change, never themselves. Keep going, despite the pain you feel when you want to be loved and listened to...yet are only thought of as "useful," a broker for other people's self-interests.

You can't get through to them any more than I could. But you can get through to me. I'm asking you to let me get through to your heart, too. Then you'll hear the prayer I pray to God my Father for you:

Lord God, my Father...look with love upon my disciples, my friends. They sometimes feel unwanted, because others want them only for their service. They are only "functions" to serve other people's selfish ends.

It's hard to live like this. They feel like quitting sometimes. Quitting on everybody, even on us. "What's the use?" they say.

Show them, Father, by the Spirit of my presence, that we love them. You sent me to tell them so. I journeyed to Jerusalem to show them. We are different from people who try to use them.

Let them understand that not everyone is selfish. Help them to be a bit more easy on the world around them, and a lot more easy on those who are true friends—like us. Amen.

Love,
Jesus

LETTER 11

(When you are saddened by constant complainers)

[As Jesus continued on his journey] he said, "Do not be anxious about... what you shall eat or what you shall wear... Which of you, by worrying about it, can add six inches to your stature? If then, you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why are you anxious about the rest?"

Luke 12:22-26

* * *

Barren sand dunes, East of the Jordan
After lunch, July 4

Dear Disciple, my Friend,

"So small a thing." I said it again yesterday. It seems that smallness and pettiness are getting to me these days. Maybe the heat has something to do with it, and this desert place we have set our tents in.

So many people are all upset over things that are of no more account than these grains of sand I hold in my hand. I'm tempted to wonder if people are all the same—stretching out for all eternity, as far as the eye can see. Is it to be forever a matter of worrying about money, jealousy over clothes, griping about food, waiting for the paycheck, and arguing about what to spend it on?

Is this what I was sent for? Will I die on the cross to give people the wonderful things I hold out for them, only to realize they aren't reaching... they won't accept? They have their hands clenched, holding on to their own worries.

You know what I mean. It's happened to you, too. You want to talk to some special person in your life. You have something important to say, but he or she won't even listen to you.

It's like trying to reach somebody on the telephone and the line is always busy. They're preoccupied, caught up with anxious concerns, disjointed by their own crushed hopes and their disappointments in the past. They keep bringing up their list of

gripes about how life has treated them so unfairly.

You might as well be talking in a foreign language. They can't hear you anyway. Remember Martha, a few months back? She couldn't listen because she had to get everything right with herself before she could relax. Well, the complainers are much worse than that. They have to feel right with themselves, too. But the only way they can stop fussing about life and worrying about the future is to turn back time... to "do over" the situations that caused them sadness in all their yesterdays.

Martha only had to prepare a dinner. These people would have to change the past, which is, of course, impossible. They have to change the past, fuss about what is, and worry that what fume over what was, fuss about what is, and worry that what "will be" will bring more of the same bad news.

Never mind. Don't feel bad because you feel this way. You're bound to feel bad when others (for whatever reason) won't listen to you. You can't do a thing about it, so accept the hurt. But don't let it stop you from loving. When I'm lifted up to heaven, I'll send you my Spirit. When the Spirit comes, you'll be able to accept the rejection and persevere in life—both at the same time.

This is the prayer I'll pray for you to God my Father: (Just make sure your own head is not busy with worry. Then you'll be able to hear me clearly.)

Lord God, my Father... look with love upon my disciples, my friends.

They sometimes don't know where to turn. They get so down, so deeply down, when good things don't seem to show up. They get depressed in the company of those who find constant fault and bellyache about what's wrong.

Let my disciples part company from these people now and then. Let them find a quiet space, where hope can happen. There, let them turn to us. See to it that they give us permission to give them our encouragement... and our courage. Amen.

Love,

Jesus

LETTER 12

(When people are too lazy to help you)

[As Jesus continued on his journey] he said: "Let your loins be girded [make sure you are wearing your work clothes] and your lamps burning....Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake....He will put on his apron and have them sit at table and he will come and serve them."

Luke 12:35-38

* * *

Tent site, East of Carmel
Just after supper, July 18

Dear Disciple, my Friend,

We had a delicious meal tonight. Andrew cooked it. They all take turns. Some are better than others. Andrew's the best.

I think the meal was memorable also because there were no squabbles or petty jealousies about who was sitting next to me or who was monopolizing the conversation or who was doing more work than the others.

This afternoon, I warned them against getting lazy or complacent. It's so easy to get this way, even for good people. My apoties are all good men, but they need a jolt every once in a while.

So do you. The "work clothes" I talked about, and the "lamps burning"—these words are symbols, of course. They say, "Concentrate on serving others: don't think so much about yourself."

I don't mean you shouldn't have your rest or enjoy yourself from time to time. I just did this very night. What I'm saying is, don't start thinking that other people exist to take care of you. If you start "expecting things from others," you'll soon feel depressed. You'll get angry at those who don't fulfill your needs. You'll begin to nag, telling others "It's not fair!"

Watch out for those words, "It's not fair!" When your life on earth is over, if you have persevered, I'll put on the apron and serve you. But until then, you have the apron, and you had better use it. You're to love others, even when they don't love you—

even when they let you do most of the chores.

Don't worry. I know the good you're doing. I appreciate it. Wait for my rewards...and for the time that I see fit to give you these rewards.

But having said that, I want to balance my warning with some consolation. Believe me, I know how disturbing it can be to get stuck with an overload of work...when other people are too busy to notice that you need cooperation.

It's okay to feel bad when you are somehow forced to shoulder more than your share. It's okay to be hurt by such things. But it's not okay to forget my teaching about the "work clothes," the lesson I taught my disciples this afternoon. And it's not okay to forget my example of loving service for you...or my insistence that deep down I am the only one you need. I know what's going on when you're "put upon"; I appreciate you for what you're doing.

When I'm lifted up, this will be my prayer to God my Father...especially when the shirkers of your world drain your enthusiasm and sap your strength:

Lord God, my Father...look with love upon my disciples, my friends. They are unfairly treated sometimes. They are expected to give more time, more energy, than other people.

Promise them, Father, that I will do all I can to inspire the lazy ones to take more responsibility and share the workload. But I can't force anyone—they know that. So sometimes they'll be stuck.

Even so, let them continue their work of love. It can't last forever. In heaven I will sit them down at a place of honor, and I will wait on them. Amen.

Love,
Jesus

LETTER 13

(When you are saddened by family feuds)

[As Jesus continued on his journey] he said: "If the servant says to himself 'my master is delayed in coming'; and he begins to beat the other servants, and to eat and drink and get drunk...The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect to, and at an hour he does not know, and will punish him."

Luke 12:45-46

* * *

Tent site, East of Carmel
Early morning, July 19

Dear Disciple, my Friend,

I've more to say about what I said last night, but I wanted to write two different letters, so you can pray over this at a different time. Enough for one day, to digest my warning about laziness and my reminder that I feel it, too, when you suffer from the shirkers of your world.

But this is something else, and the suffering goes deeper. Almost every family has its feuding members. Almost every person can tell a story of grief because someone is a prisoner of drink, or drugs, or gambling, or some compulsion.

Probably you have a tale of grief, too. If not now, you've had one or will have. Feuds will continue, no matter how you try to patch things up. Sometimes for years on end (maybe for life), the bottles or the needles will have more power over your loved ones than anything you can say or do for them.

This hurts...it has to. It hurts me also. It's hard enough to be rejected by other people's laziness; it's much worse to be rejected by somebody's obsession. I know how it feels. I grieve as you grieve. But you must continue and do your work of love. Sometimes you can patch things up. Keep hoping, praying, and thinking of new approaches. Sometimes you can reach the addicts so

that they'll move themselves to seek help and break the chains that bind them.

But whether you're successful or not, you have to keep trying. Don't give up. If you do, you'll give up on yourself...and then on us.

Every rejection of your love is a rejection of love itself. And I am love. For centuries, I will feel the full brunt of all who would rather beat up on people or on themselves than be patient with life's delays. You're hurt by only a few of them, but I'm hurt by the rejection of them all.

I don't say this to belittle your sorrows or to make light of you. I say it only to remind you of my compassion. I know what you're going through; I experience the same helplessness.

I had to continue even though I was aware that so many of my disciples will end up the way I predicted yesterday afternoon. It hasn't stopped me from loving them. I'll still love them, even to the cross.

I urge you also (indeed, I command you) to do the same. Don't worry, I'll be with you. This is my prayer for you when you think hopelessness is all there is:

Lord God, my Father...look with love upon my disciples, my friends. They're troubled because they don't seem to be getting anywhere. No matter what they do, they cannot stop the compulsive behavior of people they love.

Because they aren't successful, they are beginning to doubt themselves. Don't let them do that, Father. Cheer them up. Remind them that I wasn't all that successful either. Love, when it's real love, does a lot of losing. Let them remember my helplessness...and also my compassion. Amen.

Love,
Jesus

LETTER 14

(When you see people squandering their gifts)

[As Jesus continued on his journey] he said: "The servant who knew the master's will, but did not...act according to it, shall receive a severe beating...Everyone to whom much is given, of that person much will be required; and of one to whom people commit much, they will demand the more."

Luke 12:47-48

* * *

Nazareth
Mid-morning, August 1

Dear Disciple, my Friend,

Yesterday, I sent my disciples home for a couple of days. I wanted a break, too. I wanted to see my mother and talk over some things that have been puzzling me. I wanted to know how she's coping with loneliness, now that she is by herself. Other things, too, that I can't go into.

Just one night in my own bed and I'm feeling better. Early this morning I took a long walk around the countryside. Everything is growing so beautifully. Vines and trees are bursting with fruit. Fields are rich with grain. I especially enjoyed passing by those fields and vineyards where Joseph and I used to work as hired hands. Good memories came back.

Yet there was a tinge of sadness to it. I felt much more successful those days than I feel now, as Messiah of my people. Then there was satisfaction in my work. Now, though I'm working much, much harder, the results I see are much more meager. Human obstinacy and laziness are not as easy to work with as the soil of the receiving earth.

Even my disciples are difficult...so much has been given them by my presence and patient teaching. And some of them will squander it away. Already, some of my Seventy have left me. I'm not even sure of the allegiance of my twelve apostles—not all of them. I've warned them not to fritter away their talents, or the

rich possibilities of life I'm offering.

But some of them have done just that, and countless multitudes after them will do the same. They'll spurn my gifts, make light of their calling by God, misuse their energies by sulking and selfishness. The good wheat I've sown in hearts will come to nothing.

You know how it feels. You can't do anything about it, either. I'll happen to a friend or a member of your family. Often, the most talented—those for whom so much time was spent in cultivating their gifts—they are the ones who squander themselves most casually.

Never mind. We must continue to love. We can't give up on anybody, even though some give up on us (and on themselves). No matter how discouraged you feel, prepare yourself to persevere in hope. I'll be with you in all the let-downs of your trying times:

Lord God, my Father...look with love upon my disciples, my friends. I pray for them—not only for pretests, parents, educators, and counselors of every kind—but for all people who care about their friends.

They hurt, sometimes, when they see such a waste of talent in the ones they love. So much could be done...if only the shiftlessness could be shaken out of them...if only they had more confidence in themselves. But patience, only patience. Father, give those who care for others the spirit of my patience.

And if they aren't successful, even then...let them reach us—to be reminded that nothing is really wasted. As long as they have loved, whether the results are weeds or wheat, love has been registered by love: our love for them. Amen.

Love,
Jesus

LETTER 15

(When you meet with indignation—over the wrong things)

[As Jesus continued on his journey] there were some present who told him of the Galileans [who were massacred by Pilate's soldiers]. He answered them: "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners...because they suffered thus? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you will likewise perish."

Luke 13:1-5

* * *

Outskirts of Capharnaum
Late evening, August 2

Dear Disciple, my Friend,

My mini-vacation is over, and I am right back into the thick of it again. My apostles spent their time off fishing. They look relaxed, and are high-spirited again. I met them at Peter and Andrew's house. But we had hardly left town when we drew a crowd.

Yet, this was a good day for the most part. As long as I was healing and blessing children, I was unmolested. But as soon as I started preaching about a change of heart and repentance, I got all kinds of flack.

It's something like the distraction that the young man tried to cause a few weeks ago, wanting me to make his brother do right by him and share the inheritance. Only this is more grand-scale. Today the crowd wanted me to express my indignation over all kinds of injustices.

They wanted me to criticize the police brutality of the Roman Empire, especially to comment about the recent scandal when 20 people were murdered in a synagogue in Galilee. Certainly such things are wrong, but I'll not be tricked into ranting against all social injustices. That's a favorite dodge. It always has been and always will be. When people don't want to look at the imperfections within themselves (the beam that is lodged in their own eye), they start joining the choruses of indignation about what's

wrong with other people, especially what's wrong with the most flagrant abusers of public trust.

You know how it feels to listen helplessly as hypocrites protest over some pet peeve. Their own house is a mess, yet they're champions of righteousness in every area but the one that needs to be fixed up first.

There's not much you can do about it. Suffer it; that's all I could do. I kept trying to pull people back into themselves. I wanted them to redirect some of their indignation so that it would shake them out of their complacency, but I wasn't very successful.

You won't be, either. Never mind. All you can do is try. You very well may have to admit your lack of success. But don't get trapped into becoming indignant against the indignant ones. You can easily slide right into the mood of people who are angry all the time. Be careful of this.

I'll be praying that you may resist the rigidity of protest:

Lord God, my Father...look with love upon my disciples, my friends. They get into a bind sometimes. They know it is right—I urged them to it—to work for social justice and to protest cruelty and exploitation whenever it occurs. I bless them for their work in healing social evils.

But balance, Father...give them balance. Don't let them get so caught up in their causes that they forget to pray, or neglect the need to subdue all of their own self-serving ways. Don't let them become embittered when all they hear, all around them, are causes of unrest and cries of outrage.

Give them the calm, Father, of the last words of the prayer I taught them. You will deliver them from evil...as long as they keep working against the evil in themselves. Amen.

Love,

Jesus

LETTER 16

(When you try so long to help someone—and nothing works)

[As Jesus continued toward Jerusalem] he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree...and came seeking fruit on it, and found none. And he said to the vinedresser, 'Look, these three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down; why should it use up ground?' The vinedresser answered, 'Let it alone, sir...until I dig around it and put on manure. And if it bears fruit next year, well and good. But if not...we will cut it down!'"

Luke 13:6-9

* * *

Town park, Capharnaum
Lunchtime, August 3

Dear Disciple, my Friend,

I'm taking the afternoon off. There are no crowds to talk to because they all went home. No sense trying to strike up a conversation with my apostles, either. They're also terribly upset over what I said this morning.

For months I've been telling them about the kindness of my Father. He's not a severe autocrat without compassion for human weakness. He wants us to grow, and wants to help us grow. Just an hour ago I spoke of him as if he were ordering me to "cut down" everybody who's not producing good deeds, not bearing fruit.

I seemed to be the gentle one, willing to work with people, trying to change their hearts—no matter how slim the results. He seemed to be the angry one, tired of the lack of responses he gets and regretful that he sent me in the first place.

That was their immediate interpretation. They thought it was a "family argument," a clash between the disgusted father and the patient son, pleading for more time. Not so. Not at all. I'm consistent when I speak of my Father in terms of mercy, compassion, loving-kindness. The "clash" lies within my own soul.

There's a conflict between part of myself against the other part.

My patient side won over my angry side. But the victory wasn't achieved without struggle. Sometimes my feelings want to direct my actions into an outburst of great annoyance. I've tried, for so long, to get people to be more kind and less closed, more thoughtful of God and others, less selfish and disgruntled with their lives. I haven't accomplished much. Oh, they marvel at my healings and are impressed with my words, but nothing lasts.

You know what I'm going through. You can identify with me. You try and try to help those you love. You've tried for years. Nothing happens. Their attitudes don't change. It might be their attitude toward religion...or their compulsive anger...or their refusal to be anything but selfish.

You feel the same way I feel today, and it's tempting to give in to frustration. You have your own words for it: "What's the use?" or "I can't put up with it any longer"...something like that. Whatever the expression, you'll declare an end to your attempts. You'll say: "I cut myself off from those I'm concerned about. Why should I continue, when they never seem to change?" Don't let this side of you get control. Recognize it as a temptation, a test. Meanwhile, in the presence of my Father, I pray for you:

Lord God, my Father...look with love upon my disciples, my friends. They get so frustrated at times...so close to the end of their rope. Try as they might, work as hard as they can, their efforts to help some people come to nothing.

See to it that they don't stop trying. Let them be patient. Discover for them a different approach...

And let them remember me and the suffering, like their own, that I went through. Give them heart so that they may take heart. Make sure they never cut down the ones they love, or cut themselves off from hope...or from the source of hope: ourselves. Amen.

Love,

Jesus

LETTER 17

(When you suffer from unanswered prayers)

[As he continued on his journey] Jesus was teaching in a synagogue. And behold, there was a woman who for eighteen years had been possessed by a spirit that left her enfeebled; she was bent over double and quite unable to stand upright. When Jesus saw her...he said, "Woman, you are delivered from this infirmity." The synagogue official was indignant because Jesus had healed on the sabbath...But the Lord answered him: "This woman, whom Satan has bound for these eighteen years, ought not she be loosed from this bond?"

Luke 13:10-17

* * *

Near the Capharnaum-Nazareth Road
After lunch, August 12

Dear Disciple, my Friend,

We all need a long siesta this afternoon. Philip suggested it, and I agreed. We've had quite a hot spell, and we're thankful for these few shade trees to sit under.

Maybe it was the weather that made the synagogue official so spiteful. Just because it was the sabbath, he wanted to forbid me to heal a poor old woman who has been bent over for eighteen years. Eighteen years—never able to see the stars or watch a sunset!

I knew her personally. Nazareth's not very far away. We've chatted many times. The first time I met her was about sixteen years ago. Joseph was still alive; he introduced her to me. Oh, how my heart went out to her. I've prayed and prayed that my Father would heal her infirmity. It never happened.

I had to wait all these years until God my Father told me to begin my ministry. And finally—after eighteen years—I was able to help the poor woman...and that character in the synagogue tried to sour it on me.

You can understand my feelings. Either you or someone you

know has gone through a similar experience. You've waited and waited, years and years on end, for a cure. Someone you know and love is sick. It could be a physical handicap such as my neighbor had, an emotional disability, or something else that enfeebles the individual. You've prayed, and nothing happens. My Father's ways are mysterious. Why some are cured, and some are not...I cannot fully understand myself.

Another part of your suffering will be this: When a cure does come, there may be some characters who'll try to take away your joy over it. They'll call you a fool for having wasted so much time and effort on that person (or they might word it, "that no-good-burn!") They might try to convince you never to forgive such a person for having caused you grief.

Never mind the snide remarks. If health's come back to someone you love, be joyful about it; know that I share your joy. Don't bother with the "Pharisees" in your life. They'll always be the same....

Time's up. My siesta's over. Back to work. I beg you not to forget that your heart is linked with mine. We're in it together, you and I. I'm praying for you, and with you all the time:

Lord God, my Father...look with love upon my disciples, my friends. They get so demoralized at times. There are people they care so much about—as much as I cared for my neighbor who was unable to look up.

They do not know the future as we do. They do not know your plan of grace, or the ultimate dimension of your full love. They only know the frustration and the apparent fruitlessness of their "unheard" prayers.

I do not ask you, Father, to hurry up the time of healing. That's your decision. I only ask that you give them the spirit of my patience, and my unfailing love for them. Amen.

Love,

Jesus

LETTER 18

(When you are shocked by those filled with self-pity and anxiety)

Jesus passed on through towns and villages, teaching and making his way towards Jerusalem. And someone said to him, "Lord, will those who are saved be few?" And he said to them, "Strive to enter by the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able to."

Luke 13:22-23

* * *

West shore of Lake Gallilee
After supper, August 14

Dear Disciple, my Friend,

The people—even my own disciples—keep wanting me to make it easy for them. They want me to feed them with miracles of bread and fish every time they're hungry. They want me to be a popular hero, throwing off the yoke of the Roman Empire.

They see now that I'm not going to do it. I'm not fanning their hatred and prejudices by leading a political revolt. I'm suffering unpleasant people as patiently as I can. I live a life of service: healing and teaching and asking for no money...and it isn't easy.

The people who follow me must love as I love, without any thought of gain. This is a demanding program, and I think after today they understand. With uneasy fear—someone asked this question: "After following you and obeying your instructions, will only a few be saved?"

Those were the words I heard. But I could also read their faces...and I could sense what they didn't dare to utter: "We hoped you would make things nice for us. But now you talk about the narrow door and use hard verbs like strive...and we are scared."

When I saw their faces and felt their fear, that's when I came on strong. Some may think it was too strong. I know my words will be taken out of context, but I had to be forceful against the instinct of self-pity. People must come to terms about me. I'm not a pushover.

You understand my feelings tonight. People have expected you, too, to do the miraculous, to lead them to some kind of earthly paradise where they will be served to their hearts' content. You can't do this. And so they fill up with self-pity, and get "the sulks." Their teary eyes tell you how you let them down, and then they get fearful about the demands you lay on them. They want to quit on you...and maybe they do.

Never mind. Though you can't help being hurt, don't quit on yourself. You have me as a model. You have my grace. Your verb is "strive." Love without hope for gain; live without dominating anybody. Live a life of service, but make sure you don't let others turn you into their doormat. Above all, don't get in the habit of feeling sorry for yourself.

I'll be with you. Not just by my example and my grace. I'll be a comfort to you...for you will know by these letters that I've gone through the same distresses you have. And I'll be a prayer for you, as well as a comfort. When I'm lifted up to heaven, this will be my part in your passion:

Lord God, my Father...look with love upon my disciples, my friends. They sometimes can't live up to other people's expectations...and so they are wrongfully left out. But they could not in conscience meet those demands. To do so, they would have to surrender us and the best that is in them.

But they hurt just the same. Loneliness and desertion always hurt. Don't let them be infected by the virus of self-pity or by fear. Give to their journey, through their narrow door, the spirit of my journey to Jerusalem. And be with them, loving Father, as you always were with me. Amen.

Love,
Jesus

LETTER 19

(When people expect special favors from you)

[As he continued on his journey] Jesus said: "When once the householder...has shut the door, [some of you] will begin to stand outside and to knock on the door, saying, 'Lord, open to us.' He will answer, 'I do not know where you are from.' Then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in your presence; you taught in our streets.' But he will say, 'I tell you, I do not know where you come from; depart from me, you workers of iniquity!'"

Luke 13:25-28

* * *

Above Lake Galilee
Late evening, August 15

Dear Disciple, my Friend,

I miss my mother tonight. I'd love to be able to sit on the back porch—just the two of us—and talk about prayer, and gratitude to God, and about my concern over the hostility of the Pharisees and how it is alarming so many. But I can't go home. Too much to do. And only a few months left before I end my course.

A change has come over the world I live in. Even my closest friends are mystified. They felt it, too: the empty places where there used to be multitudes; the gloom on the faces of those who still stay to listen to me. They used to applaud, but now they are quite uncomfortable.

It began yesterday with my "showdown" speech. And today, I certainly didn't make it any easier! I've warned them before. This time it sank in because of how I said it. I had to tell them that my real friends are those who put my teaching into practice. Nodding acquaintance is not enough. I demand the hard work of loving service. My true disciples must persevere, even when it's difficult to do so. They must submit to all the challenges my words convey.

That's why people are leaving me in droves. They used to think that when death came they could just slap me on the back, remind me about the fine reception they gave me in Galilee some place, tell me how they introduced me to the chief magistrate in town, show me where I healed them...and I would just usher them into a favored place in the banquet hall of heaven. All they'd have to do is "mention my name" and speak of some personal anecdote and all would be well.

Not so. I told them, not so. They have a responsibility to work for the kingdom of God. Name dropping is not enough. So the exodus has begun, and I'm left with but a few staunch friends.

You know how it hurts when this happens to you. Same thing, really. As long as you have favors to offer and service to render, people like you. But as soon as you make demands on people, expecting mutual responsibility, attitudes change. The winds of self-seeking dry up your popularity, and only a few good friends stay with you.

Yet, keep going, I beg you. Even when consolations dwindle, stay with the best that's in you. I am with you—always will be—on the "back porch" of your quiet prayer. And when I return to heaven, I will pray for you:

Lord God, my Father...be with my disciples, my friends. Things happen in their world, hurting things. Popularity and easygoing acceptance can't always be counted on. They decided to keep their faith in me. They confronted their friends with challenges, refusing to be pushovers.

Help them to see that even though there seems to be nobody else left, we are with them. We know how difficult it is to persevere. We are proud of them for doing so. Help them to understand this. Amen.

Love,
Jesus

LETTER 20

(When people are shocked by your weakness)

At that very hour [while he was on his way to Jerusalem] some Pharisees came and said to Jesus, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." And he said, to them, "Go and tell that fox: 'Behold I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course. Nevertheless, I must go on my way...for it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem.' O Jerusalem, Jerusalem...How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings. But you would not!"

Luke 13:31-34

* * *

Herod's country, In the desert
Just before supper, August 20

Dear Disciple, my Friend,

Well, I scandalized more people today. My apostles especially; they saw me weeping. For a few moments, I was crying like a baby.

They were shocked by it. I see them now—only about twenty yards away—getting supper ready. Long faces on them all. A few muttered words exchanged...but mostly mumbles to themselves.

They accepted me as their leader. They knew I was close to God...and, by being close to me, they would be close to God, also. Well and good. But they also thought I would be a kind of Jewish Caesar. They had seen my control over winds and waves; they knew my power to heal; they had witnessed my authority over all the powers of evil.

So they latched on to my strength, to wait it out until I made my move for full political power. Then they would become the "king's cabinet" and never have to suffer any more, never be poor, never again live in tents out here in the desert.

They thrilled with excitement this morning when I told the Pharisees what I thought of Herod. It's the closest I've ever gotten to a political statement. Now everybody knows what I think of that petty king, that stupid and contemptible monarch! I've no fear of him. But my apostles immediately jumped to conclusions. They were all set to sweep through Herod's territory, and on to Judea to destroy the garrisons of Rome.

But when I told the crowd that I must go to Jerusalem to die, their faces fell. That did violence to their strategies of war. My words disarmed them. Then—worse!—I wept. They saw how hopeless I am.

I can't force anyone to believe in me. I have to wait for a free response. And it's not coming...not with my own people...not in Jerusalem. So I must perish by the hands of those I've spent my life working for. Shouldn't I weep over this?

You know how it is. Many times in your life, you've known children, even adults, who rely too heavily on your strength. You can't let your hair down, or show your sadness, or ask them for support. They're too busy wanting you to support them. When they see that you, too, are only human, they get nervous. Never mind. Be true to yourself. The sense of helplessness will get you down at times, but you have to keep going. Remember, you don't go alone. My prayer and the courage of my journey are going with you:

Lord God, my Father...look with love upon my disciples, my friends. They are burdened, sometimes overburdened, by other people's expectations.

Friends, adolescents, and little ones demand that they always be on top of things, always at their service. Sometimes they can't be all this. They suffer. They get sick. Their nerves are over-strained. They weep.

Let them know they need not be ashamed. No one can answer to others' needs all the time. Let tears refresh them. Let them be weak in our presence. We will bring strength back to them. We will teach them about true love, which sometimes grieves, but always is at peace. Amen.

Love,
Jesus

LETTER 21

(When friends and family are kinder to others than to you)

One Sabbath [as he was on his journey] Jesus went to dine at the house of...a Pharisee. And behold, there was a man before him who had dropsy [a painful cancer]. Jesus spoke to the lawyers and Pharisees saying, "Is it lawful to heal on the sabbath or not?" But they were silent. Then he took the man and healed him and let him go. And he said to them, "Which of you, having an ass or an ox that has fallen into a well, will not immediately pull him out on a sabbath day?" And they could not reply to him.

Luke 14:1-6

* * *

Back in Galilee, Near the road to Jerusalem
Late evening, August 25

Dear Disciple, my Friend,

What a tiring evening. The meal was delicious. Seven courses with well-trained servants timing things just right. The cook must have been professional. Yet all that food still sits like a lump in the pit of my stomach. Give me Andrew's cooking, out in the desert, any time! When there's no love or kindness around the dining table, the meal's not satisfying...no matter how delicately prepared.

There was no kindness tonight, only malice; I could taste that more than I could taste the food. The Pharisees and their lawyers kept trying to trip me up. They threw question after question at me—tricky ones! But then an uninvited guest created a diversion. I was so glad the man dropped in just as we were finishing desert. I was glad to be able to cure him of his paralyzing cancer. I was also grateful because he gave me an excuse to leave.

I realize now that the man gave me an opportunity to question the Pharisees, to reverse the process. They didn't like it. They're certainly sticklers for the law of God, those Pharisees. "Nothing doing" on the sabbath. And they slap themselves on the back for it. "Hoorah for us; we are the defenders of God's

day of rest!"

Right before them was a man—pained and paralyzed—and they were prepared to snub their brother, a child of Abraham...a son of the same God they worship so zealously!

You know people, maybe some of your own family, who are sweet and kind towards strangers and toward those they work with...and even toward animals. Yet they can be vicious and uncivil to family members.

You can't do much about it. You can tell them about their two-faced behavior (as I told the Pharisees, a few hours ago), but you probably won't change them, any more than I could. They'll continue to be "street angel—house devil," as the saying goes. You'll simply have to suffer, and not grow weary of trying...and not get bitter yourself.

I can't change things for you any more than I could change things for myself. But I'll pray for you. I'll remind you that I went through it, too. And I'll give you the wisdom to see that your passion is linked with mine:

Lord God, my Father...look with love upon my disciples, my friends. People they know have a most disturbing quality—they are callous toward those they should be most careful of...they are hardest on those they should be softest to.

This is so hard to take. But keep good and true the hearts of my disciples. And let them work for healing and for peace, no matter how much criticism they get.

Help them to remember what I earned for them: I have won for them the peace they're searching for: my peace, which I will give them, even in their pain. Amen.

Love,

Jesus

LETTER 22

(When people you know and love give up too easily)

[As he continued on his journey] Jesus said: "Whoever does not bear his or her cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple. For which of you, deciding to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, to see if you have enough to complete it. Otherwise...when you are not able to finish, all who see it will begin to mock you."

Luke 14:24-35

* * *

Wasteland, District of Sidon, Pagan territory
Mid-afternoon, September 1

Dear Disciple, my Friend,

I was alone most of the day. Like Samaria, this place is unfriendly to us, and we were low on provisions. Food prices are extravagant here. The few merchants who are willing to serve Jews demand a high price for the "favor." So my disciples went back to Galilee for supplies.

Their absence has given me the chance to think about the continuity of my mission. I have to have some sort of nucleus...somebody to be willing to continue my work. It's hard for people to hang on. Obstacles come up, and once they bump into these obstacles, they start counting the cost. Then they discover for themselves "good reasons" for reluctance, and they leave.

The crowds who used to follow me have dispersed. Even the number of my disciples has dwindled. And I know (for I am going to Jerusalem) that this state of affairs is but a hint of things to come. As soon as people feel secure with themselves, my Father and I can very easily be put out of their lives. Prayer can become a lost art. The boredom that sometimes accompanies prayer is too much of a cross. People will only practice their faith if they "feel like it."

It's sad to think how many people will decide to do their own thing, instead of following me. I'm sad thinking about it now.

But you know how I feel. You may be distressed this very moment about a friend or family member who has renounced the religious values you used to share.

There will be parents the world over who will struggle with guilt feelings because their grown-up children have forsaken the faith...even forsaken them. If you know such parents, please show them this letter. Urge them to be patient with their family and gentle with themselves. They did what they could. I know what they're going through. Tell them so. Urge them to continue, despite discouragement. Urge yourself to do the same, if this letter applies directly to you.

You're not alone, although many times you will feel like you are. Remember, I'm with you. Do this for me. At some time each day, close your door to the world outside and pray in secret. Wordlessly pray, in a listening mood. Then you'll hear the words I speak on your behalf:

Lord God, my Father...look with love upon my disciples, my friends. They get upset when others give up on them. Lasting friendship, like lasting faith, puts demands on people. There is a cost to it, a cross. Some can't stick it out.

My disciples grieve because of it. They seem to be abandoned. Whenever they are left, for whatever reason, they feel lonely. Please, Father, help them in their loneliness. Let them prove their faith is strong, even though it costs them.

And comfort them in their grief, so that they may quiet down enough to know that we haven't given up on them. Then their loneliness will become something they can manage, for they will know we have included them in our everlasting love. Amen.

Love,

Jesus

LETTER 23

(When snobs disapprove of your friends)

Now [as Jesus continued on his journey] the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to him. And the Pharisees and their scribes murmured, saying: "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Luke 15:1-2

* * *

Good old Capharnaum
Late, September 29

Dear Disciple, my Friend,

Yes, "good old Capharnaum"! It hasn't changed at all. The "outcasts" of society have been waiting around for me. I'm not sure they understand all I'm saying, but they are a joy to be with. They like my company and I like theirs. I can talk to them about my Father. They don't have any rigid preconceptions of how things ought to be said, or how customs ought to be observed.

They've prayed the way I taught them, and they've grown in a sense of gratitude for God and for the world as it's given them. They're gracious about kindness when it comes their way. They're humble enough to know they still have work to do...and they want to learn. They admit they're sinners, and they ask for-giveness. They also thoroughly enjoy my company. I like them for that, too.

What a refreshing contrast to those rigidly righteous ones who hang around like leeches on my back. Yes, the Pharisees and their scribes still watch me. It's "good old Capharnaum," as I said. They'll get to Jerusalem ahead of me. They only murmur now, but they'll be shouting then.

They don't want to learn, or listen, or be receivers of God's gifts. They want to instruct others to be just like themselves.

You know how it feels to suffer the relentless scorn of the self-righteous. If you're pleasant to somebody they disapprove of, they'll attack you with biting sarcasm or spiteful gossip. If you

suggest they listen to a line of reason they've not already decided on...they'll consider you impertinent. They're not interested.

Never mind. Elitism sometimes can't be cured. You probably won't change the attitudes of the Pharisees in your life. Just don't let them change you. Stay humble. You know how much growing in grace you must still do. Stay open to my inspirations. Separate yourself from the clutches of those who think they know everything.

And don't forget I am your companion. I want you to be like those "outcasts" whose company I enjoyed at Capharnaum--- forgiven by me, given my Spirit of life, grateful for my friendship, and easy to talk to.

If you are, it will be easy also for me to talk about you to my Father:

Lord God, my Father...look with love upon my disciples, my friends. They are not so confident of their own worth that sarcasm and scorn does not bother them.

They feel it when snobs attack them, by disapproving of their friends, or by throwing wet blankets on their simple joys, or by trying to put them into straight jackets of rigidity in all they think and do.

Don't let the bigots get them down. Let them be formed by us and by our law of love. We are the only ones from whom "getting approval" is really important. Let them remember this...remembering us. Amen.

Love,

Jesus

LETTER 24

(When you face the possibility of your own faithlessness)

[As he continued to Jerusalem] Jesus said to his disciples: "If you have not been faithful in worldly matters with no lasting consequences, who will entrust true riches to you? And if you have not been faithful in that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own? People can't serve two masters; either they will hate the one and love the other, or they will be devoted to the one and despise the other. They cannot serve God and Mammon."

Luke 16:10-13

* * *

South Galilee, Abandoned farmhouse
After supper, October 2

Dear Disciple, my Friend,

Indirectly the devil warned me there'd be times like this. Satan didn't exactly say it; he hinted it. It was when he showed me all the kingdoms of the world and all their riches. He said I'd never be lacking in supporters if I gave allegiance to "Mammon." If I wanted to get ahead in the world—to win friends and influence people—all I had to do was use his tactics and lie to people and bully them until I carved out my fortune.

But I decided against exploitation and manipulation in any of its forms. And so I'm left with a dwindling number of friends, a weak position, a lack of status...and a road that leads to Jerusalem.

When I gave my speech this afternoon, my apostles thought I was talking to them. I was. But they don't understand, not yet. They'll have to be on their own "journey to Jerusalem" before they do. I wanted them to hear what I said, but mostly I needed to hear it myself. I must keep alive my own commitment to the life of loving service. Mammon isn't just "money"; it's everything elusive in this world.

So Mammon includes almost everything. Popularity can't last, words can't last, and even the cures I've performed cannot last. Even the ones I raised from the dead will die again.

Indeed, my own life on earth won't last. I will die too (soon now). I can't even be certain my work will continue after I die. I can only trust my Father in this; He promised it will.

Perhaps you don't understand—yet—how I feel tonight. Of course, you can identify with part of my pain. You know how you suffer when people prove faithless to you. But right now I'm speaking of the times when you will wonder whether you can remain faithful to yourself: when you begin to face death, when your normal lifestyle breaks down, or when a crisis occurs. At these turning points in your life, you may wonder if all of life is a farce.

But don't give in to these doubts. Put memory to work; that'll be your consolation. Remember those occasions when you were faithful, when you loved without thought of gain. And a life of this love will be your permanent possession. I'll precede you into heaven. When you arrive, this is the prayer I'll use to usher you into your permanent place:

Lord God, my Father...look with love upon my disciples, my friends. They have listened to my words. They have kept faith. They have followed me as best they could.

Reward them, Father. At last...at long last...now is the time for reward. Let them delight forever in the fullness of love and peace—in that fullness they tried to give to others, and never had enough of for themselves.

Here it is; here we are...at last. Let them relax and enjoy it. Amen.

Love,
Jesus

LETTER 25

(When you must deal with the prospect of failure)

[Continuing on his journey] Jesus told the Pharisees... who were lovers of money... this parable: "There was a rich man, who was clothed in purple and fine linens and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at the gate lay a poor man named Lazarus who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table.... The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died and was buried; and, in hell, being in torment, he said : 'Father Abraham...I beg you to send Lazarus to my five brothers, so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.' But Abraham said: 'They have Moses and the prophets. Let them hear them.' But he said: 'No, Father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' Then Abraham said: 'If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.'"

Luke 16:19-31

* * *

A caravan stopover, Border of Samaria
Dawn, October 7

Dear Disciple, my Friend,

It's a little after six in the morning. I slept late, but everybody else in this stopover has washed, eaten, and started off. My disciples and I are usually on the road by now. They're all ready, waiting for me. But I couldn't help it. My heart was heavy yesterday. I slept like a stone, ten hours. I have never done that before. The parable I told yesterday is what did it! The beginning of the story came out of my mouth just the way I planned it. I wanted to shake up the Pharisees, to scare them into being more thoughtful of the poor and less crafty with money.

The moral was simple enough. If people who have food don't notice those who don't have enough, that very act of neglect will condemn them to hell. People who want to be God's friends must be concerned about the oppressed, the poor, and the deprived.

The parable had a strong message, a stern warning, but it was dear to me that people love money so much they can't hear my words. I saw the whole scope of my failure...for all centuries to come. That's when Abraham "changed." All of a sudden, he became my voice. (You must understand that the "five brothers" in the parable represent all those people, for all times, who are more concerned with making money and enjoying themselves than with sharing with the needy.) Abraham said, "They have Moses and the prophets.... Let them learn from the written word of God."

I heard the reply, the echo of that No! reverberating from so many people. "No, they won't take God's words seriously. But if someone rose from the dead...if that should happen...they would take notice and change their ways." Then Abraham sighed (Or was it I who sighed?) and said, "If they don't heed the warnings in the Bible, they won't be impressed even if someone should die for them and then rise from death."

I know it now. I know that for the most part I'll be a failure. All my work and teaching...and then my passion and death...and then my resurrection—all of it will be, for so many, nothing but a waste. Yet I must still go through with it, and end my course in Jerusalem. Not everybody will deny me. There'll be true disciples. I'm as sure of my success as I am of my partial failure. And I'm sure of you, too. I'm writing this letter for you, as well as for myself. I'm counting on you not to fail me.

Here's the prayer I prayed this morning. First it was my own. I've changed it some to show you how it'll be my prayer for you when I'm with our Father:

Lord God, my Father...look with love upon my disciples, my friends. They sometimes have a sense of failure about what they worked so hard to build. This can be a frightening experience.

I felt that way, too...as you remember. You kept me going, Father. In no way could I have stayed true to your plan of love if you hadn't supported me.

Support them, in the same way, for my sake. And for their sake, too. Stay with them so that they may finally understand success...the way we do. Amen.

Love,

Jesus

LETTER 26

(When people won't accept you unless you fuss over them)

[As he continued on his journey] the apostles said to Jesus: "Increase our faith." And he said: "If you had faith...you could say to this sycamore tree, 'Be rooted up!' and it would obey you." [Then he observed:] "If you had a servant plowing or tending sheep, would you say to him, when he has come in from the field: 'Come at once and sit at table?' Would you not say to him, instead: 'Prepare supper for me, and put on your apron and serve me till I eat and drink; and afterward you shall eat and drink'? Does the master thank his servant because he did what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that is commanded you, say: 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'"

Luke 17:5-10

* * *

Somewhere in Judea
After supper, November 10

Dear Disciple, my Friend,

As you see, it's been quite a few weeks since I've written to you. The fact is, my last big battle with discouragement left me somewhat drained. I was too weary to write. (Besides, I've had much to do. I am pressed for time, so I'm devoting most of each day to teaching my disciples.)

But I want to tell you what happened today. First, my apostles asked me to increase their faith. They have seen that I can work more cures and do greater miracles than they can. They wanted to find out why. They wanted to improve, to grow in grace.

And that is precisely the fond desire of so many good people. Good people want to improve, and they like to help others. At the same time they're actually responding to needs, their kindness is spontaneous and commendable. But then—afterward—

they want to be praised for it. That's when they can poison the good instincts they began with.

I'm not faulting them (and I'm not faulting you) for feeling bad when people treat you as a nobody after you were kind to them. You can't help feeling manipulated, as though you were a "thing," not a person. At such times, remember my parable. Don't expect compensations for being kind. When you're appreciated, fine. When others notice what you've done, and thank you for it (or thank you in practical ways by assisting you), fine. I rejoice with you. But don't expect it.

Rewards come later, much later than you think. Keep going. Your faith will increase, as long as you guard yourself against discouragement. I pray for you now that you'll continue to grow in my discipleship:

Lord God, my Father...look with love upon my disciples, my friends. They always seem to start so well, and then they falter. They get so down when others don't make a fuss over them—when their hopes to be appreciated aren't satisfied.

Encourage them, so that they will not grow weary in doing good. Let their faith increase. Let their patience withstand the lack of human consolations.

Let them continue even better than they began: to love with never a thought for gain, to live without a complaint about bad treatment. Amen.

Love,

Jesus

LETTER 27

(When you face people's ingratitude)

As Jesus continued on his journey to Jerusalem, ten lepers met him and cried out, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us." Jesus did so; and they were made clean.... One of them, seeing that he was made clean, ran back to Jesus to thank him. Jesus said, "Were not all ten made clean? Where are the other nine? Has not one been found to return and give thanks, except this (one)?"

Luke 17:11-19

* * *

Border of Samaria and Galilee
After supper, November 11

Dear Disciple, my Friend,

I'm not taking back anything I wrote yesterday. The warning still stands. The greatest temptation for good people is—and all ways will be—the desire that God, and others, reward us "after all we've done for them." No matter how demanding the service we give, we must not look for rewards of any kind, not even the reward of being appreciated.

Something happened to me today that makes me want to state this even more strongly. Just like the other aspects of the passion I've mentioned in these letters, it's one thing to write about it, it's much more difficult to endure it.

The event was simple enough in itself: it was its significance that shook me. We continued toward Jerusalem, my disciples and I. Ten lepers came out of nowhere, pleading that I heal them. I did. I did it in the right way, too. Not wanting to take over legitimate authority, I told them to present themselves to the priests, so that they could be given "medical clearance" to return to ordinary life.

On their way, they were cleansed of their contagious sores. I think they all were very happy about it... but only one out of the ten returned to thank me in a way that I could see and feel and

rejoice in. One out of ten! That's hard to take. Of course, I must practice what I preach, and I did. I cured the lepers because I loved them... not because I wanted any reward from them.

Just the same, it hurts. I was tempted to say, "Why am I doing all this? Who cares, anyway? I push myself, dawn to dusk, to help people, to encourage them, to heal them from their sicknesses. As soon as they get what they want, I am forgotten as though I didn't even exist."

You've been discouraged this way, too, and you'll probably be discouraged in the future. Each time it happens, you'll feel like giving up on everybody. Ingratitude knocks the wind right out of your sails. It causes a listlessness in the energy system. It's part of your passion... my passion, too.

Never mind. Keep going. Keep loving. Even if only a few show appreciation for you—even if only one person in the whole world of your lifetime shows it—consider it enough. We must love, you and I, whether anybody loves us in return or not. When I'm lifted up to heaven, this is the prayer I'll pray for you, and for all who will suffer like you:

Lord God, my Father... look with love upon my disciples, my friends. Fill their hearts with the nourishment of my Spirit.

They sometimes feel as I felt after I cured ten lepers and only one said thanks. They doubt their value. Their feeling is that if nobody seems to care about them, why should they care any more?

The feeling will pass; but help them so that it will pass more quickly. Let them be assured of my gratitude for them, even more strongly than they are sure of their present disappointment. Remind them that I am with them always—helping them to suffer through the humiliation of ingratitude. Amen.

Love,
Jesus

LETTER 28

(When you are sorely tempted to lose heart)

[As he continued toward Jerusalem] Jesus told his disciples a parable, to the effect that they ought always to pray, and not lose heart: "In a certain city was a judge...and a widow kept coming to him....For a while, he refused her, but afterward, he said to himself, 'Though I neither fear God nor regard man...I will grant the plea of this widow, or else she will wear me out!' And will God not vindicate [those] who cry out day and night? Will God delay long over them? I tell you, God will speedily [hear their prayers]. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

Luke 18:1-8

* * *

A deserted barn, Somewhere in Samaria
Late, November 21

Dear Disciple, my Friend,

I wish my mother were here tonight. This was a day we always celebrated together, the anniversary of her first day of school. She was a young girl when she went to Jerusalem to be taught by the Pharisees and their scribes.

They did a marvelous job. (As you know, not all of them were bad.) Mary was always grateful for her education. Every November 21, she'd tell me how she learned to pray and how she grew in wisdom and grace before God and people.

I need to remember her story. Today was very hard. I can see very clearly now how difficult it is not to lose heart. My disciples and I were alone all day. I told them the parable I was saving for just the right time. Today was it. I thought it would convince them of my Father's trustworthiness. If even the worst specimen of humanity—a wicked judge—will do the right thing if someone pesters him enough...what will my kind Father do for those who ask for favors?

I thought I needed only to remind them how much better my Father is than anyone else. But my story didn't help them much. I could see it in their faces. Their tendency to get discouraged was much stronger than all my words of assurance.

That's when I blurted out the last statement. It was a shocker...even to me. It wasn't on the tip of my tongue; it came from deep within my heart. "When I present myself to the people, will I find any faith on earth? (...Will there be anyone who'll take hold of my strength and let me be the source of their life? Anyone at all?)"

The apostles were embarrassed by my sudden outburst. They know how dismayed I am by the waning of enthusiasm, but they can't seem to understand me any more. They don't comprehend the extent of the passion I'm suffering as I continue to Jerusalem.

You'll have moments when you'll embarrass people by your sadness, which was caused by a lot of things crowding in on you. They won't understand—they won't even discuss—the battle between trust and despair going on inside you.

At moments like that, recall my mother, and recall all the good people in your life. Let them "come alive" in your thoughts. They'll help....And don't forget me. Be aware of my inspirations. I'm present to you and to my Father—both. In this double-presence, I pray for you:

Lord God, my Father...look with love upon my disciples, my friends. Their own friends and family sometimes give up on them, get down on them, or somehow fail to help them.

You help them, Father. Teach them to focus on what is good in their lives, even though others don't think they're all that good. Let them experience our love for them. And my mother's kindness, too. And all the many reasons they have never to stop praying—never to lose heart. Amen.

Love,
Jesus

LETTER 29

(When nags are never satisfied with you)

[As he continued on his journey] Jesus told this parable to some who trusted in themselves...and despised others: "Two men went up into the temple to pray....The Pharisee prayed thus with himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men: extortioners, dishonest, adulterers, or like this tax collector.' ... But the tax collector, standing far off...beat his breast, saying: 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner.' I tell you...people who exalt themselves shall be humbled, but they who humble themselves shall be exalted."

Luke 18:9-14

* * *

A friend's house, Northeast Judea
Late afternoon, November 30

Dear Disciple, my Friend,

The apostles are somewhat relieved today. I seem to be my old self again, preaching to the people, rebuking the Pharisees (instead of them). "All is well," they think, "no more emphasis on the passion." Not so. They just don't understand me yet.

The realization that "even after all my works of love, I will not find much faith on earth" hit me hard. I didn't want to talk much for a while. I distanced myself, made a private retreat, prayed in silence. I let them handle the preaching and healing.

Now I'm involved again, and I'm still talking about the passion. This is the first time I've taught in ten days. My message is the same. I just spelled out why I don't find much faith.

You know how it feels to be ignored when those you want to talk to can't find time to listen. They use up all available energy complaining, especially about other people. They go to work and find fault with their boss; they go down the street to see what's wrong with the neighbors; they nag their family, using the same tactic I mentioned in the parable. Instead of saying "I'm so glad

I'm better than that tax collector," they turn it around. The nag asks, "Why aren't you as good as, as smart as, or as thoughtful as I am?"

Newspapers give them reason to find fault with the world. Religious worship (whether they're present at it or not) gives them cause to find fault with those in church. Everything is grist for the mill. Of course, it's pride. And though pride may be the source of the trouble, the outcome is inertia. All energy is used up diagnosing other people's imperfections. Then you come on the scene, all ready to say something important, and the person can't hear you. In fact, you—as you—don't even exist.

You know how it feels to be used in this way. I know it, too. Through all generations, so many hearts will be blocked off from me because of envy, gossip, criticism, complaints about wrong done, and bickering about someone else's evil ways.

When I return to my Father, I'll pray you don't block me off in any of these ways. And I'll pray that you won't have to suffer too much when others block you off:

Lord God, my Father...look with love upon my disciples, my friends. They get tired, sometimes, from all the complaints ringing in their ears.

They want to shout out: "Please stop using me as your scapegoat. And stop that griping! Talk to me honestly, and let us grow together." But they don't say such things. They only suffer.

Father, don't let them join the list of fault finders. Give them a calm to live in. Show them a space of silence...so that they may hear my gospel, and know my love, and be able to thank you for your mercy. Amen.

Love,
Jesus

LETTER 30

(When know-it-alls disapprove of your relaxing)

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through [on his way to Jerusalem]. And there was a man, Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and rich. He climbed a sycamore tree... Jesus looked up and said to him: "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay in your house today." ... Zacchaeus received him joyfully. And when [the Pharisees saw it] they all murmured: "He has gone to be the guest of a man who is a sinner!"

Luke 19:1-10

* * *

Zacchaeus's house, Jericho
Dusk, December 15

Dear Disciple, my Friend,

It's been a lovely day, sunny and warm. December seemed like April. Instead of a hurried meal over the open fire, I had one of the best roast lamb dinners ever. And instead of facing the downcast looks of my apostles, the puzzled frowns of the people, and the hostile stares of my enemies, I closed the door on all of that and enjoyed a good long afternoon with one of the wisest, and nicest men I've met.

Zacchaeus is his name. I wish you could meet him. Oh yes, the "upright people" call him shrewd and wicked, and he was that. His wit was sometimes used for selfish purposes. I've yet to know a person who wasn't a sinner—you're one yourself—but I forgave him his sins. He's paying back four-fold anyone he's cheated.

Once that was settled, he relaxed. Then I saw his good side. He's a charming storyteller, and had many good ideas about how I can get the jump on those who try to trip me up. (He's a pro at it.)

He's resourceful, too. I could see that when I spotted him perched in that sycamore tree. Right then I decided that he was a

man after my own heart. Nothing—not even the fact that he made a fool of himself—would prevent him from reaching me. I wanted to know more about him, so I invited myself to his home.

I have never done this before. I like to eat out, but I have always waited to be asked. Today was different; I needed a break in the routine. I also wanted companionship. If Zacchaeus could risk ridicule to see me, I could do the same for him.

And ridicule is what I'll get. This is the passion I want to tell you about. The Pharisees have already started murmuring. They have another pin to stick in me. I've become a friend of the class of people they can't stand. How can I be any good if I associate with those whom "good people" claim are no good?

Know-it-alls distress me just as they distress you. Because I enjoyed myself this afternoon, the Pharisees will fault me. That's to be expected. My apostles, too, will look at me with long faces. Oh, they won't say anything, but their gestures will scold me: "Where were you? You left us stuck with all this work and all these people... and you were out enjoying yourself. We never get the day off. It's not fair!"

This hurts, but it's no big deal. The psychological passion is made up of little hurts, not only big ones. Never mind. Keep going when it happens to you, too. There'll always be people who are, as they put it, "disappointed in you." I understand how it feels to be picked on because of such things. I'll be with you in my Spirit and in my prayer to God:

Lord God, my Father... look with love upon my disciples, my friends. So often there's some kind of shadow cast on their simple joys. If they take a break from the routine—even a half-day off—they will have 'know betters' who want to tell them what they should have done instead.

Father, don't let them get upset by this. If the time off has proved to be restorative and good, then it was good. They are blessed for it.

Let them be at peace... remembering that peace on earth can never come without some passion. A world without suffering, joys without shadows, can only come at the end of the journey—theirs and mine. Amen.

Love,

Jesus

LETTER 31

(When people want immediate results from you)

[As the disciples were listening] Jesus proceeded to tell them a parable because he was near to Jerusalem, and because they supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately.

And when he had told the parable, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. When he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying: "Would that even today you knew the things that make for your peace. But now they are hidden from your eyes...because you did not know the time of your visitation."

Luke 19:11, 28, 41-44

* * *

Outskirts of Jerusalem
Late, February 2
(The anniversary of my
presentation in the Temple)

Dear Disciple, my Friend,

This is it. I've finally made it to the city where I'll be lifted up. It's not the end, exactly; that will come at Passover. But it's time to complete the education of my apostles, to explain the meaning of my parables. I feel like saying "This is it" in terms of my psychological passion, too. In a capsulated form, all I've suffered during my journey has been expressed on this one day. I was rejected by three different groups of people.

One group was the ordinary citizens. They're the reason I wept. No matter how many disabled people I cured, no matter how well I taught, I couldn't reach most of those I've come here to love. They didn't respond to my invitation.

Another group was the notables. There are about 600 of them living in Jerusalem and surrounding areas. But I've impressed only two of them: Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. That's not a good record.

The third group, and most important, was my disciples. They want the kingdom of God to appear immediately. They want

"instant happiness," love without pain. It doesn't happen that way; so they get irritated. My word is "Wait!"; their word is "Now!" One of these words has to go.

You know how it feels when you're struggling with a situation that demands cautious sensitivity. You have to balance opposing inclinations; you have to wait for answers. It's a delicate operation. And what a struggle within you when friends and family—not realizing the nature of your work—call for immediate results. They want you to be an instant winner.

It hurts to be so misunderstood. I know. I'm writing to you so that when it happens to you, you won't be crushed by it. The successful outcome of any project takes time, especially if free will is involved. Take the time. Be thorough in your preparations, even though certain individuals try to get you to cut corners because they want no delays.

Please, my friend, be patient with yourself—and with me. I'm working to establish peace and love. I offer pardon to all who ask for it (as long as they agree to pardon others). This doesn't happen overnight. It's difficult to be patient. It's very difficult to forgive those who have harmed you.

When you think of me, be kind. Consider how I labored to put stamina into the hearts of my first disciples...how I pleaded with them to persevere, despite delays. Let's make a bargain: You promise not to pressure me with your impatience, and I'll make sure that you have my strength when you feel pressured. I'll be with you; you'll have my prayer:

Lord God, my Father...look with love upon my disciples, my friends. They want me to hurry things up for them, so that their world will be less troublesome. And they are hurting because friends are trying to rush them, pushing them into panic when the need is for peace.

Give them our peace, Father. Don't deliver them over to the fast pace of their world. Love, like life itself, is a subtle thing; it takes time. Give them the time...and the patience to use time well. Amen.

Love,
Jesus

LETTER 32

(When you have too much work and no cooperation)

Jesus said: "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. So take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be overburdened with self-indulgence and drunkenness and the cares of this life.... Watch, praying at all times, that you may be accounted worthy...." Now in the daytime he was teaching in the temple; but he would... spend the nights on the mountain called Olivet. And all the people came to him early in the morning, in the temple, to hear him.

Luke 21:34-38

* * *

Mount Olivet
Late, Mid-March

Dear Disciple, my Friend,

The Mount of Olives is my headquarters from now on. I won't be here much longer. My journey's ended... except for a few more days of commuting to Jerusalem to do a job that means only drudgery and dread for me.

This is what I want to tell you about. It means taking myself away from one more hour of much needed rest, but you're worth it. And the matter I want to write to you about is worth it also.

I must be in Jerusalem by dawn! Before dawn, I'll get up, pray, gather all my wits about me, and meet a throng of people in the temple area. For hours on end, I'll endure an experience something like a "Congressional Hearing." Suppose the President of the United States wants someone to be Secretary of State. But the Congress doesn't want him or her. Imagine the ordeal as Congress bears down, trying to make that person look unworthy or unfit.

There are times when you've felt the intensity of what I'm experiencing. Sometimes, you don't even want to get up. Another

day! Another carbon copy of the same old grind. No relief. You go to work and get no satisfaction. You face the same suspicions on the part of your superiors, the same lack of cooperation on the part of co-workers, the same frustrations on the job.

I know. These last days commuting to Jerusalem—I'm going through it, too. My "supervisors" are putting me through their inequity. The ordinary people (my disciples, too) are so overburdened by self-indulgence and anxieties that they're no match for the single-minded hatred of the Pharisees. My revelation of God as the Father of mercy is falling on stony ground.

I write this to tell you we're in it together whenever such a dreadful passion comes up in your life... when "too much work" combines with "no satisfaction and no cooperation." Don't give up because you're discouraged. Keep going. Those days when you don't even feel like getting out of bed, force yourself to get going.

I'm not saying that the psychological passion will pass; it isn't passing for me. I'm saying that courage is the only answer. I'll give you mine. You'll receive my determination to do good, although you'll get no consolation from it, none at all. Trust me. You'll benefit, even in your sadness, from the prayer I'll pray for you in heaven:

Lord God, my Father... look with love upon my disciples, my friends. Give them the staying power you gave me during my last days on earth.

They suffer very much sometimes. Oh, not from the boredom of routine. They can handle those everyday demands. But sometimes it seems like the drudgery is too much. Their work means nothing to them. Friends are so self-indulgent that they don't care. From dawn to dark, they plod ahead without support, without job satisfaction.

You be their support, my Father, when all else fails them. You be the reason for their valued constancy. Amen.

Love,
Jesus

LETTER 33

(When you must face betrayal and all its ramifications)

When the hour had come, Jesus reclined at table with his twelve apostles. And he said to them, "I have earnestly desired to eat this passover with you before I suffer... But behold, the hand of him who betrays me is with me... Woe to that man by whom I will be betrayed...." Now there arose a dispute among the apostles, as to which of them was the greatest....

Luke 22:21-24

* * *

Mount Olivet, Wednesday, Late
The evening before my Last Supper

Dear Disciple, my Friend,

The journey's over. I suppose I should've stopped writing two or three letters back since I'm no longer on the move. The "psychological passion" I've been suffering will soon give way to the more brutal kind: my passion to the death.

It's not this kind of martyrdom my Father asks of you. But there are some related sufferings you will endure, and I want to point them out to you. You might miss them; they could be overshadowed by the larger events of these last days.

From now on, my letters will be written before the things actually take place. I won't have the time or opportunity to write afterward. I know what's coming up, well enough to make a good guess at it. I must steel myself, and writing to you helps.

The time for my betrayal is at hand. You know how it feels to be betrayed, but I am not writing about this. I've already touched on it in some of my other letters. Besides, it's too painful to mention my feelings now; it's too personal. I can only say that it, too, is part of my passion.

However, there is something else, a sideline of tomorrow, that I want to mention. It is all the other things that accompany betrayal. If it were only Judas who did me in, I think I could man-

age. After all, one out of twelve is a good average. But the other eleven will depress me also.

As soon as I mention betrayal, all my apostles will collapse. I am saving my most important words for the most important night of my life, our Last Supper together. My disciples won't even be listening. They'll start disputing with one another, quarreling among themselves like a bunch of unruly children! They won't be thinking about me or gathering around to support me. No, they'll be thinking mostly about their own crushed hopes... and the severed ranks that one traitor has caused... and their own positions of prominence. Yet, I must love and accept them as they are. Just as you must love and accept your friends as they are, with all their weaknesses. This is your passion, too.

I wanted to write you this, beforehand. By doing so, I hope you will understand even better how much I love you... and that you'll accept me as your source of courage when you endure sufferings like mine.

I will always be with you. Don't worry. I will send you my Holy Spirit, my wisdom and my courage. We will help you understand what true love is; we'll help you prove your love under trials patiently endured:

Lord God, my Father... look with love upon my disciples, my friends. Don't let them drown in sorrow when friends they count on are too busy with their own panic about survival to have much time for them. Help them survive, as you helped me.

Our Spirit will be with them. We'll see to it. And when they die, let our same Spirit raise them up, like me, beyond all chance of further betrayals. Amen.

Love,

Jesus

LETTER 34

(When you must encourage others, though "down" yourself)

Jesus said [to his eleven apostles]: "You have continued with me in my trials. And I appoint you a kingdom...so that you may eat and drink at my table...And the Lord said [to Peter]: "Simon, Simon, behold Satan has desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail...and when you have turned [back to me] again, you may strengthen your brethren."

Luke 22:28-32

* * *

Mount Olivet, Wednesday, Later
The evening before my Last Supper

Dear Disciple, my Friend,

I can't sleep tonight, so I will put these thoughts on paper to encourage you, and also to encourage myself. The very fact that I'm expressing myself like this strengthens me.

I suggest you do the same. Write letters to me as I am writing to you. It's a good form of prayer; it helps to develop trust in God, and it helps wisdom to emerge. The shaping of words on paper stimulates energy. It also (as in my case tonight), builds up a better resolve to be at the service of friends.

I must encourage my apostles tomorrow. Unless I give them some sense of their value—some anchor for their hope—they will falter beyond recovery. I must not become too saddened because they can't seem to encourage me. I wish they could, but their hearts are too heavy. I must encourage them.

I will remind them that they have a special place in my kingdom. They've continued with me through all my trials, all the psychological suffering of my journey to Jerusalem. They were not perfect, but they remained loyal, despite their murmurings and misgivings. So the Father loves them; he will never leave them orphans. They will sit at my table in the eternal kingdom.

And I'll have special words of encouragement for Simon Peter. He'll need it most, because he's the leader...and because he'll be the most devastated. I will tell him about my prayer for him tonight. I know he will disappoint me Friday, but I also know that his basic goodness and fine leadership qualities will eventually show themselves. In time, he will prove to be a strong and good leader.

Tomorrow, I will remind all eleven of them that I never regretted selecting them. I am proud of them, in spite of their occasional outbursts of temper and their quarrels and doubts. I will do this tomorrow, even though I am tempted to tell them off instead.

You must never think I've been free from such psychological pressures. Rather, I feel things just as you do. Just as you have to let go of your claims on family members and friends to answer their needs, so must I with my disciples. Such self-denial takes high resolve, but I will do it. Even when they fall asleep on me, I will do it, and do it well.

So will you. My pledge of prayer is my testament to you. When I go to my Father, I will ask that your faith may never fail. And once you have been tested and proven true, I want you to strengthen others...as Simon Peter will eventually do...as I will do Friday, two days from now:

Lord God, my Father...look with love upon my disciples, my friends. It's hard, sometimes, for them to face the day ahead. They have been serving others for so long, encouraging them with words and deeds. They give encouragement, but they seldom get it.

We are the only ones left, Father, you and I. Send them our Spirit. Give them an "inside way" to know about love. Then they will be able to serve others...because of what I, first, have done for them. Amen.

Love,

Jesus

LETTER 35

(When you need courage to face the "same old thing")

Jesus, according to his custom, went to the Mount of Olives....He withdrew from his disciples, and kneeling down, he began to pray: "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; let not my will, but yours, be done."...And his sweat became as drops of blood running down upon the ground.

Luke 22:39-44

* * *

Mount Olivet, Wednesday, Later still
The evening before my Last Supper

Dear Disciple, my Friend,

Interesting. In a way, I'm exhilarated by the prospect of my ordeal tomorrow in this same Garden of Olives. I know it will be extremely painful, but I have a sense of victory.

My last temptation will be a carbon copy of all the others. Satan will be up to the same old tricks. He started me off with discouragement on a grand scale. That was almost three years ago, after my forty days in the desert. He showed me all the kingdoms of the world that I would lose unless I served him.

Oh, he was clever! Each of his temptations pointed out the contrast between winning and losing. If I chose to love people, I would lose; if I decided to control them, I would win.

"See?" I could hear Satan saying to me, "See where love gets you? You still can do so little for so few...people still want to praise you for the wrong reasons...they still refuse to listen...the whole world of the future is summed up by the response of those nine out of ten lepers who didn't bother to return to you...Even if you died and then rose from death, the world will still be like those five brothers of the rich man: They won't pay one bit of attention!"

Yes, my disciple, my friend, that is the suffering I have wrestled with for three long years, especially since I began my last

journey to Jerusalem. I know I will be mocked and scourged, and it will be extremely painful. But the worst pain is the same as all the others: that I have so little to show for all I've tried to do.

You know the hurt of it. You have experienced the like of it. It's so hard to be battling the same old thing—over and over and over.

Keep going, no matter what the odds. Love, when it is real love, does a lot of losing...but it is never a loser. People who misuse power end up being the losers, for death (as well as old age, or even the whims of chance) puts an end to power. But love does not depend on tangible results, not really. It suffers from the lack of results, but it doesn't need results to prove its value. Keep practicing this kind of love.

And I will give you my Spirit to see you through, and the promise of God's approval. I am in your corner, and in your heart. Each time you wrestle with the devil of discouragement, you will be sustained as I will be sustained...tomorrow:

Lord God, my Father...look with love upon my disciples, my friends. Things pile up sometimes. They get downhearted because the same old temptation never lets up. They are tempted over and over, as I was, to choose control over love.

Don't let them get down; don't let them buckle under. Let my friends strain forward to live even more purely, to share their love even more obviously.

You gave me the power to do just this. Give them the power to do the same. Love is worth it. You are worth it, Father. And they—with victory over death in sight—they are worth it to themselves. Amen.

Love,
Jesus

LETTER 36

(When people try to console you—but do it wrong)

They led Jesus away to be crucified. Now a great crowd of people was following him...[among them] women who were wailing and lamenting him. But Jesus, turning to them, said: "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but for yourselves and for your children...."

Luke 23:27-31

* * *

Mount Olivet, Thursday, Mid-afternoon
The day of my Last Supper

Dear Disciple, my Friend,

I thought I'd said it all last night, all there was to say. I had prepared myself for the ultimate test of Satan. I was ready...so I thought.

Then, this morning, something unforeseen happened. I was walking through the streets of Jerusalem on my last trip to the temple precincts. I overheard a group of women planning their work of mercy for tomorrow. They're good women and my Father will bless them for their thoughtfulness. They knew I'm going to be crucified, and they felt sorry for me. They do this for all victims condemned to die; it's their work of mercy. They'll position themselves at the most strategic corner on my way to Calvary. They'll weep for me...offer me some wine if the soldiers let them...show me how sad they are that I am brutalized.

They mean well, but their futile attempt to console me will only make me feel more miserable. It already has. The contrast is what gets me. The women are, in a sense, a case of too little too late. Just a handful of pious women doing their good deed for the day. "Where are the other people—the multitudes I fed in the desert, the many I cured? And why aren't the leaders of my people as impressed with my innocence as these women are? After all, I've spent three long years establishing my credentials as

the Christ. The compassion of these few women—strangers to me—only serves to mock my failure in reaching those I wanted so much to impress."

I have to tell you this (I hope you won't be shocked): For a brief moment this morning I was tempted to shout at these women: "Don't bother! Your feeble attempt to cheer me up only makes me more miserable, for it makes me think of my ratio of success; a few who care compared with thousands who don't." Of course, I never said such things. But I was tempted to...

You know what I mean. In the strangest ways, the full burden of sorrow will throw its full weight on you, perhaps as it happened to me. Well-meaning people may try to cheer you up, but they don't do it right—they don't know how. Never mind. Just don't vent your frustration on those people who are trying to help you. Even if they aren't "the right ones," they deserve your love...and your civil response.

I must go now. Everything from now on will either be action or prayer to my Father, prayer that I can not interrupt. Farewell. God be with you. I promise you my love—always—and especially during those times when a surprising turn of events makes your sadness almost overwhelming:

Lord God, my Father...look with love upon my disciples, my friends. I must now begin my sacrifice of love. Henceforth, I ask you, Father, to be my prayer for me. You know my heart. You know my concern for my disciples. Let all my prayers—written and unwritten—give nourishment to them in times of need.

And free them, finally, for the day that I, too, look forward to: for fullest life with you, and joy in its abundance. Amen.

Love,
Jesus

LETTER 37

(When you must face the prospect of death)

It was about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour....And Jesus cried out with a loud voice and said, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." And having said this, he breathed his last.

Luke 23:44-46

* * *

Prison

Mid-morning, Good Friday

Dear Disciple, my Friend,

Surprise letter. I never thought I'd have the time or occasion to write you again. One of the soldiers who scourged me (in fact, he seemed more cruel than any of them) is an old friend of Judas. He's guarding me, while I wait for Pilate to grant me an audience. He apologized for Judas. He also expressed regret for what all the soldiers did to me. "Only doing our duty," he said. Then he gave me writing material, as well as something to stop my bleeding. Thoughtful of him.

I've already written my mother. He'll make sure she gets it. Don't know how much time I have, so this may be hurried. Consider it a "postscript" to all my other letters. (When I have sent you the Holy Spirit, you'll be able to understand what I'm going through these last days...and why I'm going through it.)

I just want to tell you that right now I'm glad I suffered all those psychological passions as I journeyed to Jerusalem. They were difficult at the time. On reflection, some of them seemed more painful than today. But they got me ready for today. They were a kind of "dress rehearsal," preparing me for my agony last night...and for the unfair allegations and the mockings of this morning...and for the crucifixion coming soon.

The way I continued through all the hardships in the past has steadied me in my resolve today. No one takes my life from me. I give it out of love. The devil hasn't broken my spirit, neither

has the violence of my enemies, nor the insensitivity of those who turned their backs on me.

What I will say from the cross, I say to you right now: I'll commend my spirit to God my Father, trusting that he won't allow death to have its final word over me.

I sense the cohort of soldiers coming. Better finish. Just this: Know that your perseverance under trials—all those I've written about this year—will be "feathers in your cap" some day. You'll face death, too. At that ultimate moment, one of two things will happen. You'll give up in despair and rage against the meaninglessness of life, since all life ends with death. Either that...or you'll trust God's power to raise you up from death—to a fuller life, linked with mine.

If you go the way of trust, you can thank yourself (and me) that you continued to love even though you suffered from one or more of those daily hurts you had to put up with. They were your "dress rehearsals," preparing you for the greatest challenge of all—the one I must meet in a short time.

Farewell. I'll be with you in all distress. No time for a prayer, not now. I must seal this letter and leave it for my friend to take to Mary...and to you. My prayer for you will be a silent one...from the cross. When I commend my spirit to the Father, I'm commending yours as well.

Amen. Wait for my alleluia.

Love,

Jesus

LETTER 38

(When you need to adapt to the unexpected)

Very early on the first day of the week (some women) came to the tomb...And looking up, they saw that the stone had been rolled away....While they were perplexed about this, two messengers stood by them...and they said: "Why do you seek the living among the dead?"

Luke 24:1-6

* * *

My favorite hill in Galilee
Mid-afternoon, Easter

Dear Disciple, my Friend,

Happy Easter! It is for me. I want it to be for you. I'm waiting here in Galilee for my disciples to catch up to me. Had a lovely visit with my mother. She has gone home to get things ready for a big dinner. I've got some time on my hands and I thought I'd write to you.

Strange, though, there isn't much I can say. I was dead, now I'm alive. It's exhilarating! I can't even explain it myself. (That's what makes this letter so hard to write.) For me to describe the nature of my life is as impossible as it would be for you to tell a six-year-old child about what you enjoy most as an adult.

But I can tell you this much: Be ready for surprises. And, be very careful not to get stuck in the "tombs" of your misery. God and gloom don't mix. Wherever my Father and I are, moodiness must absent itself.

The angels told me about the shock Mary Magdalen and the other women had. They were expecting me to be in the tomb. They thought I was still dead: as dead as their hopes. They felt miserable, so they figured I was boxed in the misery as well. They were surprised. I didn't fit the pattern of their expectations. Never have. Never will. The Easter message from my point of view is: "He is risen." The Easter message from their point of view is "He is gone."

Your ideas about me might be the same as the women a few hours ago. You can become so engulfed in your own woes, your enemies can treat you so unjustly, the calamities of nature, wars, or the death of a dear one can so overwhelm you—in any of these cases, you may be tempted to think I'm as crushed as your life seems to be. But I am not crushed. I'm not dead. I rose from death, and I'll raise you out of your dark nights and depressions, too—as long as you don't lose hope, as long as you continue to let me surprise you.

I'll be with you, so that you may know my victory over death and every kind of evil. My Father and I will always be the source of life...and the God of surprises.

That's how I'll be for my disciples tonight. I'll see them after supper: they don't expect me. They won't believe the women when they tell them the good news. They'll stay where they are in Jerusalem, behind locked doors. So I'll have to change my plans. I'd rather they drop their dismal mood and come running up to Galilee to meet me, but they won't. So I'll surprise them where they are. I'll go back to the city and show them my victory over death, and I'll give them peace.

Once their sins have been forgiven, they'll become more confident. Then they'll be more alert at last to my ways of grace. They'll be more open to my possibilities.

I want you to be the same. Don't box me in by the pressure points of your moods or your needs for immediate satisfaction. Give me room to strengthen you my way, to alert you for new situations you can't even imagine until you experience them.

This is my Easter message: Be ready for surprises. And the surprise I'll give you will always lead to more life. I'll no longer tell you of my prayers for you. I already have sent you my Holy Spirit. He'll let you know in prayer how I'm pleading for you to drop those symbols of entombment and decay...and to meet me "some place else"—in "Galilee."

Love,
Jesus