

This study guide can be used for individual Bible Study, small group curriculum, or family studies.

Small Group Leaders Note:

The purpose of this study guide is to draw you and your group into conversation and discussion of God’s Word and its application to our lives. The questions are posed in a specific order and each of the questions has a specific purpose. As you become familiar with the purpose of each question, this will help guide the flow of the discussion.

A high-level view of the five basic questions and their functions:

1. Introduction (*lean in*). The goal of this first question is to get everyone in the group to “lean in” and get involved. It is normally easy to answer, fun and creates a sense of energy—so much so that you’ll see group members sometimes physically lean in as they engage in the discussion.
2. Observation (*look down*). This is an observation question. It is designed to help group members “look down” and see the relevant details and facts in the Bible passage being studied. This question establishes a solid foundation for the rest of the study. Regardless of how much time someone has spent studying God’s word in their lives, everyone in the group can get involved simply by taking an observant look at what the passage says.
3. Evaluation (*look up*). What do we learn about God from this passage? This is the ultimate goal of every Bible study—to get a clearer picture of the God we worship, so that we can serve and love Him better.
4. Understanding (*look out*). This question helps group members “look out” and see the principles of the Bible passage through the lens of the world today. It builds a bridge between the facts of the passage and our understanding of it as it relates to our lives and culture.
5. Application (*look in*). Here is where group members begin to “look in” and see what God might be nudging them to change in their lives. During this part of the study, group members move from “knowing” to “doing” what God’s word says. It’s the final step of all Bible study: life change—of being transformed into the likeness of Christ.

Adapted from the Liquid Curriculum series

Week One

There are several interesting aspects of the genealogy that begins the gospel of Matthew. The first is highlighted in Matt 1:17. It points out that there were 14 generations from Abraham to David, from David to the Exile, and from the Exile to Messiah. Yet, when we look at genealogical records from the Old Testament, we see that in several cases, certain generations were skipped over in the listing we are given in Matthew. We seem to be missing a few names in this genealogy. Noticing this helps highlight for us an important fact we need to keep in mind when reading scripture.

We must take care not to lose sight of the fact that this book, our Bible, was written in the Ancient Near East, some 2,000+ years ago. It is not written from a 21st century Western perspective. We must put on new glasses when reading scripture and try to move beyond our western way of thinking. What Matthew is doing in listing this genealogy this way is creating a mnemonic device, a tool common to that culture, which will help make memorizing these generations easier. So, it is divided into 3 sections of 14 names. It is not meant to be comprehensive, as we, in the West might expect. We need to read the scripture with different lenses than we're used to.

Another interesting fact is that we see in each of the genealogies of Christ recorded in the Gospels (Matthew, Luke, and John), a unique perspective is offered. In Matthew's genealogy he lists the generations from Abraham through King David and traces Jesus' royal lineage all the way down to Joseph, Jesus' earthly father. The book of Matthew was written primarily for the Jews, to demonstrate that Jesus was and is their long-awaited Messiah—thus highlighting His connection to Abraham.

Whereas, the genealogy in Luke traces the bloodline of Jesus from Adam down to David (the list of names from Abraham to David is identical to Matthew's account), but then Luke diverges from Matthew after King David, tracing the lineage of Jesus not through Solomon, but another son of David, Nathan, all the way down to Heli, the father of Mary, Jesus' mother.

The significance is that the combined force of these two complementary genealogies establishes Jesus' absolute right to the throne of David: through the bloodline of Mary (Luke 3:23–38); and by legal title through Mary's husband, Joseph (Matt 1:1-17).

Finally, one can also see John 1:1-18 (especially John 1:1) as another genealogy of sorts. The book of John highlights the deity of Jesus and thus this genealogy reveals the supernatural origin and eternal roots of who Jesus truly is—another unique facet that reveals more of the identity, mission, and role of our Messiah.

1. Who is someone famous (or infamous) in your family tree? Have you, or your family, ever done a genealogical or DNA trace to explore your roots? What did you find?

2. Why do you think Matthew includes a genealogy in his gospel? Why would he start with Abraham? How would this be meaningful to his Jewish audience? What were the Jews looking for in a Messiah?

3. Read the genealogy given in the gospel of Luke as well (Luke 3:23-28). Why would it be important for Jews to be confident in both the blood pedigree, as well as the legal title for Jesus, for them to acknowledge Him as Messiah?

4. How is someone's pedigree (cultural, racial, educational, or financial) important to those in the world today? What doors will this status open/close for a person?

5. What does our pedigree as adopted sons and daughters of God say about us? How should that affect our behavior? Is this motivating for you? Why or why not?

Going Deeper:

1. Read Gen 12:3 and 2 Sam 7:12-16. How do these verses relate to Matt 1:1? How is this first verse of Matthew “good news”? How should it have been received by the Jewish audience reading it for the first time?

2. Read through the genealogy again in Matt 1:1-7. How many female names do you see? Why do you think only Gentile women are named? Why is this significant that there are female names included at all?

Week Two

To expand a bit on our introduction last week—how many of us just skip over the genealogies when reading through Matthew and Luke? Who would have thought that these seemingly innocuous lists of names contain a riddle that when deciphered, give us a glimpse into the sovereignty of God that is fairly astounding? When reading the genealogies in Matthew and Luke, we notice that they are different. They are both supposed to be genealogies of the line of Messiah. So what is going on here? How is it that they can be different?

The key to deciphering this riddle points us right back to the time of the deportation and exile of Israel to Babylon—when Jeconiah, a king who only reigned for 3 months, was declared to be so wicked that God cursed his entire family tree.

We see his actual bloodline was cursed in Jer 22 where God says, “...no man of his descendants shall prosper sitting on the throne of Judah” (Jer 22:24-30). That seemingly posed a big problem for God. The problem was that this was the royal line from David. The Messiah *had* to come from this line. How would God get around His own blood curse and provide a Messiah through the line of David? Not surprisingly, it actually took a miracle; namely, a virgin birth.

In 2 Sam 7:13 God had promised David that his throne would never end. With this blood curse, this promise seemed to be in jeopardy. Satan thought he had won. In his twisted mind, all Satan believes he has to do is to invalidate just one of God’s promises for God to be shown faithless. What God does, though, is to have Matthew, in his genealogy, trace the royal line down through Jeconiah all the way to Joseph, the husband of Mary. This genealogy ties Jesus (through legal adoption by Joseph) to the royal line of David. So Jesus is the legal heir to the throne of David. But there is no blood descendant of Jeconiah that would sit on the throne through this line, since Jesus is not Joseph’s actual son by birth, but rather by adoption.

But what of the bloodline? If Jesus did not share the bloodline of David, would He still be the true heir to the throne? What God does, in a way only God can do, is demonstrate through the genealogy over in Luke that Jesus actually does share the bloodline of David, but traces this genealogy back through his mother Mary, who does share blood relation with Jesus. This genealogy traces Jesus’ line back through Mary to David, but through one of David’s other sons, Nathan, not through Solomon—thus bypassing the line of Jeconiah.

So Jesus is related to David, and thus qualified to be Messiah, in two different ways. He is entitled to the throne both by blood and by legal title. This could only have been accomplished by the miraculous virgin birth—where the Messiah had no earthly father to pass the bloodline

through. These genealogies reveal a God who is sovereign. If you're looking, you can see the fingerprint of the Holy Spirit in the most unlikely of places.

1. What is the most vivid dream you can remember? What kinds of things do you typically experience in your dreams?

2. Seeing how God would occasionally communicate to people in dreams throughout the Bible, how surprised do you think Joseph was that it happened to him? Do you think the angel addressing Joseph as the "son of David" had an effect on how he received the message? What is the significance of that title?

3. Read Matt 1:23; Isa 7:14; Isa 41:10. What does it mean that God is with us? How does this truth affect you (everyday; and when you are experiencing trials)?

4. How do those outside the Christian faith react when they hear that the Bible teaches, and we believe that Jesus is actually God in human flesh? Why do you think they have this reaction?

5. What situations are you facing where you need to know and really feel the presence of Jesus in your life right now?

Going Deeper:

1. How do you think you would feel if you were in Joseph's place in v.19? How would you have reacted to the situation (if an angel had not visited you)? Would your reaction have changed if you did get an angelic visitation?

2. To the Jewish audience the title "God is with us" might signify that Jesus is God in human flesh. God has come to dwell among men. But it also might signify that God is faithful in sending Messiah. What do each of these aspects of "Immanuel" mean to your heart?

Week Three

The story of the wise men visiting baby Jesus has become an integral part of our celebration of Christmas. We see the Magi displayed in every Christmas manger scene. Was it just the star in the sky that drove them to travel hundreds of miles to bring lavish presents to a baby? Or, is there more to this story than we realize? We sometimes base our beliefs about the Christmas story on traditions we have heard rather than on historical and biblical fact. Who were these “Magi” and why are they such a big deal?

If you recall from the book of Daniel, Daniel was placed in the position of “Rab-Mag,” or chief of the Magi, over 500 years before the time of Jesus. The Magi were a hereditary priesthood that were known for their ability to interpret dreams. We often think of astrology or even astronomy when we hear the name Magi (because of tradition), but that was not what they were known for. It was the interpretation of dreams. Is there any wonder then, why Nebuchadnezzar put Daniel in charge of them?

It is believed that Daniel, after having been told by the angel Gabriel when Messiah would come (Dan 9:24-27), then organized and commissioned the Magi from then on to be the ones who would prepare for and welcome and anoint the Messiah upon His arrival.

By the time of the birth of Christ, the Magi had risen to wield significant political power in the Parthian empire—the rival empire to Rome in the east. The Magi were actually the king-makers in the region. When the king was to be replaced, the Magi picked the king. In doing so, they fulfilled their original mandate from Daniel.

When we read the story of the Magi, we read about the three gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And throughout history the legend developed that, correspondingly, it was three kings that were visiting. But that was not the case. They would typically have travelled in a large retinue, including an imposing military force to protect them—thus the reason “all of Jerusalem” was troubled at their arrival (Matt 2:3). This was not three old wise men on camels. This very well could have been seen by Herod as an invading army arriving on his doorstep.

Judea sat as the buffer zone between Rome and Parthia and, thus, was in a very precarious position politically. Herod was by no means secure in his position, and so had to tread very lightly when dealing with this powerful group of Magi.

If you recall, Herod was appointed king of the Jews by Caesar. Herod wasn’t even Jewish. He was Idumean. So this statement—“where is he who was born king of the Jews”—was a carefully crafted insult to Herod, who had bribed his way into office. And now this powerful rival to Rome had sent a large military force to his city, headed by the group that appointed kings, and they were claiming that a true king had been born. Is there any wonder this made Herod nervous? Have you ever wondered why this tyrant Herod, this madman who

had his own family executed on a whim, would be so polite, and even deferential to this group of Magi?

How did the Magi know to bring these three gifts? Why would they fall down and worship this baby? I think the answer is that this group had been trained and prepared and had been waiting over 500 years for this to happen. Daniel was told by the angel Gabriel when Messiah was coming and so this was not a surprise for the Magi. They were there to anoint the true coming king.

1. What is your favorite Christmas memory?

2. What was significant about the town of Bethlehem? Why was it necessary for Jesus to be born there (see John 7:41-42; Micah 5:2)?

3. What is the significance of the arrival of the Messiah, God in human flesh, being announced to and welcomed by the lowest of the low (the shepherds), as well as the highest of the high (the wise men) in society? What does this say about the message of the gospel?

4. What are some of the different reactions to the coming of Messiah in Matthew chapter two? Seeing the different reactions in this passage, what reactions do you see in the world today to the message of Christ and the exclusivity of the gospel (i.e. that Christ is the only way)?

5. Sometimes we are so familiar with a Bible story it can lose some of its power for us. Re-read Matt 2:1-6. What strikes you about this passage? How is our response to the coming King similar to the response of the Magi, how is it different?

Going Deeper:

1. Read Psalm 91. What parallels do you see between this Psalm and Matthew chap 2? How do both of these passages help us to trust in God's promises and protection?

2. Read the other account of the birth of Jesus in Luke 2:1-20. How is this account similar to the account in Matthew? How is it different? Why do you think the Holy Spirit left us with these two different versions of this story?

Week Four

Who was this strange character who wore camel's hair clothing and snacked on locusts dipped in honey? Born in the hill country of Judah to Elizabeth, a relative of Mary the mother of Jesus, John the Baptist was the cousin of Jesus. He came preaching in the spirit and power of Elijah (Luke 1:17). In a very real sense he bridged the gap between the Old and New Testaments.

His first testimony to who Jesus was came when he was still in the womb. When Mary, who was pregnant with Jesus, came into the room, John leapt in his mother's womb (Luke 1:41). This foretold what would lay ahead in John's future. His life's goal and mission would be testifying to who Jesus was.

Taking the Nazarite vow, John's life was set apart to God; dedicated to not drinking wine, nor strong drink, not cutting his hair, and not going near a dead body. His unique appearance and dress increased his likeness to Elijah.

Jewish tradition holds that after Elijah's death, his mantle (or his cloak) was stored in a small chamber in the golden altar in the temple. Hundreds of years later, this tradition tells that the priest Zechariah (Luke 1:5-10), during his temple rotation, took the mantle of Elijah for his son John to wear during his ministry. This helps explain a little of what the angel Gabriel meant when he said John would come in the spirit and power of Elijah. Elijah himself demonstrated the importance of his mantle when he threw his mantle over his apprentice Elisha, symbolizing his ministry being passed along to him.

What did Jesus mean when He told the people in Matt 11:14 that if they cared to accept it, John was indeed Elijah who was to come? There was an expectation the Jews held that Elijah would return preceding the arrival of Messiah coming in power. Malachi chapter four spells this out. In fact, Jews, still today, hold an empty seat at their Passover Seders in anticipation that Elijah will return. Jesus was saying that, if you had accepted Me and the message I am bringing, this indeed would have been the return of Elijah, and the establishment of the Kingdom.

John paved the way for Jesus by calling people to repent and to be baptized as a symbol of turning away from their sin. Multitudes flocked out to the wilderness to hear the message of John. When Jesus, too, came to be baptized, John acknowledged that this was indeed the Messiah Israel had been waiting for. Even in the face of death, John maintained his witness to Jesus in front of King Herod. We can sometimes overlook this remarkable man who does not get a lot of attention in scripture. Yet in Luke 7:28, Jesus described John as the greatest man who had ever lived, up until that point.

1. When was the last time someone told you they were “well pleased” with something you did? How did it make you feel?

2. Read Isa 11:1-2; 42:1; 61:1-2. How does this baptism and anointing of Jesus fulfill these prophecies? For those who were present and were familiar with Isaiah’s message, how do you think this experience affected them? What was their expectation for the coming Messiah?

3. This is one of the instances in scripture when all three members of the Trinity are interacting together at the same time. Read Gen 1:1-2; Isa 6:8; Matt 28:18-20; Acts 5:1-11. What do we learn about the Trinity from all these passages?

4. If John the Baptist was preaching his message today (v.2, 11-12), what would it look like? What kinds of things would he be focusing on in the world?

5. When have you had a wilderness experience in your life? What did God teach you through this season?

Going Deeper:

1. Describe what you think it would have been like to experience the baptism of Jesus. You would be down at the Jordan River watching people repent from their sins and be baptized by this peculiar Old Testament style prophet. And then Messiah comes walking up and John stops what he is doing and actually baptizes Him. And out of the heavens the voice of God booms out, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." What would your reaction be? When have you heard God communicate most clearly to you in your life?

2. Read and compare John 1:29-34 and Matt 11:2-6. What do you think was going on in the mind of John the Baptist in the Matt 11 passage? Is he doubting? When have you had times of doubt in your own life? What did you learn through them?

Week Five

There are so many theological ideas and questions to explore that this passage in Matthew chapter four raises. One of these questions is about the Trinity. How do the various members of the Trinity relate to and interact with one another. Jesus, who is “God, the Son”, is led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness. Here we also see Jesus showing dependence upon the Father.

The Trinity is one of those topics that seems so daunting that many Christians simply acknowledge it, and avoid going any further with trying to understand it. But there are some things about the Trinity that we can know and be confident of—things that are perhaps important to know.

Rather than going into a full exploration here of what the Trinity is all about, it might be helpful to focus on one small aspect of the Trinity. Before we do, it’s important to acknowledge, as a starting point, that within our understanding of the Trinity, we confess that there is one God, who exists in 3 distinct persons. The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Spirit is God. They are all distinct persons from one another, but there is still only one being we call God. One simple way this has been expressed is: three “who’s,” and one “what”.

But one question about the Trinity this passage points us to is, how do the members of the Trinity relate with one another? Scholars, teachers, and theologians have come up with a name for this discussion. It is referred to as the “economic Trinity.” This is not a term we find in scripture but is simply a way to discuss the unique relationships among the Trinity. The term comes from the Greek “oikonomia” which means “household management.” This discussion focuses us on what God does, rather than just who He is.

The idea is that each member of the Trinity seems to consistently do certain things. Each has different roles they play. For example our salvation flows from the love and power of the Father (John 3:16); accomplished by the death and resurrection of the Son (1 John 2:2); and held secure by the regeneration and sealing of the Spirit (Eph 4:30; Titus 3:5).

Although there is an equality of substance within the Trinity (each member is equally and fully God), there is a voluntary subordination among the members. The Father is the source of all things. He sends the Son into the world (John 6:57). The Father and Son send the Spirit (John 15:26). The Son and Spirit only speak what they hear from the Father (John 12:49; 16:13). We see a beautiful explanation of this subordination in Philippians chapter 2.

The Spirit seems to play the role of the wonder working power of God. When God’s power is on display, it is often attributed to the working of the Spirit. The Son seems to be the powerful presence of God. When God “shows up” it is normally the second person of the Trinity, the Son. In the Old Testament we see this in “theophanies,” physical appearances of God; and in the New

Testament, in the person of Jesus...each member working together in harmony, love, and perfect unity.

So, in our passage here, we see the Son, being led out into the wilderness by the Spirit. The Spirit is guiding and leading the Son, just as the Spirit leads us. The Son also shows Himself completely dependent upon and reliant upon the Father for providing for and sustaining Him—as a perfect example for us to follow.

The Trinity is a complex and wonderful puzzle that reveals the unfathomable nature and majesty of our immense and infinite God. But we should not shy away from exploring it, because the clearer our picture is of God, the truer our worship will be.

1. Describe the longest you have ever gone without food. What was it like? What was the purpose? Have you ever incorporated fasting as a spiritual discipline in your life? Why/why not?

2. Read Matt 4:1 carefully. What all do you notice? What does this verse tell us about Jesus? About God? About life?

3. What was the nature of each temptation of Jesus? What areas of life did they attack (1 John 2:15-16)? Why do you think each of these temptations would be appealing to Jesus?

4. Where have you seen those in the world (or even in the church) twist scripture to suit their own ends, or to undergird their own agenda? Where have you seen those around you ignore certain scriptures and/or misapply other scriptures to excuse or justify their behavior?

5. Read Psalm 119:1. Notice how Jesus answered every advance by Satan with scripture. How important is scripture memorization to you? What has been your experience memorizing scripture? What fruit has come from it? How could you foresee incorporating more scripture memorization into your daily spiritual routine?

Going Deeper:

1. In what areas are you most likely to be tempted? How are you best able to combat these temptations?

2. Describe a “desert time” you have experienced in your life? What was it like? How long did it last? What did you learn about yourself and about God through this time?

Week Six

When we read of Jesus approaching Simon Peter and his brother Andrew in Matt 4:18 and asking them to leave their father and the family business and just walk away, has that ever surprised you? And perhaps even more surprising is that they immediately left their nets and followed Him—without hesitation. Have you ever wondered how they could do that? How they could just abandon their father like that? Wouldn't their father be upset?

We can sometimes forget that the Bible is primarily a Jewish book, written to Jewish people. So we need to dive into the Jewish context to really hear how the message of the Bible would have been received by the original recipients.

I love the term “disciple” to describe what it means to be a follower of Jesus. When we look at what the term meant for those who heard Jesus use it, we get a whole new understanding. It was the dream of every young Jewish boy, and every Jewish mother for their son to be taken on as a disciple, as a “Talmidim,” a follower, a student of a great rabbi. The entire school system of the day was set up to train young boys to be able to get recruited by famous travelling rabbis. All they wanted was to be “Talmidim.”

A disciple, a Talmidim (one who studied Talmud), would sit at the feet of their teacher, their Rabbi, learning from and imitating everything their master did. In the Jewish educational system of Jesus' day, there were 3 different levels—like in the West we have elementary education, junior high, and high school. In Bet Sefer (both boys and girls, ages 6-12) children learned to read and write and to memorize the Torah. Bet Sefer means “house of the book.”

After this, the boys would begin to learn a trade and only the top students continued on in education. The girls would stay at home to help with the family. These top male students, who had memorized the Torah by now (the 5 books of Moses, Gen– Deut), would continue their study in second level, Bet Midrash (age 13 to 15 or 16). Bet Midrash means “house of interpretation.”

This second level was invitation only. They would continue to be taught by the local Rabbi (while continuing to learn the family trade) and would memorize the entire Tanach (the Old Testament). They would still be helping with the work for the family, but their focus would be on their studies. But then at age 15 or 16 most all students would be done. They would go back to the family business.

After this, only the best of the best would make it to the top level. This is where the most brilliant, promising students would then be specially selected by a famous traveling Rabbi to enter Bet Talmud (age 15-30). Bet Talmud means “house of disciple.” If you thought you had what it took, you would go seek out prominent teachers, or rabbis, and ask if you could follow them.

Very few students would make it this far. They would normally leave home to travel with and emulate everything the Rabbi did. They would be called “Talmidim.” This is translated as “disciple.” But you had to be accepted by the rabbi—why? Because his reputation was made by

the caliber of his students. When you were known as a Talmidim of a particular rabbi, your conduct and your holiness reflected on him (does that sound familiar?). At 30 years of age, you could then graduate and become a rabbi yourself.

When Jesus called His disciples to follow Him, this was the highest of honors. They would forsake everything in this world and sit at His feet and learn from Him. That is why so many wanted to follow Jesus—but He only chose a few.

So do you see how it is that Peter and Andrew could leave their nets immediately and follow Jesus? They had hit the lottery. After they thought any chance had passed of their making it into Bet Talmud, along comes this rabbi, and He actually seeks them out and selects them! Of course they would leave immediately. It's what they had been dreaming of their whole life.

And what do you think Zebedee, their father, thought about this? He could not have been more proud. That was what every Jewish parent dreamt of. His boys were going to be able to follow their rabbi—sit at His feet and emulate everything He did.

1. What was it like when you moved away from home for the first time? What surprised you the most? What did you learn about yourself through this?

2. In Matt 4:12-13 we see Jesus moving away from His hometown of Nazareth about 2 days' journey northeast to Capernaum, which is at the northern tip of the Sea of Galilee. What do you think it was like for this new rabbi, at 30 years old, to make this move? Why do you think it was important, at the beginning of His ministry, to have this fresh start (see also Matt 13:54-58)?

3. What characteristics do you think Jesus was looking for in the selection of His disciples? What characteristics do you think Jesus desires in His disciples today? What does this look like in your life?

4. How does culture today react and respond to the message of the coming Kingdom? Why do you think they react this way? How has reaction been changing in the past few decades?

5. If you were in the crowds, what would you ask Jesus to heal for you? Perhaps you can take some time as a group to pray for this right now.

Going Deeper:

1. Describe the beginning of Jesus' ministry (Matt 4:23-25). What different elements do you see? Why do you think Jesus started out His ministry in this way (why healing, why synagogues, from where did His followers come)?

2. We see Jesus preaching about the coming of the Kingdom. In what ways is the Kingdom present now? In what ways is it still future?

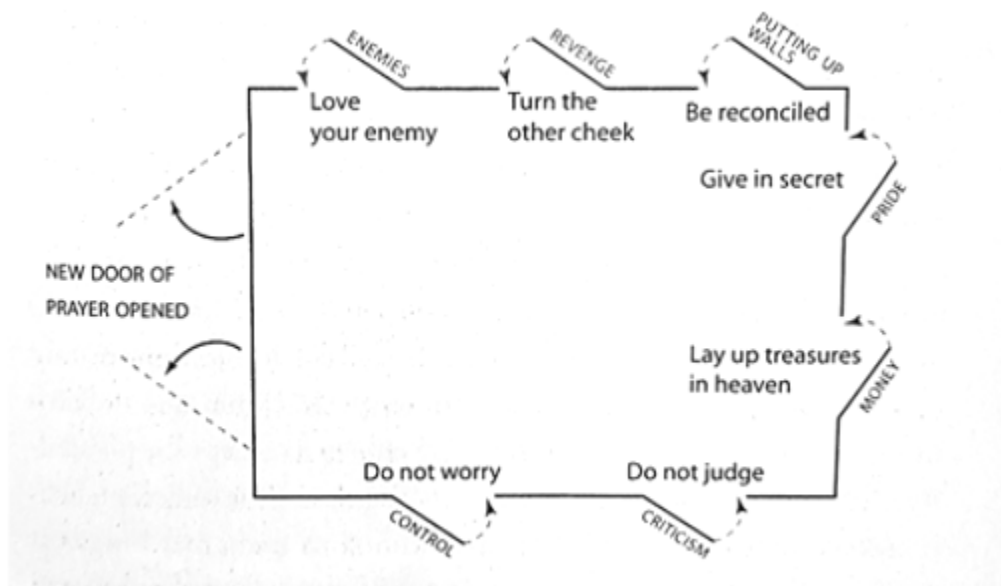
Week Seven

What would it look like to be completely dependent upon God for wisdom, grace, and courage? Most of us rely upon ourselves for these things far too much. But God has given us a resource, a tool, a message in His Word that charts out a path that we can follow which shows us that kind of life of dependence is really possible.

Over the next few weeks, as we go through this powerful message from our Lord called the Sermon on the Mount, let's see if we can focus in on where He is leading us to take our eyes off ourselves and begin to see the world through His eyes.

There is a wonderful book on prayer that illustrates how we can view the Sermon on the Mount as a blue-print for helping us give up the control we crave and give that control over to God. It describes the Sermon on the Mount as a how-to-manual for learning to die to ourselves and our self-will and live for God. The book is called "A Praying Life" by Paul Miller. I cannot recommend this book highly enough. It describes how our lives can be characterized by prayer and provides a pathway for us to get there.

In chapter 18, the author likens our life to a room with many open doors. These are doors that lead us to human power, glory, and control. These are doors that entice us to put up walls, and seek after revenge; to live in pride or allow worry to control us. But what Jesus is offering in the Sermon on the Mount is that He can help go through our lives and close those doors for us, if we allow Him to. We can learn to close the door to control by giving up worry. We can loosen the grip money has on us by laying up treasures in Heaven. As we make our way through this message in the next few weeks, we'll see the way to close all these doors.



Jesus begins this message with what are called “the beatitudes.” In an overview kind of way Jesus begins this sermon laying out what life in the Kingdom can look like. Then in the next two chapters, He will flesh out what it looks like to close the door to control and learn to open the door to dependence through prayer. Jesus is offering us a new kind of life.

1. Who in your life (teacher, coach, or mentor) taught you the most about character and attitude?

2. Matt 5:1-12 lays out what are sometimes called “the beatitudes.” The term “blessed” does not refer to happiness (as some translations unfortunately have it), but rather to a true state of blessedness. These who are being called “blessed” are to be considered fortunate for being in a right relationship to God. Each blessing is connected to a promise. When will these promises find their fulfillment—in this life, or in the Kingdom? Or, is it possible that both are in view?

3. What does it mean to hunger and thirst for righteousness? What does it mean to be pure in heart? What does it mean to be poor in spirit? Who are some people that you believe really exemplify these traits?

4. How do you think popular culture would react to these statements by Jesus? How do the values of those in the world compare with these listed here? What are some examples?

5. Where would you rate yourself when it comes to exhibiting these qualities in vv. 3-11 (poor in spirit, mourning, gentle, hunger and thirst for righteousness, merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers, persecuted for righteousness)? Share which areas would rate highest for you, and which would rate lowest for you. What is your plan for raising the lower marks?

Going Deeper:

1. In a practical sense, what does it mean to be salt and light to the world around us (vv. 13-16)? How does this command relate to the previous section (the beatitudes)? What are some examples?

2. The sermon on the mount, and especially the beatitudes, helps paint a picture of contrast for us between what living for this world or living for God really looks like. Read 1 Cor 1:18-31. How does this passage relate to the counterculture message in the beatitudes?

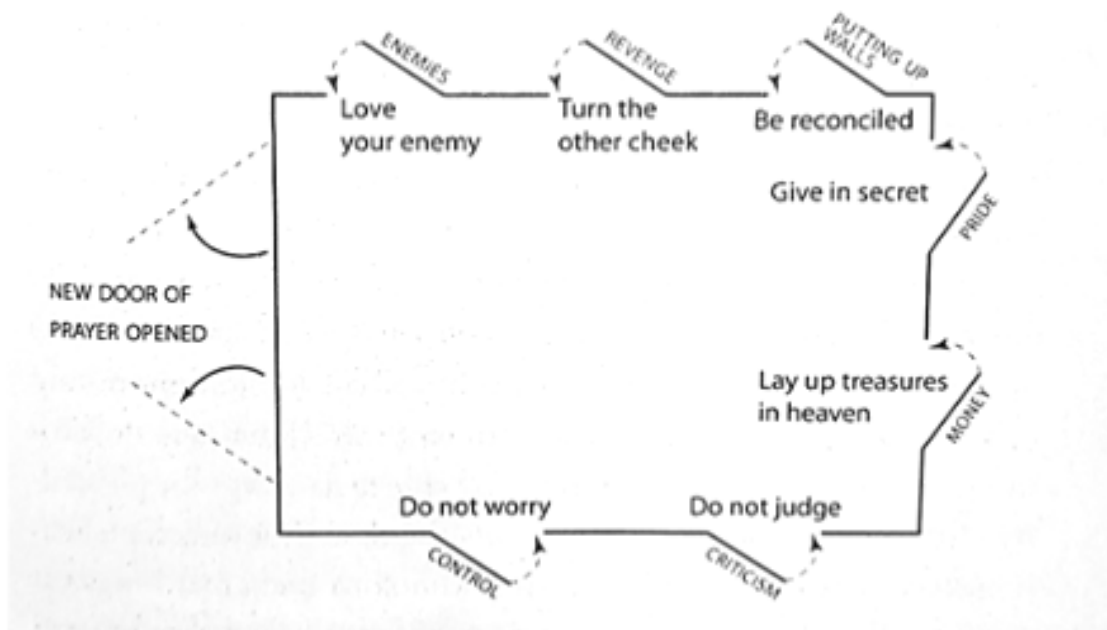
Week Eight

Mark 1:22 says that the people were amazed at the teaching of Jesus because He was teaching them as one having authority, not as the scribes. The way Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount was by saying, "You have heard it said...but I say unto you."

The way the Scribes typically taught and expressed authority to their students was by citing respected scholars and rabbis from the past. Whereas, Jesus cited Himself as the authority. This would have been shocking to those hearing His words.

Jesus completely turns upside down the view of authority in that day. Jesus was changing culture by attacking the long-held institutions the current culture held as sacred. Jesus also helps us overturn long-held ways of thinking and acting that prevent us from living in complete dependence on God. Again, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is offering us a new way of living.

We saw last week how we can picture our life like a room with many open doors. These doors lead to attitudes and actions that inhibit the powerful working of the Spirit in our lives.



Jesus begins this section in Matt 5:17-48 by affirming this new way of looking at life is not a repudiation of the Law of Moses. But rather, it is a repudiation of what mankind has done in distorting God's beautiful Law given through Moses. Then Jesus goes on to help us close these doors by redirecting us back to God's Word and explaining the true nature of the commands religion has twisted to its own ends.

Jesus helps us close the door to anger and resentment by encouraging us to seek out those with whom we are in conflict, even though it might not be our fault (vv. 21-26). He helps

us close the door to sexual temptation by showing us it all begins in our thought life—and that this is where we need to address it (vv. 27-30). He closes the door to revenge by helping us know how to turn the other cheek—by selflessly giving up our so-called “rights” (vv. 38-42).

One by one Jesus addresses all the doors we have open to living independently from God and shows us a better way. We’ll see later in this message how, after He helps us close all these doors to undesirable things, He opens the door to a life of dependence upon God through prayer. As we begin to stop doing our own will, we begin to wait upon God and begin to abide in His will.

1. What’s the best advice you have been given for how to deal with anger? How do you personally deal with anger and frustration?

2. What did Jesus mean in v.17 that He came to fulfill the Law? How does v.19 help us to understand this?

3. Jesus chooses six different topics here in vv. 21-48 and corrects our misunderstanding about how we have understood God’s directives. He seems to be taking us behind the letter of the law to the spirit in which it was intended—and saying, the spirit is what it was all about all along. Discuss how He does this with murder (v. 21), and with adultery (v. 27). What does He really want us to know about these two topics?

4. Jesus makes a shocking statement in 5:39. How would culture in the world today have you react in this situation? How do you normally react?

5. Choose one of these topics Jesus presents in this section. How can you personally help Jesus “close the door” to living according to your own will with this issue, and how can you transform it into an opportunity for prayer?

Going Deeper:

1. How would you counsel a woman who was being abused by her husband to understand 5:39?

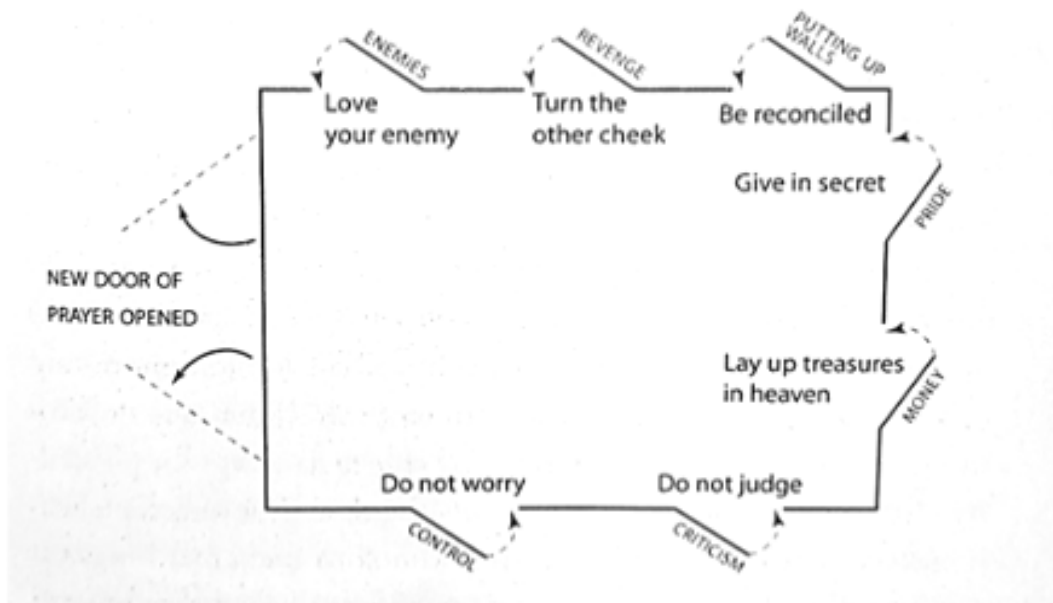
2. When have you had the opportunity to practice (or ignore) Jesus' statement in 5:44-45? How can Jesus ask this of us?

Week Nine

We have been exploring in the past couple of weeks how Jesus gives us a profound, yet simple lesson in the Sermon on the Mount—a lesson that will take us on a journey from self-will to a submitted will; from being independent back to being a dependent child of God. Culture tries to convince us that independence is what we ought to be striving for, whereas, the scriptures guide us toward the beauty of a simple reliance and dependence upon our Father as the way to live.

Paul Miller points out in his book, “A Praying Life,” that in the beginning of Matthew chapter 6, Jesus is helping us move away from merely wanting to look spiritual. Jesus says when we give of our resources to the Lord, not to call attention to it (vv. 1-4). In this way, we can begin to close the door to pride. Jesus goes on to teach that we shouldn’t use our prayer life to try to make ourselves look good (vv. 5-8). And that if we fast, we shouldn’t parade it in front of others as some sort of badge of honor (vv. 16-18).

We are learning through this message by Jesus to give up the control we desperately seek and we are learning to see how our self-will colors much of what we do. Again, we are seeking to allow the Lord to close the doors to us getting our identity from our own righteousness—and to not use spirituality as a way to gain power and glory for ourselves.



Jesus also gives us a simple prayer to model our own prayers after. He helps us learn how to direct our attention and focus away from ourselves and our own needs and focus our eyes on God. It is God who knows what we need before we even ask (v. 8).

At the end of the prayer Jesus leaves us with a challenging and sobering idea (vv. 14-15). If we forgive others, then God will forgive us. But if we do not, then God will not either. Jesus

repeats and re-emphasizes this idea later in Matthew as well. In Matt 18:21-35 Jesus tells the story of the ungrateful slave and finishes the story by saying that there will be dire consequences for those who do not forgive.

1. What kind of faith tradition did you grow up with? Was yours a Christian family? Were they Roman Catholic or another religion? How big a part of your life was your faith while you were young?

2. Read Matt 6:2; 5; 16. Then go back and read 6:1. What do these three sections of chapter 6 all have in common? What is the message Jesus has for us in the first half of chapter 6?

3. In the first half of the Lord's Prayer (6:9-13) where are we taught to place our focus (vv. 9-10)? What do we learn about God and about ourselves from these verses? Then what do we learn about how we might look at our needs in vv. 11-13? What needs are in focus? What do we learn about dependence upon God?

4. What do you think motivates those in the world to give to the poor, to charities, and philanthropy in general? What motivates believers to do the same? Is it the same motivation? Why or why not?

5. How private are you about your faith? What would it look like to live your faith more publicly? What is the difference between “living out your faith” to be a witness and “flaunting your faith” to be seen by others?

Going Deeper:

1. What is your attitude toward giving to the Lord? Do you lean more toward giving out of obligation or more towards giving out of joy? What do we learn about giving in 6:1-4?

2. Read through 6:1-18 again and notice all the mentions of rewards in Heaven from our Father (see also 6:19-21). What is the role of coming rewards as a motivation for service in scripture? Is there anything wrong with being motivated by eternal rewards? Why or why not?

Week Ten

As we have been examining over the past few weeks, the Sermon on the Mount is a beautiful commentary by Jesus on a completely different, completely freeing way to do life. In our flesh it is so natural to try to accomplish things on our own; forgetting and neglecting to look to the source of life for our identity, our sense of worth, really, the energizing force for doing life. God so desires that we give up the control we think we want and begin to rely on Him to supply our needs. But our self-will gets in the way from us leaning back and resting in God as our loving Father. We've forgotten the comfort that child-like trust affords us.

As author Paul Miller describes for us in "A Praying Life," the Sermon on the Mount can be seen as a blueprint for helping us give control back to God. We have seen Jesus help us close the doors to pride, anger, lust, revenge, and more. In this passage (6:19-7:12) we see that Jesus invites us to close the door to looking to money as a source of security, because money is more than what it might seem.

Money actually serves as a barometer of our hearts. We often feel safe and secure when we have plenty of money, and we panic when we don't. But this natural inclination betrays a mindset that is not set on God. If we truly believe in a sovereign, loving God, who cares for us, then investing our peace of mind in the fatness of our wallet would be the last thing on our minds. Our peace of mind ought to come, and really can come, from resting in the promises of our God.

Money can be a barometer of not only the state of our hearts, but also a tell-tale sign of where our allegiances lie. We may not even be aware of the extent to which we are invested in this temporary life, but Jesus tells us to take a look at our checkbook and this will reveal where we are storing up our treasures. If we are living for this life or living for eternity, it will be reflected in how we invest our resources.

If we want to shift our hope and our focus to eternal things, we can. All we need to do is begin to invest our time, talent, and treasure into the things of God. And the amazing result is that our heart will follow. We will begin to see this life in a new way. We will begin to value and seek after ways to be involved in Kingdom activities. That is what Jesus meant by, "...where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

When we begin to move away from relying on money to solve our problems, insecurity, anxiety, and fear can begin to creep in. We are so used to trusting in ourselves that we can feel untethered at first. We can even panic and allow anxiety to invade our hearts, not realizing that God simply wants us to look to Him with eyes of trust. So Jesus then says, don't worry about the basic necessities of life. God knows what you need before you even ask. Here, Jesus gives us one of the most powerful and precious promises in scripture. He declares that if we will seek God first; if we will place in first priority the things of His kingdom and truly pursue

righteousness, then we will never have to worry about those basic needs. All we need to do is ask (Matt 7:7-8). And thus, two more doors have closed: self-reliance and worry.

1. What was your view of riches, or wealth growing up? Did you want to “get rich?” Why or why not? Has your view changed over time?

2. Matt 6:25 begins by saying, “For this reason...” What is the reason we are not to be anxious? What is the connection between 6:25 and 6:19-21? How does this passage help us to develop an eternal perspective? What is the connection between anxiety and having an eternal perspective, or, lack thereof?

3. Read Matt 6:33-34 and 7:7-8. What connection do you see between these two passages? How might 6:33-34 flavor how we approach 7:7-8?

4. In the world today, how is success typically measured? In the Kingdom of God, how is success typically measured? With which metric do you personally lean toward more often? Why do you think this is?

5. How much pressure do you feel to “keep up with the Joneses”? In what areas of life does this show up for you? What does this perspective or attitude say about how you feel about God; about your trust in His provision for you; about having an eternal perspective? What would you like to change in this regard?

Going Deeper:

1. If Jesus were to do an audit of your life, where would He say “your treasure is”? What would be the evidence?

2. Read Matt 6:25-34 again. Also read Phil 4:6-7. What is the cause of anxiety? What is the cure for anxiety?

Week Eleven

As we approach this last portion of the Sermon on the Mount, we come out of a section where Jesus helps us close the door to being judgmental. As we begin to see life in a new way, our priorities start to change. As we close the door to the mindset of living for this world, a whole new world opens up to us. We start to value things differently. We now, rightly, are placing value on eternal things rather than on simply what we can see around us. One of the first temptations we can now face is to sometimes look with a critical eye on those who don't.

We may feel the exaltation of no longer being chained to this world. We can even glory in the truth that this life is not what we are living for anymore. And yet out of the shadows, the flesh can still exert its unexpected grip on us as we find ourselves being judgmental. But Jesus tells us we can close the door to that too.

Do you want to be viewed with gracious eyes, Jesus asks, then look with gracious eyes upon others. When you see shortcomings in others, use that as an opportunity to shine a mirror upon your own heart. Where am I falling short (because I am)? Where do I need to allow the Spirit to gain more control of my fallen and frail flesh?

The wonderful truth Jesus shares with us is, if you truly want to help your brother who is in sin, then deal with your own. And perhaps he can follow you down the path of repentance. Rather than poking, and prodding, and pushing, and goading someone to change, how much more pleasant the journey, and profitable the endeavor, is someone eagerly following your example towards transformation?

We then see that after we have allowed Jesus to close all these doors to power, control, self-will, and personal glory, He opens the door to a new way of living—a life of prayer. He simply talks to His Father and tells Him what He wants. Oh, how simple and also how freeing!

What would we think if we discovered our 5-year old child was looking for change in the couch cushions; if he was hoarding scraps of food in his closet; if he was looking through the neighbor's trash for old, worn-out garments? When we discovered this and asked why, how would we react upon hearing that he was scared about not having enough food for tomorrow's lunch—that he was worried his clothes might wear out and he wanted to have something to wear to school?

Would it not break our hearts that our precious little child did not understand that it is our heart's greatest desire to care for him—that we love him so much that we will always take care of him—and that if there is literally *anything* he needs, all he needs to do is ask? How could it be different for our Heavenly Father, who loves and cares for us far more than we could even care for our own children?

This new way of living closes the doors to all the consequences of us striking out to live life on our own, separate from God. When we allow Him to, Jesus shows us a new way to live;

in dependence upon a Father who loves us; in the freedom of knowing our needs will be met; and in security, understanding that all we need to do is ask. Prayer is the open door that comes from a surrendered will.

1. What would your dream house look like? Where would it be located?

2. Who do you think the false prophets are that Jesus is warning us of in vv. 15-20? Are they inside the church or outside? What kind of fruit will they bear? How does vv. 21-23 help us understand who these false prophets are?

3. What is the one requirement for entrance into the Kingdom, according to 7:23? What does it mean to know the Lord, and to be known by Him? What will this person do as a result of this relationship (7:21)? What does this look like in real life?

4. What does the “broad road” look like (7:13-14)? What does the “narrow road” look like? What is it about the broad road that is so attractive? What is it about the narrow road that is so challenging? What is it about the narrow road that is so rewarding?

5. Jesus closes this famous Sermon on the Mount by saying that we need to both hear what He is saying and we need to put it into practice (7:24). Do you think you need to learn more at this point, or simply practice what you already know? What do you think is holding you back? What is one thing you can do this week to “put it into practice”?

Going Deeper:

1. What does it mean to have one's foundation on the rock (v. 25)? How do you build such a foundation? How do we put the words of Jesus into practice? What foundation do you most rely upon (your talents, intellect, resources, self-confidence, others, wishful thinking, etc.)? How would you describe your foundation right now?

2. What does it mean that we will know false prophets by their fruit (v. 16; 20)? What does this fruit look like? What is the difference between being "fruit inspectors" and the kind of judging Jesus warned us about in the beginning of the chapter?

Week Twelve

One of the things that we are going to start to see more and more clearly as we go through Matthew, is that Matthew is a little different than the other gospels. It has a specific purpose for which and specific audience for whom it was written. In fact, each of the gospels has a little different “take” on the life and ministry of Jesus. This is important to understand because God chose to not “dictate” His Word to us. But rather, God chose to use the individual personalities and backgrounds, and even writing styles of the men who wrote scripture to communicate His message, but each from a little different vantage point.

The gospels are, in one sense, a history of the life of Jesus. The authors wrote in a specific historical setting, first century Palestine, during a time of Roman occupation. They communicate accurate historical information based on credible sources and traditions. But they are so much more than history. They are also narrative. They tell a story. We see a plot, characters, and a setting; with the author sometimes selecting different events to highlight his perspective and his purpose. But the gospels are even more than history and narrative. They are more specifically “theological historical narrative.” They each have a different theological agenda. Each gospel brings out a different aspect of Jesus’ identity. It is like seeing different facets of the same gemstone.

Matthew is writing his gospel for a Jewish audience; for someone who is familiar with the Old Testament. His purpose is to demonstrate that Jesus is, indeed, the long-awaited Messiah Israel had been promised ever since the beginning. Matthew focuses on prophecies that have been fulfilled. For Matthew, Jesus is the promised King, the “Son of David,” who will sit on His glorious throne someday.

The Gospel of Mark was written to a Gentile audience. There are things that would have been appealing to a Jewish audience that Matthew includes, that Mark does not. Mark focuses on Jesus as the suffering servant. In that Mark focuses on action, we see this is the shortest of the Gospels. A very common word in Mark is “immediately.” Here we see Jesus in action. There are more miracles recorded in Mark than in the other Gospel accounts.

The Gospel of Luke focuses on the humanity of Jesus. A phrase he uses more than anyone else is “Son of Man.” Luke was a physician and so focused on events that stress Jesus’ humanity. Luke was a Gentile and wrote for a Gentile, perhaps Roman audience. Luke is part one of a two-part work: Luke/Acts. Some scholars believe that Luke wrote this two-part document as the trial documents that would have had to proceed Paul to Rome for his trial before Caesar. They lay out an orderly account of the life and ministry of Jesus, as well as the work of Paul in the early church.

John is very clear about his purpose. In chapter 20 of the fourth Gospel he states: “These things have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of

God, and that believing, you might have life in His name.” John wrote to put on display the deity of Jesus. John wants us to know that Jesus Christ is God in human flesh.

Each Gospel has its own style, its own purpose, its own emphasis—yet all with the same goal in mind: to reveal to us who this Jesus truly was. As we make our way through Matthew, let’s keep that purpose in mind. How does Matthew point us to the truth that Jesus truly is the Messiah? Here in Matthew chapter 8, as Jesus is heading out to do the ministry He was called to, what do we see? We see lepers cleansed, the sick are healed, demons are cast out—all things that Messiah was going to come and accomplish.

1. When was a time when you felt accepted and loved? When was a time when you felt like an outcast?

2. Describe what you think it would have felt like to be a leper in that society (physically, emotionally, socially, and spiritually). What would it mean for that person for Jesus to touch them? Why do you think Jesus told the man not to tell anyone?

3. Why was it significant that Jesus offered to go into the home of the centurion? How did Jesus characterize the faith of the centurion (vv. 5-13)? How would this message have been received by the Jewish crowd following Him (v. 10)? What is membership in the kingdom based on, lineage or faith?

4. After this series of events what do you think the religious leaders were thinking of Jesus (in that they saw the miracles and still did not believe)? How do unbelievers today view the miracles of Jesus? Is it any different than it was 2,000 years ago?

5. Here at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, in just one chapter, what do we see Jesus do? What kind of wonders does He perform? What does He show He has control over? At the end of this short period what kind of confidence do you think the disciples would have had in Jesus—after seeing all these miraculous signs? What kind of confidence do you have in Jesus, knowing all that He did: back then, and for you now? What typically makes your confidence wane? What bolsters your confidence?

Going Deeper:

1. What is the cost of discipleship Jesus describes in 8:18-22? Do you think we really take this seriously today? Why or why not? What have you learned about the cost of following Jesus in your own life?

2. Knowing that these disciples were mostly professional fisherman who fished on this same body of water every day--describe what you think the disciples were thinking and feeling: as the storm began and Jesus was asleep; as the storm grew out of control; when Jesus spoke to and "rebuked" the storm; and when it immediately became calm. How would you have reacted?

Week Thirteen

We saw last week a glimpse of the beautiful tapestry that God has woven together in the four Gospels—four different pictures—four distinct but complementary portraits of the life of Jesus. Matthew presents Jesus the King, the Son of David. Mark shows us the suffering servant. Luke displays Jesus as the Son of Man. John reveals to us Jesus as the divine Son of God.

Yet this is not the only time we see these four images of our Lord set before us. In both Ezekiel 1 & 6, and in Revelation 4 we are given a glimpse into the throne room of God. What we find are some amazing creatures called “cherubim.” These creatures appear to be a higher order of angel and are called “the living ones”. It seems to be their job to protect the holiness of God. They do not cease day and night to declare, “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty.” Seven times in the Old Testament God is described as “He who dwells between the Cherubim.”

The interesting thing about these creatures is their physical description. They are described as having six wings; with two they covered their face, with two they covered their feet and with the other two they flew. But it's their faces that are most intriguing, for they all have four faces each. They each have the face of a lion, the face of a bull, the face of a man, and the face of an eagle. One face on each side. This is the picture God wants us to have about His throne-room—His holiness in the middle surrounded by these four images.

If we jump back to the book of Numbers chapter two we find these same four images represented. When Israel was wandering through the wilderness, God told them very precisely how He wanted them to set up their camp. They would erect the tabernacle in the middle, representing the throne of God. Around the tabernacle the tribe of Levi would camp. Then in four groupings (to the east, west, north, and south) the rest of the tribes would set up their camps.

Each of these four “camps” were composed of three tribes with one of the tribes being the “lead tribe.” Each tribe also had a banner, or a standard they flew that represented their tribe. Each banner had a symbol on it representing that tribe.

Now the four camps were divided up like this: to the east were the tribes of Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun. This is referred to as the "camp" of Judah. Judah was the lead tribe in that camp. To the south would be Reuben, Simeon, and Gad. This was called the camp of Reuben. To the west were Ephraim, Manasseh, and Benjamin. This was the camp of Ephraim. And to the north were Dan, Asher, and Naphtali—in the camp of Dan. Each of these "camps" were to rally around the standard of the lead tribe.

This all starts to make sense when we discover what was on the standard of each lead tribe. The tribe of Judah was represented on its standard by a picture of a Lion. The tribe of Reuben was represented by the picture of a Man; the tribe Ephraim had the picture of a Bull;

and the tribe of Dan had the image of an Eagle. The same four faces surrounding the throne of God in heaven also surrounded the Holy of Holies in the camp of Israel in the desert—the lion, bull, man, and eagle. Every time Israel camped during their 40-year wilderness wanderings, they were picturing the throne-room of God.

Just like the camp of Israel was a model of the throne room of God, so too, the four Gospels give us that same four-fold picture. In Matthew, Christ is portrayed as a Lion, the king of the beasts, and the King of Kings. In Rev 5:5 Jesus is called “the Lion of the tribe of Judah.”

In the book of Mark, Christ is presented as a servant, a sacrifice for our sins. This can be seen as a bull, a beast of burden, an animal to be sacrificed.

We see Christ in the book of Luke pictured as “the Son of man”. So, too, the third living creature, and the camp of Reuben was represented by the picture of a man.

The fourth living creature was described like a flying eagle—which symbolizes sovereignty and supremacy. This is seen in the camp of Dan and is laid out for us in the book of John beautifully. John shows us Jesus to be the Son of God, the God-man.

God paints a colorful picture for us all throughout the scriptures of who He is. The four gospels depict Jesus in that same four-fold manner. Keep an eye out as we continue through Matthew—how he reveals the kingship of Jesus, the royal lion of the tribe of Judah.

1. At the beginning of chapter 9 Jesus returns to His new adopted home in Capernaum. What is more “home” to you—where you live now, or where you grew up? What does “home” mean to you?

2. After seeing all the amazing healings Jesus was doing, what would the people have expected Jesus to do in the beginning of chapter 9? Why would His first act (v. 2) have been a surprise to them? What issue was Jesus forcing them to grapple with?

3. What abilities/powers is Jesus displaying in chapter 9? Do you see any difference (or escalation) from chapter 8? What were the different reactions to this powerful, unprecedented display in Matt 9:33 and then 9:34? (Remember 9:34 as we progress throughout the first half of Matthew. This is significant.)

4. In this chapter alone Jesus heals a paralytic, raises the dead, heals a sick woman, heals two blind men and a dumb man who was demon possessed. And still the Pharisees react the way they do (9:34). Why do you think the world has the reaction to Jesus that they do? What do you think it would take for them to believe in Him?

5. At the end of these two mighty chapters, what is Jesus' response (9:36-38)? How are you working in His harvest?

Going Deeper:

1. What key word do you see repeated in Matt 9:6 and 9:8 (NASB)? Describe what authority has to do with the ability to heal and the permission to forgive sins? Why would this have been important to the scribes who were questioning Him (see Matt 7:29)?

2. In 9:30-31, Jesus commands the blind men not to tell others about Him and what He had done for them. And they did the opposite. They spread news about Him in all the land. Ironically enough, Jesus tells us the opposite. He tells us to go into all the world preaching the gospel, and what do we do? We rarely, if ever, obey. Why do you think this is? What is it about our responsibility to evangelize that most Christians struggle with? What has been your experience in sharing your faith? Do you go beyond simply being a living witness? What would you like your life to look like in this regard?

Week Fourteen

When we are reading scripture we need to be sensitive to the kind or type of genre we are reading. Reading different parts of scripture requires different methods of reading and interpretation. We instinctively know this in life, but somehow need to be reminded of this from time to time when it comes to reading scripture.

We know, for instance, that when we are reading poetry, we experience it and look for different things than when we are reading a phone book, or a cookbook. Different rules apply. We need to be careful and mindful about how we are reading scripture, to make sure we are applying the correct principles for each genre we encounter—or else we will end up with a wrong understanding of what we're reading.

The genre of Gospel contains quite a bit of narrative. Narrative is interesting because there are often multiple layers of significance involved. And it takes some insight sometimes to fully explore what all is being communicated. What I mean by different layers is that there is a story that is being told on the surface. And then that story also plays into a bigger narrative the author is developing behind the scenes. We sometimes call that a “meta-narrative.”

An example might be: if I asked you what the book of Acts is all about, you might say it's a collection of stories about Peter and Paul and the adventures of the early church. And that would be right. But on a deeper level, as you zoom back a bit, you might say it's also the story of how the church was born and how it began to spread and transform what was a local event (the death and resurrection of Christ) into an international movement (Christianity).

But zooming back further, on an even deeper level, you could say it's the beginning of a new phase in God's plan to provide salvation to the world. This new phase is called the “New Covenant.” It is God taking the next step in revealing the big picture of His plan to save and redeem the world.

So we see it is the same set of stories seen from a much bigger, much deeper perspective. That is what is meant by a “meta-narrative.” It involves taking a step back and looking at the story—behind the story—behind the story. It is the story of how God has been working all throughout history, through the books and stories we read in scripture—in order to accomplish His purposes. Through the genre of narrative, several layers of story and storytelling are woven together.

Where that shows up for us in Matthew is in the understanding that at the uppermost level, the meta-narrative of God's unfolding of salvation history, we see that God promised a Kingdom here on earth to Israel all throughout their history. This was to come with the arrival of Messiah. When Messiah does arrive, Israel rejects that offer of the Kingdom. This is not done through any formal declaration, but rather through their actions initially of rejecting His teachings, and later through crucifying Him.

This rejection of the Kingdom is seen most clearly in the gospel of Matthew. As we make our way through the next few chapters, let's keep focused on this idea. How is the Kingdom offered, and how is it rejected?

We get a glimpse of this offer of the Kingdom in 10:5-7, where Jesus sends out His disciples two by two to spread the news about Him. But notice what He says:

“Do not go in the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter any city of the Samaritans; but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And as you go, preach, saying, ‘The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.’”

He sends His disciples to the Jews first. This is because the Kingdom was offered to Israel. We see this gospel priority in Rom 1:16 where Paul says:

“For I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.”

When Israel rejects the offer of the Kingdom, then God's plan moves out with a new focus—which we'll cover later. But keep looking for this meta-narrative of the Kingdom as we approach chapter 12.

1. In Matt 10 Jesus changes the game for the disciples. They embark on a brand new phase in ministry. What new job, adventure, or season in your life challenged you the most? What did you learn through this?

2. Again, here in Matt 10:1, we see this word “authority” being used when it comes to an ability to do the miraculous. How do you think the disciples reacted—after watching all the amazing things Jesus was doing, to then, be given that ability and authority? What would you do, if you were in their position?

3. In light of the weighty burden Christ warns the disciples of in this entire chapter, discuss what you think Jesus means in 10:38-39?

4. This message of Jesus in chapter 10 can be seen as very divisive. What reactions to this message have you heard from others (e.g. Jesus came to set a man against His father, etc.; He who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; you will be hated by all on account of me)?

5. When do you find it easiest to talk about your faith with others? When do you find it most difficult?

Going Deeper:

1. Describe some of the different kinds of people Jesus called to be His disciples. Why do you think Jesus would call as disciples a Zealot (Simon), someone who thought Rome was the enemy and wanted to overthrow them—and also a tax collector (Matthew), who conspired with Rome to overtax his own people—someone who is a natural enemy of the zealots? Why do you think there is such a wide variety of types of people Jesus puts on His team? What does that say about how we in the church work together today?

2. Why do you think in Matt 10:5-6 Jesus instructed His disciples to avoid the Gentiles and the Samaritans here at first (see Rom 1:16; 9:4-5)? What does this priority to the Jew first really mean? Then discuss what the rejection of Jesus' offer of the kingdom in Matt 12 does in opening up the working of God to the Gentiles (see Rom 11:11). How does this open up for us an understanding of salvation history more clearly?

Week Fifteen

Matthew chapter 11 begins with the doubts of John the Baptist. The question is, why would he be doubting the identity of the One he had spent so much time promoting as the Messiah? We saw last week how Jesus had come to offer the Kingdom to Israel. Yet, somehow, the kind of Kingdom Israel was hoping for, the overthrow of their current oppressors Rome, didn't seem to match up with the teachings of this Jesus.

Is it possible that John the Baptist saw the rejection Jesus was experiencing and it undermined his confidence as well—especially since he (John) was sitting in jail at the time?

This mention of John the Baptist and his doubts perfectly sets up the rest of the chapter. Jesus responds to John's message by asking the crowd a series of questions that reveal that expectations were not matching up with reality. Jesus says that the crowds were seeing something in John they did not expect. The inference is, is it possible that the Messiah they were seeing is not what they expected either? This is seen in Jesus' peculiar statement in 11:12 where He says that the kingdom of Heaven suffers violence. This would have been a shocking statement to them—as it should be to us. How could the Kingdom of Heaven be under assault? Let me paint a snapshot of how this unfolded.

God created the world and the world rebelled against Him. He then graciously reveals that He will send a redeemer to fix what was broken (Gen 3:15). He chooses one man, Abraham, through whom God says He will create a nation, a people for His own good pleasure. And through that nation He will send a savior to reconcile the world back to Himself—to heal what mankind had damaged and ruined. This is the story of the Old Testament—the creation of the world, the rejection of God by His creation, and the offer by God to restore what was broken. But when this Messiah comes, rather than rejoicing in God's grace, the evil in men's hearts wins out again, and this Messiah, and His offer of this Kingdom is rejected. How can this be? Do we love our sin that much?

Jesus goes on to describe this opposition to the offer of the Kingdom in the rest of the chapter. In 11:16-19 Jesus describes how both He and John were misunderstood, maligned, and rejected. In vv. 20-24 He then details how the nearby towns where He performed so many miracles will be held accountable for their rejection of Him as well.

Matthew chapter 11 gives us a preview of the climactic chapter 12 coming next. This rejection of Him and His message by the people is formalized by the rejection of Jesus by the religious leaders in chapter 12. And as we'll see, after chapter 12, everything changes.

1. Describe a time when you had doubts about something important. Where did you look for answers? How did it work out?

2. Put yourself in the shoes of John the Baptist. You have spent your entire life preparing for your role as forerunner of the Messiah. And everything seems to be going to plan. Your cousin arrives. He's the Messiah. The sick are healed. The dead are raised. And then all of a sudden everything stops. You get arrested and thrown in jail, and Jesus is now facing opposition. You are sitting there in desperation and you start to wonder if it is all true. Read Matt 11:2-6. Describe what you think John was feeling. Discuss Jesus' answer to him. Where did Jesus point John to with this unexpected answer?

3. What does Jesus declare about John in 11:10? In verse 11? In verse 14? What were the people not understanding about John that Jesus wanted them to know?

4. How do you think the world today would receive the message of John the Baptist? Do you think they would see him as a street-corner preacher or a modern-day prophet? What do you think His message would look like?

5. How do Jesus' words in 11:28-30 strike you? Do they give you comfort? Do they challenge or inspire you? After the passion expressed in the entire chapter, how do you think Jesus was feeling when He said these words?

Going Deeper:

1. What does Jesus mean in 11:15 when He says, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear?” Read also Mark 4:9; 23. Jesus repeats this phrase seven times in the seven letters to the seven churches in Rev 2 and 3. Is there a difference between having ears, and having “ears to hear”? What is Jesus trying to call to our attention?

2. What do you think Jesus means that the Father has hidden these things from the wise and intelligent (v. 25)? See also 1 Cor 3:18-20.

Week Sixteen

Matthew chapter 12 is a pivotal chapter, not only in Matthew, but in scripture as well. We understand that Messiah has come, and He has brought an offer of the Kingdom to Israel. We have seen the works the Messiah was foretold to perform in the earlier chapters in Matthew; healing the sick; cleansing the lepers; and even raising the dead. Matthew is unambiguous that this Jesus is the promised Messiah.

But we have also seen the early opposition to Him by the people, and here in this chapter, what comes into focus is the opposition to Jesus by the religious establishment—who officially speak on behalf of Israel. Yet even amidst all this opposition we see the heart of Jesus at the end of chapter 11. He pours out His heart to His Father in prayer and tells the people, “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.”

Despite the opposition and rejection He is experiencing, His offer still stands. But what reaction do we see to His offer? Chapter twelve describes it for us. Watch how the intrigue unfolds.

Because Matthew’s mission is to present Jesus as the promised Messiah, he is especially clear in his description of this encounter with the Pharisees as to what is really taking place. Matthew is making crystal clear that something extremely significant is going on here regarding the coming of Messiah.

We see Jesus in chapter 12 setting up an opportunity for the Pharisees to reveal their hand. Jesus chooses to walk through the grain fields on the Sabbath and pick some of the heads of grain for a snack—something He knew full-well the Pharisees had defined as “work” on the Sabbath. He then walks right into a synagogue and heals a man on the Sabbath—something they would also consider “work”. And work was strictly forbidden on the Sabbath.

The Pharisees goad Him back by asking whether it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath. They are testing Him by playing a game of “chicken” with Him. He does not blink and heals the man right in front of them. The game is afoot. They immediately went out in response to the healing to plot how to destroy Him. He stood up to them, and they were going to take Him down. The strategy they come up with is to bring a demon possessed man, who was deaf and dumb to Jesus because they knew He would heal him—and they would have the opportunity they were waiting for.

They wanted to discredit Jesus in front of the people by attributing the unmistakable miracles He was performing to the power of Satan. There was no way they could admit His miracles were from God, or else they would have to admit He was the Messiah. The showdown was set. What would Jesus do?

As expected, Jesus heals the man and casts out the demon. How do the crowds react? They naturally proclaim that this is the long-awaited Messiah. He is doing the things only

Messiah can do. Now the Pharisees have exactly what they want. They seize upon this and attribute His works to the power of Satan. Now the crowds will see Jesus in a different light, they must have thought.

But what the Pharisees did, in saying Jesus performed His works by the power of Satan, was far more egregious than we might realize. Jesus helps us to see that this claim by the Pharisees, who were representing Israel herself, was something that was unforgivable. All of history had awaited the arrival of the King, and when He comes, in the power of the Holy Spirit of God, they officially reject Him as the Messiah, and attribute His works to the power of the devil. By rejecting His Messiah, they are rejecting God.

Even the pagan Queen of the South, Jesus points out, recognized God's work in Solomon. Even the evil Ninevites recognized God's work and repented. But God's own people, when He finally arrives, are so caught up in their own sin and their own righteousness, they refuse to repent and acknowledge the work of God. God had gone so far as to tell them precisely when Messiah would come 500 years earlier in the book of Daniel and they still rejected Him when He came.

Israel rejecting the Messiah in Matthew 12 was the unforgivable sin, and is the turning point in the book of Matthew. We'll see in the next chapter, after this, everything changes.

1. Describe a time when someone deliberately picked a fight with you? Or, you picked a fight with someone else? How did it make you feel? What happened as a result?

2. Coming right after the rejections Jesus faced in Matt 11, it's no coincidence that Jesus chose this time to set up a showdown with the Pharisees. Notice how He goads the Pharisees with their most hallowed of sacred cows, the Sabbath. Much of the Pharisees' control of the people came in them over-interpreting and telling the people what they could and couldn't do on the Sabbath. How does Jesus undermine the Pharisees in 12:1-7? How does He do this in 12:9-13? What is the Pharisees' immediate reaction (v. 14 and then in v. 22)?

3. Jesus declares in 12:31-32 that there is a sin that is unforgivable. He says this in response to what the Pharisees have just done. To whom did the Pharisees attribute the work of the Spirit in Jesus healing the man in 12:22-24? We can see this even clearer in Mark 3:22-30. Remembering the Pharisees already started down this road (Matt 9:34), why do you think they specifically chose to bring to Jesus a man who was demon-possessed (12:22)? How was this a trap they were setting for Him? What did this allow them to accuse Him of? How did this relate to their strategies (12:14)?

4. How does Jesus' reaction to and description of the Pharisees in 12:34-37 square with today's view of Jesus as a gentle, always kind, loving, teacher of peace? What was Jesus clearly expressing to the Pharisees? How does this embody "righteous indignation"?

5. How do you respond to seeing Jesus in this fiery encounter with His enemies? Do you have a hard time picturing Jesus raising His voice and getting angry with those who are rejecting His gracious offer? When we raise our voice today, I would venture to say it is not often done in a righteous way. How does seeing Jesus get angry righteously help us understand Eph 4:26? How might the Holy Spirit be prompting you today in regards to your own anger?

Going Deeper:

1. Everything changes in Matt chapter 12. What does Jesus begin to do in chapter 13 that He hadn't done before (13:10-13; see also 13:34)? Why did Jesus begin to speak in parables? Was it to explain things more clearly, or, was it to hide the truth from those who refused to hear (13:14-15)?

2. How can Matt 12 be seen as the official rejection of the Messiah and His offer of the Kingdom to Israel?

Week Seventeen

What will Jesus do, now that His offer of the Kingdom has been rejected? Jesus wastes no time in showing us. Matthew 13 tells us that on that same day Jesus went down by the sea and began teaching the people. But there was something different about how He now taught. And the disciples noticed it.

After Jesus taught the parable of the soils in Matt 13:10, the disciples asked, “Why do you speak to them in parables?” Evidently, this was something new to them. We take for granted that Jesus speaks in parables as a part of His teaching, but the big question is why. And more importantly for us, why does He start now?

Jesus gives us the answer by saying to the disciples that to them has been granted to know the mysteries of the Kingdom, but this had not been granted to everyone. Jesus goes on to say that while the crowds are hearing His words, they are not really understanding what He says. Jesus points out that this is on purpose.

In Matt 13:14-15, Jesus quotes Isaiah and the Psalms which spoke of this very thing:

“You will keep on hearing but will not understand; You will keep on seeing, but will not perceive; for the heart of this people has become dull, with their ears they scarcely hear, and they have closed their eyes, otherwise they would see with their eyes, hear with their ears, and understand with their heart and return, and I would heal them.”

Jesus is saying this is willful disobedience. Their hearts have become dull and they have closed their eyes and ears. So Jesus teaches in parables—not as a way of explaining the truth, as some have thought. But rather as a way to hide the truth—from those who are rebelling against Him. Parables explain the truth to those that have “ears to hear”—those who are open to the truth of God. But they also hide the truth from those who have closed their hearts to it.

This is a big change in the ministry of Jesus. He came and offered the Kingdom, and told them of their need to repent. That offer was rejected and so the next phase of God’s plan came into effect. God was now going to temporarily set Israel aside as a nation, as a tool in His hand for spreading the gospel. He was going to set them on the shelf for a time. The gospel was now going to go out to the world through the Gentiles. We will see this come to fruition in the book of Acts.

So, for now, Jesus would speak in parables. He explained what the Kingdom of Heaven would be like by using parables. But this vision of the Kingdom looks a little different now. For now, the Kingdom will only come in part...not in its fullness. We, in this age, will be beneficiaries of the sending of the Spirit who will indwell us, but the full force of the Kingdom will not be seen until Christ returns. This current state of the Kingdom is sometimes called “the Mystery form of the Kingdom.” And we see that not all is as it should be. We see tares mixed in with the wheat. This new unforeseen phase of the Kingdom is what we experience now. But all things will be made right at Christ’s return when He establishes His Kingdom in full.

Jesus confirms this new strategy in 13:34-35 when Matthew tells us that from then on, Jesus only spoke in parables. This was definitely something new. Everything has changed.

1. What sorts of “weeds” have you had to battle most in your life (health, financial, emotional/relational, other)? How have you grown through this struggle?

2. On the same day that all those events in chapter 12 occurred, Jesus immediately begins teaching the crowds in parables. In the three parables we see in 13:24-33 something seems to be amiss. There are tares sown in amidst the wheat (13:24-30). There is an unnatural growth into a tree for what should be a small mustard bush (vv. 31-32). And leaven can be seen as a “type” of sin, and more precisely pride—in that it “corrupts by puffing up” (v. 33). What was Jesus communicating to His disciples about the current state of the Kingdom (the Mystery form of the Kingdom)? Why are there tares in the midst of the wheat today? What will Jesus do about this at the end of the age (13:40-43)?

3. During this incredibly tumultuous time, Jesus makes His way back home to Nazareth. What kind of reception does He get (13:54-58)? Why do you think they reacted in this way? Why do you think Jesus could not do more miracles there (v. 58)? What is the connection between faith and miracles?

4. Looking at the parable of the sower (vv. 3-8; 18-23), why do so many people misunderstand the message of the gospel? Why do they reject it? What characterizes those who produce good fruit (v. 23)?

5. What different ways do you think you could apply the parable of the sower today to your life (in how you deal with unbelievers; in how you explain the gospel to others—as well as follow up; in how you see your task as a seed sower; and in your responsibility to grow deep roots and produce fruit)?

Going Deeper:

1. What do we learn about life in the church from the parable of the wheat and tares (vv. 24-30)? What kind of obstacles will we face? Who is the source of those troubles? What would God have us do?

2. What kind of attitude toward the Kingdom do you see represented in the parables in 13:44-45? How often do you see that attitude expressed today? What would it look like to incorporate that attitude more in your life today?

Week Eighteen

When Jesus heard about the death of His cousin John the Baptist in Matthew 14, He withdrew by Himself to a lonely place. We might imagine that if there was anyone who wouldn't need to get away by Himself to rest and recharge, it would be Jesus. He's the Son of God after all! But no, Jesus gives us a beautiful example of why this discipline is so important in our lives.

For those who may not be familiar with them, what have historically been called "The Spiritual Disciplines," are practices that devout followers of Jesus have engaged in all throughout the history of the church to help them in their pursuit of living holy lives. Just like discipline and training are required to develop our physical muscles, the same is true when we seek to develop and grow our spiritual muscles.

What the Spiritual Disciplines do for us is to train our habits and sensibilities to think "God kinds of thoughts," and focus our attention in a moment-by-moment way on the pursuit of holiness as a way of life.

One popular definition of the disciplines is: "training expected to produce a specific character or pattern of behavior." Some of the more well-known disciplines include: the reading, studying, memorizing, and meditating on scripture. Additionally, they include prayer, fasting, solitude, silence, and several others.

What the disciplines do is help produce behavioral patterns in us that draw us closer to God, and help instill a hunger and thirst for righteousness. They do not make us more holy, but rather help train our propensities, habits, and desires toward more holy ends.

One of the most foundational of these disciplines that devout believers throughout history have found beneficial is the practice of "solitude and silence." This is what we see Jesus modeling for us in Matthew 14. In a world where being connected is often seen as essential, considering shutting ourselves off from the chatter and incessant noise of the world might be a bit disquieting. But this discipline so often proves to be the exact prescription our souls need to reboot, reconnect with God, and refocus our priorities.

Solitude and silence is the intentional refraining from contact with others for a specified period of time, and creating as serene and peaceful an environment as possible to enable us to quiet our thoughts, cleanse our minds of the worries of the world, and reconnect with God. Jesus practiced this, not only in times of mourning over the death of His cousin, but throughout His earthly ministry as well.

As we walk through Matthew chapter 14, we see that God used this situation (of Jesus going away to a desolate place) as an opportunity for ministry to take place. Because the crowds followed Jesus so far from town, Jesus had the chance to display the power and glory of God in the feeding of the 5,000. God can use any situation we find ourselves in to use us and work through us for His glory. We also see that immediately after this miraculous feeding of the 5,000, Jesus went right back to His time of solitude and silence. This is how important it was to Him.

1. We see in Matthew 14 that Herod gets an unusual birthday present. What was your “dream” birthday present when you were a kid? What would be your dream birthday present today?

2. Read Matthew 14:22-25. What details of this story stand out to you? Why do you think Jesus waited until the fourth watch of the night (when it was almost dawn) to go out to the disciples? Did Jesus know this storm was happening? Was God in control of this situation? Why do you think Jesus didn’t rescue the disciples right away? Why do you think Jesus allows challenges to happen in our lives? Is God in control of these situations? How does seeing Jesus act in this story help us trust in the sovereignty of God even more?

3. In Matthew 15:32-33 we see Jesus is looking to feed a crowd of 4,000. The disciples, even after having seen Jesus do this same thing with 5,000 people in the previous chapter (Matt 14:13-18), still react in unbelief. Why do you think this is? Where have you had trouble learning the lessons God has for you the first time around?

4. The Pharisees and Sadducees repeatedly asked Jesus for a sign. In Matt 16:1-4 they ask again, and Jesus responds by saying that the only sign they would receive is the sign of Jonah (Matt 12:38-41). What is the sign of Jonah? Why do you think Jesus points them to this sign as proof of His authority? Why is it that some people in contemporary Christian circles are so dependent upon seeing the miraculous happen to validate their faith? How is “seeing” antithetical to faith (Heb 11:1)?

5. In Matthew 14 we see Jesus walk on water and Peter try to do the same. There was a popular Christian book a few years ago entitled, *“If You Want To Walk On Water, You’ve Got To Get Out Of The Boat”*. We all wish we could trust Jesus more in our lives. What is one area you would like to start trusting Jesus more this week? Where would you like to “get out of the boat” in your own life? What practical steps can you take to pursue this?

Going Deeper:

1. In Matt 16:5-12, Jesus warns the disciples about the “yeast” of the Pharisees and Sadducees. What is this yeast He was talking about? Why do you think Jesus uses this image of yeast? How is this yeast at work today in the church?

2. In light of the rejection of Jesus and His offer of the Kingdom in Matthew 12, we see in this extended section more rejections of Jesus. At the end of Matthew 13 Jesus is not accepted in His own hometown. Herod rejects God’s prophet John in the beginning of chapter 14. The Pharisees and teachers confront Jesus again in chapters 15 & 16. All the while Jesus continues to minister to the people, performing miracles and doing all the things Messiah was sent to do. How do you typically face obstacles in your life? Do you push through or do you tend to get overwhelmed? What have you learned about yourself and about God through times of trial?

Week Nineteen

When we read the phrase in Matt 16:13 that Jesus “came into the district of Caesarea Philippi,” we typically don’t think twice about it. It’s simply another name in another region in Israel that most of us know little about. But if we lived in the times of Jesus’ ministry, we would most likely be shocked by that simple statement. A couple of questions arise from this passage that beg to be answered. Why would it be so surprising that Jesus would take His disciples to this place, and why is it that such a significant milestone in the ministry of Jesus would take place here?

The city of Caesarea Philippi, also known as Panias, or Banyas, was located two miles east of the city of Dan, about 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee, and even more significantly, about 10 miles south of the towering Mount Hermon—from which Israel gets much of its water supply. Water is life in that region and so this has been a significant location throughout the history of Israel. This city also became the center of Greco-Roman culture at that time as it was the capital city of Herod Philip. Philip had built this city to honor the Roman emperor Augustus.

A major feature of this site is a massive rock face from which flowed an immense fresh water spring. The famous historian Josephus referred to the powerful stream that flowed directly from this rock face as “the fountain of the Jordan.” Indeed, this is one of the three primary sources that merge and form the powerful Jordan River.

Carved into this rock face are remnants of the pagan worship that happened here. This kind of worship was often conducted near running water. Several niches carved into the rock remain to this day, and mention the site being dedicated to “Pan and the Nymphs.” This site was the center of Pan worship in the Greek period following Alexander the Great. Horrible pagan rituals would occur at this site, and no self-respecting Jew would have been caught dead in this place. It was a hotbed of pagan worship. But it was here that Jesus chose to take a stand against the powers of Satan and make a declaration that would ring out through the centuries.

In this rock face that still stands today, you can still see the giant cave out of which this powerful stream once flowed. This cave was thought to be the entrance to the underworld. It was known as the “gates of Hell.”

As we know, it was the teaching style of Jesus to highlight His surroundings and use them as illustrations for His metaphors and parables. As Jesus walked along a path He would point out the fig trees, or the stones in the temple, or the grass in the fields, and would use them as illustrations. But here Jesus went miles and miles out of His way directly into enemy territory to gather His disciples in front of a massive rock face stronghold of Satanic worship just so He could say to Peter, “You are the rock, and upon this rock I will build my church.” The rock face before which Jesus stood boasted of the pagan gods and Satanic ritual worship that occurred there. But Peter’s powerful pronouncement to Jesus, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,” was a direct challenge to both the gods represented in the niches of the cliffs and their devotees.

Not only this, but Jesus goes on to say, while standing directly in front of the “gates of Hell,” that He will build His church, and the gates of Hell will not prevail against it! How powerful would it have been for the disciples, in that setting, to hear Jesus first announce His purpose to

build a church—a community of the redeemed, to carry out His work while He was gone—and that nothing Satan would do could withstand that purpose.

Here Jesus also gave His apostles the authority of the keys of the Kingdom—that whatsoever they would bind on earth will have already been bound in Heaven. And it is here that Jesus would go on to announce His impending death and resurrection, as well as explain to His followers the demands of being a true disciple of His. This was an extremely charged environment and a very significant moment in the ministry of Jesus.

The simple phrase, “...Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi...” carries so much weight for us.

1. How would you answer this question: Who is _____ (fill in your name)? What would you say about yourself? How would others answer that question about you?

2. What do we learn from Matthew 16:16-17? What details do you notice? Why must the Messiah (Christ) be the Son of God? Why is this bold statement by Peter so significant? According to these verses, what is the only way we are able to understand and perceive this truth? Why is that?

3. Why did Jesus warn the disciples not to tell others that He was the Messiah (John 2:4; 7:6; 7:30; 8:20)? Contrast this with John 12:23-24. What different (and opposite) reactions would this news have prompted?

4. Who do people in the culture around you think Jesus is? How is this different than it was 20 years ago?

5. When and how did you come to recognize that Jesus was the Messiah?

Going Deeper:

1. What do we learn about insight (v. 17), power (v.18), and authority (v. 19)? What sorts of things will be (or more precisely, “will have been”) bound on earth and in Heaven?

2. In contrast to Jesus not wanting the disciples to tell others that He was the Messiah, what did Jesus go out of His way to do in Luke 19:28-44? Why would He arrange for a donkey, or a colt (Matt 21:4-5)? For what specifically was Jesus going to hold them accountable (Luke 19:44—NASB)?

Week Twenty

At the end of Matthew chapter 16 Jesus gives His disciples the clearest picture yet of His return in glory. The way He refers to Himself is “the Son of Man.” This is Jesus’ favorite way of referring to Himself. Over 80 times in the New Testament Jesus is called this intriguing name by the writers of scripture.

One of the things this name highlights is that Jesus is indeed fully human. The Gospel of Luke focuses our attention on this aspect of Jesus very clearly. What this name communicates is that just as the Son of God is also Himself deity, so too, a son of a man is a man. The early church wrestled with comprehending how Jesus could be both fully God and fully man. But the “humanity” of Jesus is only part of what this title makes clear.

Even more significant is that the term “Son of Man” is also a messianic title. In Daniel chapter 7, Daniel is given a vision in which he sees a coronation ceremony. God the Father, who is called “the Ancient of Days” in this passage, is described as sitting on His throne in blazing glory. And “...one like a Son of Man” came up to the throne and was given dominion and glory and a kingdom.

What a beautiful picture of the gift that God the Father gives to His Son. The kingdoms of this earth are His inheritance. This is a depiction of the consummation of the ages. This is, in essence, the coronation of the King of kings—and this regal scene is where this title “Son of Man” comes from. Thus, this title, “Son of Man” became synonymous in the Jewish mind for the coming Messiah, one who was God Himself.

In one of the great climaxes in scripture, in Mark 14:62, when the Jewish leaders demand that Jesus tell them who He was, out of all the names and titles He could have chosen, Jesus picks this one. They ask, “Are you the Messiah, the Son of God?” And He says, “I am” (which is another powerful claim to deity). He goes on to say, “...and you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power, and coming with the clouds of Heaven.” And just so there is no confusion as to what He is actually claiming, all we need to do is to look at the reaction of the high priest. He tore his clothes (something the high priest was forbidden to do) and he called this blasphemy.

When Jesus calls Himself the Son of Man, He is asserting so much more than just His humanity. He is saying “I am the One to whom Daniel was pointing, whom Daniel saw the Kingdom being presented to. “Son of Man” is an eschatological title of deity. By Jesus’ use this title, He is unequivocally claiming to be God.

We also see Stephen, later in the book of Acts, standing before that same group: the Sanhedrin. Stephen gives a vigorous defense of the gospel, and right at the point when he has completely devastated them in their guilt, Stephen looks up and has a vision of Jesus, the glorified Son of Man, standing at the right hand of the Father. When he says this, their reaction also speaks volumes. They cover their ears and rush at him all at once. They were horrified to even let their ears hear such blasphemy.

So Jesus called Himself the Son of Man, and the Sanhedrin had Him killed for it. Stephen calls Jesus the Son of Man, and what does the Sanhedrin do? They have him killed for it. That is

how significant this title was to them. They understood exactly who this Son of Man was that Daniel described in chapter 7, and that Jesus claimed to be.

1. What is the best compliment you have ever received?

2. Contrast what Jesus says to Peter in Matthew 16:23 with 16:17-18. What do you think Peter was feeling after v. 17-18? What do you think he was feeling after v. 23?

3. What do we learn from Matthew 16:23? Why do you think Jesus' admonition was so strong? Where was Peter focused? Where should Peter have been focused? How did the question of the coming Kingdom play into this answer by Peter and the rebuke by Jesus—as well as the vision for what that Kingdom was going to entail? What do we learn about God from this section?

4. What does Matthew 16:26 look like today? What kinds of things do people seek after rather than the Kingdom of God? What prominent examples of this come to mind?

5. How do Jesus' words in Matthew 16:24-26 prompt you to examine your priorities? What do you think it means to be a disciple? How does your definition match up with Jesus' challenge in these verses?

Going Deeper:

1. Describe the cost of discipleship Jesus lays out in Matthew 16:24-26 (see also Luke 14:25-33; Romans 12:1-2; Phil 3:7-8). How does this compare to how the typical Christian lives their life?

2. How do you think the disciples reacted to Jesus' proclamation in Matthew 16:27-28? This was His first mention of such things. What specific things do we learn in these two verses?

Week Twenty-One

The Mount of Transfiguration is one of the most unusual events in all of scripture. Here we see Jesus briefly pulling back that which veiled His glory so that Peter, James, and John could get a glimpse of who He truly was. There are so many details of this story that beg to be explored.

Every so often in scripture God will pull back the curtain and give us a glimpse into the unseen reality that is happening behind the scenes. These episodes are invariably shocking, but they also help us understand that our perspective is often very limited in this life.

In 2 Kings 6 we see an example of this. Here Elisha asked God to open the eyes of his servant so that he could see the flaming angelic chariots surrounding the armies of their enemy. What we learn is that there was a dimension of reality that Elisha's servant was not privy to. In Daniel chapter 10, mention is made of angelic warfare that is happening behind the scenes; a reality of which we are not typically aware. Again, something is going on that we don't really see or perceive.

The same is true with the Mount of Transfiguration. The Rabbi and teacher the disciples had come to know and love had done things that no one else had ever done. He had healed the sick, cleansed the lepers, cast out demons, walked on water, commanded the wind and the waves, and even raised the dead. But this was something on a completely different level. It was one thing for Peter to verbalize his suspicion that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God. But then to actually see a full, unfettered vision of the glory of God emanating from Jesus had to have been an unsettling, surreal, and even devastating experience.

The Mount of Transfiguration forced the disciples to grapple with the reality that God Himself was walking among them. The theological term for God becoming man is "incarnation." This forces us to grapple with the question: how can Jesus be both God and man at the same time?

In the incarnation, it was necessary for Christ to take upon Himself the limitations of finite humanity. This is described in Phil. 2, which is known as the "kenosis," or emptying of Christ. Some have taught that this entailed Him giving up His deity. But that is not the case. What He gave up did not, nor could not include any of the divine attributes, for that would be impossible (God cannot cease to be God). Jesus merely voluntarily restricted the independent use of those divine attributes, or prerogatives.

The incarnation was actually a gaining of human attributes rather than a giving up of divine attributes. Jesus simply added a human nature to His divine nature. The union of the two natures meant that they did not function independently. Yet, this union necessarily placed restrictions on how the divine could operate. Jesus still had the power to be omni-present, but He chose to limit Himself from exercising that prerogative.

Within the person of Jesus, the two natures (divine and human) cannot be divided, and also cannot be confused (or somehow melded together). They are totally distinct and yet work in conjunction and perfect harmony with one another.

But we also need to see that the incarnation was not temporary. Just because Jesus veiled His glory while He ministered on earth does not mean that He was only human for 33 years. No, what we need to understand is that today there is a man standing at the right hand of the throne of God. And He will be the God-man for the rest of eternity.

So, at the Mount of Transfiguration we get a visual confirmation of what Philippians chapter 2 describes. God Himself was standing among them. What was once veiled is temporarily unveiled. We are able to see the glory that was there all along peeking through. This is a preview of when we will see Christ in all His glory as we read about in Revelation chapter 1.

1. Describe one “mountain-top experience” you have had in your life.

2. We saw back in Matthew chapter 11 that Jesus already made the connection between Elijah and John the Baptist. What do we learn here in chapter 17 about Jesus’ view of John the Baptist’s ministry? What do we learn about Elijah’s future ministry (see also Malachi 4:5-6)?

3. In Matthew 17:22-23 Jesus once again tells His disciples that He is going to be killed and rise from the dead. This is the third time He has said this in the space of just two chapters. In light of their pre-existing perception of what the Messiah’s coming would bring, what do you think they were thinking when they heard this statement by Jesus? What did they (and what do we) learn about God from this passage?

4. How do people typically react when they are confronted with something that is truly holy? Why do you think this is?

5. When have you unmistakably heard God speaking to you in your life? What was the message? How did God speak to you? What did you do as a result?

Going Deeper:

1. Why do you think demons (and their manifestations) seem to be more common in Jesus' day than in our own time (or at least in our part of the world)?

2. Why would specifically Moses and Elijah be at this meeting with Jesus?

Week Twenty-Two

In Matthew chapter 18 we come to a very popular verse, a verse that has been quoted and used in many different contexts and many different ways. But it is a verse that needs to be looked at more carefully. In Matt 18:20, Jesus says, “For where two or three have gathered together in My name, there I am in their midst.”

This verse has been used by pastors to indicate that God’s presence is here in our church service in a special way, because there are more than two or three gathered. It has been used as a definition of “church.” It has been used by Christian musical performers to claim that God is definitely present in their concert. It has been used to undergird prayer gatherings, maintaining that there is more power or a special anointing when two or three are gathered. But to what is this verse really referring? What does it actually mean?

One of the most important principles for the proper understanding of scripture is that every verse, every passage, every thought expressed in scripture is written in the context of a greater thought or argument. We sometimes like to have little scripture jars on our counter or “verse of the day” apps that give us special verses to put up on our mirrors or tape to our computer monitors. These are usually short, succinct ideas expressed in scripture that we either hold onto as promises or that inspire us to focus our hearts on God that day. And there is nothing wrong with that idea. We are definitely to hide God’s word in our hearts to help strengthen us for the daily battles we face.

But a danger that accompanies this “verse of the day” idea is that we can very easily take a verse out of its context and not properly understand what the Holy Spirit means by it. When we do this, we are assigning meaning to a verse or passage that it doesn’t really contain. In essence, we are putting words in God’s mouth that He didn’t intend. Matt 18:20 is a prime example of this.

When we look at the context of Matt 18:20, we see that it is part of a section in which Jesus is talking about His heart for lost sheep. In 18:12-14 He reminds His disciples that even shepherds go out of their way to find and restore lost sheep. So, too, He goes on to say in 18:15-20 that when there is a lost sheep among our brethren, His heart is to restore that lost one.

Jesus says that if there is a brother in need of correction, we are to go to him privately. If that doesn’t work, we are to take one or two more with us. Why does He say this? There is a principle in God’s law that is repeated many times in the Old Testament. Deut. 19:15 is a good example. It says that a single witness shall not be allowed to make an accusation against someone. Only on the evidence of two or three witnesses will a matter be confirmed.

We see this principle reaffirmed many times in the New Testament as well. In 1 Tim 5:19-20 Paul says that every fact is to be confirmed by two or three witnesses. In Hebrews 10:26-28 and 2 Cor 12:21-13:1 we see the same idea. This is the principle that underlies how we are to exercise church discipline. In Matt 18:15-20 Jesus is telling us that when we are seeking to restore a sinning brother, we are to go to him privately. If that doesn’t work, we are to take two or three

witnesses. If that doesn't work, we are then to take it to the church as a last resort. The idea is that the threat of being put out of the church will hopefully motivate the sinning brother to repent. The purpose of church discipline is restoration, not exclusion.

Jesus ends this section on how to exercise church discipline by saying that the church has His authority to exercise this discipline. Whatever we bind on earth will have been bound in Heaven. Why? Because where two or three witnesses are gathered, you have the minimum number of witnesses God's law requires. So, Jesus concludes by saying in Matt 18:20, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in their midst." In other words, just as it takes at least two or three people to convict someone of doing something wrong in the Mosaic law, so too, when you are exercising church discipline, it cannot be based on the word of one person alone. It must be verified by two or three.

Jesus is saying that where two or three have gathered for this purpose of church discipline, that His authority is there as well. He is not saying that when we gather together for prayer, there is somehow more power present than if there were only one believer present. This is an example of what is called "folk theology." It is something that has been taught time and time again, and is perhaps something we ourselves have repeated time and time again, but is simply a misreading of the text of scripture.

When we aren't careful to take into account the context in which a verse or passage is set, we are in danger of reading into the text an incorrect understanding of what God is communicating to us. Our goal when reading scripture is to rightly understand what God is saying to us, and then put that into practice in our lives.

1. Who do you think is the greatest athlete of all time? Make your case.

2. What does Jesus say greatness in the Kingdom of Heaven is all about? Why do you think Jesus uses children as His example? What is child-like faith?

3. What do we learn about God's heart for the lost in Matthew 18:10-14? In Luke 15 Jesus gives three more examples of His heart for the lost. Read the story of the lost sheep (Luke 15:4-7); the lost coin (Luke 15:8-10); and the lost son (Luke 15:11-32). What do each of these stories teach us about God's heart for the lost?

4. What is a story of forgiveness you have heard that has really moved you?

5. How does Jesus' instruction about forgiveness in Matthew 18:21-35 motivate you in your quest to be a forgiving person? How does it convict you? How does the enormous debt we have been forgiven compare to the debt we hold over others? Who is someone that you need to forgive?

Going Deeper:

1. The heart of Jesus' teaching about who is the greatest in the Kingdom (Matt 18:1-10) revolves around humility, and specifically a child's humility. Read Philippians 2:1-18 and discuss Christ's example of humility.

2. What advice have you been given or approach have you taken regarding forgiveness that has most helped you to be a forgiving person?

Week Twenty-Three

In Matthew 19:16 we see a question asked of Jesus by a rich young ruler. It is a question that many people have: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Although it may seem like a simple question, beneath this question lies a profound truth about our salvation that every Christian should understand.

This is the normal human response when opportunities arise. “How much does it cost?” “What can I do to earn it?” This mindset flows from our natural desire for benefits to accrue from our hard work. We have been told our whole lives, “You get what you deserve.” The Bible even tells us that, in general, you reap what you sow. But when it comes to salvation, this truism does not apply.

The question with which we are grappling is this: how is one saved, or “made right” before God? How is it that we can avoid the condemnation we all deserve and instead spend eternity in Heaven with God? One of the rallying cries of the Reformation—and one of the foundational principles of biblical Christianity—is what has come to be known as “sola fide.” This is a Latin phrase that means “faith alone.” This phrase highlights the fact that our salvation is God’s work from first to last. We are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, by the work of Christ alone. There is nothing we can do to earn or deserve our salvation. This is in stark contrast to every other religion or religious teaching in the history of the world. Every religious system outside of Christianity focuses on our own efforts.

The reality is that deep within each of us is the awareness that God exists, as well as the understanding that we fall short of what God requires of us. Religion can be seen as man’s attempt to reach up and make himself acceptable to God. Whereas Christianity involves God reaching down to mankind and providing a way for us to be made right with Him. The Bible teaches that God declares us to be righteous on the basis of what Christ did for us on the cross.

We all sin. We all have rebelled against God and deserve to spend an eternity separated from Him. But God didn’t want things to stay that way. Knowing that there was nothing we could do to change that situation, God sent His own Son Jesus to pay the price, to pay the penalty our sin required—the punishment we deserve. On the cross Jesus suffered everything we would have suffered if we spent an eternity separated from God. And He did that for each of us. He offers the payment of our penalty to us as a perfectly free gift. All we have to do is accept it.

An indispensable aspect of this salvation message is that there is nothing we can do to earn or deserve that gift. We desperately want to be able to contribute to our salvation. We want to somehow work for or earn some small part of paying our debt. But the gospel message is clear: it is by grace through faith that we are saved. It is the gift of God (Eph 2:8-9). As we exercise faith in Him, God simply declares us to be perfectly righteous because our debt is paid. If we were able to work for it, God would owe salvation to us as an obligation. But when we simply trust God, it is our faith that is credited as righteousness (Rom 4:4-5). God trades the perfect life that Jesus lived for our life of sin. God “imputes,” or reckons to our account, the perfection of Jesus (2 Cor 5:21).

So when we circle back to the question of the rich young ruler, “What must I do to be saved?” the answer comes clearly into focus. There is absolutely nothing we can do to be saved. We must simply acknowledge our sin, and humbly and gratefully accept the gift that God gives us—the suffering and death of Jesus which He endured on our behalf.

We need to be aware of any attempt to water down that clear and essential message of Christianity. World religions such as Roman Catholicism try to convince us that our own works contribute to our salvation, adding to what Christ did on the cross. But that is not the message of the Bible. Salvation by grace alone through faith alone is not a trivial or secondary matter. This lies at the core of the Christian faith.

1. How did you propose to your spouse (or how were you proposed to)? If you are not married, what is the most romantic proposal you have heard of?

2. Why do you think Jesus tells the rich young ruler that if he wants to be complete, he should sell his possessions and give to the poor? Do you think this is the same advice Jesus would give to everyone, or was this specifically for this wealthy young man? Why do you think earthly riches are such a stumbling block for so many?

3. In Matthew 19:21, Jesus relates riches in this life to riches in the next life. Why do you think that selling everything he had and giving to the poor would result in treasure in Heaven for this young man? What exactly are treasures in Heaven? How do we get them? Is it wrong to seek after them? Why or why not? What do we learn about God from this story?

4. Some people within the church teach that God wants every Christian to be wealthy. They even go so far as to say that a lack of wealth/riches is a result of sin in your life. What do you think about this idea? How does it line up with scripture?

5. Do you see wealth in this life as a blessing; a sign of favor by God? Why or why not? How does this passage address this idea? How does wealth make it difficult to keep an eternal perspective? How does having wealth and possessions affect you? Where do you feel God leading you in adjusting your ideas about wealth and possessions?

Going Deeper:

1. What is the world's view of marriage and divorce in this day and age? How does this differ from the view of most Christians today (if it does)? How would you counsel a Christian couple considering divorce?

2. Both here and in the next chapter, Jesus discusses the idea that the first will be last, and the last will be first. What do you think this means?

Week Twenty-Four

In Matthew 19:18-19, on the way up to Jerusalem, Jesus tells His disciples that He is going to be delivered to the chief priests and the scribes, and that He is going to be put to death. This declaration and warning comes at an extremely significant time in the ministry of Jesus. In the very next chapter the “triumphal entry” will happen. We will see next week just how significant this truly is.

By now, this kind of proclamation about His impending death might be sounding a bit familiar to us. Back in Matt 16:21 we saw that Jesus told His disciples the very same thing. This was such a shock to them that Peter actually rebuked Jesus for saying such a thing.

Then in Matthew 17:22-23 Jesus declares this same thing again. Following right after the Mount of Transfiguration, when His glory was most on display, and when the disciples might have most needed a reminder of His earthly mission, Jesus points out again that shortly He would be put to death.

So, when we come to Matthew 19, we see this is at least the third time Jesus has focused on this sobering truth. Why would Jesus do this? Why would Jesus take the time to repeatedly point this out to His followers?

Perhaps one reason is that we sheep are a bit dense and hard of hearing. Jesus repeatedly said, “While seeing, you do not see, and while hearing, you do not hear.” Even though Jesus tells the disciples clearly and directly that He is going to die, this idea does not seem to really register. There is such a disconnect between what they believe the Messiah’s coming is all about, and what Jesus was actually doing, that they need to be told over and over again. This misunderstanding of theirs is made clear when, after Jesus’ third reminder of His death (in Matt 19:18-19), James and John approach Jesus jockeying for position in His kingdom administration.

But what is even more significant than the fact that we are sometimes clueless, is the realization and understanding that God always prepares His people for what is to come. This is a truth we see prominently displayed all throughout scripture.

When God used Moses to lead His people out of captivity in Egypt, what did He do? He prepared Moses for 40 years by having him wander around in that same desert ahead of time. God loves us and takes care of us and knows what we truly need—and He knows we need to be prepared. In fact, the wilderness wanderings themselves were a preparation for God’s people to learn how to depend on Him as they entered the Promised Land.

Before Jesus began His ministry, the Holy Spirit led Him into the wilderness to prepare Him for the trials that lay ahead. Before Paul went out onto the mission field, God sent him to Arabia for 3 years for preparation.

Not only does God prepare His servants for the ministry He has for them, He prepares His people for what is to come. The process of sanctification is a process by which God prepares His children to be able to dwell in His presence. We must learn how to be holy. We must learn

how to worship God. We must learn through trials and suffering to let go of this world and embrace the world to come. This life is preparation for the eternity we will spend with God in Heaven.

Prophecy itself attests to this truth. God speaks to us through prophecy in the Bible for several reasons. Through prophecy He demonstrates His sovereignty— declaring what will be, ahead of time. Through prophecy He also gives His people hope, so we can trust without worry that God will accomplish His purposes. But a further reason God gives us prophecy is to prepare us for what is to come.

God tells Abraham to sacrifice His only begotten son on a hill in Jerusalem to give us a prophetic preview of another Father who will sacrifice His only Son on that same hill some 2,000 years later. Later, God passes over the Israelite houses marked by blood on the doorpost showing His people that we would someday be covered and saved by the blood. Later, God has Boaz marry a Gentile bride, Ruth, redeeming the land back to Naomi, which gives us a picture in advance of what our Kinsman-redeemer, Jesus Christ, will do for His people.

All throughout scripture, God gives us pictures in advance, showing us what is to come so that we are prepared. God loves us and wants to train us for what He has in store. God does not typically spring surprises on us. He lovingly, patiently reveals His plans to us ahead of time, and then when the time comes, we know what to expect. This is why Jesus keeps telling His disciples of His impending death—to help retrain their understanding and expectation of what the Kingdom is truly all about, and to prepare their hearts for what otherwise would have certainly been too shocking.

1. In this chapter we see a zealous mother campaigning for her children’s future. What did you want to be when you grew up? How did this compare with what your parents wanted for you?

2. What “cup” is Jesus referring to in Matthew 20:22-23 (see Matt 20:18-19; John 15:18-20)? Do you think they knew what was really at stake in Matthew 20:22 when they said, “we can?” Why or why not?

3. What do we learn about the world’s system of values in Matthew 20:24-28? How does this value system differ from God’s value system? What do we learn about God from this passage?

4. Why do you think the other disciples were outraged at the approach of James and John and their mother (Matthew 20:20-23)? How do those in the church view ambition? How do those outside the church view ambition? How are these two perspectives similar or different?

5. How does the challenge Jesus gives in Matthew 20:26-27 affect you? In what ways do you wish to be great? What does it look like in your life to be a servant of others?

Going Deeper:

1. In the parable Jesus tells in Matthew 20:1-16, is the business practice of the landowner unjust or is it generous? If you were one of the first workers hired, what would you have thought? What does this story reveal about how God’s perspective on fairness and justice are different from our own?

2. How would you explain Jesus’ statement in Matthew 19:30 and 20:16 (that the last shall be first and the first will be last)? What does this story teach us about Heaven’s value system (those who are esteemed in this world vs. those who will be honored in the next life)?

Week Twenty-Five

We have come to one of the high points, not only in the ministry of Jesus, but in the entire scope of salvation history. Matthew 21 (as well as Mark 11 and Luke 19) tells the story of what we call the “Triumphal Entry.” But as we’re going to see, it’s not so triumphal after all.

The Luke version gives a bit more detail and so that is what we will explore. We see in Luke 19:28-35 that Jesus goes out of His way to set up certain circumstances so the people know He is presenting Himself to them as their Messiah, their King. He arranges for a donkey to be brought to Him so He can enter Jerusalem just as Zech 9:9 foretold Messiah would. As Jesus approaches the city some of the people cry out “Hosanna,” recognizing Him to be the Messiah. But why was this particular day so significant? Why did Jesus choose this day to enter into Jerusalem in this particular way? As we’re going to see, this was the exact day God’s people had been waiting for, for a very long time.

Some six centuries earlier, the angel Gabriel had visited the prophet Daniel and given him a vision which detailed precisely when the Messiah would come (Daniel 9:24-27). The vision given to Daniel is communicated in the idiom of “weeks of years”—which is just another way of saying “periods of seven years.” Gabriel reveals to Daniel that “from the going forth of the commandment to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until Messiah comes will be 69 weeks of years,” which is 483 years (of 360 days each). This commandment came on March 14th, 445 B.C. by the Persian ruler: Artaxerxes Longimanus.

What Gabriel is saying to Daniel is that once Israel sees this command issued to allow them to rebuild their city, they will know from there precisely when Messiah will arrive. So Daniel organizes the Magi to watch and wait and prepare for the coming of Messiah—so that when He does arrive, they can come and present Him with some gifts, anoint Him as King, and welcome Him into the world. But you know that story.

So how does Jesus fit within this prophesied time frame given by Gabriel to Daniel? In examining His ministry, we must determine when, if ever, Jesus presented Himself as king. Whenever the people tried to take Him by force to make Him their king, He would slip away quietly, eluding them. A phrase He often used was that His hour had not yet come (John 6:14-15; John 7:8; 7:30; 8:20).

His birth certainly wasn't very majestic or king-like. His entire ministry was characterized by service and humility. But there was one event in His life that was quite a bit different, an occasion when Jesus specifically set up the circumstances to fulfill very detailed prophecies about the promised coming of Israel's king. This “triumphal entry” was that very day. This was the precise day that Gabriel told Daniel the Messiah would come as King. This was the end of that 69 weeks of years—to the very day!

Jesus confirms this by the way He went to great lengths to set up the circumstances for this event. It is also confirmed by Jesus’ reaction. . Take a look at what He says. Again, this is supposed to be the triumphal entry. Luke 19:41-44 says:

*When He approached Jerusalem, He saw the city and wept over it, saying, "If you had known in this day, even you, the things which make for peace! But now they have been hidden from your eyes. "For the days will come upon you when your enemies will throw up a barricade against you, and surround you and hem you in on every side, and they will level you to the ground and your children within you, and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, **because you did not recognize the time of your visitation.***

When Jesus approaches the city, He weeps over it. He goes on to say that Jerusalem is going to be destroyed. This happened in 70 A.D. when the Roman army under Titus Vespasian laid siege to the city and destroyed it, killing over a million inhabitants.

But why was Jerusalem destroyed? Jesus gives us the answer in v. 44, where He says, "...because you did not recognize the time of your visitation." Jesus held them accountable to know this prophecy from Daniel. God not only told them hundreds of years earlier Messiah was coming, He told them the very day—and they still rejected Him.

This remarkable day was the very day all of creation had been waiting for since the beginning. It was the day God had set apart to make all things right again—the day for which He had sent His Son to be King. Still, the prophesied Messiah was rejected and crucified.

1. In Matthew 19:12, Jesus entered the temple area and drove out the money changers. When you witness something that is clearly wrong, what is your first reaction? Are you the kind of person who will more likely act without thinking, or think without acting? Why?

2. What does it mean in Matthew 19:22 that we will receive anything we ask for, as long as we believe? Read John 14:14, 1 John 5:14, and Psalm 37:4. How do these verses give additional context, explanation, and parameters for what Jesus tells us in Matthew? How can this verse be abused?

3. Read Matthew 20:29-34. What do we learn about the heart of God in v. 34? Do you tend to see God most often in this way, or perhaps more often as a rule-enforcer or judge? Why?

4. How do you think Israel's expectation of what Messiah's coming would be, influenced their reaction to His actual arrival? How do you think most modern Christians' expectations of the return of Jesus influences how they live their daily lives?

5. In Matthew 21:12 Jesus boldly defies the religious authorities of His day by tearing down their blasphemous desecration of His temple. He then doubles-down on His disregard of their own self-appointed authority in Matthew 21:28-46 by insulting them with several parables. He obviously didn't care about their opinion. When it comes right down to it, whose opinion do you pay more attention to, God's or that of other people? How does this manifest itself in your life?

Going Deeper:

1. Read the parallel passage in Luke 19:28-48 to this account in Matthew of the triumphal entry. Focus on 19:41-44. What do you think Jesus is feeling at this point? Why? Then read 19:45. How do the previous verses help us understand the mindset of Jesus when he clears the temple?

2. Read the story of the two sons in Matthew 21:28-32. Which son do you think you most resemble? Why?

Week Twenty-Six

In Matthew chapter 22, we continue to see more fallout from Jesus' bold move of clearing out the money-changers from the temple in the previous chapter. Jesus had struck the religious leaders right where it hurt the most—in the pocketbook. The religious establishment made a lot of money by extorting the people coming to the annual feasts by requiring them to buy the “approved” livestock for their sacrifices. Jesus exposed the corruption that was happening here by driving out all these “money-changers.” He then heaped insult upon injury by telling three parables that revealed how God felt about the hypocrisy of the religious leaders and made it clear that they would never enter the Kingdom of God.

In response, we see these leaders go out and conspire as to how they might trap Jesus into saying the wrong thing (Matt 22:15). The rest of this chapter describes these traps that were laid for Jesus and how deftly He navigated them—so much so that He completely silenced His opponents. The passage goes so far as to say that no one was able to answer Him a word, and that from that point on, no one dared ask Him a question (Matt 22:46).

In the middle of one of these traps, we are exposed to a very interesting and somewhat bizarre question by the Sadducees (Matt 22:23-33). This question gives us the opportunity to explore a bit about how God weaves His story together, tying the Old Testament to the New. And it gives us the chance to show how diving deeply into God's Word can uncover wonderful nuggets of truth.

The Sadducees tell the tale of a married man with six brothers who died without having children. His widow then was married by his next oldest brother, who also died childless. This happened for all seven brothers in the family. Each, in turn, married the widow of his older brother, and each died childless.

To us, this story might sound extremely odd. In our society, marrying the widow of your recently deceased brother does not happen all that often. But for it to happen with seven brothers in the same family is extremely foreign to our ears.

What we need to understand though, is that this idea is not only described in the Bible, but is commanded under Mosaic Law. It is known as the “law of levirate marriage.” The sad reality is that in that day, women were completely dependent upon men for their livelihood. Women would marry young to make sure they were taken care of. If a woman's husband died, then the duty to take care of the woman would fall to her son, or her brothers.

One way that God designed protection for women in the Old Testament was allowing a childless widow to request her next of kin to take her as a wife and raise the first child they bore together in order to continue the deceased husband's bloodline. The firstborn son would retain the family name of the older dead brother, as well as his property rights. This would ensure the continuation of the bloodline of the deceased man, as well as keep the property within the family. We see a beautiful description of this in the book of Ruth, in which the widow

Ruth is taken care of by her kinsman Boaz, who is called the “kinsman-redeemer.” She will now be provided for, and the property her husband owned will remain in the family.

But as is often the case, there is more going on behind the scenes than is readily apparent. As we take a closer look at the role of Boaz as the “goel,” or kinsman-redeemer, we can easily see how he, in some ways, pre-figures our own kinsman-redeemer, Jesus Christ. Through his act of redemption, Boaz returns Naomi (a “type” of Israel) to her land, and also takes Ruth (a Gentile) as his bride.

This gives us a beautiful picture in advance of how Christ does the same thing. Our Messiah takes for Himself a Gentile bride, the church, and returns Israel to the land. We saw this happen in 1948, when Israel became a nation again—for the first time in almost 2,000 years. Our “Goel,” our “kinsman-redeemer” Jesus Christ rescued us from destitution and redeemed us for Himself and made us His beloved bride. This beautiful reality is tucked in behind a somewhat strange question by the Sadducees. There are untold riches to be found in God’s Word if we are willing to do the digging.

1. In this chapter, Jesus is asked a question about what life will be like in Heaven. If you had the chance right now to ask Jesus one question about Heaven, what would it be?

2. In Matthew 22:30 does Jesus say that we will be angels in Heaven (as some people believe)? Or is He saying that, just like the angels, we will not be married in Heaven (see Luke 20:34-36)? Why do you think there is no marriage in Heaven (1 Cor 7:39; Rom 7:2)? What is the purpose of marriage?

3. The attacks on Jesus in Matthew 22 seem to be unending, really, one after another. If you have been following this, ever since Matthew chapter 12, when Israel rejected God by rejecting His offer of the Kingdom, the tension and conflicts between these leaders and Jesus have been growing and growing. We're going to reach a climax of this tension in the next chapter where Jesus blasts the "scribes, Pharisees, hypocrites" with both barrels. How does Jesus view the religious leaders, and how does He describe them and their hypocrisy (see Matt 12:34; 12:39; 15:3; 15:7-9, 14; 16:4, 6; 21:43-44; 22:18, 29)?

4. What does it mean to give unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's? Does this change when "Caesar" funds and supports things that oppose God? Who was the Caesar when this was said by Jesus?

5. What does loving God with all of our heart, soul, and mind look like? Where, in your life, do you think you do this the best? In what areas do you think you need the most work regarding this command?

Going Deeper:

1. Jesus tells the story of an unusual wedding feast. In the custom of the day, for events of this splendor and magnitude, a host would typically offer gowns and robes to their guests in order that they might be suitably attired in the presence of royalty. In light of the attack Jesus is waging on the hypocrisy of the religious leaders in Matthew 21-22, what is Jesus proclaiming about these Jewish leaders who assumed their place in the coming kingdom of God—these leaders who refused the coverings offered to them (read Isa 61:10)?

2. Understanding that the word “Christ” in scripture simply means “Messiah,” what is the point Jesus is making in Matthew 22:42-45? Why was it important that the Pharisees know that the Messiah was to be divine, and not just human?

Week Twenty-Seven

As we peek ahead to the next chapter, we see that we are approaching Matthew 24-25—the climactic portion of Matthew where Jesus discusses the end times with His disciples. When we read the beginning of Matthew 24, it seems calm and peaceful, perhaps just a casual question Jesus answers from His disciples. We can maybe picture the disciples and Jesus having a nice day at synagogue—perhaps just finishing a potluck—and walking out of the temple on the way up to the mount of Olives for an afternoon nap. But, as usual, much more is revealed when we look at the context.

Yet, as we turn back one chapter to Matthew 23, our chapter for this week, we see a much different story. Jesus had just entered Jerusalem in the triumphal entry. The people had been yelling out “Hosanna, save us Lord.” The Pharisees were livid and tried to get Jesus to make them stop. Then Jesus wept over Jerusalem. Why did He do this? Because this was the one day in the history of the universe that God had told His people to anticipate—the day Messiah was to present Himself to them as their king. And yet He was still rejected.

Immediately after this, Jesus violently drove out the money changers from the temple—which was a significant source of income for the religious leaders.

In case you haven’t noticed, Jesus has been carefully and strategically setting up a conflict with the religious leaders, provoking a response from them. They obviously didn’t like the fact that He was setting Himself up as a higher authority than them and driving out their money changers. Who did He think He was?

This was two days before Passover—two days before He would be hanging on the cross. This was not only a climax in His ministry, but the tension was at an absolute fever pitch. Over the past 10 chapters Jesus has been involved in a near constant battle with the religious leaders. The Pharisees confronted Jesus in Matthew 21 and asked Him where He got His authority for doing this. Jesus responded by telling more stories about how they would not have any part of the coming Kingdom.

Jesus begins chapter 23 by undermining the religious leaders’ authority. He implies that they are hypocritical in what they say. He claims they only do things for appearances’ sake. All they want is adoration and attention.

And then Jesus begins to attack them personally. The language He uses is the language of “woes.” This may not mean much to us today, but in context it would have essentially been a curse He was calling out to them. The language of blessing and cursing, or blessings and woes was very significant in that time. Jesus is really saying that they are under a curse. Can you imagine the looks on their faces when this upstart Rabbi disrespects them and says “curse you” right to their faces?

It’s not all that hard to imagine all the bitterness and anger that is in Jesus’ voice—you can feel it in His words. This is not the peaceful, carefree Jesus with children sitting around His feet. This is the “wrath-of-God” Jesus who, in His righteous indignation, is sick and tired of what

is being done in His name. This is the perfect example of what Paul says in Ephesians: “be angry, yet do not sin.” Jesus was angry and He let these religious leaders have it—and was absolutely righteous in doing so.

The only real way to grasp the tension of this moment is to read this passage out loud. Every time you get to the words “woe to you,” increase your volume and pitch. Continue to get louder and louder, angrier and angrier, more and more upset with the affront which has been made to God.

Then imagine all the pain, and disappointment, and love God has for His people all welling up within Him at once—yet also mixed with anger over what the Pharisees were doing to lead His people astray. All of this comes out at once as He cries out a lament over His beloved city:

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling. “Behold, your house is being left to you desolate!” For I say to you, from now on you will not see Me until you say, ‘BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD!’” (Matt 23:37-39)

Can you picture the religious leaders as they heard this? How angry do you think the Pharisees were at this point? What do you think the disciples were thinking after they witnessed Jesus doing this? What do you think Jesus was feeling, knowing that the cross was two days away?

It is right at this point, as they leave the temple and walk outside, that the disciples decide to ask Him the question at the beginning of Matthew 24.

1. Describe one time you remember someone “talking the talk,” but not “walking the walk?” How did you respond?

2. This chapter is striking in its display of the boldness of Jesus' condemnation of the religious leaders. Jesus has seven "Woes" He pronounces upon these leaders. Read through Matthew 23:13-39 and every time Jesus says, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites...", note what follows these pronouncements. What do these charges have in common? What is Jesus' primary message in these pronouncements?

3. Jesus speaks about the religious leaders in Matthew 23:2-12, and then speaks directly to them in vv.13-39. How do all these condemnations (23:13-39) relate back to Jesus' statements in 23:2-12? What do you see of God's heart toward hypocrisy—especially in those who have set themselves up as leaders?

4. Where have you seen leaders or teachers make it more difficult for you to grow in your faith? Where have you seen leaders or teachers make it easier? What did this look like?

5. In what areas do you see hypocrisy appear in your life? What do you hear the Holy Spirit saying to you about being more transparent and open with those around you?

Going Deeper:

1. What does Jesus mean in Matthew 23:2 about the authority of the Pharisees and teachers? How is Jesus' statement in 23:3 surprising? What does this say about Jesus' view of authority?

2. Discuss Matthew 23:12. Where have you seen this happen in life? Is this principle true of this life or is this a principle of the coming Kingdom? What is the difference?

Week Twenty-Eight

In Matthew chapter 24, Jesus begins a two-chapter discourse on the end times. He says more here than He does anywhere else about His return. As He approaches the end of His earthly ministry, Jesus details for us some of the things we should expect to see as the end draws near—things He calls “the beginning of birth pangs”. The high point in this message is in Matthew 24:15 where Jesus references Daniel 9:24-27 as the key to unlocking an understanding of end times events.

So many followers of Jesus are confused about what the end times will look like because they fail to follow Jesus’ advice to look to Daniel to begin their exploration of what is called “eschatology” (the study of the end-times). Far too many jump straight to the book of Revelation, not realizing that there are hundreds of allusions to the Old Testament in the book of Revelation—and that this book of apocalyptic prophecy will not make sense to them until they do their due diligence in Old Testament study.

So what was Jesus’ purpose in pointing us to the book of Daniel? Three weeks ago we discussed what is known as the “Seventy Weeks of Daniel.” We discussed one amazing aspect of this monumental prophecy, namely, how it foretells the exact day when Messiah would arrive. But this prophecy is much more than that. It is actually a timeline that lays out the entire future and fate of national Israel.

In Daniel chapter 9, Daniel understands he and his people are nearing the end of the Babylonian Captivity. This was a time where God had sentenced His people to be taken captive for 70 years in the foreign empire of Babylon. As the end of this captivity draws near, Daniel knows that God will restore His people back to the land of Israel, yet he still prays for them.

In his prayer in chapter 9, we see Daniel's burden is specifically concerning the fate of his people, the city, and the temple. So we will see that the divine answer to his prayer in vv. 24-27 also deals specifically with his people, the city, and the temple. Daniel prays about the 70 years of punishment in Babylon, and the answer from God refers to 70 weeks of years in prophecy. What is most amazing to see is that Daniel prays for the fate of his people for the next few decades, and God answers his prayer with a revelation of the future and fate of his people for the rest of time.

God had given Nebuchadnezzar the same kind of timeline for the future and fate of all Gentile world empires in Daniel chapters 2 & 7. But this timeline here in chapter 9 specifically focuses on the nation of Israel.

In this vision, the angel Gabriel tells Daniel that 70 weeks of years (a week, a “Shabuwa,” is simply a period of 7) are set apart for Israel for God to accomplish a certain number of things. One of these things is the second coming. So God’s message to Daniel through Gabriel is that He is starting a clock running for Israel. That clock is 490 years long. By the end of that time period the second coming will happen.

The clock will start when a command is given for Jerusalem to be rebuilt. This commandment came on March 14th, 445 B.C. by the Persian ruler Artaxerxes Longimanus. From that point on when you count out the number of years (360-day years to be precise), you will be tracking God’s plan for Israel, and you will see incredible prophecies fulfilled. It has been said that Israel is God’s timepiece. If you want to know what time it is prophetically, look at Israel.

At the end of the first 69 weeks of years (or 483 years), the prophecy says that Messiah will come (the first time). We explored that a few weeks ago. Then, what happens next is the most crucial part to understand. When Messiah comes, He offers the promised kingdom to Israel. But they reject it, and they reject Him. So, God presses pause on this clock. Israel, as a nation, and as the channel of God’s blessing to the world, is put on the shelf, as it were.

This pause opens up a gap between the end of the 69th week and the beginning of the 70th week. That gap we know as “the church age”. Romans 11:25 says that a partial hardening has happened to Israel “until” the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. When that last Gentile has been brought into the church, the hardening will end, and God will once again focus His attention upon Israel, and that 70th week of years will begin. The 70th week of Daniel’s vision is what we call the “tribulation” period. This will be the final 7 years prior to the return of Christ. That will be the end of Gabriel’s prophecy about Israel because the Messiah will return and the Kingdom will begin.

There are a lot of details to explore in Matthew 24-25 about what God’s people should look for as the birth pangs begin. But it is crucial to see that none of it will make sense to us until we understand this “tribulation” period Jesus refers to is none other than the 70th week of Daniel 9—the final 7-year period that precedes His return in glory. Once that is understood, then the various pieces of what happens during that 7-year period will begin to fall into place.

1. What one question would you ask Jesus about His return if you had the chance (other than the date)?

2. What prompts the teaching Jesus gives in Matthew 24-25 (24:1, 3)? Why was the temple so important to the Jews, and how would Jesus declaring its destruction be received by them? What connection did the disciples make from Jesus' statement in 24:2 that led them to ask about the end of the age?

3. What do we learn about God and His sovereignty in this first section of Matthew 24? What do we learn about His plan?

4. What do most people (outside the family of God) think when the topic of the second coming/apocalypse comes up? How do followers of Jesus react or respond differently? What is your typical approach when discussing the second coming?

5. If Jesus returned next weekend, what regrets would you have, and what would you be most relieved/excited about? How might those anticipated regrets motivate change in your life now?

Going Deeper:

1. How does 1 Thess 4:13-18 help supplement what Jesus says here about His return?

2. Read 1 Cor 15:35-53. What do we learn here about the return of Jesus that we do not learn anywhere else?

Week Twenty-Nine

The idea of judgment is one we don't normally like to talk about, but when Jesus does, we should pay attention. At the end of Matthew 25, Jesus is finishing His teaching on what the world will be like at His second coming, and He ends this discourse with a description of judgment.

The second coming is referred to as "the Day of the Lord" many times in scripture. This phrase carries with it the idea of Christ coming for the purpose of judgment. He is returning to the world that rejected Him to rid the land of its usurpers. This is when the wrath of God is poured out on the unbelieving world. Yet, while the entire scope of His return involves judgment, there are specific judgments that are put into focus in scripture.

Here in Matthew 25:32-33 we see that when the Son of Man comes in His glory:

"...all the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on His left."

All the nations will be gathered before Him when He sits on His glorious throne and there will be a separation: believer from unbeliever. This is sometimes referred to as "the sheep and goat judgment." When Christ returns it says that all who are living at this time will be gathered. Let's see what Jesus says to them. In Matthew 25:34 it says:

"Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.'"

Those believers who are living at the time of His return, whom Jesus calls, "blessed of my Father," will inherit the kingdom that God has been promising His people ever since the time of David. And right then, at that very moment, they will get to enter into the Messianic kingdom, which Revelation 20 tells us will last for a thousand years.

We are also told at the end of Matthew 25 that those on His left will be sent away into eternal punishment. Jesus is coming back, and there will be a reckoning.

Yes, Jesus is returning and the wrath of God will be poured out upon this world, but scripture also tells us in 1 Thessalonians 5 and Romans 5 that the church is not appointed unto wrath. Christ took His Father's wrath for us upon Himself. So the only judgment awaiting believers is of a totally different kind.

In 2 Corinthians 5:10 we read about another judgment. Here, all believers will be recompensed for the deeds done in the body. This is sometimes called the "Bema seat judgment." Here, only believers will stand before Christ to be judged, or the better term is "evaluated." And the purpose of this judgment is that we might receive the rewards He has for us, His children. This is not a time for determining salvation or focusing on our sins, but rather an evaluation of the quality of our work for God.

1 Corinthians 3:12-15 describes how we build on the foundation with things like gold, silver, and costly stone, or wood, hay, and straw. And that fire will test the quality of our work. If what we have built survives, we will receive our rewards. Jesus tells us in Revelation 22:12 that He is coming soon, and that His reward is with Him to give to everyone according to what He has done. This is the only judgment awaiting the church; an evaluation and an awards ceremony for the deeds we do for Him.

Then, finally, at the very end of the Millennium, there is the last judgment. This is the “Great White Throne judgment” in Revelation 20—and that is only for the unsaved from all time. This is where they will receive their final condemnation. It says “the books were opened” and these will also be judged by what they had done. And those whose names were not written in the book of life will be thrown into the lake of fire, and will be separated from God for all eternity.

So, there are different judgments in scripture for different purposes. Our motivation in serving Christ is not the rewards, but rather from gratitude for all we have been given. But our service to God will be evaluated. May we all reflect what Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 4:7-8 and live in such a way that we long for His appearing:

"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing."

1. Are you more of a saver or a spender? Why do you think this is?

2. When the Lord comes in judgment at His second coming, in what ways is this similar to what happened to the world at the Flood (Matt 24:37-39)? For whom is the return a surprise (see 1 Thess 5:1-5)? What does this say about how we are to live in expectancy?

3. What do we learn about the stewardship of what God has entrusted to us in Matthew 24:45-25:30? What is God's expectation of us?

4. Why do you think many Christians shy away from studying the topic of the end times in scripture?

5. How does the imminent return of Jesus affect how you set your priorities and how you live your life? How well do you think you are investing your life? Examples?

Going Deeper:

1. In this section of scripture, Jesus teaches the parable of the talents. What has God made you a steward over in your life?

2. How would you describe the second coming to an unbeliever?

Week Thirty

In Matthew chapter 26 Jesus is approaching the end of His earthly ministry and the last of the passovers He will celebrate with the disciples. All throughout the Old Testament and many times in the New, we see mention of certain feasts the Jews were commanded by God to celebrate. Passover is one of these feasts. To memorialize the rhythms of life that God wanted His people to establish, and to facilitate their remembering His faithfulness, God instituted a yearly cycle of seven feasts so that Israel would regularly remember and celebrate His goodness.

In Leviticus 23, the LORD said to Moses, "...Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'These are my appointed feasts ... which you are to proclaim as sacred assemblies.'" These seven annual feasts and festivals corresponded with the agricultural cycle of Israel. They were celebrated in conjunction with various harvests throughout the year to thank the Lord for His continued provision.

The barley harvest happened in March and April and the early wheat harvest in May and June. There were three spring feasts that corresponded with these harvests: Passover, Feast of Unleavened Bread, Festival of First Fruits.

Then fifty days after First Fruits came the celebration of the Feast of Weeks. We sometimes call this Pentecost.

Then in the fall there is a grouping of three more feasts: Feast of Trumpets, Day of Atonement, and the Feast of Tabernacles (or Booths). The fall saw the harvesting of grapes, dates, figs, and olives.

These were intentionally scheduled times spread throughout the year to remember what God had done for His people and to celebrate His goodness. They were times for the entire faith community to gather without the burden of work to simply worship and celebrate. During the feasts, the Israelites ate, danced, sang, played instruments, prayed, and offered sacrifices to God.

All able-bodied Jews were required to come to Jerusalem three times a year—for Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. So while they were in Jerusalem for Passover, they would typically stay for all three spring feasts. The same is true for the fall feasts and Tabernacles.

In addition to being historical celebrations of significant events in the history of Israel, these feasts are also prophetic, pointing to the mission of the Messiah. The three feasts in the spring focus on the first coming of Messiah and have already been fulfilled. The Feast of Passover was fulfilled by the substitutionary sacrificial death of the Messiah. The Feast of Unleavened Bread reminds us of His sinless life. And the Feast of First Fruits was fulfilled by His resurrection.

The Feast of Pentecost (or Harvest) began with the coming of the Holy Spirit and a great harvest of three thousand souls on the Day of Pentecost. This feast focuses on the church age.

The three fall feasts point toward the second coming of Messiah. The Feast of Trumpets portrays the Rapture (the end of the Church age). The Day of Atonement will usher in God's judgments in the Day of the Lord. The Feast of Tabernacles looks toward our God and savior Jesus Christ setting up His literal, physical Kingdom and ruling the world from Jerusalem in the Millennium.

1. What was the most extravagant gift you have ever given or received?

2. Read Matthew 26:26-29. Then read Exodus 24:8; this is the blood of the old covenant—an agreement or contract between God and His people. The people would obey and worship God, and in return, they would enjoy His blessings in the land. In Matthew 26, Jesus is referring to a New covenant. Read Jer 31:31-34; Ezek 36:24-27. This is the New Covenant Jesus points us to. What are the features of this New Covenant?

3. Seeing that Jesus knew Judas would betray Him, and yet still treated Him with love, what do we learn about God's heart for us—those who can often take His forgiveness for granted and still sin against Him daily?

4. What does selfless love look like for those in the world? What do you think motivates such acts? What is the difference between acts of selfless love done by those in the world, and those done by Christ followers?

5. Following the example of Jesus, how are we to treat those who are our enemies, or who betray us? Read Matthew 27:3-5 and Romans 12:18-21. What can be the result of us displaying this kind of selfless love?

Going Deeper:

1. In Matthew 26:13 Jesus makes a powerful statement about the ramifications of one solitary act by His good friend Mary. The statement He makes highlights the legacy Mary leaves behind. What did she do? Why was it significant? What kind of legacy do you want to leave behind?

2. Read 1 Cor 11:23-30. In very familiar passages like this, we can sometimes miss significant details. Read it slowly and carefully this time. What do you notice about the instructions given here? What surprises you? What aspects do you need to remember more consistently?

Week Thirty-One

In Matthew 26 we see Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane with His disciples. It is a scene that carries with it so many emotions and reactions. We see anger, betrayal, resignation, grief, and indignation. But one emotion that stands out above all the others is agony. In the parallel passage in Luke 22, we see Jesus praying so fervently in the garden that His sweat became like drops of blood. Luke clearly says that Jesus was indeed in agony. What was it that Jesus was anticipating? What imminent event caused Jesus suffering like this?

The only possible answer points back to the purpose for His coming to earth in the first place. God the Father sent His Son Jesus to die on the cross to pay the penalty for your sins and for mine, and to reconcile the universe back to Himself. But what did this entail? What did Jesus actually endure on the cross? And why was it necessary?

Sometimes we can discuss these ideas in such sanctified and holy language that those who are not familiar with the biblical story are unable to fathom what we are talking about. The theological term for what Christ did on the cross for us is “the atonement.” But what does that mean in everyday language?

The starting place for understanding this concept is the fact that God created the universe, a place where He would be able to pour out His love. But the children He placed in that universe rebelled against Him. We decided we wanted to rule our own lives. We believed the lie that this is even possible.

We dwell in a universe that only exists because God is God and He holds it together by the word of His power (Col 1:16-17; Heb 1:3). It is pure folly to think we can exist apart from our creator. He is life itself. That would be like us declaring, “I am going to exist now, without breathing, or eating, or drinking. I am now determining the rules of reality for myself.” This would be pure and utter nonsense.

God is God. He is pure and holy and deserves to be worshipped and obeyed. He not only deserves it, but reality itself requires that nothing that is at war with God can dwell in His presence. That is what is known as sin. Sin is going our own way. Sin is cutting off all connection and communication with God. Sin is doing what we want even when it defies what God wants and who God is, and also what is best for us. Sin separates us from God. And unless something is done about that, we will be separated from Him for all eternity.

Since all that is good, right, just, and beautiful comes from God, being outside His presence entails all that is bad, and evil, and ugly, and would be unending torture. That is the offer made to us. We can either dwell with God in purity, love, light, blessedness, and fulfillment, or we can experience unending torture, hate, and evil for all eternity. It seems like an easy choice, but the stark reality is that we are short-sighted, selfish, and self-centered creatures who are blinded by desire and our love for the pleasures of sin.

When we sin against an infinite God, it is an infinite offense that requires satisfaction. The just penalty for that offense of defying and warring against God is to dwell outside his

presence forever. And the most amazing news in the history of news is that God loves us so much that actually He offers to pay that price for us. But what would that entail?

For me, it would entail Jesus experiencing everything I would have experienced if I spent an eternity separated from God—all that fear, loneliness, anger, desperation, pain, and torture. The cumulative weight of all the suffering I would ultimately endure is hard to even fathom. Yet, that is what just one person deserves. Imagine bearing the full and collective weight of that unbearable misery and anguish on behalf of all people for all of time. Clearly, Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, cannot be separated from God, because He is God. But, in His humanity, He can feel what it would have felt like.

Jesus bore in His body while He was on the cross the full penalty for all the wickedness mankind has ever done; all the unjust wars, atrocities, killing, outrageous and senseless violence, selfishness, hate, and evil mankind has accumulated and committed all throughout time. That is what Christ did for us on the cross. And that is precisely what lay ahead of Him as He prayed in the garden.

So when we read about Christ sweating drops of blood and praying to His Father in the garden; that if it were possible for our salvation to happen any other way to please let it be so. This is but a faint glimpse of what that agony He was feeling pointed toward.

Because sin separates us from God; because God is holy; and because sin makes us helpless to do anything about it on our own, this was the only possible solution to our predicament. If you have never sincerely asked God to forgive your sins, and have never received the free gift of salvation and reconciliation that Jesus offers you—where He exchanges His perfect righteousness for your sin—take the time right now to talk to a family member, your small group, or your pastor about this. Jesus loves you enough to die for you and He offers this to you as a perfectly free gift. All you have to do is say yes.

1. Describe the longest night of your life.

2. Read Matthew 26:33. How do you feel like this Peter at times? Read 26:74-75. How do you feel like this Peter at other times?

3. What do we learn about prayer and reliance upon God from the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane (Matt 26:39, 42)? What do we learn about ourselves by the actions of the disciples (Matt 26:36-45)?

4. How have you seen those around you (in the church and in the world) deal with betrayal? What does this reaction say about their view of God?

5. What has been the place where you wrestled most with God? What was the circumstance or issue? How was it resolved? What did you learn about yourself and about God through this?

Going Deeper:

1. How have you dealt with disappointment or betrayal in the past?

2. Why do you think Jesus was silent when they brought accusers against Him? Why do you think He answered when they asked Him if He was the Messiah? What was His answer? Read 1 Peter 3:15-16. How does this verse relate to what happened to Jesus? How do you put these verses into practice (actively, not passively)?

Week Thirty-Two

(This introduction is going to be a bit different than the others. This is a 2-part intro. Please read the introductions for weeks 32 and 33 together.)

One of the things I love about worshipping with classic hymns is the theology they teach. There is a richness and depth of meaning that has stood the test of time. There are a few modern hymns that I believe carry that same kind of weight. *“How Great the Father’s Love for us,”* is one of those hymns. It is a beautiful and powerful song, yet there is a troubling line in this song that has unfortunately helped bolster a false idea about what happened on the cross. As we dive into Matthew 27 we see Jesus tried, beaten, crucified, and buried. So much is happening, but let us focus on one significant saying by Jesus from the cross.

In Matthew 27:46 Jesus cries out, *“My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken Me”*. It is commonly taught that the purpose and meaning behind this statement of Jesus is to reveal that there was some kind of separation that occurred between the Father and the Son while Jesus bore the sins of the world on the cross. The way the song puts it is: *“How deep the pain of searing loss. The Father turns His face away.”* Others say that the Father somehow turned His back upon the Son while on the cross. Where did this idea come from? There is nothing in scripture that states this. In fact, scripture militates against this idea. There are far too many reasons why this is problematic to state here, but here are a few to consider.

The first reason is that we have a misunderstanding of the holiness of God, and of Habakkuk 1:13. In the book of Habakkuk, the prophet is wrestling with his understanding of God and His justice. Habakkuk cannot fathom how a good God could consider using wicked Babylon to be the instrument of discipline upon His people Judah. Habakkuk cries out in 1:13 *“Your eyes are too pure to approve evil, and you cannot look on wickedness with favor”* (NASB). Other translations unfortunately say something like, *“your eyes are too pure to look on evil.”* Some have taken this to mean that because of His holiness, God is somehow required to look away when evil is present. This is not true, and could not be true.

The entire world is full of evil, and has been ever since the Fall. Yet God is intimately involved in every aspect of the world. His holiness does not require that He look away. Jeremiah 16:17 actually says the opposite. God declares that *“My eyes are on all their ways; they are not hidden from My face, nor is their iniquity concealed from My eyes”*. The verse in Habakkuk means that God cannot *approve* the evil He looks upon, not that He cannot actually allow His eyes to see it.

Next, the cry by Jesus on the cross was, *“My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me.”* What’s important to note is that in scripture (outside of this event), Jesus doesn’t ever address His Father as “God.” He does speak of Him as “God” when talking to others, but never addresses Him directly as anything but “Father.” This should give us a clue that something unusual is happening. So why does He do so here, when two other times on the cross He calls God, “Father”?

We see the answer to this in the way rabbis would quote scripture back then. There were no chapters and verses in the Jewish Bible at that time so how would a rabbi ask His

student to quote a passage he had memorized? He would say, “Moshe, please recite the passage, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me.” This is how the student would know what passage he was referring to. The rabbi would cite the first line of a passage to call attention to the whole passage. Jesus was simply saying to the watching world, as a rabbi would, “recall and remember Psalm 22.” Jesus is declaring that this is what is happening now to me. *(Please continue reading in the next chapter...)*

1. Are you more a “go with the flow” kind of person, or a “rebel without a cause” person? When was a time you were influenced by the crowd and later regretted it?

2. What is the difference between the betrayal by Judas and the betrayal by Peter in the previous chapter? What does heartfelt repentance look like?

3. What do we learn about Jesus in Matthew 27:13-14? Read Isaiah 53 (especially v. 7). How does this chapter in Isaiah flesh out the story of the crucifixion more fully?

4. If Jesus came for the first time today, who would be first in line to crucify Him? What would they charge Him with? What does this say about the culture today?

5. Take a minute to read Matthew 27:1-32 out loud. How does it make you feel?

Going Deeper:

1. Read Matthew 27:24-25. What is Pilate trying to accomplish with this pronouncement? Is he successful? What is the meaning of v. 25? Who is ultimately responsible for the death of Jesus?

2. Read the parallel passage in John 18:33-37. What do we learn about Jesus' answer to Pilate we did not learn in Matthew? What does Jesus mean at the end of v. 37 about those who can or cannot hear His voice?

Week Thirty-Three

(This is a continuation from the introduction of the previous week.)

So why would Jesus cry out this phrase from the cross, “My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me”? Jesus wanted to call our attention to the feelings expressed in Psalm 22, from the beginning to the end. Jesus was expressing His distress; His very real suffering. The cry was not, “why have you turned your back on me”? It was, “why are you so far from helping me”? The cry is that, in my present circumstances, it is so hard for me to feel your presence. But as so many Psalms do, the Psalmist moves from distress in the beginning of the Psalm; through a recitation of God’s goodness and faithfulness in the middle of the Psalm; to the end where praise once again happens. Psalm 22 ends, just as Jesus words on the cross end, by saying it has been accomplished and is finished.

In fact, the very Psalm Jesus points us to, Psalm 22:24, explicitly states that God does not turn His face away from the afflicted. The very Psalm Jesus highlights for us while on the cross disproves this idea.

Far from His eyes being turned away, scripture says the opposite, specifically referring to Jesus on the cross. In John 19:36, John tells us that while Jesus was on the cross, a prophecy from Psalm 34 was fulfilled which stated that *“not a bone of Him shall be broken.”* When we look back to that passage in Psalm 34, we see in vv.15-20 David says, *“The eyes of the Lord are toward the righteous...many are the afflictions of the righteous; but the Lord delivers him out of them all. He keeps all his bones; not one of them is broken.”* John unequivocally tells us that this Psalm is talking about Jesus. And there David affirms that the eyes of the Lord are on Jesus.

There are so many instances in scripture that give us the opposite message to this false idea. But the most profound is that God has revealed to us that He exists in three persons. God is a Trinity. This is who and what He is. If the Son were separated from the Father in any sense, God would no longer be God. If ‘God the Father’, turned away from ‘God the Son’ on the Cross, then sin appears to be more powerful than the unity of the Triune God. Did sin break the Trinity? No!

If God truly did forsake Jesus on the cross, then we might also imagine that God might forsake us when we sin. Yet, Jesus promises to never leave us or forsake us. Do you believe that God forsakes us, or turns His face away from us when we sin? Of course not! Then why would He somehow turn His face away from His own Son when He was bearing the weight of sin (not sinning Himself), in the very act the Father sent Him to do?

Not only would this necessitate the triune God ceasing to be God, but it would also mean that Jesus ceased to be God. If the Father turned away from the Son because of the demands of holiness, then the Son would have to turn away from Himself. Jesus is just as much God, and just as holy as is the Father. If the Father cannot look at sin, then what does that say about Jesus? Jesus is fully God, and fully human. If we say that God cannot look at sin, yet Jesus can, then we dishonor and devalue the deity of Christ.

Does this matter? I think it does. God wants us to worship Him in spirit and in truth. We need to be passionate about making sure the God we worship is an accurate picture of the one true God and how He has revealed Himself. Yes, Jesus felt all the feelings of being forsaken, but more than that, He was simply teaching us another lesson. He was telling us to turn to Psalm 22. Here we see a fuller picture of what was happening on the cross; a picture we see nowhere else in scripture. Through this Psalm we can feel a bit of the depth of His pain. We can sense that in His humanity, through the fog of overwhelming suffering that He was experiencing, His sense of the nearness of His rescue was no longer in His grasp. Yet, through it all, Jesus is communicating, by calling out this Psalm, that by the end of the Psalm and by the end of the cross, that it will be finished. His mission will be complete. This is not a prayer or cry of desperation. It is actually a prayer of hope.

1. Describe the saddest funeral you have ever attended.

2. When the veil in the temple was torn in two from top to bottom, what does this signify? Why is this important in salvation history? What does it mean for you and me?

3. Describe the unusual supernatural events that accompanied the death of Jesus (vv. 51-54). Why do you think this happened? What do we learn about God from this?

4. What do you think a marginally religious person thinks about what happened on the cross? How about an agnostic person? How about an atheist? How would you share the importance of the cross to these people?

5. Read Psalm 22. What do you learn about the crucifixion from this Psalm? Sometimes we can unintentionally minimize the humanity of Jesus. What do you think He was feeling as He was being led up to the cross?

Going Deeper:

1. What physical description are we given of the actual crucifixion (v.35)? Why do you think more focus was not put in the gospels on the physical act?

2. When you read about the crucifixion now, how does it affect you? Has this changed over time? Why do you think this is?

Week Thirty-Four

Whether or not we realize it, most all of us inwardly desire life to be all about triumph, about overcoming, about victory. We root for the underdog. We cheer when Rocky comes out victorious or the Death Star explodes. And yes, while victory is our ultimate outcome, I believe this life is more about the struggle than the result.

When we come to Matthew 28 a new day has dawned; the sun has risen and the long nightmare-ish night has passed. We experience the indescribable joy that the resurrection of Jesus has brought. This is indeed the climax of history. This is both the reason and remedy for all the sufferings that have come before. Then Jesus places the capstone on the book of Matthew by sending the disciples out to spread this good news.

We might be tempted to wonder why all of life cannot be spent in the joy that Matthew 28 brings. But the daily grind of life is not spent on the mountaintop. It is spent in the valley. We don't have to imagine very hard to feel what the disciples must have been feeling on that Saturday, the day after the crucifixion, and the day before the resurrection. It must have seemed like evil had won, and God was nowhere to be found.

But isn't that where we live as well? We look at the world around us and see that evil triumphs and bad things happen to good people. We do know that God is God, and that God is good, but why do we see so much suffering? It is like we are living perpetually on that Saturday.

We have read the end of the story and trust in the truth that God wins in the end. But that brings us back to the question, why was all this necessary? Why could we not have simply stayed in the Garden of Eden and had our blessed eternity begin then?

I would propose that it seems to be how life and how human beings operate--that we are unable to appreciate the good without first experiencing the bad. We would be unable to fully appreciate Heaven without having lived through this life first. We must go through the muck and the mire, before we will be able to appreciate the glory that follows.

Nobel Prize winner George Wald said, "When you have no experience of pain, it is rather hard to experience joy".

In scripture and in life there is an undeniable connection between suffering and glory. Scripture is full of images and examples of this:

"If we suffer we shall also reign with Him" (2 Tim 2:12 KJV).

"...to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation" (1 Pet 4:13).

"For momentary light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison" (2 Cor 4:17).

"Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22b).

“But if we are to share his glory, we must also share his suffering” (Rom 8:17 NLT).

“...as you share in suffering, you will also share God’s comfort” (2 Cor 1:7b NLT).

The list of verses that discusses this theme is seemingly endless. But why is this the case?

It is an inescapable reality of this life that before a new birth comes, you must experience the birth pangs. The birth pangs, the pain, and the suffering are just as integral to all new births as is the joy that follows.

The sobering truth is, suffering helps “uncloud” our vision. It helps us to see things more clearly. Suffering is the mechanism by which God wrests our eyes off of ourselves, and turns them toward Him. Suffering alone is immediate and powerful enough to force us to loosen the grip we have on the things of this world. And valuing the things of God above all else really is the goal. Suffering makes us long for home; our true home. Suffering helps make it clear that this world is not our home.

What if trials and suffering are actually necessary tools that God uses in our lives? What if James 1:2-3 are actually true—that we indeed should count it all joy when we encounter various trials? Perhaps we might consider beginning to cease running from and desperately avoiding all the trials of life and begin to lean into the lessons God has for us.

This is why the Bible consists of more than just Revelation 21 and 22. Yes, Heaven is the destination. This is the prize at the end of the journey. But where we learn and grow is on the journey. May we learn to live daily with the confidence that God allows the suffering we experience in our lives precisely because while this is not the most perfect world, it is the most perfect way to the most perfect world.

1. Other than Jesus, who is one of your top 5 people in the Bible you want to talk to in Heaven? Why? What would you talk about?

2. Why do you think God uses angels here in chapter 28 to verify the reality of the resurrection? What would this accomplish that nothing else really would?

3. Read Matthew 4:10; Acts 10:25-26; Acts 14:11-15; Rev 22:8-9. Why is it significant here in Matthew 28:9,17 that Jesus is worshipped, and that He allows it? Now read Phil 2:9-11. What will ultimately happen in this regard? Why is this important?

4. How do the various parties in this passage react to the news of the resurrection (the women, the chief priests, the disciples)? How does this compare to how people react today?

5. How are you actively obeying the Great Commission in your life? What are the action words in these two verses (Matthew 19-20)? Is there a way to argue that “being a living witness” or “living a Christian lifestyle” fulfills what Jesus commands here (making disciples, baptizing, and teaching)? Why do you think so many of us try to get out from underneath the weight of this command?

Going Deeper:

1. When we see in Matthew 28:17 that, after all that had just happened, some were still doubtful, why do you think this is? How does this verse really capture the state of the church today?

2. Why do you think it is significant that the first people who saw the resurrected Jesus were women?

“These resources were very helpful in the creation of this study guide. “SmallGroups.com” and “Serendipity Bible for Groups.” For helpful answers to many of your Bible questions, the website GotQuestions.org has often proven to be useful.”