

RECOGNIZING THE WORLD AS IT SHOULD BE, THROUGH THE MIRACLES OF JESUS

LIVING IN
THE
ALMOST
THE TENSION

RECOGNIZING THE WORLD AS IT SHOULD BE, THROUGH THE MIRACLES OF JESUS



The Almost Series Guide

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Explanation: The miracles of Jesus demonstrate Jesus's absolute authority and power over the devil, sickness, death, and nature, thereby confirming to all that he is indeed the Messiah and the Son of God. Also, the signs and wonders of Jesus testify to his limitless compassion for people and his longing to see people set free from all bondage.

Thanks for joining us for this new series. We are speaking of "The Almost: Living in the Tension." We live in the tension between the "now" and the "not yet" when we decide to follow Jesus. We are constantly reminded that there is more to this world than we know, and we have to find a way to live with our heads in the clouds, yet with our feet planted firmly on the ground of this world. It is as if we have a dual citizenship in heaven and on earth. Until Jesus comes, this will be our plight. We will learn to live with the breakthroughs, with the miracles, and with the hints of the way the world should and can and, ultimately, will be! We take a look at some miracles of Jesus and we even head to the Old Testament at the end of the series to recognize that God has always been breaking through to show us the Almost. May the journey be beneficial, may you grow, and may we all see a greater breakthrough of the Almost in our lives!

Blessings,

Pastor Tim

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the name 'Tim', written in a cursive style.

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WEEK 1

MARK 4:35-41 (NLT)

35 As evening came, Jesus said to his disciples, "Let's cross to the other side of the lake." **36** So they took Jesus in the boat and started out, leaving the crowds behind (although other boats followed). **37** But soon a fierce storm came up. High waves were breaking into the boat, and it began to fill with water. **38** Jesus was sleeping at the back of the boat with his head on a cushion. The disciples woke him up, shouting, "Teacher, don't you care that we're going to drown?" **39** When Jesus woke up, he rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Silence! Be still!" Suddenly the wind stopped, and there was a great calm. **40** Then he asked them, "Why are you afraid? Do you still have no faith?" **41** The disciples were absolutely terrified. "Who is this man?" they asked each other. "Even the wind and waves obey him!"

The Almost.

We live in the Almost...

Almost heaven, but not quite. We leave with glimpses of a world that we can almost live into, a God that we can almost see, a peace that we can almost have. It is frustrating sometimes. However, when Jesus was here, and throughout the biblical narrative, we see times when God decides he needs us to be able to see a bit into the world that he really created for us. A world of reconciliation, a world of deep peace, and a world where suffering stops being our natural state. Nowhere in scripture is this more clear than in the Miracles of Jesus. This series will take us from many of these miracles; miracles of the natural world, of healing, and of reconciliation, to even some instances in the Old Testament where we can look into that world that we almost had!

We will unpack this idea of “almost” more and more throughout the series, and what it means to live in that tension between the now and the almost, but let’s start with a practical conversation.

What are miracles? We have a way of saying that miracles are all those little things that make life amazing. All those moments in time where we feel like God is moving, where friends are connecting with us, and where things just seem to be working out. We use words like “amazing” and “phenomenal” to talk about very mundane things. Was this what was in the minds and hearts of the biblical writers when they wrote about miracles? Did they have common and mundane things

in mind, but they wrote about them as if they were supernatural? Or were they actually experiencing something that was so out of the ordinary they had very few words for what had really happened?

The Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible says this about Miracles: “Event(s) which may seem contrary to nature and which signifies an act in which God reveals himself to man. The classical definition of miracle assumes that it is contrary to natural law, but this is a misnomer for two reasons. First, many of the miracles of the Bible used nature rather than bypassed it (e.g., the wind which parted the Red Sea, Ex 14:21). Second, there no longer is a concept of “absolute natural laws”; rather, a phenomenon which is not readily explainable (e.g., quasars) may reflect laws with which science is not yet fully conversant. In Scripture the element of faith is crucial; a natural approach cannot prove or disprove the presence of “miracle.” The timing and content of the process can be miraculous even though the event may seem natural. The consistent rationalist demonstrates the necessity of faith; he would place any so-called miracle in the category of unexplained phenomena rather than accept it as a pointer to the presence of God’s activity in the world. The revelatory significance is also important. In every case God performed the miracle not merely as a “wonder” to inspire awe in man but as a “sign” to draw men to himself.”

This gives us a bit of an understanding of the purpose of miracles. In faith, we

believe that miracles reveal something about God in order for us to understand Him better. The purpose is important for us, as they are not just God manipulating the world for His own purposes, but for the reason of growing His people in a direction that leans toward faithfulness.

There is a vocabulary to miracles that we should understand. The words “signs” and “wonders” are used frequently. They have the same general thrust in the New Testament. “Miracle” is added to this vocabulary in the New Testament, used often in the synoptic

gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) while “signs” are used exclusively in the book of John. (Actually, the term “work” is also introduced and used in John, but “signs” or “wonders”.) For John, the word “signs” points to the theological meaning of a miracle as a revelation of the power of God to work in a person’s life.

We have chosen the word Miracles for the vernacular of this series. One major question we need to ask ourselves in this series: If God can do anything, why can’t He do miracles?

1 – Have you ever witnessed a miracle?

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2 – If not, do you want to?

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3 – If you have, write it down; if not, write down what you would like to experience by way of the miraculous.

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35 As evening came, Jesus said to his disciples, "Let's cross to the other side of the lake." 36 So they took Jesus in the boat and started out, leaving the crowds behind (although other boats followed). 37 But soon a fierce storm came up. High waves were breaking into the boat, and it began to fill with water.

During his ministry on earth, Jesus Christ transformed innumerable lives. Like all the other events in his life, his miracles were seen and recounted by eyewitnesses. We have 37 miracles within the 4 Gospels. Mark recounted the most. We can assume that although there were 37 recorded miracles, Jesus probably produced countless more. In the Gospel of John, he finishes with "Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written." (John 21:25)

The first miracle we will study is found in Mark 4:35-41. The context is that Jesus had been teaching and ministering to a significant crowd throughout the day. If you know anything about preaching and leading, you know it takes an emotional toll on the one who is presenting. So when the evening came, Jesus thought it wise to take a few boats and friends and go to the other side of the lake. As the trip was taking place, Jesus fell asleep. This is interesting to note, because we see a glimpse of his humanity. Remember, Jesus was 100% human and 100% divine. (However, we use the theological term "Quiescent," which meant that his divinity was covered, or shroud-

ed. It was available to him, but he did not call on it {See the temptations of Jesus}).

As the boats were crossing the Galilee, Mark says a "furious squall" came about. A squall is a very quick increase in wind speed that can last minutes, as opposed to a gusting wind that will probably only last seconds. Other terms used in translation are "fierce storm." Regardless, there was some real danger that was being experienced as they were trying to go from one side of the lake to the other. This, for good reason, put the disciples into a bit of a fear-based conversation. They weren't sure what they were supposed to do. This might seem somewhat strange as some of them were fishermen, but even ardent sailors can become troubled when mother nature really shows you what she can do!

Apparently, the boat, while seaworthy, was not so "storm-worthy", as it was filling up with water. Have you ever been in a boat that is filling up with water? There is fear that comes from the understanding that you don't have much time before the water hits a "tipping point" and there is so much water in the boat that no matter how much bailing you do, you cannot stop the inevitable. Scripture doesn't say they were at this point, but their fear was palpable. They were afraid

that things were out of their control, and they were desperately afraid for their own lives.

1 – Have you ever feared for your life in a real way? What were the circumstances?

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2 – What was the outcome? Did you succumb to fear, or did you trust God would get you out of the situation.

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3 – How can we, in the face of destruction, find a way to trust God more than we do when we are not faced with tragedy or destruction?

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38 Jesus was sleeping at the back of the boat with his head on a cushion. The disciples woke him up, shouting, “Teacher, don’t you care that we’re going to drown?” 39 When Jesus woke up, he rebuked the wind and said to the waves, “Silence! Be still!” Suddenly the wind stopped, and there was a great calm. 40 Then he asked them, “Why are you afraid? Do you still have no faith?” 41 The disciples were absolutely terrified. “Who is this man?” they asked each other. “Even the wind and waves obey him!”

The word that is used for where Jesus was sleeping is an interesting word, and it connotes Jesus was very far away. It could mean that he was very asleep, and it is the same implication we find in the Jonah story. They both were deeply asleep in the midst of a storm. While Jonah was awakened in order to pray for help, Jesus was awakened in order to BE that help.

But then, something extremely human happens. When the disciples wake Jesus up, rather than have concern for Him, they had concern for themselves. The way they asked the question, “Teacher, don’t you care that we are going to drown?” depicts a panic-stricken humanity. Remember, Jesus was asleep. I don’t know how you wake up when someone is in a panic, but it has a tendency to create panic in me, as I don’t know what is happening when I am made awake. This interaction seeks to remind us that often, our humanity gets the best of us and creates in us a panic. When we think we are responsible for our own salvation, our own safety, we should panic! But when we realize that our safety and salvation

is in the hands of an amazing God, our panic seems a bit silly!

Jesus simply stands up, tells the winds and the waves to “stop it!” And then turns back to his disciples and asks them a tough question: “Do you STILL have no faith?” It seems that Jesus is asking, after everything that you have seen, everything that you have heard, everything that I have done, how can you still question whether or not I am who I say I am?

While this is some conjecture, or guessing, there seems to be implied in the story a question that Jesus gives to his disciples. Remember, they had just seen him rebuke the waves and wind as if they were petulant children. (In the Matthew account, Jesus rebukes the disciples first, and then the waves. Mark has him get right to it with the waves!). This throws the disciples back on their heels, they are agog and aghast at the way Jesus wields his power. They are having a hard time getting their heads around the awesome power that he expresses on this day!

Some theologians say that the fear they felt when they saw Jesus do this act

of incredible power was a fear which is greater than any fear of a storm. From what we know of the panic they were in, they sort of went from panic to even greater fear. And by the way, we should have deep fear when we experience that kind of display of divine power! Fear, awe, call it what you would like, but it is so super-ordinary, that we are often at

a loss for words. But experiencing that power and that fear is not a bad thing; in fact, it is a powerful thing. The disciples were surprised at the scale of the power Jesus held. It served as an anchor point in their lives, a hook to hang their hats on. They now knew how powerful Jesus really was!

1 – Have you ever experienced the power of God like this in your life? If so, how, when, and have you told anyone? Did they believe you?

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2 – What do you think your reaction would be to this sort of awesome expression of power?

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3 – Can you look around your life and see where God is showing His awesome power already?

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We have titled this series, “The Almost” because in the Miracles of Jesus, and in God breaking through, we begin to see what the world is almost like. We live in The Almost, but we are still deeply rooted in the Not Yet. This is difficult for those of us who believe in Jesus because we believe the Almost is breaking through by the power of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. But while our heads and our hearts are there, our feet are firmly planted in the Not Yet, in the here and now. This is hard for us because we know we are not inhabitants of this earth, we are passers-by, we are stewards of this place. Like the lyrics to the old song, “This world is not my home, I’m just a-passing through,” we are visitors here. We know there is another world, one that we can almost touch, one that we can almost live in.

As we go through texts about the power of God breaking through into the world, we are not going to call these things “Super-Natural.” The reason we won’t call them this is because we, as believers in God, have a worldview and a view of reality that says God is alive, He is moving, and He is working in the world at all times. This worldview, this ideology and belief system means that what we are talking about in this series is “super-ordinary,” because this is what has done in the past, is doing now, and will continue to do in the future. God has not abandoned us to this world; rather, He is active and powerful in the world today, as He was in biblical

times. Through this series, we want you to move from “I haven’t seen a miracle” to “all I see is miracles. . .” We want the Almost to become the reality in your life.

We have looked at some of these stories before over the last couple of years, but we visit them again from a new perspective, a new vantage point that will allow for new insights into these texts. Perspective is an important thing, and each text can be seen from multiple views. What we are trying to see in each of these stories of the Super-Ordinary is where we can get a glimpse into heaven, a glimpse into the Almost, what life could and will be like when all is reconciled again to God, when the earth is made new, and there is nothing that will separate, even physically, from Jesus, our Savior.

This first story is a story that reminds us of the real power of Jesus, the power that can’t be denied, that cannot be ignored, and the power that, when we experience it, can easily overwhelm us. We are not in control of such power, we are not used to such pure and incredible love that even the winds and the waves listen to it. This is not what we are used to, but that does not mean it does not exist in the world today. Every miracle is an opening of the door into the kingdom of God and how it can be seen in the world today.

Here are some questions to ask yourself as we look at these texts together in the sermon today:

Here are some questions to ask yourself as we look at these texts together in the sermon today:

- 1— What is the most miraculous thing you have ever seen?
- 2— What did seeing the miraculous do for you?
- 3— Did it solidify your faith?
- 4— Did it make you question your faith more?
- 5— How did God reveal Himself to you through the miraculous?
- 6— What do you believe the kingdom of God to be like?
- 7— How do miracles play into the kingdom of God?
- 8— John says that Miracles are signs. What is God showing you or pointing you to through these stories?
- 9— In this story, what particularly did you resonate with?
- 10— Can you understand why the disciples were so afraid?
- 11— What can you do to be the miraculous in someone’s life today?

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WEEK 2

MARK 5:1-20 (NLT)

1 So they arrived at the other side of the lake, in the region of the Gerasenes. **2** When Jesus climbed out of the boat, a man possessed by an evil spirit came out from the tombs to meet him. **3** This man lived in the burial caves and could no longer be restrained, even with a chain. **4** Whenever he was put into chains and shackles—as he often was—he snapped the chains from his wrists and smashed the shackles. No one was strong enough to subdue him. **5** Day and night he wandered among the burial caves and in the hills, howling and cutting himself with sharp stones. **6** When Jesus was still some distance away, the man saw him, ran to meet him, and bowed low before him. **7** With a shriek, he screamed, “Why are you interfering with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? In the name of God, I beg you, don’t torture me!” **8** For Jesus had already said to the spirit, “Come out of the man, you evil spirit.” **9** Then Jesus demanded, “What is your name?” And he replied, “My name is Legion, because there are many of us inside this man.” **10** Then the evil spirits begged him again and again not to send them to some distant place. **11** There happened to be a large herd of pigs feeding on the hillside nearby. **12** “Send us into those pigs,” the spirits begged. “Let us enter them.” **13** So Jesus gave them permission. The evil spirits came out of the man and entered the pigs, and the entire herd of about 2,000 pigs plunged down the steep hillside into the lake and drowned in the water. **14** The herdsmen fled to the nearby town and the surrounding countryside, spreading the news as they ran. People rushed out to see what had happened. **15** A crowd soon gathered around Jesus, and they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons. He was sitting there fully clothed and perfectly sane, and they were all afraid. **16** Then those who had seen what happened told the others about the demon-possessed man and the pigs. **17** And the crowd began pleading with Jesus to go away and leave them alone. **18** As Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon-possessed begged to go with him. **19** But Jesus said, “No, go home to your family, and tell them everything the Lord has done for you and how merciful he has been.” **20** So the man started off to visit the Ten Towns of that region and began to proclaim the great things Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed at what he told them.



1 So they arrived at the other side of the lake, in the region of the Gerasenes. **2** When Jesus climbed out of the boat, a man possessed by an evil spirit came out from the tombs to meet him. **3** This man lived in the burial caves and could no longer be restrained, even with a chain.

Here is a story that you have heard many times. But let's take a look at it from a new perspective. However, before we move forward, a couple of notes; **1)** Mental Health. If this is something that you struggle with, please get help. All kinds of mental health issues can be dealt with by great therapists and a great deal of prayer and strong community and family support. While this story touches on mental health, we don't want to assume expertise or anything related to an issue that you or someone you know may be going through. **2)** The understanding that what the Gerasene demoniac was dealing with was simply a mental health issue is a bit too simplistic as well. In the narrative we will discuss the "Super-Ordinary" that happens, and how it shows us the "Almost."

Let us begin with the text.

We see that they were moving to the other side of the lake. Remember, this is right after Jesus is calming the storm, so the disciples of Jesus are somewhat primed for more of the "super-ordinary." However, through the other gospels, we

know some things about this man: **1)** He had been demon-possessed for a long time (Luke 8:27). **2)** He wore no clothes and lived like a wild animal (Luke 8:27). He lived among the dead (in a cemetery) which would have been anathema to any believing Jew. He pulled chains apart, he was self-destructive and had behavior that no one could control.

Have you ever seen someone like this? This is often frightening to polite society. We are often fearful when we are confronted with such issues. Some of us handle it better than others. But there is a bit of fear. The disciples would have probably felt the same when they saw this man. The added fear of the dead and being around corpses would have added to the anxiety.

What do you normally do when you are confronted with a situation like this? Do you flee? Do you engage? Do you protect yourself? All of these are reasonable responses when we encounter something like this. But is this what we are called to do, as Christians, in response to those who are in desperate need? While some of this feels like a serious mental health issue, in tomorrow's text, we will see there is something more at play here.

1 – How comfortable are you with those who seem to have these sorts of symptoms?

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2 – What can you do to help ease their discomfort?

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3 – How do you think Jesus felt when he saw this man?

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4 – What is something that you can do today to help understand mental health and some of its issues?

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4 Whenever he was put into chains and shackles—as he often was—he snapped the chains from his wrists and smashed the shackles. No one was strong enough to subdue him. 5 Day and night he wandered among the burial caves and in the hills, howling and cutting himself with sharp stones. 6 When Jesus was still some distance away, the man saw him, ran to meet him, and bowed low before him. 7 With a shriek, he screamed, “Why are you interfering with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? In the name of God, I beg you, don’t torture me!” 8 For Jesus had already said to the spirit, “Come out of the man, you evil spirit!”

As we continue the story, we see that there are super-ordinary things that are happening here as well. There is strength that seems overwhelming, behavior that was disturbing, and self-harm that showed he was dealing with some significant unhappiness and distress in his life. All of this is an understatement, to be sure. As we know, he was filled with an “unclean spirit.” This was a Gentile territory, and even the Gentiles often thought of graveyards as a place where demons were to dwell. But what is more disturbing is that we see the demons had taken such control of him, that they were harming him (in the form of self-harm) and they had no respect for the vessel which carried them. This led to him being ostracized and to be treated in an uncaring fashion by his own people. Of course, they didn’t know what to do in order to tame the man who had become a wild beast.

What comes next is fascinating by all accounts. The man sees Jesus and runs to meet him! You would think that this man and these demons would run the other way, in danger of their very existence. Rather, they ran toward him and bowed low.

Even the demons recognize the Authority of Jesus.

They submitted to Him at every turn. This is not the only exorcism narrative that we see in Mark. Previously, 1:32-34, 3:11-12, that of the disciples, 3:15, and a major controversy that arose out of a successful exorcism (3:22-30). As well, there would be further exorcisms recorded in this book (6:7-13; 7:24-30; 9:14-29). But this narrative is by far the most spectacular. The notion that it took place in a Gentile area, the severity of the possession, the naming of the multiple demons, and the success of transference of the demons make this story significant. It also shows us a window into the Almost world that

Jesus also carries authority into.

When we say that even the demons recognize the authority of Jesus, we mean that his power is in no way confined to the physical world we inhabit, but it transcends into the spiritual world that we only get glimpses of at certain times in our journeys with Christ. But these glimpses remind us that we know very little of the way the universe works, especially in correlation to where God's power and authority truly expresses itself. The

demons bow, they submit, because they are of a lessor power, a lessor authority, and in this instance, while faced with the creator God of the universe, they were utterly terrified.

Now this fear is not fear of the unknown for them; it is fear of the awesome power they knew existed in Jesus. They bowed as a sign of respect and submission. We, at times, bow out of respect, but our submission is sometimes lacking, or at least waning.

1 – What authority does Jesus have in your life?

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2 – How do you submit to God?

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3 – Are you willing to let your obedience be anything less than the obedience of the demons we see in this story?

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6 When Jesus was still some distance away, the man saw him, ran to meet him, and bowed low before him. 7 With a shriek, he screamed, "Why are you interfering with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? In the name of God, I beg you, don't torture me!" 8 For Jesus had already said to the spirit, "Come out of the man, you evil spirit."

We are reiterating this verse today as it holds so much for us to unpack. Some of scripture is deep upon deep, layer upon layer; like an onion, layers that become more powerful as you unpack them. These demons bowed low to Jesus, but the use of language here is fascinating. We won't go into a deep word study other than to say it is usually the exorcist that uses an "oath" to bind the demon. In this language, the demon is the first to utter an oath, in what seems like a worthless attempt to somehow get the upper hand on Jesus. There is a great deal of scholarship and evidence around the idea that to declare the name of a person or spirit was to wield power over them, and similar ways of naming people were quite common in the ancient literature. (A book by J.M Hull entitled "Magic" speaks to this.)

Jesus will use a name in V.9 to control the demons, so this is interesting that the demon sought to bind Jesus first. But the title they give Jesus here seems to make it silly that a demon would think it could have authority over Jesus. The use of "Son of the Most High God" shows the demons knew exactly who they were

dealing with. Their begging Jesus not to torture them implies that Jesus not only had the authority, but the power to do so, as well.

The language again shows us that Jesus had taken initiative by calling the demon out of the man. V.8 is a parenthetical statement by the author to give us further context. Perhaps as the man walked up to Jesus, Jesus gave the call for the spirit to come out of the man, and so the oath the demon utters is in response to the command Jesus gave to the spirit. We don't always see evil/unclean spirits talking or dialoguing with Jesus, but we do in this case. As we will see, this case is not just one evil spirit, but a multitude.

Again, however, we are struck with the deep authority that Jesus wields in both the ordinary and super-ordinary realms of existence. And this plays into the way that we see the authority of Christ in our lives.

How do we follow Christ each and every day? How can we understand what it means to live under the authority of Christ and to submit to Him daily? Paul gives us some suggestions in the book of Romans, particularly in the 12th

chapter: 12:1-2 So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily

recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you. (Message Bible)

We are struck again with the notion that every aspect of our lives is not only worship, but under the authority of Christ. So here are some questions:

1 — Is there a place where you have failed to submit to Christ in your life? Are you holding a portion of your life back?

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2 — When you examine your life, have you figured out why you don't give it all to Christ? Why do you think you are holding on to a portion that you don't want to submit to Christ?

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3 — What will you have to give up? Is it worth the sacrifice?

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9 Then Jesus demanded, “What is your name?” And he replied, “My name is Legion, because there are many of us inside this man.” 10 Then the evil spirits begged him again and again not to send them to some distant place. 11 There happened to be a large herd of pigs feeding on the hillside nearby. 12 “Send us into those pigs,” the spirits begged. “Let us enter them.”

Names are important, as we have established. Now, Jesus is turning the tables on the conversation. Have you ever noticed how good Jesus is at this? He always asks more questions than he answers. I wonder if that wouldn't be a good model of conversation for us as well at times. In our witness, it might make sense for us to actually listen to someone else's story before we dive into our own.

When Jesus asks for the name of the demon, the reply is in the plural. Legion, meaning what could be literally thousands, answer. The name is descriptive as well as obligatory. They seem to have to give Jesus their name. As well, it seems that the conversation moves now from a conversation with the man who is possessed, to the demons inside of him. The whole narrative shows us that the New Testament seems to deal with demon possession as less of a psychological problem, and more of a problem of alien occupation. Once Jesus has dealt with the demons, he will begin to deal with the man again.

The introduction of the pigs as an alternative is interesting. There seems to be some indication that some ancient societies believed that demons were rele-

gated to certain areas, and therefore they didn't want to be cast “out” or “away” from their home turf! However, there is no indication of that in the Jewish tradition. Rather, pigs were unclean, these demons are spoken of as unclean spirits, so the correlation between the ideas of unclean in both arenas might make more sense. Also, the man was spending his time in an unclean area (graveyard) among unclean corpses. Seems like we might be on to something here.

What is not up for question is that Jesus was going to rid this man of the demons; the only question seems to be where these demons would go!

Perhaps the size of the herd was mentioned because it was so significant that it could hold the multitude of demons described by the term “Legion.” It seems that, even for this region, this herd was particularly large. On this account, we cannot be sure. However, it seems that Jesus considered this suggestion and took it quite seriously.

What are the practical applications of today's text? Perhaps there is a two-fold application that we can look to: 1) Jesus knows your name as well. In knowing your name, he does hold power over your life. But he does not use this power

as leverage, but as knowledge to connect with you, to be an intimate guide through the Holy Spirit, and to let you know that He is interested in being part of every aspect of your life! 2) That uncleanliness seems to lead to more uncleanliness. When we are fully unclean, we seek respite in the worst of things, rather than in the best of things. The demons asked to be placed in a situation in which they were comfortable. In the pigs, they found the uncleanliness they had become accus-

tomized to. In our lives, the more we seek that which could be called "unclean," the more comfortable we become with this in our lives. Jesus seeks authority, not simply to punish, but to make us more comfortable with the best and most holy things in our lives. He is not comfortable with the unclean, and when he enters into our lives, he seeks to remove that which is not holy and replace it with a righteousness that is all encompassing.

1 – Where are there areas of your life that are unclean that lead to more uncleanliness?

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2 – How can you take the time to specifically give those to God today? Also, is there anything that might need some professional help to overcome?

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3 – What can your church/family/community do to help? Are support groups needed, available? (While this can be painful, reaching out to those who are safe can be a helpful tool in overcoming these parts of our lives.)

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13 So Jesus gave them permission. The evil spirits came out of the man and entered the pigs, and the entire herd of about 2,000 pigs plunged down the steep hillside into the lake and drowned in the water. 14 The herdsman fled to the nearby town and the surrounding countryside, spreading the news as they ran. People rushed out to see what had happened. 15 A crowd soon gathered around Jesus, and they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons. He was sitting there fully clothed and perfectly sane, and they were all afraid. 16 Then those who had seen what happened told the others about the demon-possessed man and the pigs. 17 And the crowd began pleading with Jesus to go away and leave them alone.

Jesus heard the demons' plea to be put in the herd. He let them go there.

This was a physical manifestation of his power. However, the pigs then ran to the water and drowned themselves. The herdsman ran to the town to let people know what happened. The narrative the herdsman may have given might not have been the best thing. Remember, there are some significant financial implications for what just happened. 2,000 pigs is a huge herd, even by today's standards, and it would have shocked that area economically for years!

Also, the author would not have had the same sort of empathy that the modern reader might have for livestock and their fate. The treatment of the animals was not the point for Mark; rather, the incredible demonstration of the power of Jesus over a spiritual entity that, until that

point, had not been managed, contained, or controlled.

And did you notice everyone's response? They were "all afraid." As so often is the case, and was certainly the case in the story of Jesus calming the storm, when his power is truly expressed, people don't know how to react. The real and true power of God, when experienced, is nothing short of overwhelming, and this has not changed even up until today. When we experience the true power of God's grace in our lives, we are overcome and our life trajectories experience a change!

However, for these people, the change they saw in this man's life — now sane, clothed, and in his right mind—was too much for them to handle. Jesus became an unsettling presence in their midst, and rather than accept him, they

asked him to leave.

I have often wondered what we would do if Jesus came to church with us today? Would we sense his disturbing presence and want him to leave, as well? Would Jesus be comfortable in our church, in our lives, and would we be able to conform our lives to his presence? For those in the Decapolis, his presence was unsettling because it did not conform to what they expected from their

gods. His presence was disturbing because to be in proximity to that much real and palpable power could only remind them of their humanity, their brokenness, and their weakness. No one likes to be reminded of this, especially without the understanding that Jesus could have fixed all of that for them. He was outside of a salvation schema for them; he was not a savior, he was a disturber of the peace and order of things.

1 — Have you ever thought it would be better if Jesus just went away and let you alone?

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2 — Have you ever asked him to leave? (Because he will honor that request.)

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3 — Should Jesus have tried to explain to them what had just happened?

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4 — How can we seek to strengthen the presence of Jesus in our lives, not diminish it?

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18 As Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon possessed begged to go with him. 19 But Jesus said, "No, go home to your family, and tell them everything the Lord has done for you and how merciful he has been." 20 So the man started off to visit the Ten Towns of that region and began to proclaim the great things Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed at what he told them.

Love how Jesus does not argue or try to convince the people that he should stay. He simply gets back into the boat. However, the newly healed man does not want to part with Jesus and asks to go with him. The word used is "begged" to go with him. It is shame that Jesus says no; however, it is not for a negative reason. Jesus had already chosen his "inner circle," if you will, and now he wants this man to become an evangelist, telling the world how merciful God has been to him. We see that the man does just this. People responded, and while we don't know exactly the process, we do know that when Jesus goes back to this area in 7th chapter of Mark, the foundation has been laid for work amongst the Gentiles, as they expected Jesus to come and heal those afflicted in their area.

Jesus always meets a request for discipleship with trepidation. Have you noticed that anytime someone wants to go with Jesus, he seems to push back and tell them things like "foxes have holes, birds have nests, but..."(Matthew 8:20) Why does Jesus do this?

Remember, Jesus is about multiplication, not simple addition. He knows

that if this man stays, he basically will become a missionary to his own people. This man, with his first person story of healing, will be able to translate the gospel to his own people better than any emissary that Jesus could send from the Jewish people. The effect of this one man could be so much more impactful than that of someone else.

So where is Jesus asking you to tell your story of healing and redemption today?

Who are you a missionary to? Who is God calling you to share your testimony with? Is it family, is it co-workers, is it a people group that only you have great access to? Is it the underserved or the over-served? Where do you find yourself placed with influence and a voice? Chances are, it is right there that God wants you to serve, to tell your story of redemption and to be a voice for the kingdom!

While this must seem like a big ask from God, and you may not feel trained, remember, this man was healed, and then began to tell the story. That was all the training that he needed. We don't evangelize by having the best argument;

we evangelize by telling the world of what Jesus has done for us. This is a better way of letting the world know about the love of Christ for humanity. The powerful portion of this story is that Jesus used a broken man to tell the Gentile area of his love for them. Then, as people became comfortable with the idea of Jesus, he was able to visit them again and make a real impact. This healed man laid the groundwork for

a great harvest. Perhaps that is what you are called to do today!

And how do we see a glimpse of the Almost in this story? In many ways, but the most obvious of which is that Jesus holds authority over spiritual powers that we are sometimes helpless to thwart in our own lives. And in that healing comes a powerful calling to expand the kingdom of God.

1 — How has Jesus healed you?

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2 — How can you share that with others?

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3 — To whom has God given you influence?

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4 — How can you impact them for the kingdom with your story of healing and redemption?

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This story is one of the most powerful narratives of healing demon possession that we can find in scripture. It is outstanding in its clarity, its storytelling, and in its effect. From the man encountered in the graves, to the naming of the demons, to the pigs, to the reaction and response of the townspeople, to the ultimate effect of this story for the kingdom, it is an important narrative to understand and engage.

How we see the Almost in this story is fourfold:

1 – We see the power that Jesus wields over spiritual powers.

1 – We see that the demons submit to this power, and even beg for mercy.

1 – We see that when Jesus asks us to follow him, it is usually in the area where he has already given us influence.

1 – We see that telling the story of our encounter with how the world should be is always deeply compelling, and ultimately leads to the growth of the kingdom of God.

How do you see the Almost in this story? When heaven breaks through, especially in the power of Jesus, things always take a turn for the better. This man was healed and his life was changed. The demons were not just thwarted, but utterly annihilated! The victory over the unclean was so complete that even the townspeople were overwhelmed by what had occurred. They were so uncomfortable they asked Jesus to leave as soon as he could. Jesus complied, but not without clarifying the calling of the healed man back to his own people, so that his story would compel them to understand more of who and what Jesus was and is.

The Almost is the glimpse we have into the real realm of God, one that we hope to inhabit when Jesus comes again. In every healing narrative there is a glimpse into what things could be

and should be like. It is a reconciliation with the natural world, with the spiritual world, and with what it means to truly be healed. The Almost world, the one that the healed man got to experience, can be ours today as we submit all of ourselves to Jesus, to his power, to his grace, and to his life for us. We are not simply to live lives of quiet sanctification and salvation, but we are to share the Almost, the kingdom which we live in, to all of those whom we have been given influence and a voice. Jesus never saves so you can sit; there is always a calling connected to your redemption. What is God calling you toward today?

Here are a few questions that might spark some great discussion:

- 1 – What do you need healing for in your life?
- 2 – What demons do you struggle with? (Demons can be defined as things that take over your life and you have little to no control of).
- 3 – How can professionals help you in your journey toward healing? (God has put them in place and given them a calling to help be his healing in the world today!)
- 4 – What are the places where your influence can create a better understanding of the kingdom that God is trying to build on earth?
- 5 – How can you more fully submit all of yourself to God?
- 6 – What part can a strong worshiping community play in your reconciliation and submission to God?
- 7 – How is God calling you to follow him in all aspects of your life?
- 8 – Where do you feel you have lost control of your life? How can you give that to God?
- 9 – Does the presence of Christ make you uncomfortable?
- 10– What does submission look like to you?
- 11 – What sort of authority does God ask for in your life?

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WEEK 3

JOHN 9:1-12 (NLT)

1 As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man who had been blind from birth. "Rabbi," his disciples asked him, "why was this man born blind? Was it because of his own sins or his parents' sins?" **3** "It was not because of his sins or his parents' sins," Jesus answered. "This happened so the power of God could be seen in him. **4** We must quickly carry out the tasks assigned us by the one who sent us. The night is coming, and then no one can work. **5** But while I am here in the world, I am the light of the world." **6** Then he spit on the ground, made mud with the saliva, and spread the mud over the blind man's eyes. **7** He told him, "Go wash yourself in the pool of Siloam" (Siloam means "sent"). So the man went and washed and came back seeing! **8** His neighbors and others who knew him as a blind beggar asked each other, "Isn't this the man who used to sit and beg?" **9** Some said he was, and others said, "No, he just looks like him!" But the beggar kept saying, "Yes, I am the same one!" **10** They asked, "Who healed you? What happened?" **11** He told them, "The man they call Jesus made mud and spread it over my eyes and told me, 'Go to the pool of Siloam and wash yourself.' So I went and washed, and now I can see!" **12** "Where is he now?" they asked. "I don't know," he replied.



1 As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man who had been blind from birth. 2 “Rabbi,” his disciples asked him, “why was this man born blind? Was it because of his own sins or his parents’ sins?”

The story this week is another well-worn journey of expectation of the disciples and a new perspective coming from Jesus. A man had been born blind from birth, which was not terribly common at the time. At this time, it was common to believe that all disfigurement and suffering was a retribution for some sort of sin which had happened either in someone’s previous life, or as a result of a sin that had been perpetrated by one’s parents. This may have come from Deuteronomy 5:9: “You must not bow down to them or worship them, for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God who will not tolerate your affection for any other gods. I lay the sins of the parents upon their children; the entire family is affected—even children in the third and fourth generations of those who reject me.”

Regardless of the complete theology behind this suffering, the disciples were interested in this man, in this situation, and began with the name “Rabbi,” meaning teacher. Perhaps they knew this would be a teachable moment for Jesus, who seemed to have no end of advice and wisdom for his disciples. Perhaps they could sense when Jesus was ready to give them the wisdom of the ages. Remember, Jesus at 12 years old was already being regarded as someone of great wisdom. In fact, he had spent

three days in the temple, teaching and discussing. (Luke 2:41-52)

Do you have teachable moments in your life? Can you tell when they are coming? When we are close to Jesus, we can tell when the wisdom of the Almighty is about to break through. There are times we will get a glimpse of heaven and the way things are supposed to be as we come closer to Jesus. The disciples walked with him for three years and would have known his mannerisms quite well. Perhaps this was a leading question, you know, those questions that are just manipulative enough that you can get a teacher to wax eloquently for a few minutes, almost distractedly, yet still learn something valuable.

As a professor, I am often led by the questions of the students, and I know I have fallen into their traps before. While I can sometimes catch what they are doing, even the rabbit trails that we go down can be valuable opportunities for learning. Never believe that a leading question is simply a waste of time; we can learn wisdom through any medium. And Jesus was taking the bait!

His answer, as we will see tomorrow, was a watershed of truth, one that changed the disciples’ perspective on suffering!

1 – Have you ever led a teacher down a path because of a leading question? What was it, and what was the answer? Did it become a teachable moment? Which teacher was it?

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2 – How can we begin to lean into the teaching of Jesus when we can tell it is coming in our lives? Does Jesus still teach us today?

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3 – What are you interested in learning from God today? Have you prayed that he would show you more truth, more grace, and more wisdom? It's worth a minute to ask him to continue to teach you in every moment!

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3 “It was not because of his sins or his parents’ sins,” Jesus answered. “This happened so the power of God could be seen in him. 4 We must quickly carry out the tasks assigned us by the one who sent us. The night is coming, and then no one can work. 5 But while I am here in the world, I am the light of the world.”

The answer that Jesus gives is typical of the way that Jesus approaches conversations. We live in the binary, the truth and the untruth. The way the question was asked was simple: The man or his parents; someone must have sinned. But Jesus has a way of finding a third way in every conversation. He offers that it is neither the man or the parents, while of course they were sinners. He actually proposes that this man is blind simply for this teachable moment!

What? Let’s take a moment and unpack this concept. It would be easy to think that perhaps God had visited this suffering on the man in order for this moment to be fulfilled. However, that would be an egregious error! God did not send this suffering in order for this moment to take place; however, he will use this misfortune for God’s glory. God is not the author of suffering, but he can create purpose and meaning out of that suffering. He seems to be saying the suffering has no specific cause, other than the sinful state of the world. However, it is now something which can not only be solved, but can be used to glorify God!

How do you suffer today? Is this suffering something that only God can solve

and heal? Is it physical or emotional or spiritual suffering? How can this suffering be used to the glory of God? How is that even possible? We know that Jesus suffered greatly while on earth, and suffers even more as we suffer. So how can our suffering create a stronger identity and bond with Jesus, even in the midst of such great suffering?

Jesus then makes reference to the idea that there might be some haste which needs to be taken in doing the good work of healing this man. He uses the metaphor of darkness (Night) and light (Him). This is not an uncommon metaphor for John, but what we see here is Jesus wanting to do as much good as possible while he is on the earth. I wonder if we have that same sort of urgency to tell others about Jesus?

Jesus wants to use his power to heal this man. And he wants God to get the glory. Remember, in the book of John, every miracle was considered a sign that points to the God. So Jesus here seems to be in a hurry to show the power of God to the world through the sign of healing this man. How can you show the power of God in the world today?

1 – What affliction are you suffering with today? How can God use that suffering, and how can He use that healing to give hope to others through you?

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2 – Is there a greater purpose in your suffering that will help you get through it today?

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3 – How can we see the Almost, or the way the world should be through our suffering? Does that even make sense?

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6 Then he spit on the ground, made mud with the saliva, and spread the mud over the blind man's eyes. 7 He told him, "Go wash yourself in the pool of Siloam" (Siloam means "sent"). So the man went and washed and came back seeing!

Gross! Why did Jesus need to do this? And did you notice the man never asked to be healed? Do you think this was an unwelcome healing? I can't imagine that it was; however, the healing shows the prerogative of Jesus to heal people even when they don't think it is possible. It is so good that God knows what we need even before we ask—even if we never ask!

The use of saliva is interesting. Jesus didn't need to do this. There was no physical manifestation that was needed for Jesus to heal. In fact, in other instances, he didn't do anything but heal with a word, so why the act of physicality? Why even spit on the ground?

It seems that some conventional wisdom of the time was that the saliva of a firstborn might have healing properties. However, this was not always accepted. And in the pagan cultures around Palestine, saliva was often used in pagan ceremonies. For a Jew, it would have been seen as making someone ceremonially unclean. But none of that stopped Jesus. He made a salve of saliva and mud and told the man to go wash in the pool of Siloam (meaning "sent").

What is important to note is that the man did it, without hesitation it seems. When we are told to do something by God, especially something to benefit our

situation, we should do it without hesitation. Our first response to the call of God should always be obedience, even if we have questions. Remember Zechariah in the first few chapters of Luke? He questioned Gabriel, rather than obeying first, and he was silent for the next NINE months!

Perhaps we ask this question a great deal, but is there something that God is asking you to do today that you have hesitated to do? What is it, and how can you get going on the request coming from God? I know sometimes it is difficult to discern what is coming from God in our lives, what those requests look like. However, it is fair to say that God is asking us for obedience, and whether it is in general (Micah 6:8-Justice, mercy, humility) or whether it is in a specific request or leading of God in your life, we should seek to be obedient and pliable to his requests of us. Had the blind man refused to obey, he also would have refused the healing that Jesus offers to all of us.

1 – This metaphor of the saliva and the dirt reminds us that Jesus is not afraid to get his hands dirty! How is he calling you to get dirty so that someone else may be healed?

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2 – Do you think the metaphor of saliva and dirt is important to the story today? What other lessons can you extract from this metaphor? Be creative!

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3 – Are you willing to be healed by God? If so, are you willing to be obedient?

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8 His neighbors and others who knew him as a blind beggar asked each other, "Isn't this the man who used to sit and beg?"

9 Some said he was, and others said, "No, he just looks like him!" But the beggar kept saying, "Yes, I am the same one!"

Ah, the aftermath of a changed life! This is something that we all have experienced as we have converted to a belief in Jesus. Our friends are incredulous, sometimes our families are confused, and we have to keep convincing the closest people in our lives that we are truly that same person, but changed.

Remember, this man had been BORN blind, so they only knew him as a beggar and as someone who was deeply disabled. He had been scorned, assumed a sinner, or the son of sinners, and was human trash for many of them. He would not have been allowed into the temple, as the disabled were discriminated against as under the curse of God.

Now, with his healing and change, they would have had a hard time even recognizing this man. Sometimes, the same is true of us as we continue to have an experience with Jesus. As we are changed and conformed more greatly into his likeness, his manifesto, if you will, others might not recognize us anymore.

Have you ever been to a reunion and have had the chance to see people you haven't seen in a great long while? It is always shocking to see how everyone has changed. Many change for the better, some for the worse, but it is always shocking to see such a great change occur in the life and countenance of those around

us. This man must have been shockingly different!

If you have ever seen the video's of people who put on those glasses that allow color blind people to see colors, you know what I am talking about. The way those people react is nothing less than heart-wrenching! To realize that there is so much brilliance to be seen, all the colors of rainbow, it brings them to tears, and it brings those around them to tears as well. Can you imagine what this man would have felt like as he discovered the faces attached to the voices in his life! Amazing!

Of course, amazing is what God does through Jesus and the Holy Spirit. This amazing can be ours every single day. It can be ours today! We don't have to wait to see Jesus in the flesh to be healed of what ails us. Through prayer, community, study, reaching out to professionals, and even by simply understanding the purpose of our suffering, a modicum of that healing this blind man felt can be ours. The people around us may not understand, how we can even rejoice in our sufferings, but we get it! We understand how God heals.

1 – How is God healing you today? Be specific, and be prayerful.

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2 –Have you experienced your friends and family not recognizing you as you become closer to Jesus? Was that hard to experience? How can we help those around us understand the change that God is making in our lives?

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3 – What is the the biggest change that God is making in your life? How can you let others know?

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10 They asked, "Who healed you? What happened?" 11 He told them, "The man they call Jesus made mud and spread it over my eyes and told me, 'Go to the pool of Siloam and wash yourself.' So I went and washed, and now I can see!" 12 "Where is he now?" they asked. "I don't know," he replied.

Sometimes, the best explanation is the obvious one! He speaks of Jesus as if Jesus had a modicum of fame already. Jesus was becoming a well-known entity in the culture at this point, and why wouldn't he be? He is traveling around, with a group of relatively unkempt and surly characters (the disciples!) And he is healing wherever he goes, as well as preaching and teaching about the Almost, the Kingdom of God and of how things ought to be. Is it any wonder this man simply intones the name of Jesus and they understand?

When they asked him where Jesus went, the man said he simply didn't know. I love the simple answers the blind man gives, because he doesn't try to explain anything. This will serve him well later on in the text. As well, perhaps some of the best answers we can give as to who Jesus is in our lives are not the more ornate and philosophical answers, but simply the answers that are full of life and truth.

What do you say when you talk about God? Do you let people know what He has done for you? Have you told them of the grace and goodness, of the healing and the purpose he has given you? Are you aware of the impact

those simple words have?

The astounding change the blind man's friends and family saw in him is akin to the change that God wants to continue in you. God wants to not only heal you from your sufferings, but also wants you to be a reflection of the Almost, of the Kingdom of God and how that kingdom might be accessed through Jesus in the lives of everyone around you.

However, our witness must be simple, straightforward, and true. We often speak of the Almost as a world that is supposed to be this way or that way, while we have not experienced it ourselves in those ways. The brilliance of the witness of the blind man is in its simplicity. How can you express a testimony that is so simple and yet so true?

A testimony is not something to embellish, not something to convince, not something to create. It is a simple telling of what it is that God has done for you. In simple words, with simple actions that back up the truth of the testimony. If God has shown you great love, then show great love to others as testimony. If you have become a kinder, more thoughtful person, show them. Let them see the grace of God in your life so they

might be convinced of the great Power testimony to the power of God in Jesus.
of God in the world today. The blind May our testimony be so simple today!
simply said, "Now I see" as his greatest

1 – What can you see that you couldn't because you were blinded before?

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2 – How is your testimony true to your experience of God?

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3 – Have you ever given your testimony of what God has done for you? What were the results?

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The rest of the story...(John 9:13-41)**25 “I don’t know whether he is a sinner,” the man replied.****“But I know this: I was blind, and now I can see!”**

There is a great deal more of this narrative, and I would suggest you go and read the rest of the story today. While we have not put it all in this study guide, the story continues in a fascinating way. The man goes to the temple, to the pharisees, as he would have had to have been proven healed to regain his status in society at the time. When they see him, they have a lot of questions. (v.13-17). The man sticks to his story, I was blind, now I can see! They question him about the status of Jesus as a prophet, as a sinner, and as a healer.

When they don’t get the answers they were looking for, they go ahead and ask the man’s parents, who have a deeply lackluster response! (v. 20). They basically throw it back to their son, saying “He is of age, ask him.” Thanks guys, thanks so much for the help!

However, the crux of these verses comes in verse 25, quoted above. When asked again, as this is the second interview the pharisees are conducting with the man; the blind man simply says: “I don’t know about his sin, about his prophetic role, all I know is that I was blind and now I can see!” Sometimes, we simply have to let the power and results of that power speak for themselves about how much God loves us through Jesus.

The reason why this story resonates so much is that here we see a great

glimpse into the kingdom of God, where good is done without reservation, where healing occurs, and where explanation is simple. Why was the man healed? Out of love! What was the result? Simple sight! What was the ongoing conversation? It was about Jesus and how the glory of God is revealed through him.

In this story we see what it is like to live in the tension between the Now and the Not Yet. The man who was healed by Jesus got a glimpse into the Almost, in a way that he could and would not deny. He allowed the kingdom to come into his life and he was forever changed, and he continued to sing the praises of Jesus to anyone who would ask. The tension was clear in the reaction of those around him: Incredulity, fear, anger even. These responses create the tension that we live when we know the kingdom is right around the corner, the kingdom is Almost here!

1 – Have you experienced living in the tension between the Now and the Not Yet?

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2 – What was that tension like?

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3 – What is a simple way that you can explain that tension to someone who is just beginning to follow Jesus and is experiencing that tension?

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This story has so much to unpack, and we focused on the first 12 verses so far this week. But if we learned anything, we should learn the following: Jesus never answers questions with what is expected.

Rather than simply answering the disciples' questions about who had sinned, he moved the conversation to the purpose of the suffering, and then he quickly went about alleviating that same suffering. Watch that progression: Recognition of the Suffering, Purpose of the Suffering, Alleviating the Suffering.

Jesus does this all the time. He recognizes that someone is hurting but puts meaning behind the pain and hurt. Sometimes our suffering feels pointless, it feels worthless, just something we have to endure. However, whenever Jesus encounters suffering, his response is to use it for the glory of God and then to stop it as quickly as he can.

Jesus understood the truth of the matter; his time with us, physically, was limited. But he also understood that doing the good you can, while you can, is paramount to people understanding who God is. The same sense of urgency is something that we can take into the world today. There is so little time to do as much good as we can! How are we busying ourselves with the work of the Kingdom, rather than sitting around lamenting our suffering?

God has the power to use any suffering in your life to show people the kingdom of God. His miracles and signs opened the door into the Almost, and our lives can continue that work. It is a big ask

to give our lives to him, everyday, and in every way, but this is what he asks for, nonetheless.

I can remember when I changed colleges after my freshman year. I went from a school where I had grown up to a place I had never been before. This was an opportunity to change the way people thought of me. Many had seen me as primarily an athlete (although not a great, I loved playing basketball and volleyball). However, in my new context I wanted people to see me as a musician! (Again, not a great one, but hopefully one with potential!) This went really well until I would run into someone who knew me back at my old place. They would look at me incredulously and wonder what I was doing playing guitar up on a stage somewhere. It didn't fit their preconceived notions about who I was.

In the same way, this blind man met resistance to his changed status. People didn't think it could be him and he had to keep convincing them that it WAS him! That must have been frustrating for him, but I think it is reasonable for us to understand that when change occurs in our lives, it will be met with resistance. Sometimes, it will even be met with a great deal of resistance. However, this is to be expected, as people often don't like change and don't want to see you change. It is not that they don't want you to be happy; they just don't see what you see, don't know what you know, and haven't experienced what you have experienced. This is why it behooves us to share, everyday, what we are learning about God.

As you consider the text and the sermon today, here are some questions for you personally or your group:

- 1 — What is the biggest change that has come to you since becoming a Christian?
- 2 — Was it met with resistance by those who know you?
- 3 — What is your testimony? Is it simple, accessible, and speak clearly of Jesus?
- 4 — Have you ever written out your testimony? Perhaps this would be a great time to do it!
- 5 — What is the most powerful part of the kingdom of God that you have seen? And how did you see it? Was it through community, through prayer, through study of Scripture?
- 6 — What do you want others to know about the change that is happening in you?
- 7 — Do you feel that sense of urgency that Jesus spoke to his disciples about?
- 8 — Do you ever sense the presence of God in your life?
- 9 — If you haven't seen a change in your life since meeting Jesus, how can you put some practices into your habit, into your schedule, that might help be a catalyst for the change you want to see?
- 10— A great book to read is Celebration of Disciplines, by Richard Foster. While the spiritual disciplines are never an end unto themselves, they do connect us with habits that foster our spiritual growth and depth. Things such as prayer, study, service, and fasting help us down the path of spiritual maturity.

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WEEK 4

MARK 5:21-34 (NLT)

21 Jesus got into the boat again and went back to the other side of the lake, where a large crowd gathered around him on the shore. **22** Then a leader of the local synagogue, whose name was Jairus, arrived. When he saw Jesus, he fell at his feet, **23** pleading fervently with him. "My little daughter is dying," he said. "Please come and lay your hands on her; heal her so she can live." **24** Jesus went with him, and all the people followed, crowding around him. **25** A woman in the crowd had suffered for twelve years with constant bleeding. **26** She had suffered a great deal from many doctors, and over the years she had spent everything she had to pay them, but she had gotten no better. In fact, she had gotten worse. **27** She had heard about Jesus, so she came up behind him through the crowd and touched his robe. **28** For she thought to herself, "If I can just touch his robe, I will be healed." **29** Immediately the bleeding stopped, and she could feel in her body that she had been healed of her terrible condition. **30** Jesus realized at once that healing power had gone out from him, so he turned around in the crowd and asked, "Who touched my robe?" **31** His disciples said to him, "Look at this crowd pressing around you. How can you ask, 'Who touched me?'" **32** But he kept on looking around to see who had done it. **33** Then the frightened woman, trembling at the realization of what had happened to her, came and fell to her knees in front of him and told him what she had done. **34** And he said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace. Your suffering is over."



21 Jesus got into the boat again and went back to the other side of the lake, where a large crowd gathered around him on the shore. 22 Then a leader of the local synagogue, whose name was Jairus, arrived. When he saw Jesus, he fell at his feet, 23 pleading fervently with him. "My little daughter is dying," he said. "Please come and lay your hands on her; heal her so she can live."

This story starts out like much of the other stories. Back on the lake, by the shore, presumably in Capernaum, the seeming headquarters of Jesus' teaching ministry. The first thing that we see is an important man from the synagogue in town comes through and supplicates himself in front of Jesus. His daughter is dying, and he loves her so desperately he is willing to do anything for the hope of saving her life.

Any of us would have done nothing less for our kids, or anyone that we love. Having just gone through the loss of my father, I am acutely aware of the pain involved in watching someone whom you love die in front of you. Perhaps this was more common in the days of Jesus, in that healthcare was nowhere near where it is today, but I doubt the frequency of death really makes anyone feel too much better about it.

He falls at the feet of Jesus, which is something that important men don't usually do. This could be out of desperation, but it could also be out of deference for this teacher who is becoming more and more famous for the miracu-

lous things he has been doing all around the country. The name of Jesus was becoming synonymous with healing, with salvation, and with the grace of God. Wherever he was going would be a bit of a spectacle.

He asks for specific healing, by the laying on of hands. This is something that was common practice, and the early church did it as well. James 5:14 states: ""Are any of you sick? You should call for the elders of the church to come and pray over you, anointing you with oil in the name of the Lord." Perhaps Jairus thought it not only proper to lay hands, but necessary for the power of God to be given to his daughter. We know that Jesus did not need to touch anyone to heal them, although he sometimes does touch them, or they touch him).

Here is a quick question: is there anything you wouldn't do in order to help save your child's life? As a parent, I would go to the ends of the earth. Would you feel the same way about a friend? How about a brother or sister in Christ? How self-sacrificing is our love for one another? Jairus had no qualms about looking foolish or submissive in front of

his own congregation and community taking as we advocate for those who are
in order to advocate for his daughter. underserved in our community as well?
Perhaps that is a stance we should be

1 – How far would you go to advocate for a loved one in their healing process?

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2 – What can we do as a church to become those advocates for others in the world?

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3 – How do you think Jesus is going to respond to Jairus' request? How would you respond? Don't forget, Jesus was in the middle of teaching!

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24 Jesus went with him, and all the people followed, crowding around him. 25 A woman in the crowd had suffered for twelve years with constant bleeding. 26 She had suffered a great deal from many doctors, and over the years she had spent everything she had to pay them, but she had gotten no better. In fact, she had gotten worse.

In the middle of the story of the daughter of Jairus, we see another story unfold. As Jesus was following Jairus to his house, he was confronted by a crowd. Crowds can really become a problem when you are trying to get somewhere! John Lennon was asked how he was able to get through the inevitable crush of people who would crowd around him when he would walk around New York City. His answer was pretty simple: As long as he kept moving, they would let him pass. When he would stop, they would crowd around so much that he could not continue toward his destination.

Jesus was following Jairus, walking through the crowd, and one woman was mentioned. This woman who had suffered for so long with an issue of bleeding. Let us not forget that this condition would have created a really tough situation in that the Jewish tradition did not allow anyone to touch blood and be ritually clean. Therefore, she had been ostracized from her community for the last 12 years, without the ability to continue to be with her family, with her friends, or even stay inside of the town. Her health issue had made her anathema

from the rest of the community.

As well, healthcare at this time in history was probably a pretty scary thing. We have all heard stories of certain time periods where to go to a doctor was worse than just waiting a disease out. At times, the middle of the 1800's was such a time. When the SDA faith tradition was getting into health ministry, healthcare was a scary thing. Some of what we brought to the table changed the way healthcare was handled in the US and around the globe. That is an incredible blessing and legacy. However, this woman did not have any access to this kind of care.

It is interesting that in the midst of working on one health emergency, Jesus is brought into another health situation. It goes to show the need for healing that always surrounds us, and surrounded Jesus as well. The sick and infirm will always be present, and in that way, there will always be more people that we can advocate for. The history of nursing is a pretty interesting story in that it came from a Christian perspective of compassion. Throughout the last 2,000 years, Christians have forwarded the healing ministry of Jesus by simply being avail-

able to help alleviate the suffering of fellow humans in their proximity. Even if your church isn't a place you feel that you can bring people, you can always show the love of God by being available to help someone in need!

1 – When have you advocated for someone who was in need? How did that make you feel?

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2 – What are the opportunities in your life to serve the underserved?

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3 – Have you ever been socially ostracized? How did that feel? Could you imagine being left out of everything for 12 years?

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27 She had heard about Jesus, so she came up behind him through the crowd and touched his robe. 28 For she thought to herself, "If I can just touch his robe, I will be healed." 29 Immediately the bleeding stopped, and she could feel in her body that she had been healed of her terrible condition.

This is getting really good! There were rumors of Jesus, his healing power, and that even the touching of his garments could bring about healing to the sick. She would have had to brave the crowds, and anyone who has traveled in the Middle East knows that being jostled by a crowd is hardly an uncommon experience. But her desperation must have been true, and her belief in even the touching of his robe was palpable. As she touched his robe, she felt the power of God's healing course through her body, and things were made right.

Can you imagine the relief she must have felt? All these years of being sequestered from her friends and family, from her ability to worship God in the temple, from her community, gone in an instant! A miracle and a sign of how powerful Jesus is, and how much his healing touch can heal not just a physical ailment, but social separation and spiritual isolation as well. Touching his robe was a courageous thing for her to do, and she was willing to take that leap in order to be closer to the presence of God in Jesus.

Are you willing to take that leap today, even for just a portion of the robe that Jesus wears? (Obviously, we are speaking metaphorically here. . .) We often think

that we need a flood of the presence of God in our lives to make us whole, but this story tells us something different. We need a sliver of the presence of God, just a touch of His robe can create a whole new life for us. Perhaps we expect to little and demand too much! This woman had faith that a brush against the fabric would be all she would need, and truly, it was all she needed.

All we need of Jesus is the very whisper of his breathe upon us, and we are given new life, new purpose, and new trajectories. Today, your life can be changed by the simple exhale of Jesus into it! Are we looking for it? Are we seeking it out with the same commitment and fervor that this woman did?

It should not be lost on us that this woman went to find Jesus. She braved the crowd, the discomfort, and the social stigma so that she could be close to him. Are we seeking him out in all areas of our lives as well? Even the uncomfortable areas in our lives need the breathe of God today!

1 – How do you go about seeking the robe of Jesus each day? Is it a comfortable thing for you?

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2 – How can just a breath of Jesus change your life?

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3 – What would a breath of Jesus look like? How can you recognize it?

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30 Jesus realized at once that healing power had gone out from him, so he turned around in the crowd and asked, “Who touched my robe?”

What is happening here? How can Jesus know that someone is touching him? Was there some sort of transfer of power (dunamis—Greek for power) between him and the woman? He seems to know the intention in which he was touched by her.

Intention is an interesting word. It speaks to why we do something, what is the impetus of our actions or behavior, and what outcomes we are looking for. We can ask this of almost anything we do! When we worship, what are we seeking? Is it peace, power, profundity, or presence? Is it a safe harbor in the wind and waves of our lives? Is it that feeling that you are hoping for, like coming to the crest of a mountain you are climbing and looking around and seeing the world from a different vantage point? What is your intention in your conversations about Jesus? Is it to convince, to show love, or to prove a point?

While this seems a bit transactional in the way he experienced it—power going out of him, into her—that is not the point of this text. I would say that one of the important aspects of this text is his understanding of his power, and his full control of the situation, even though it seems as if it might be a bit chaotic. Even though people were around him, he knew when a touch was different and had a different intention than the others.

Perhaps we should call this the “touch of faith.” The touch of faith is a touch that has an intention of expectation behind it. She did not touch him erroneously or without expectation of healing. She believed that if she could simply grasp his garment, she would be healed. Her intention was not to steal his power, but experience the healing that comes from proximity to Jesus.

Is that our intention when we share Jesus with someone? That they might gain a perspective of health and wholeness that can come through a relationship with Jesus? Is our intention that they might live their best life, becoming at peace with those around them, with the world, and with God?

When we live our lives with an intention or expectation, we believe that God is going to do something amazing! We believe that he is alive and well and moving in today’s world as powerfully as he ever has! While we may not see the wind, we can certainly see its effects; and the same is true with Jesus working in the world today. There is still healing to be had, still peace to be found, and still hope to give! Make sure you share that with someone today!

1 – What is your intention today as you seek Jesus?

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2 – How can that intention play into everything that is asked of you?

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3 – Do you believe that God is still at work in the world today? Where do you see it most profoundly?

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31 His disciples said to him, "Look at this crowd pressing around you. How can you ask, 'Who touched me?'"

I love this question by the disciples, because this is the same question I would have asked of Jesus. "How in the world could you have known when someone is touching you with a faithful intention as opposed to all the hands and shoulders and hips that are banging against you in this crowd?"

But somehow, Jesus knew that power had been taken out of him. To be sure, it is not because his batteries were low and he needed recharging, or he was worried about a "loss of power." That is not how the power of God works. But he did know that someone was reaching out in faith, with pure hope and belief that his touch would fix what was broken.

The disciples must have sensed that the way Jesus was asking this question was different, and they were placed on alert that this might be another teachable moment for Jesus. It was a super-ordinary question, but for some reason, the insight Jesus had did not continue on to him knowing the culprit who touched his robe! However, we have seen God ask questions before that demanded someone to step up and be recognized. In the story of Adam and Eve, when God came to the garden in the evening after the fall, God said "Adam, where are you. . ." (Genesis 3:9). It is not that God did not know where Adam was, but he was giving Adam a moment to step up and take responsibility for his actions. In a way, that

was an extension of grace to Adam. Perhaps this was some of the same situation. Jesus wanted the person who touched his robe to step forward, on her own volition, so that he can interact with her.

Is God asking where you are? Is he waiting for you to step up so that he might have a more substantial interaction with you as well today? Is the reason that you have not heard more of the voice of God in your life because you have been unwilling to answer the call of God? Of course, He knows where you are, but is He asking for you to step out of the crowd so you might be part of a more important conversation, one that might change your life? How incredible would that be if this is your moment to interact with God on a personal and powerful level!

1 – When was the last time you felt called out by God?

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2 – Does it feel like there are so many people vying for his attention that you might not be noticed?

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3 – What would you do if he actually was calling to you? (Because he is!!!)

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32 But he kept on looking around to see who had done it. 33 Then the frightened woman, trembling at the realization of what had happened to her, came and fell to her knees in front of him and told him what she had done. 34 And he said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace. Your suffering is over."

Chances are this woman had already begun to make her escape. After so many years of being an outcast, she was probably beginning to skulk (yes, I used the word "skulk!") away and trying not to be noticed. She would have wanted to take stock of what happened and make a plan to re-introduce herself to her family and friends. But now, she is obliged to return and own up to her own temerity.

Why temerity? Because what we might have forgotten is that her fear might have been rightly placed. Remember, she had touched Jesus without permission, and her issue was one of bleeding. All this means she would have made Jesus unclean, according to Jewish law and tradition. Of course she could have expected Jesus to take issue with now being ceremonially unclean. But interestingly, neither Jesus nor Mark mentions this issue at all.

She comes to him and falls on her knees in front of him, ostensibly to beg for forgiveness. However, the words of blessing that he utters for her are different than he uses anywhere else. He calls her DAUGHTER!

Let us not fly past the importance of this. Nowhere else in the gospels is this term used. And no one else is called by this name! This is important, not only for her, but for us as well. He uses this term as an endearment, as well as a blessing. There is also an Old Testament model of reassurance and blessing that we see happening here. Jesus reassures her by calling her daughter, and then blesses and confirms the faith that caused her healing. From his words, it is clear that her cure is not a remission, but a complete healing and restoration.

She can finally have the peace, the shalom, that she has been wanting for years and that has eluded her up until this point. Her healing is complete, total. She will be restored to her health, her community, and her congregation. When Jesus heals, he doesn't do it halfway! Of this we can be sure.

1 – When was the last time you felt completely healed? Have you ever?

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2 – What would it be like to be called Daughter/Son by Jesus?

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3 – While he speaks of the inheritance that the children of God will receive, why do you think it is so important that he called her daughter, specifically?

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This story happens within a story. Kind of like a story inception! The power of this story is threefold:

- 1 — Jesus knows when he is touched with righteous intention.**
- 2 — Jesus wanted to know who this woman was, and gives her an opportunity to step forward in faith, again!**
- 3 — Jesus reassures her and blesses her with the affirmation of the complete healing that comes through him and his power.**

We learn so much from this story. We have seen the power of God revealed, we have seen the incredible competency of God in the healing, and we see his kindness expressed through the use of the name “daughter” and his reassurance that what he has done is good and complete. This story really is a story of hope, intention, expectancy, grace and kindness, all of which stems from the power of Jesus to heal, and more importantly perhaps, the willingness of Jesus to heal. It happens within the story of Jairus’ daughter, which we will be getting back to next week; and it is continuing the ongoing story of a God who loves His creations so much He is willing to take care continually to intercede and care for them.

As we seek to understand more the context of this teaching, we have to take a moment and think about the implications of Jesus understanding that some of his power had left him through the touch of the woman. Jesus is always in full control of all his capacities, and he is keenly aware of the intention and intent of those around him. Because he is without the dulling affects of sin, his awareness of what is happening around him must be

acute, and with that, the ability to see into the hearts of those around him was clear.

As the woman touched his robe, Jesus felt the “transaction” take place. As well, the woman was instantly healed. It must have been a thrilling time for them both, as the woman was completely restored. We also see Jesus become interested in who had reached out and “taken” some of his power.

How does this show us the Almost, the kingdom of God? I think one word is appropriate here; restoration. The woman was restored to the way things SHOULD be. When her life was given back to her through the healing touch of Jesus (even his garment) she immediately recognized that there was nothing that continued to hold her back from being restored to her previous life, her family, and her friends, as well as with her God.

Have you ever had something so new it seemed perfect, only to put a dent, a scratch, or a ding into it? Surfboards are like this for me. I rarely buy a new surfboard, but when I do I find myself hesitating to take it into the water. Inevitably, I will brush it against a rock, or stand up a bit too hard and get a ding on it. It is really difficult to put it back to per-

fect once this happens. I wonder if this is how the woman felt, as if she would never be made new, and her life of struggle and difficulty was what she would have to endure for the rest of her life? It's possible that she had all but given up. But then came Jesus! Hope for the hopeless, rest for the weary, and healing for the sick and broken.

We serve a God who is willing to show us into the kingdom of God, into the Almost, by simply allowing us to touch his robe, by breathing the breath of life into us, and by creating in us new hearts. He is even willing to heal our physical bodies. He has shown us the way of life and bids us to follow it.

Here are some questions for today:

- 1 — What do you need healing from that seems to be chronic in your life?
- 2 — What is the greatest gift Jesus could give you? Have you asked him for it and believed that it will happen?
- 3 — Why was bleeding such a big deal to the Jewish society at this time?
- 4 — Did the woman have a right to be nervous when Jesus called her out?
- 5 — Have you ever been called out by Jesus and needed to come forward?
- 6 — How many times have you felt as if you were just one more in a crowd around God, not understanding that he knows exactly when you reach out to him?
- 7 — Do you have status in society? Would you have bowed down in front of Jesus like Jairus did?
- 8 — Are you interested in the Jairus narrative and getting back to it?
- 9 — How do these two stories parallel, even though Jairus and woman with the issue of blood are so different?
- 10— How can you see where God is wanting to heal you and your family today?

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WEEK 5

MARK 5:35-43 (NLT)

35 While he was still speaking to her, messengers arrived from the home of Jairus, the leader of the synagogue. They told him, "Your daughter is dead. There's no use troubling the Teacher now." **36** But Jesus overheard them and said to Jairus, "Don't be afraid. Just have faith." **37** Then Jesus stopped the crowd and wouldn't let anyone go with him except Peter, James, and John (the brother of James). **38** When they came to the home of the synagogue leader, Jesus saw much commotion and weeping and wailing. **39** He went inside and asked, "Why all this commotion and weeping? The child isn't dead; she's only asleep." **40** The crowd laughed at him. But he made them all leave, and he took the girl's father and mother and his three disciples into the room where the girl was lying. **41** Holding her hand, he said to her, "Talitha koum," which means "Little girl, get up!" **42** And the girl, who was twelve years old, immediately stood up and walked around! They were overwhelmed and totally amazed. **43** Jesus gave them strict orders not to tell anyone what had happened, and then he told them to give her something to eat.



35 While he was still speaking to her, messengers arrived from the home of Jairus, the leader of the synagogue. They told him, “Your daughter is dead. There’s no use troubling the Teacher now.”

And so we are back to the story of Jairus’ daughter. While the previous story was a phenomenal story, that taught us so much, this first story is one that needs to be finished in the telling. As the story of the woman with the issue of blood is wrapping up—in fact, Jesus is still speaking—we see a messenger arrive with a message, and it is not a good one!

This delay Jesus had allowed must have been a deep test of faith for Jairus, for while Jesus was healing the woman, his daughter was sick, and worse, had died. His fears that his daughter would die before Jesus returned with him were confirmed by this messenger. You can sense the sadness and frustration, and even the futility of it all in their tone. They also seemed to feel as if Jesus was too busy to be bothered now, as there was nothing that he could do. Oh, how little they know of Jesus.

I think we sometimes feel the same way with Jesus. We don’t want to bother him with issues that are either beneath his worry or would bother him. However, nothing could be further from the truth. There is nothing that is underneath his ability to care and have concern for in your life. Regardless of the size of the problem or the ask, Jesus cares. As well, there is nothing that is hopeless when it

is given to Jesus to deal with.

While it is easy for us to become despondent about things in our lives that we don’t believe can change, things that we have had failure at overcoming, and in turn no longer want to bother God with, he is still deeply interested, invested, and ready to be by our side through the struggle and be our strength in the overcoming. That is not to say things will always be easy; far from it.

But there is no such thing as a hopeless cause when Jesus is present!

Why do you think you give up before Jesus does? What would it take for us to hold on just a little longer, just a little further in our journey, to put our faith a little more solidly on Jesus? These are easy things to say, but of course, they are difficult to do in our lives. But Jesus is really good with hopeless cases. It is somewhat his specialty. So when he hears them, he hears them with very different ears than everyone else in the crowd would have heard this message.

1 – Have you ever thought something was hopeless, later to find out you had given up too soon? What was that like, and how did you feel afterward?

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2 – What is something that you think Jesus cannot do? Please explain!

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3 – How would you have felt if you were Jairus and you heard about your daughter? Devastated? Broken? Angry? Any other emotion you can think of?

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36 But Jesus overheard them and said to Jairus, “Don’t be afraid. Just have faith.”

The word that is translated “overheard” can also be translated as “rejected” or “ignored” or “paid no attention to.” So whether Jesus was rejecting this report as false, (Fake News!) or simply heard it and rejected it, the point is that he wanted this very important man to have faith despite what was believed to be his daughter’s death.

Probably the best way to think of this is that he overheard the true report of this man’s daughter’s death, and simply refused to believe that death would hold her in light of the power of God as experienced through Jesus himself. Though he did not tell the man how the crisis would end, Jesus wanted him and urged him to believe that all would end well. He emphasized the man’s faith, much like the woman with the issue of blood. In this account Mark demonstrates the power of Jesus over hopeless situations.

He begins the phrase with “don’t be afraid.” This is an interesting admonition. Perhaps he was telling the man not to be afraid of death, as it holds no power over the power of God. Or perhaps he was telling the man that everything would work out well, and not to fear any outcome. However, regardless of the intent, it must have been a hard declaration for the man to hear. He had come to Jesus in the hopes that Jesus would help, and Jesus seemed willing. Then, with the interruption in the journey to his daughter,

Jairus had to watch Jesus heal another person, waylaying their trip to save his daughter. I am sure he is not just afraid, but deeply distraught.

Have you ever been deeply distraught and someone tells you to “calm down”? How has that interchange worked out? I don’t think telling anyone to calm down has really helped any situation. While this is not the translation that would be appropriate for this interchange, I wonder how the admonition was received by Jairus? Unfortunately, and I do deeply apologize, every time I read this text I feel as if Jesus was saying “don’t stop believin’” and he is saying it in that Steven Perry voice! (Cue Don’t Stop Believin’ by Journey!). (Again, sorry!)

It could be that he was in a state of shock, and the bewildering words of Jesus would have hit him like a ton of bricks. No one had experienced resurrection or even resuscitation of those who had passed, so there was no precedent from which to pull some sort of understanding. I would guess Jairus just let the words of Jesus wash over him, not sure how to respond.

1 – Have you ever been so confused by something that you just stand there and see what will happen? When did that happen, and how did you feel?

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2 – Have you lost someone you cared for deeply? How did you deal with the anguish of this kind of loss?

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3 – How do you think you would have handled the words of Jesus to “not be afraid” and to “just believe?”

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37 Then Jesus stopped the crowd and wouldn't let anyone go with him except Peter, James, and John (the brother of James). 38 When they came to the home of the synagogue leader, Jesus saw much commotion and weeping and wailing. 39 He went inside and asked, "Why all this commotion and weeping? The child isn't dead; she's only asleep."

So Jesus calls his "boys," or the inner-circle of the disciples that traveled with him. Peter, James and John were often called when Jesus had a desire for privacy when miracles were involved.

Have you ever felt like you were in the inner-circle, or even more concerning, that you were not in the inner-circle of something? Did you ever wonder if the other disciples felt left out and somehow excluded from what the "cool kids" were up to? I don't know if that is something that was happening, but social theory has a tendency to tell us that if you get 12 people together, some will be outside and some will be inside. It is human nature. And we know that they had been involved in a conversation about who was to have the greatest position in the kingdom of God, (Matthew 18) and Jesus told them that a child would be the greatest in the Almost!

While I don't think the disciples would have felt left out, I thought I would mention it because I might feel that way, and you might feel that way. We have to remember that we are all called to different purposes and positions and perspectives in God's kingdom. God has

called us all to a unique portion and position, and to be jealous of another's calling is to misunderstand what God is wanting from each of us. In the Almost, every position and calling is deeply important and an imperative to the work of the kingdom.

The reason that Jesus would have seen much commotion and weeping is that it was often a practice to hire mourners. Although some have argued that there was very little time to actually hire mourners, as the daughter had just died, it is safe to say that those there were lamenting the loss of this little girl.

Jesus plays this one almost in a coy fashion. He walks in and asks, "Why all this commotion and weeping?" This was a silly question, and seems to almost be tongue-in-cheek. It's not a joke, but it is ironic in the sense that he was playing a game with them. He was pushing them toward understanding that death has no place in his plan or in his kingdom.

Then he makes the announcement that this little girl is actually just sleeping! They must have thought he was having them on. I can imagine the confusion and incredulity expressed toward Jesus at this point in the story. They KNEW the

little girl had died; they had been there. And then Jesus walks in and says that she is just sleeping! That couldn't be further from the truth.

What we see happening is that once again, Jesus is playing chess when the rest of the world is playing checkers.

He is not having the same conversation that they are. He is not living on the same level they are; rather, he is living in the Almost, in the kingdom of God, and they can't understand what he is even talking about!

1 — Have you ever read scripture and felt like you didn't know what Jesus was talking about?

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2 — How would you have received his comments if you had been in the house that day?

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3 — What do you think happens when you die?

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40 The crowd laughed at him. But he made them all leave, and he took the girl's father and mother and his three disciples into the room where the girl was lying. 41 Holding her hand, he said to her, "Talitha koum," which means "Little girl, get up!"

Have you ever wondered why Jesus made all the mourners leave? It wasn't because he was trying to keep some secret, but rather, because he could sense their intention and their unbelief. The father and mother and the three disciples stayed because they had the faith that Jesus could do what he said he would do.

Now, there are some that have supposed that this girl was not actually dead, but was in a coma, and Jesus just woke her up from this state. While this would be no small feat on its own, it is not what seems to be the intent of the scripture here. When Jesus tells this girl to "get up," he uses words that are often used in reference to the resurrection of Jesus and later Christians. It seems more likely that Mark would have wanted his readers to see in the resurrection of this little girl, a precursor to the resurrection of Jesus himself.

Another thing happened that would have caused a stir. Jesus took this little girl's hand, before she had been resurrected. This means that for the second time in this story, Jesus has become ritually unclean. First, it was with the woman with the issue of blood, and now this little girl. Jesus is often showing us that the convention that most of us live by might not matter as much as we think it does,

especially when there is compassionate and merciful work to be done!

It is interesting to see that Mark, and the oral tradition that he pulls from, valued and preserved the Aramaic words that Jesus used. Since the return from the Babylonian exile, Aramaic would have been considered the common language, and Jesus probably would have spoken to his crowds in this tongue. There are four instances in Mark of Aramaic language use: 7:34; 14:36; 15:34, and this one, of course. Mark translated this Aramaic phrase using a Greek word that everywhere else in the New Testament is used to speak about the resurrection of Jesus and Christians. The argument could then be made that this resurrection is a preview or precursor of the resurrection of believers.

A quick note on miracles; they have a tendency to push back on the status quo of the political and economic world. Jesus was constantly taking money out of the pockets of the pharisees by setting up his own healing, while normally the healing would be paid for and prayed for, but rarely happen. Jesus, by way of healing and teaching and creating a new order to the world, would have been seen as a great threat to the way society worked at that time. Even Jesus resurrecting the daughter of Jairus is a big disruption. Jai-

rus was a leader (ruler) of the synagogue; therefore, it is assumed he was wealthy and a leader. For the upper crust of society to begin to go to Jesus would have upset the “natural order” of things in their culture and economy. I have often wondered if they didn’t want to stop Jesus for

less than spiritual reasons, and mostly because he was such a threat to the way their hierarchy was set up. Remember, in the Almost, there is only God, and then all of us. All other sorts of hierarchy are done away with, because they are no longer needed.

1 — The crowd laughed at Jesus. Do you think that happened often to Jesus? Why would you laugh at Jesus if he was around you today and suggested the things that he suggested to the first century audience?

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2 — What was the purpose of Mark putting this story into his Gospel? What do we learn about Jesus, and what do we learn about the Almost?

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3 — How was Jesus, while on earth, living in the tension between the Kingdom of God and the earth he had come down to save? How are we living in the tension between life and death in today’s world?

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42 And the girl, who was twelve years old, immediately stood up and walked around! They were overwhelmed and totally amazed. 43 Jesus gave them strict orders not to tell anyone what had happened, and then he told them to give her something to eat.

Death is a hungry business... Or so it seems, as Jesus tells them to get her some food! I love that Jesus was not done caring for the child when he resurrected her; rather, he was still interested in making sure she was okay. This shows us the depth of the care that Jesus shows to all of us. (I also like the idea that there would be a great meal when resurrection comes for us!)

These stories that we see, both Jairus' daughter and the women with the issue of blood, show us that Mark does not treat miracles as settled events that prove faith. Rather, they are open-ended narratives which leave us with more questions. With Jairus, we have to ask what he would do next. He can't keep this a secret, but what are his next moves? He is a leader in the synagogue and has stature in society. To abandon all that and follow Jesus is a pretty significant thing. Even to have affirmed who Jesus is and stay in power would be difficult.

As well, the woman who was hemorrhaging would have to reclaim her old life back, and this might not be an easy thing to do. What choices was she going to have to take in order to live a new life and to move away from her old shame? And what would she say about Jesus, and

would she remain faithful to him? Again, these miracles almost lead to more questions than simply answering every question we might have about God.

The biggest question they lead to is the person of Jesus. Who is this man? Is he truly God? How does this power work? These stories show his incredible sensitivity to the faith of others, but they also show us his incredible faithfulness to us. We might ask if he will truly settle this thing that he set in motion. Is Jesus faithful moving forward? The truth is, if it is impossible to reduce the movement that he started to set of principles, and we realize that this movement is really about the faithfulness of Jesus, then the person of Jesus is inseparable from the things that he set in motion.

Now, this is good news for us, because Jesus is not a God who walks away from his people. Even in his leaving the earth, he has left us a guide and counselor in the Holy Spirit. God does not abandon what he has started. In fact, he cares for us even more universally because of the power of his Holy Spirit. His kingdom will reign forever, and we, as subjects of his kingdom have become the continued power of the movement. We are God's declaration in declaring how good he

is to the world. The movement moves through us, and the power is manifest in us as well. When people see Christ in us, then they know that we are living in the tension!

1 – What has Jesus started in your life that you believe he will finish?

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2 – Have you ever started something and then had a hard time maintaining it? What was it and how did you overcome this issue, or have you?

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3 – What can you do to help manifest the power of God in the world? Things such as compassion, mercy, grace, and humility are great places to start.

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42. . .They were overwhelmed and totally amazed. . .

How many times have we heard this reaction to Jesus, to his miracles and to his teachings? People have a tendency to forget that it was his actions and his teachings that ultimately got him killed by the pharisees and by the people. We have had so long to hear his words that we can easily forget the real impact they were having every time Jesus opened his mouth and every time he showed us who God was through the signs and wonders he did for those in need.

If we are not careful, we take these overwhelming teachings, this undeniable truth, this roaring lion of a narrative, and we make it into a domesticated house cat; one that might scratch us, but has no real danger of truly changing us dramatically. It is as if we have traded a Porsche 911 turbo for a Toyota Prius. We have allowed time, we have allowed culture, and we have allowed context to change the power of the words of the gospel.

Do you think that if you saw what Jesus was doing back then happen today, you would be prepared to understand it at all? Those who followed Jesus in those early years had seen him do miracles, had seen the great ferocity in which he turned over the tables in the temple, and had heard the words that he said on the cross when asking for forgiveness for his captors and judges.

They were “overwhelmed and amazed.” How often do you feel these sentiments in your spiritual or even ev-

eryday life? How often are you simply amazed by what God is doing in your life, in your community, and in the world? Is it possible that we have stopped looking for miracles and have settled for the mundane?

Perhaps it is time to be overwhelmed again, to be amazed. We should never settle for the mundane when there are miracles to live through, declarations to declare to world about God, and callings of God to follow in our lives. We need to go back to the primal instinct of Christianity, the instinct that reminds us that everything is possible for and with and through God. We have lost that, as we have been willing to settle for Good Enough, rather than for the amazing gifts and lives that Jesus is calling us to!

1 – When was the last time you were amazed by God? When was the last time you were overwhelmed by his goodness and grace?

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2 – If there was a time you were overwhelmed, remember it here in these pages and write it down.

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3 – How would you feel if you were able to see a beloved family member again because of resurrection? Would you ever be able to keep it quiet

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These two stories have kept us busy. We have been plumbing the depths of meaning that each story has. The two questions we always have to ask are these:

1 – What does this tell us about God?

2 – What does this tell us about living in the tension of the Almost kingdom of God?

These two questions keep us focused on what Jesus was trying to do and say while he was on the earth. He wanted people to know the Father better through him; because when they saw him, they saw the fullness of the Father, while at the same time he was wanting them to experience the totality of grace that is given to us through God and experienced most fully in His kingdom. He wanted people to know that the Almost is a palpable kingdom, and while we live in the tension, it does not mean that the Almost does not break through. It has and it still does.

The story of Jairus and his daughter has become even more powerful as I became a father of a little girl, Hannah. Your perspective changes, and I knew instantly that I would do everything that I can to keep her safe, to keep her growing and to keep her faithful to God. Jairus must have felt the exact same when he saw his daughter. I don't think that in 2000 years between Jairus and myself that much has really changed in a father's love for his daughter. To ever have to think about losing my daughter is something that I can hardly even do. His pain was palpable, but so must have been his relief.

Also, did you notice the way that Jesus talked about death? For him, it

seemed that it was really nothing to even bother with. Jesus takes this attitude whenever he experienced death. He continued, again and again, to diminish the power of death that is in the world. He seems to think that because death was never supposed to be part of this world, that soon it will be banished once again. There is a confidence that Jesus seems to exude in the face of death and it should be the same sort of confidence that we can take into our own deaths.

Watching my father die a few years ago was the hardest thing I have ever had to do. But for him, the fear was never there. He, of course, didn't want to die, but some of his last words to me were; "I have faith. . ." I couldn't believe it! But in the end, is it so hard to believe that someone who had put his faith in Jesus for 76 years would continue that same faith and faithfulness through the next steps of the journey? I hope to see my father again soon, but that will only take place through the power of Jesus in this world. I always pray "Come, Lord Jesus, come," but I am also willing to be faithful in the tension between his death and his resurrection.

WEEK 6

MATTHEW 26:36-42 (NLT)

36 Then Jesus went with them to the olive grove called Gethsemane, and he said, "Sit here while I go over there to pray." **37** He took Peter and Zebedee's two sons, James and John, and he became anguished and distressed. **38** He told them, "My soul is crushed with grief to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me." **39** He went on a little farther and bowed with his face to the ground, praying, "My Father! If it is possible, let this cup of suffering be taken away from me. Yet I want Your will to be done, not mine." **40** Then he returned to the disciples and found them asleep. He said to Peter, "Couldn't you watch with me even one hour? **41** Keep watch and pray, so that you will not give in to temptation. For the spirit is willing, but the body is weak!" **42** Then Jesus left them a second time and prayed, "My Father! If this cup cannot be taken away[a] unless I drink it, your will be done."

2 CORINTHIANS 12:7-10 (NLT)

7 ...Even though I have received such wonderful revelations from God. So to keep me from becoming proud, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger from Satan to torment me and keep me from becoming proud.

8 Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away. **9** Each time he said, "My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness." So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me. **10** That's why I take pleasure in my weaknesses, and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles that I suffer for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong.



36 Then Jesus went with them to the olive grove called Gethsemane, and he said, "Sit here while I go over there to pray." 37 He took Peter and Zebedee's two sons, James and John, and he became anguished and distressed. 38 He told them, "My soul is crushed with grief to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me."

The inner-circle is moving again. This time, we are close to the end of Jesus' life. The passion week is coming to its climax, and the idea that we are living in the tension between the Almost and the Not Yet is more powerful than it has ever been. Jesus knows he will be going through the biggest trial of his life soon. But before the literal trial, he has to go through the spiritual trial, the one which he might fail. This was a trial of the spirit, a trial of the will, and a trial of his obedience to the call for which he was born.

The term Gethsemane means "Oil Press" and so there are many olive trees in the grove where these four men went to pray. Today, there is an opulent church, where some tour guides assure you that the olive trees you see presently are the same ones that Jesus would have sat under. I am not a botanist enough to know if that's true; I somehow doubt it. But what is true is that the church is not only on the traditional site, but it is also just about the only place that it could be on the Mount of Olives.

Jesus asks these three friends to stay and "watch" over him, by which

he seems to indicate they are to stay awake and pray for him. This indicates that the kingdom of God is a place where we pray for one another, and corporate prayer is a powerful thing. Have you ever had a community praying for you? Have you ever been involved in a praying community? How can you help coalesce the people around you to pray for one another?

My favorite translation of verse 37 says Jesus was "crushed with anguish," which I think captures the sense of what he was really feeling like. He understands the difficulty which lies ahead and he is summoning strength for the tribulation. Spiritually, he recognizes the even greater agony involved in bearing the sins of the world. Physically, he knows of the death and gruesome details of how he would be executed. He tells them he is at the point of death with his grief.

Have you ever encountered someone who is so depressed they are having suicidal ideations? This is not to say Jesus was contemplating suicide, but he used the ideation of death, which is disturbing. If you have dealt with someone who is thinking about suicide, you

know the seriousness of such an emotional situation. In the times in my ministry when I have had to deal with these difficulties, I always get a professional

involved as soon as I can. However, for Jesus, he went to talk to his Father in heaven, trying to understand the next steps.

1 – Have you ever been crushed with anguish? What do you think this would feel like?

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2 – Was Jesus saying that he wanted to die, or that he might be suicidal by mentioning he was “at the point of death” in his grief?

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3 – What would you do if you find yourself in a situation where suicide is being contemplated by either you or someone around you? Do you know who you would call in order to get help for you or for them? Take some time this week to have a plan. The suicide rate continues to climb, with an increase of 33% from 1999 to 2017. (NCHS Data Brief No. 330, November 2018). This is not something we can ignore. Be prepared, have resources, and take every conversation very seriously.

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39 He went on a little farther and bowed with his face to the ground, praying, "My Father! If it is possible, let this cup of suffering be taken away from me. Yet I want your will to be done, not mine."

This is one of the most difficult and human verses in the whole of the Gospels. It demonstrates the full measure of the humanity of Jesus, while at the same time showing how real the temptation was to use his divinity to get him out of this situation. This is a crucial moment where Jesus has to decide to continue to live in the tension. This is one of those moments when the curtain

is pulled back on this world and we see Jesus fully interacting with the Almost. Likewise, when we pray, we are reaching out to Jesus, who we know is fully immersed and inhabits the kingdom of God. We sometimes call this place "heaven". But Jesus just calls it Home!

In this prayer we see two things happening that are important.

- 1 — Jesus is having a real temptation and struggle. He is asking, with full honest suffering, that he not have to do what God is asking.**
- 2 — At the same time, he is making it plain and clear that he is willing to do whatever is asked of him, as he knows that the will of his Father is what is best.**

These two things are happening simultaneously. He is doubting his ability and want to carry out what is asked, yet he is also committing himself to whatever lies ahead, as it is the will of God. It is possible to have these conflicting ideas at the same time. We sometimes think that following God means never doubting what lies ahead, but this is simply not true. There are moments where we must decide between doubt and continuing to obey the will of God in our lives. The one thing that we can lean on, even within the doubt, is the character of God, which has proven to be good and true time after time.

Jesus certainly knew the goodness of God, but he was still doubtful about the

future, the pain, the suffering, and the responsibility of carrying the weight of the world. He could not see beyond the grave, and this makes his sacrifice and willingness to serve God even that more powerful. He was forging ahead in this way believing this might be the end of him. While he made statements about rebuilding the temple (John 2:19), at this moment, all he could see is the work ahead, the hard and heavy work of carrying the sins of the world on his shoulders.

Have you ever carried something very heavy on your shoulders? What was it like? If you are a cross-fitter, you do this all the time; your shoulders get stronger, but then more weight is put on. At some

point, you come to the limit of what you can actually carry. But for Jesus, that weight was infinite, and that burden real. Can you imagine what sort of spiritual burden that would be, and the anticipation of what would lie ahead must have been crushing.

But thank goodness that Jesus is faithful, both to us and to God. His willingness to take on this burden is why we are here today, living in the Almost. His faithfulness is a model for our continued lives in the tension.

1 – Have you ever thought about where Jesus is now? What do you believe heaven to be? What is it like? While we don't know, it is sometimes fun to conjecture as to its nature.

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2 – Have you ever had both doubt and firm obedience happen to you simultaneously? We are not always 100%, we sometimes are conflicted, and yet can still be faithful to the call of God in our lives. Talk about a time this has happened to you.

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3 – Have you ever carried anything heavy on your shoulders? How did it feel? Can you imagine the burden of carrying the sin of the world on your shoulders? Would that be a daunting proposition for you?

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40 Then he returned to the disciples and found them asleep. He said to Peter, "Couldn't you watch with me even one hour? 41 Keep watch and pray, so that you will not give in to temptation. For the spirit is willing, but the body is weak!"

Jesus returns to his friends and finds them asleep. Apparently, Jesus had prayed for an hour, which he did not consider to be a long time of prayer. When was the last time you prayed for a protracted period of time? In contrast to our meager efforts at prayer, Jesus had an ongoing conversation with God which required time. This should be a model for us. We can't microwave prayer. We can't microwave intimacy with God. Jesus knew this and continued, throughout his ministry, to seek moments of silence and solitude to be with God. How are you doing that in your life today?

We allow our schedules to run us! How many of us wake up in the morning, turn on our phones and just walk down the pre-determined paths that our schedules tell us to walk? While there is nothing wrong with being busy, and there is certainly no issue with being organized and productive, do you set time aside to be with God. Do you set a solid amount of time, not just passing time? Do you have a place in your home or at work where you can be alone and allow yourself some time to reflect, to pray, and to give your time back to God? Of course, the Sabbath is an important moment, but how are you "Sabbathing" every day?

Jesus again admonishes the disciples to stay up and pray, and he basically

calls sleep a temptation. Obviously, it is not sleep that is the problem; it is the weakness of the body that Jesus is speaking of. He wants them to suffer a little physically so there might be a spiritual reward at the end. He tells them that their "spirit is willing, but the body is weak." Where, in your life, is your spirit willing, but you have allowed your bodies to be weak?

I don't want to oversimplify this for anyone. I have things that I continue to deal with in my life, things where my spirit is willing, but I suffer from a weak body. We all have some things that seem very difficult to overcome. Acknowledging this is the first step to surrendering it over to God, to his will for you, and then begins some of the hard work of re-creating our habits and behaviors to conform to what God wants for us. None of this is easy or simple.

However, the request to the disciples from Jesus was relatively simple; just stay awake and pray for me!

Why do you think this was so hard for them?

1 – When was the last time you prayed for a protracted amount of time? Try to pray for 15 minutes, uninterrupted, and see how long that feels.

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2 – Where, in you life, is the spirit willing, but yet your body is weak? What spiritual discipline can you engage in to change your habits and behavior around this particular issue?

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3 – How are you seeking moments to be with God? Are you getting to your calendar first and thinking of your spiritual time as the tithe you give back to God in your schedule? Is the time you give to God the “first fruits” of your schedule?

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42 Then Jesus left them a second time and prayed, “My Father! If this cup cannot be taken away unless I drink it, your will be done!”

We now see Jesus returning to his conversation with his Father. He admonished his disciples to fight their flesh, and he is, in essence, doing the same thing with his interaction with God in this verse. However, in this prayer he uses the negative sense of the sentence. “If this cup cannot be taken away unless I drink it, your will be done.” It seems to connote that he is becoming acutely aware that this is the will of God, that he move forward into the fray!

It is always difficult when we come to the realization that God wants something from us we don't really want to do, or even something that we dread doing. For Jesus, it was no different. But that is what it is like when we live in the tension of what we want and what God wants for us. It is great when everything aligns, but when they diverge? It is important for us to have decided to follow Jesus in those good times, so that when we are struggling with the will of God, our habitual state is one of obedience, not defiance. Having this sort of attitude is important to our continued obedience in the direction of God.

What habits are you creating in your life that lead toward obedience? Do you serve consistently? Do you pray daily? Do you ever fast and ask God for wisdom? Do you seek the will of God

through community? Fellowship through a small group? Hope through intentional conversation, and wisdom through daily study? There is a great deal you can do to work toward the habitual attitude of obedience. How can you put those into practice in your life?

Our commitment to living into the Almost is one we have to decide upon daily. Regardless of what is happening in our lives, our commitment to following Christ, his will, and his actions are important for us to be able to live in the tension. What we see in this text is that even Jesus struggled to follow God's will, but his obedience to his Father won out in the end. This is only possible when we seek the will of God on the daily, and we put in place practices that will enable us to stay strong, grow strong, and live courageously in the way we follow God's will.

1 – When was the last time you spoke with either your earthly father, or your father in heaven? If you are blessed to still have your father, call him today and chat. If not, spend a bit more time in prayer with God.

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2 – Have you ever sensed that what God wants you to do is something that is very different than what you want to do? How do we stay faithful in those moments?

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3 – Spend some time creating a schedule of daily/weekly/monthly spiritual practices that might create space in your life to become habitually obedient to the will of God.

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7 ...even though I have received such wonderful revelations from God. So to keep me from becoming proud, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger from Satan to torment me and keep me from becoming proud.

We are now jumping to 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 to spend some time dealing with how the apostle had to deal with following the will of God when he was suffering as well. This is a model for how we can communicate with God about his will in our lives, even if we wish it were different.

Paul recognizes first the blessings he has from the wonderful revelations that God has given him about Jesus, the world, the Almost, and even the revelations about his sufferings. In fact, the NIV translates this phrase as “these surpassingly great revelations.” He is wary these revelations, those that have truly elevated him into the kingdom of God, might be the thing that causes him to have an over-inflated sense of self. He believes that the “thorn in his flesh” is something that God is sending him to keep him from becoming proud and boastful. However, he is also recognizing that this thing that is troubling him and making him suffer he would much rather do without.

Do you believe that you can never really tell God what you are feeling? Here, Paul is sort of disagreeing with what God has given him, and is asking that it specifically be taken away. While his understanding of his own pride is admirable, he still struggles with his affliction. However, most of us are not self-aware enough to know what might

happen if we were given the things that Paul was given. His understanding of God, which is super-ordinary (or we wouldn't still be reading his letters to understand who God is, how salvation works, and how to organize our communities) is truly outstanding. He understands himself enough to know it could make him boastful.

But in the midst of his understanding of this, he is still wishing that his affliction might abate in order to more fully understand the will of God in his life. But in wanting to do that will, he also understands he must submit to that will. There is a passive voice that is used in the language that means Paul is resigned to the fact that God gave him his affliction, so it is part of the plan God has for Paul.

What is interesting for us, contextually, is that he never mentions what his affliction actually is. The Corinthians must have known and were familiar with what Paul was dealing with. Some have argued it was a physical affliction, some have said spiritual, and some have even said psycho-social (we could dig deeply into this, but will leave it for another time). Regardless of what Paul was dealing with, it was significant and he seemed to believe it hindered his ministry significantly.

What affliction might you carry that you would love to see eliminated from your life?

**1 – Have you ever wished the will of God were different than it is for you?
What do you do when this happens?**

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2 – Do you think that God sometimes allows things in your life so you might not become boastful or proud? What, if anything, would you be boastful about or proud concerning in your life?

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3 – What is that thing which continually afflicts you? Is it something you think will be in place forever you will simply have to deal with? Is there a purpose for this affliction or suffering? How is God using it to help you understand Him or to understand your calling?

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8 Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away. 9 Each time he said, "My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness." So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me. 10 That's why I take pleasure in my weaknesses, and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles that I suffer for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Paul is deciding to flip the script on the conventional way of thinking when it comes to suffering and when it comes to weakness. He has asked God to take away this affliction, but each time God gave him a word, and what a powerful word it is: "My grace is all you need. My power works best in your weakness." These words are so incredible that we need to unpack them.

The kingdom of God, the Almost, as we have been calling it, is a contradictory thing. Strength in weakness? How does that even make sense?

It makes sense when you realize that the rules of this world don't apply to God in the same way they apply to us. As well, He can take what is broken and use it in a powerful way. The most important thing for a broken vessel is to be available to God, and He can use everything that is left for His purposes and His will in the world.

It is interesting to note that we love a comeback story. We love a story about how God works through the least of us, the most broken of us. We are taken aback by the way God can use something that we think is absolutely horrible

and make something beautiful out of it. God uses what other people think is trash to make the most beautiful masterpieces. There is nothing that God cannot use, cannot change, cannot fix, cannot heal, and cannot reveal himself through.

If this is the case, then we are the perfect vessels for his message. We are broken, we are bent, we are estranged and sometimes even strange. We can become that revelation of God, we can become a powerful announcement of the Kingdom of God, of the Almost, but simply being available to be used, to be fixed, healed, and to even do this through our suffering, in order to reveal who God is to the world. He works with the broken much better than he works with the perfect, because the perfect simply are not available to be used by God. They are way too busy working to maintain their perfection. They actually become useless to God, as they don't have any real estate in their lives to give to God. Being perfect is a full-time job.

But following God, and being available to him, is the work of eternity!

1 – Have you ever tried to be perfect? How did that go?

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2 – When was a time when God used your weakness or your suffering to show others his goodness?

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3 – How can you maintain your availability to God in the midst of your struggle and hardship?

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The stories we have seen this week remind us that following the will of God is not an easy thing. It takes courage, fortitude, suffering, and submission. Without these things, we are often taken up in our own will rather than Gods. But let's unpack each one of these:

- 1 – Courage. To follow Christ is not for the faint of heart. It means putting your will aside in order to follow Christ and where he would have you go. This takes courage in that anytime we move into the unknown, into the Almost, we are taking a leap of faith. I have always said; “if it's not a leap, is it even faith.” This means that we must have courage to forage into the unknown in search of God's will. This is never easy, it is never comfortable, nor is it following our own will. It is a willingness to continue on, without answers at times.**
- 2 – Fortitude. This is the strength to keep the courage going. Sometimes, we move on what we feel is a prompting from God, but that prompting is not always consistent. Sometimes, we start off on a path that we believe God has for us, and he becomes very silent on that path. At this point, we need fortitude to continue the journey God has begun in our lives.**
- 3 – Suffering. We know on any journey there will be suffering. Anytime we are out in the wild, we will find ourselves in uncomfortable situations. Those of us that hike or camp know what I am talking about. However, those of us that travel this world a bit know this all too well too. I once spent 48 hours in the Rome airport, waiting for a plane that was being delayed a half-hour at a time. Discomfort, suffering is part of the plan when we follow God's will. When Jesus was here, he was rarely comfortable, why do we think our following of God's will would be any different.**
- 4 – Submission. This is where it all coalesces into a beautiful way! By continually submitting the will of God in your life, we experience all of the above with the knowledge that what God has for us is ultimately better than what we could create for ourselves. It is not comfortable, it is not easy, it is not what we may have chosen for ourselves, but in this submission to the will of God is a different kind of peace. It is that peace that passes all understanding. A peace that recognizes you are doing the will of God and that you are exactly where you are supposed to be.**

This week has been about surrender. How are you surrendering to God today?

Here are a few questions for your journey.

- 1 — Do you know the will of God for your life? If not specifically, in general?
- 2 — How can you submit to God today and be willing to drink from the cup he gives you?
- 3 — What scares you most about following and submitting to God's will?
- 4 — Do you think Jesus had those same fears?
- 5 — How can you help others around you to know the will of God in their lives? Sometimes we see it better from the outside.
- 6 — Do you daily submit to God and have an attitude of availability?
- 7 — What is the greatest thing God has asked of you? How is he making this a reality in your life for the kingdom of God?
- 8 — What can you give to him in order to free yourself of the bonds that are holding you back?
- 9 — What affliction do you have that might actually help God's will to become a reality?
- 10— Of what can you boast?

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WEEK 7

DANIEL 3:1-27

1 King Nebuchadnezzar made a gold statue ninety feet tall and nine feet wide[a] and set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon. **2** Then he sent messages to the high officers, officials, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates, and all the provincial officials to come to the dedication of the statue he had set up. **3** So all these officials[b] came and stood before the statue King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. **4** Then a herald shouted out, "People of all races and nations and languages, listen to the king's command! **5** When you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes, and other musical instruments,[c] bow to the ground to worship King Nebuchadnezzar's gold statue. **6** Anyone who refuses to obey will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace." **7** So at the sound of the musical instruments,[d] all the people, whatever their race or nation or language, bowed to the ground and worshiped the gold statue that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. **8** But some of the astrologers[e] went to the king and informed on the Jews. **9** They said to King Nebuchadnezzar, "Long live the king! **10** You issued a decree requiring all the people to bow down and worship the gold statue when

they hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes, and other musical instruments. **11** That decree also states that those who refuse to obey must be thrown into a blazing furnace. **12** But there are some Jews—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—whom you have put in charge of the province of Babylon. They pay no attention to you, Your Majesty. They refuse to serve your gods and do not worship the gold statue you have set up.” **13** Then Nebuchadnezzar flew into a rage and ordered that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be brought before him. When they were brought in, **14** Nebuchadnezzar said to them, “Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you refuse to serve my gods or to worship the gold statue I have set up? **15** I will give you one more chance to bow down and worship the statue I have made when you hear the sound of the musical instruments.[f] But if you refuse, you will be thrown immediately into the blazing furnace. And then what god will be able to rescue you from my power?” **16** Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego replied, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you. **17** If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God whom we serve is able to save us. He will rescue us from your power, Your Majesty. **18** But even if he doesn’t, we want to make it clear to you, Your Majesty, that we will never serve your gods or worship the gold statue you have set up.”

THE BLAZING FURNACE

19 Nebuchadnezzar was so furious with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego that his face became distorted with rage. He commanded that the furnace be heated seven times hotter than usual. **20** Then he ordered some of the strongest men of his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace. **21** So they tied them up and threw them into the furnace, fully dressed in their pants, turbans, robes, and other garments. **22** And because the king, in his anger, had demanded such a hot fire in the furnace, the flames killed the soldiers as they threw the three men in. **23** So Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, securely tied, fell into the roaring flames. **24** But suddenly, Nebuchadnezzar jumped up in amazement and exclaimed to his advisers, “Didn’t we tie up three men and throw them into the furnace?” “Yes, Your Majesty, we certainly did,” they replied. **25** “Look!” Nebuchadnezzar shouted. “I see four men, unbound, walking around in the fire unharmed! And the fourth looks like a god[g]!” **26** Then Nebuchadnezzar came as close as he could to the door of the flaming furnace and shouted: “Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!” So Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego stepped out of the fire. **27** Then the high officers, officials, governors, and advisers crowded around them and saw that the fire had not touched them. Not a hair on their heads was singed, and their clothing was not scorched. They didn’t even smell of smoke!



1 King Nebuchadnezzar made a gold statue ninety feet tall and nine feet wide and set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon. 2 Then he sent messages to the high officers, officials, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates, and all the provincial officials to come to the dedication of the statue he had set up. 3 So all these officials came and stood before the statue King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. 4 Then a herald shouted out, "People of all races and nations and languages, listen to the king's command! 5 When you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes, and other musical instruments, bow to the ground to worship King Nebuchadnezzar's gold statue. 6 Anyone who refuses to obey will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace."

This is one of those stories that we all know and we all love. There is a great deal of context to flesh out. But the reason for this story is when we see the Almost breaking through, we need to see why, and think about what it teaches us. This whole series has led us to the understanding that Jesus is real and ushered in his kingdom, and we now live in the tension of the now and the not yet. We call this tension the "Almost." And it is in this tension that we see the power of God moving, the grace of God expressed, and the love of Christ becomes most clear in our lives and hearts.

After Daniel 2, and the vision that King Nebuchadnezzar has (King Neb from now on!) he decides to build what he saw in his dream for real. There is a lot of scholarship around when this happened, if it was immediate or it took

a great deal of time. Regardless of the time frame, there is a discernible link between the Daniel 2 and Daniel 3.

King Neb built his image out of Gold. The common thinking is that it was more of a stylized obelisk, rather than a normal statue. It would have been 90 feet tall and 9 feet wide, so being so large it was probably not made of solid gold, but probably overlaid with gold. This was a pretty common practice in the ancient world.

King Neb invited all the dignitaries in his provinces and magistrates to come to the dedication. This was going to be a big deal. Have you ever been to the launch of something new? There is so much excitement around a new building, a new business, or a new church. Can you imagine what it would be like to basically be launching a new religion? There must have been excite-

ment, with everyone having their own part to play. My bet is they were hoping everything would go well. There is nothing worse than something going wrong

at a launch. If anyone saw the launch of the Cybertruck by Tesla, you know what I am talking about!

1 – Have you ever been part of the launch of something new? What was it like, and what were you launching?

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2 – The statue must have been a great thing to see. Have you ever seen something that was so significant in size you had to step back to take it all in?

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3 – What is God building in your life that is so significant you have to take a step back to see it all?

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7 So at the sound of the musical instruments, all the people, whatever their race or nation or language, bowed to the ground and worshiped the gold statue that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. 8 But some of the astrologers went to the king and informed on the Jews. 9 They said to King Nebuchadnezzar, “Long live the king! 10 You issued a decree requiring all the people to bow down and worship the gold statue when they hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes, and other musical instruments. 11 That decree also states that those who refuse to obey must be thrown into a blazing furnace. 12 But there are some Jews—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—whom you have put in charge of the province of Babylon. They pay no attention to you, Your Majesty. They refuse to serve your gods and do not worship the gold statue you have set up.”

Everyone hates a tattletale! But this is what the others in the court were doing to the three Hebrews. When the crowd all bent down to worship the statue, and the king it represented, the three of these young men would not bow. And of course, this was their undoing.

A quick question for you. What do you bow down to and worship that is not the Jesus we know? Is that a tough or even antagonistic question? It is really easy for us to put other things in place of God, and sometimes we don't even know that we are doing it! Whether it is work, money, entertainment, family, friends, or what have you, when we hold something as more important than the God that created us, we begin to become idolators and our worship and our focus changes

from the God of the universe to something that will ultimately let us down.

While the impetus for King Neb to create this statue was devotion and loyalty, his real issue was a lust for power and a position that was akin to being a God. When we seek to replace the God of the universe with anything, we have a problem, but when we seek to replace God with ourselves, we are on a path to destruction.

The tattletales were Chaldeans, who had a political motivation against these Jews, who had been promoted above them in the kingdom. This happens a great deal. When someone thinks God is blessing another over them, jealousy can easily be the result. The stakes here were really high! The command was

that anyone who did not worship would be killed, and they had the furnace from which they had forged the statue ready and willing to be used for any who would not bow down.

I do wonder, however, if King Neb had known that it was his trusted Hebrew officials he would be throwing into the furnace, if he would have been quite so ready to make that decree! He loved these guys, and they had been incredible workers for him and for Babylon. Sometimes, we make decisions so quickly, we forget about all the consequences that

take place after. Have you ever been caught up in something like this?

Unintended consequences are always a problem when we make decisions without considering all of the outcomes that could happen. I know that I have been the victim and the cause of these situations many times before. This is what is so amazing about God: He knows all those consequences and He can foresee what the outcomes will be. When we are close to God, we are able to, with much more clarity, make a decision that is best for all involved.

1 – What do you bow down to that is not Jesus?

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2 – Have you ever made a decision that had unintended and unforeseen consequences? What was it and how did it play out?

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3 – How can you ask Jesus into the decision making process? It should probably be at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end!

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13 Then Nebuchadnezzar flew into a rage and ordered that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be brought before him. When they were brought in, 14 Nebuchadnezzar said to them, "Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you refuse to serve my gods or to worship the gold statue I have set up? 15 I will give you one more chance to bow down and worship the statue I have made when you hear the sound of the musical instruments. But if you refuse, you will be thrown immediately into the blazing furnace. And then what god will be able to rescue you from my power?" 16 Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego replied, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you. 17 If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God whom we serve is able to save us. He will rescue us from your power, Your Majesty. 18 But even if he doesn't, we want to make it clear to you, Your Majesty, that we will never serve your gods or worship the gold statue you have set up."

You can tell the king had a great deal of respect for these men, as he asked them if they had really done what they were accused of. This was an even greater test of faith for the three Hebrew young men. It is something to make a stand for God; but it is a great thing to stand true to your convictions when pointedly asked if it was true. Peter followed Jesus after his arrest, but when tested, he failed to admit it three times, a story we all know too well. What would we do in the face of the same accusation, and the same consequences. Perhaps it has been too easy for us to believe. The most of us have not had to stand up for our faith with any consequence at play. What if there were consequences

to believing in Jesus Christ? Could we still have the same courage of conviction that we do without those consequences being presented? The strange part is the Christian faith has always grown exponentially with persecution. Faith in the midst of persecution is true faith indeed!

"But if you do not worship, you will be thrown into the furnace. . ." It seems that the king was unwilling to lose face on his auspicious occasion. It must have been his pride that made him declare "you will have no other Gods than me!"

When humans decide they will be gods, very strange things happen. This king was certainly not the only king to have declared himself divine. There is a great deal of history surrounding this

idea. When humans have no boundaries, and no one around them will tell them the truth of their humanity, people get an unbounded sense of self-importance and power.

The young Hebrews were always a source of reality for the great king of Babylon, much like Daniel was. If we are a person with position and influence, we must always surround ourselves with people who can keep us dealing in reality. Quick story; I used to play in a band, and we had some limited success. One day, as we were walking into the arena we were playing in Northern California, our manager took my bag and said, "I don't want them seeing you carrying your own bags!" I thought that was silly, but went along with it. I guess we were trying to

get the appearance of importance. That night, we signed autographs for something like three hours and we felt like we were pretty famous and important! However, when I got home the next day, I was met by my wife, with a child on one hip, a bag of dirty diapers on the other, and she handed them both to me! I have never been reminded of my true humanity in a better way!

To keep the king in his place, the three young men reminded him that they would never worship him as a god, because they worshiped the one true God! He reminded them of the consequences and they let him know that they were more than willing to die in order to continue to follow their God.

1 – Do you think you can stand the test of examination if someone asks you if you are a believer in the Cross of Jesus Christ?

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2 – Have you surrounded yourself with those who keep your humanity present before you? Who is the person who grounds you the most? Thank them today!! The king asked them who would save them? If we asked you that today, what would you say? Why would you say what you do?

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19 Nebuchadnezzar was so furious with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego that his face became distorted with rage. He commanded that the furnace be heated seven times hotter than usual. **20** Then he ordered some of the strongest men of his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace. **21** So they tied them up and threw them into the furnace, fully dressed in their pants, turbans, robes, and other garments. **22** And because the king, in his anger, had demanded such a hot fire in the furnace, the flames killed the soldiers as they threw the three men in. **23** So Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, securely tied, fell into the roaring flames. **24** But suddenly, Nebuchadnezzar jumped up in amazement and exclaimed to his advisers, "Didn't we tie up three men and throw them into the furnace?" "Yes, Your Majesty, we certainly did," they replied. **25** "Look!" Nebuchadnezzar shouted. "I see four men, unbound, walking around in the fire unharmed! And the fourth looks like a god!"

Then the king was MAD! The scripture says that he was "full of fury." No matter how brave the young men were, to stand in the face of a furious king would still be intimidating. We get the feeling that King Neb had comported himself with kindness and grace toward the men. Now, however, the expression on his face had clearly changed! They were bound and thrown into the fire, to be completely burned and done away with.

The consequences of their faith were real, were terrifying, and were brutal and violent. While we don't face these kinds of consequences, many in the

world still do. Many still face violent attacks for their faith. What can we do to encourage, support and protect them?

The king jumped up in astonishment as he realized that these men were not only not burning, but they were standing and talking with another. The soldiers who had thrown them in died as they approached the furnace, it was that hot! Now, you have to remember that kings, heads of state, and even simply important people don't usually jump up. I always say, when you see a man in a suit running, you should probably start running after them. It must be something pretty serious if you can get a man in a suit to

run! The same can be said of kings, I am sure! His surprise and his astonishment were real!

He then exclaims that the fourth man in the fire looks like a god, or a son of a god. Perhaps a couple of items are worth mentioning: 1) Whoever was with them was good looking!! But also probably had a powerful demeanor and charismatic profile! 2) Jesus is not afraid to step into danger to be with his people. We see this again and again in his incarnated life, but we also see it in God's willingness to get dirty with his people; to stand in harm's way and to be deeply committed to their salvation.

Spurgeon observed that God's people are often in the furnace, and though there are different kinds of furnaces, they serve similar purposes in our lives.

(<https://enduringword.com/bible-commentary/daniel-3/>)

There is the furnace that man prepares.
There is a furnace that Satan prepares.
There is the furnace that God prepares.

God can deliver from a trial, or he can sustain us and strengthen us in a trial as well.

1 – What can we do to encourage, support and protect those who are still facing the consequences of following Jesus in hostile territories?

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2 – Can you think of a time you saw a man with a suit running? What was the situation?

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3 – When was the last time you saw God getting into the midst of the struggle that you have had to endure?

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26 Then Nebuchadnezzar came as close as he could to the door of the flaming furnace and shouted: “Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!”

So Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego stepped out of the fire. **27** Then the high officers, officials, governors, and advisers crowded around them and saw that the fire had not touched them. Not a hair on their heads was singed, and their clothing was not scorched. They didn't even smell of smoke!

He calls out to them saying: “servants of the Most High God!” This is a big deal. Before they were out of the furnace, the king was accepting the idea that there was a God, a True God, a God that was higher than anything that he worshipped, and certainly that was over him as well. This is a significant reversal. Five minutes before he was killing people for not worshiping him, and now he is acknowledging the God of the Hebrews!

This reversal is seen time and time again in scripture, and it is seen time and time again in the lives of those who declare Jesus as the son of the Most High God. We now call it conversion, but to watch someone who doesn't believe, and who certainly doesn't want to believe, become a fully convinced and fully following disciple of Christ is one of the most powerful things a Christian can experience. It is to truly see the power of God expressed in the transformation of someone's heart!

King Neb had this sort of transformation. It took a super-ordinary instance, but it changed his mind. He was recognizing that the power and authority that he had was not one of consequence for them. They served a higher and more powerful God than he could ever be. This recognition must have been hard for him to understand, but he also knew when he had been bested!

You see, the king had an experience with the Almost! He got a chance to have the door opened to the way the world was supposed to be. When God is lifted up, when our faith is steadfast, and when God is allowed to enter in, we see the world begin to conform to how it was always supposed to be. It is startling to see this when you are a believer, but when you see God break through when you don't even believe in him, it can be life-changing. The king of Babylon had fancied himself a God, but when he came into contact with real power, he recognized the laughable nature of what he was trying to get people to do! Why worship him when you could actually acknowledge the Most High God!

Lastly, the men did not even smell like the fire. It seems that God was trying to make a point here. Perhaps God wanted the king to understand that this salvation was no accident, no small feat. Rath-

er, it is the complete salvation of God that becomes the most powerful entity in the universe. When God starts something, he finishes it completely. Shadrach, Me-

shach, and Abednego were as completely saved as you and I are by the grace and power of Jesus Christ on the cross!

1 – When were you convicted that Jesus was real and that you should follow him? Is it something you have always known, or was it out of the realm of possibility for you?

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2 – Have you noticed that even the proud are brought down to earth when God shows up? Has this ever had to happen to you for you to understand God a bit more?

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3 – How complete do you feel you have been saved? Can you live in that assurance today?

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DAY 45

It is time to sum up this series. The hope is you will understand a bit better that when God decides to break through from heaven, it is to show us the way the world “almost” is. When the kingdom breaks through, we become more and more clear on who God is, how He works in the world, and what His kingdom is really like.

Through His miracles, through visions, and through the power of His presence, we are constantly reminded that we live in the tension of the “Now” and the “Not Yet.” We mature as believers as we begin to see the Almost in everything that we undertake. God is present, and God is powerful. We see hints and allegations of it.

Through the stories of miracles and signs, through His interaction with people who were in need, and even in the miraculous happenings we see in the Old Testament, we know that there is something more for each of us in the world that God originally created, the world we hope to see when Jesus comes again.

It is too easy for us to forget that there is a super-ordinary God that we serve who is often opening the door for us to see how things ought to be! We live in the tension between these worlds all the time, but it is by the grace of God that we have a glimpse into the very heart of God’s first and ongoing kingdom. We have been living on the edges of that kingdom for so long. This is why we hope for the return of Jesus, so that these worlds can be reconciled to one another for the last time!

How are you seeing the breakthroughs? How are you experiencing the tension of this world and the world the God originally created? How can we reconcile the two in our own lives? This can only happen through things like compassion, love, grace, mercy, submission, and worship and prayer. When we recognize that Jesus has so much more for us than what we can have for ourselves, we begin to lean on to His words, His life and His grace that much more! There is no reason that we be separated from God (Rom. 8:38-39). We must be willing to stand courageously, to be clear on who Jesus is, and to be deeply committed to where Jesus is taking us. This is the way that we live in the tension between the Now and the Not Yet!

Our time on this earth can be frustrating, but it can also be incredible as we watch the power of God at work in this world. Pray that God might open your eyes in order to see what He is doing and how He is showing us all about the Almost! May the tension be your power.

1 – What is the best thing God is doing in your life today?

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2 – How can you help show others the kingdom of God?

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3 – How can the community of God come together and partner with you in helping to show others who God really is?

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