

## **The Mount of Transfiguration: Matthew 17:1-8**

“1) Six days later Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John his brother, and led them up on a high mountain by themselves. 2) And He was transfigured before them; and His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light. 3) And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him. 4) And Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, I will make three tabernacles here, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” 5) While he was still speaking, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and behold, a voice out of the cloud said, “This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!” 6) When the disciples heard this, they fell face down to the ground and were terrified. 7) And Jesus came to them and touched them and said, “Get up, and do not be afraid.” 8) And lifting up their eyes, they saw no one except Jesus Himself alone.”

Why Jesus took Peter, James, and John with Him and none of the other disciples is a mystery. The same three accompanied Him for prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. (See Matthew 26:36-37) It might be surmised that leadership was beginning to emerge.

The exact location is not known, but the text said it was “a high mountain.” Since the previous chapter happened in Caesarea Philippi, it is commonly assumed that they went up into Mt. Hermon.

While there, two things happened. First, Jesus was transfigured before them. “His face shone like the sun and His garments became as white as light.” This is a common picture of the glorified Christ.

Second, Moses and Elijah appeared and were talking to Him. It should be noted that Jesus finally answered the desire of Moses to enter the Promised Land (Numbers 27:12-14), but that was far from his mind on this day.

Two questions now confront us. The first question is “Why Moses and Elijah?” This may emphasize that Jesus fulfilled everything in the Law and also the Prophets. Both sections of the Old Testament pointed to the Messiah. The Law was full of symbols, types and shadows about the Messiah. The prophets had many very specific prophecies about the Messiah ranging from His birth to His suffering and death.

The second question comes from curiosity; “What were they talking about?” According to Luke 9:31, they “were speaking of His departure which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.” It is noteworthy that Peter was listening to their conversation.

Years later Peter would pen some intriguing words about the Old Testament prophets. 1 Peter 1:10-12 states that they were very perplexed about the prophecies concerning “the sufferings of the Christ and the glories to follow.” It is more than coincidental that they were talking to Jesus about that very subject on this occasion. Could this encounter be the conversation that colored Peter's insight into the intrigue of the Old Testament prophets about the crucifixion of the Messiah? It cannot be discounted from our consideration. But let's move on.

Peter's suggestion about making three tents or tabernacles, one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah at first glance seems mysterious. He may have been referring to the tabernacle in the wilderness, but more likely to the tent of meetings where Moses would often meet and converse with God. He at least recognized that they were on holy ground.

No sooner had he made this suggestion than the cloud of glory overshadowed them and the Father spoke, "and they were afraid as they entered the cloud." The message was simple; "This is my Son, My Chosen One, listen to Him!"

Now let me venture a speculation about the three tabernacles or tents. The suggestion from Peter was very Old Testament. Something new was coming. In the New Testament, every believer becomes a temple of the Holy Spirit. (See 1 Corinthians 3:16-17; 6:19-20)

Could it be that God did honor Peter's suggestion? By overshadowing the three disciples with the cloud, a new kind of tabernacle was being inaugurated. They were the new "tents" the Spirit of God was shortly going to fill following the day of Pentecost! Was the Father giving them a foretaste of His promise of the Holy Spirit? (See Acts 1:4-5) Did they become "new tents?"

Do not take this topic lightly. If you are a born-again believer, your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. You are a tabernacle for God. The Holy Spirit dwells in you. You have the potential for constant communion with Christ.

Evidently, the Mount of Transfiguration accomplished as much for Moses and Elijah as it did for Peter, James, and John. The baton was being passed. The Old was being fulfilled and the New was about to begin!

(Mark also covers this event in Chapter 9 of his Gospel. I love how he explains Peter's suggestion of building shelters in verse 6: "He said this because he didn't really know what else to say, for they were all terrified." (NLT) Indeed, being in the presence of Moses and Elijah and a glorified Jesus would have been astounding and terrifying. As a writer, Mark's account of the event clearly tells me that, at one point, Mark asked Peter why he would make such an impulsive and seemingly odd offer. It also tells me Mark and Peter had a relationship as brothers and friends.) -dj

### **The Debriefing: Matthew 17:9-13**

"9) As they were coming down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them, saying, "Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man has risen from the dead." 10) And His disciples asked Him, "Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?" 11) And He answered and said, "Elijah is coming and will restore all things; 12) but I say to you that Elijah already came, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they wished. So also the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands." 13) Then the disciples understood that He had spoken to them about John the Baptist."

The experience on the Mount of Transfiguration had a significant impact on the three disciples. Peter wrote of it many years later in 2 Peter 1:16-21. He used the occasion to speak of the accuracy of prophecy. It is a must read Scripture when studying the Transfiguration.

As they were coming down from the mountain, Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about the vision until He had risen from the dead. It is intriguing that Jesus referred to the transfiguration as a "vision."

What happened on that mountain is shrouded in mystery. They all experienced the exact same event, but of the three, Peter was the only one to write about it. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record it in their Gospels, but none of them were actually present on the mountain. It is absent completely from the Gospel of John, and of the four Gospel writers Peter was the only one present on the mountain.

A curious question is posed to Jesus by the disciples on the way down from the mountain in Matthew 17:10; "Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?" The scribes were Old Testament scholars. They may have been referring to Malachi 4:4-6. It is intriguing that both Moses and Elijah are mentioned in that context. The disciples had just witnessed them together on the Mount of Transfiguration.

Some believe they are together again in Revelation 11:1-13 as the two witnesses during the tribulation period. Verse 6 says, "These have the power to shut up the sky, so that rain will not fall during the days of their prophesying; and they have power over the waters to turn them into blood, and to strike the earth with every plague, as often as they desire." As you can see, it is hard to refute this claim of the identity of the two witnesses in the end times being Elijah and Moses.

Why are the two so important? I believe God was saying that the whole Old Testament from the Law given through Moses to the prophets point to Jesus. I have said this before, but it is worthy of repetition; "History is His Story!" The New Testament is concealed in the Old Testament. The Old Testament is revealed in the New Testament. They are in harmony.

Note in Matthew 17:11-13, Jesus pointed to John the Baptist fulfilling the role of Elijah in preparing the way for the Messiah. He was the forerunner for the Messiah. John the Baptist was definitely in the spirit and power of Elijah.

The key however, is that Jesus uses the trip down the mountain to again highlight His coming suffering, death, and resurrection. He spoke of it twice in these five verses. He was very intentional about preparing them for His coming crucifixion.

On the cross, the Lamb of God redeemed humanity from the curse of sin. He paid the sentence in full. The resurrection confirmed His claim to deity. (See Romans 1:4) This is the Gospel message.

But it may be helpful to talk about Old Testament prophecy from the vantage point of the Scribes and religious leaders. The disciples had obviously picked up on the Scribes' objection to Jesus

being the Messiah. So, why did they reject Jesus? The simple answer is the timing was off by 2,000 years according to their theology.

They viewed the six days of Creation followed by the day of rest as God's prophetic calendar. Psalm 90:4 states that a thousand years from God's perspective is as one day. Accordingly, by the historic Jewish calendar, Jesus came at the end of the fourth millennium after Creation and not at the end of the sixth millennium.

According to their interpretation of prophecy, the Messiah would usher in the Sabbath rest for Israel. (See Hebrews 4:9-11) He would set up His Kingdom and restore the nation of Israel. Even the disciples questioned Jesus about this very issue after His resurrection. (See Acts 1:6)

Are you starting to see the problem? The timing of Jesus being the Messiah didn't fit their theology. The timing of the return of the Messiah to restore all things and set up His earthly kingdom was off by 2,000 years in their thinking. This is the primary reason the religious leaders rejected Jesus as the Messiah and treated Him with scorn. They were blinded by their own theology.

We now discover a unique characteristic of prophecy, it can have dual meaning and fulfillment. It can relate to both the first and the second return of Christ. Elijah is a great example. He was the forerunner for Jesus as John the Baptist and He is pictured as a forerunner for the return of Christ as one of the two witnesses in Revelation 11:6. Prophecy about Elijah had dual fulfillment.

So what is our takeaway from this debriefing in Matthew 17:9-13? Let me present a concept to you: God's Word, especially related to prophecy, is always accurate and true, but is cloaked with a degree of mystery. It must be handled with care.

Biblical prophecy is intended to help us walk by faith and not by sight. It always makes sense when looked at in the rear view mirror, but looking ahead is like driving into fog. Scripture says to be alert and ready for the second return of Christ; but it leaves plenty of room for things to unfold in unexpected ways as the end times come upon us.

Here is my advice: Don't force or calcify your view of the end times to the point that your theology makes you blind! Leave room for things to unfold in unexpected ways. There are many theological theories of the end times and some people get very testy if you question their views.

I confess, I am amused by each view, but I leave room for things to unfold with plenty of surprises. Prophecy does not put God in a rigid box related to the end times, it merely presents the signs of the times. My goal is to be faithful, share the gospel, and remain alert and ready for the second return of Christ.

### **Faith Journey: Matthew 17: 14-21**

"14) When they came to the crowd, a man came up to Jesus, falling on his knees before Him and saying, 15) "Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is a lunatic and is very ill; for he often falls

into the fire and often into the water. 16) I brought him to Your disciples, and they could not cure him.” 17) And Jesus answered and said, “You unbelieving and perverted generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring him here to Me.” 18) And Jesus rebuked him, and the demon came out of him, and the boy was cured at once.”

When Jesus and His three disciples returned from the Mount of Transfiguration, they were met by a desperate father whose son was demon possessed. It is reminiscent of Moses coming down from the mountain with the Law only to discover the golden calf in the camp of Israel. A mountain top encounter with God is often countered by an attack from the evil one.

The father began begging Jesus to heal His son. The demon was mercilessly trying to destroy him. Demon possession is real and tragically happens to people today. John 10:10 paints an amazing contrast between Satan’s intent for people and what Jesus wants to do for people; “10) The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

Notice the father had asked the disciples to cast out the unclean spirit and they could not. Jesus responded in verse 17 by lamenting their lack of faith. The same holds true for many pastors and religious leaders today. Many even deny the existence of demons and hand tormented people over to medical doctors or secular psychiatrists for care. Pastors who embrace naturalism are tragically unprepared to confront the kingdom of darkness and seldom see miracles in their ministries.

Fortunately, Jesus rebuked the spirit and it came out of him. The boy was cured at once. According to the Bible, some physical health problems can have demonic origins. The root cause may be spiritual and not physical.

In the next three verses the disciples came to Jesus privately and asked, “Why could we not cast it out?” In verse 20 He pointed to their small faith. He then said that faith as small as a mustard seed can move mountains.

The Bible has three cures for small faith. First, Romans 10:17 says that “faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.” Embrace the Word of God and make it your standard for truth as you build a biblical worldview under your life.

It does not say that faith comes from studying theologians. Many of them wrongfully conclude that God does not do miracles today. They destroy faith. It has taken me years in the Word of God to sort out truth versus theological deception. If you want to become mighty in faith, devote yourself to spending hours in God’s Word listening to the Holy Spirit.

Second, in Matthew 17:21, Jesus said, “... this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting.” If you want your faith to grow, deepen your relationship with God through prayer and fasting. Prayer is not about prayer, it’s about intimacy and communion with God! Set aside time daily to seek God in prayer and carve out seasons for extended fasting and communion with God.

Finally, 1 Peter 1:6-9 teaches that faith is refined through times of trials and testing. If you want your faith to grow, forsake living in your comfort zone and step up and step out to the front lines where things are really tough. Go on a mission trip to a less affluent country. Visit a slum or ghetto. Serve in a homeless shelter. Become the hands and feet of Jesus in a war-torn region delivering food and help. Volunteer for a disaster site to deliver hope where everything looks hopeless. Start praying for the sick on a cancer ward or in hospice care.

But you say, “What difference can I make in those situations?” The answer is “absolutely none!” These are situations where you quickly come to the end of yourself and have no choice but to cry out to God! That’s what makes the difference show up.

I am learning that faith starts when and where I come to the end of myself. Living a sheltered, comfortable and self-reliant life kills faith. It’s true, faith doesn’t thrive in a vacuum.

That’s why Jesus sent His disciples out to preach the gospel with limited provisions to heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers and cast out demons – and then to freely give what little they had. (Matthew 10:7-8) He wanted them to come face-to-face with personal inadequacy as quickly as possible to force them to cry out to God.

When you stand face-to-face with a tragically demon-possessed person that is desperate for help, you plant your mustard seed of faith really fast. You quickly turn to the Word of God for answers and to prayer for Divine help. Soon faith begins to grow and mountains begin to move.

These disciples may have failed the test in Acts 17, but the gates of hell could not prevail against them after the day of Pentecost. They discovered mountain-shaking prayer in the face of opposition. Take time and read Acts 4:29-31. Faith grows on the front lines!

I graduated from Bible College smart in theology but weak in faith. Much of my faith was painfully developed on the front lines of ministry. Like the disciples in Matthew 17, I have failed many tests, but over time, mountains began to shake as I came to the end of myself and desperately began crying out to God for help! (Acts 4:29-31) Courageous prayer doesn’t sound like poetry. It is much more like a plea of desperation.

So what can be learned from this text in Matthew 17:14-21? Let me fire off a few points. Don’t run and hide from the demons in life. Faith grows best on the front lines. When you come up short, turn to God’s Word for your answers. Jesus is more than a match for any trial. Prayer is not about prayer, it’s about developing intimacy with God. Faith starts the moment you come to the end of yourself. Failure is not fatal, rather it’s the necessary motivation to push you deeper with God! Mountains shake through prayer, but they move when you stand in faith and speak to them through your authority “in Christ.” (That one might take some biblical reflection.) Growing in faith is a journey that must be walked by every believer over time. Be patient with yourself, God is not finished with you yet!

**Don’t Mess With My Painting: Matthew 17:22-23**

“22) And while they were gathering together in Galilee, Jesus said to them, “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men; 23) and they will kill Him, and He will be raised on the third day.” And they were deeply grieved.”

It would be a fascinating study to read the four Gospels and count how many separate occasions Jesus foretold His disciples about His coming death, burial and resurrection. This is the fourth time in the past two chapters alone.

In Matthew 17:22-23, Jesus makes this the main subject of His conversation with His disciples. Matthew said, “They were deeply grieved.” Mark 9:32 adds; “But they did not understand this statement, and they were afraid to ask Him.” Luke 9:45 adds even more commentary; “45) But they did not understand this statement, and it was concealed from them so that they might not perceive it; and they were afraid to ask Him about this statement.”

Foretelling His coming death, burial, and resurrection now becomes a major theme in His conversations with the disciples. He was trying to prepare them, but His warnings were falling on deaf ears.

In a previous conversation recorded in Matthew 16:21-23, Peter took Him aside and rebuked Him for mentioning the subject. One must wonder what was happening? Let me pose a few natural possibilities.

First, they were so attached to Jesus they were experiencing emotional denial. This seems to be the motivation of Peter rebuking Jesus in Matthew 16:22. His words are telling; “God forbid it Lord! This shall never happen to you.” His emotions were blinding him.

Second, they were experiencing willful denial. They were so focused on His identity as Messiah and the promise of His coming Kingdom, they willfully ignored His warnings. This may help explain the next conversation between the disciples as they walked on with Jesus. It’s hard to imagine, but they were arguing about which of them would be greatest in the coming kingdom. (See Matthew 18:1, Mark 9:33-37, and Luke 9:46-48)

Third, they were experiencing subconscious denial. Their minds simply could not reconcile this kind of cruel treatment of Jesus with His continual acts of compassion, mercy, and kindness toward people. If it is true that we reap what we sow in life, there was no way anything bad could happen to Jesus. He was the nicest, most loving, honest, and kind guy that ever walked on earth. After all, life is supposed to be fair! Right?

This leads to the final possibility: Their minds could not reconcile paradoxical truths. Concepts like love and hate, light and darkness, good and evil, mercy and justice, blessings and suffering, faith and works, sovereignty and free will, and even heaven and hell are so opposite that our minds naturally cling to one and dismiss the opposite. Wait a minute: If Jesus was indeed God, how then could He die? God is immortal, isn’t He?

The above four things happen to people all the time. It is nearly impossible to have a balanced view of reality. We naturally want to tip the scale in the direction of our experience and bias. Everyone sees the world through colored lenses.

A huge example of this is seen in the contrast between the western church and the persecuted church today. Because life is so good in the Laodicean church, it is hard to imagine that the church at Smyrna even exists. Our western minds subconsciously erase things like poverty, suffering, exploitation, persecution, and the doctrine of martyrdom. They don't line up with our daily experience.

Jesus spent significant time preparing His disciples for His coming suffering, death, burial, and resurrection, but it did not register in their thinking until after the fact. Why? It did not fit the puzzle of His identity they had been assembling up to that point in His public ministry.

They couldn't imagine an old rugged cross suddenly superimposed as the new main feature on the beautiful paintings of the life and works of Jesus Christ they were painting. It didn't fit the picture! But it happened... just as Jesus said!

So what does your painting of Jesus and the Christian life look like? Are you saying to God, "Don't mess with my painting!"

### **Lessons From Taxes: Matthew 17:24-27**

"24) When they came to Capernaum, those who collected the two-drachma tax came to Peter and said, "Does your teacher not pay the two-drachma tax?" 25) He said, "Yes." And when he came into the house, Jesus spoke to him first, saying, "What do you think, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth collect customs or poll-tax, from their sons or from strangers?" 26) When Peter said, "From strangers," Jesus said to him, "Then the sons are exempt. 27) However, so that we do not offend them, go to the sea and throw in a hook, and take the first fish that comes up; and when you open its mouth, you will find a shekel. Take that and give it to them for you and Me."

As Jesus and His disciples returned to Capernaum from Caesarea Philippi, Peter was approached by a tax collector about paying the two-drachma tax. Most scholars consider this as the annual Jewish tax valuation Moses prescribed for the temple service and not a tax imposed by the Romans. (Exodus 30:13, 38:26) It was collected from men ages twenty to fifty.

This tax was considered voluntary. In outlining areas, it was collected primarily from strangers to prove they valued the religious services provided by the local Jewish religious leaders. Over time it became like a "customs tax" imposed on travelers through the area.

By paying the tax, Jesus was acknowledging that He was like a pilgrim passing through, yet He honored Moses, the Law, and the temple. He was not going to enter into an argument over residency. After all, He was from Nazareth about twenty-five miles to the south east.



What becomes intriguing about the story is how Jesus displayed the attributes of Deity. Notice that He spoke to Peter first about the ordeal. This was a display of Omniscience. Only God knows all things. This quality was again displayed by foretelling about the fish and the piece of money in its mouth.

I cannot imagine the sequence of events that transpired for the coin to be in the mouth of the fish, but Jesus knew it! Peter did exactly as Jesus instructed him and so it happened.

It now becomes intriguing to follow the exchange between Peter, Jesus, and fish. Two times when Peter came up empty with his fishing, Jesus provided nets full of fish. Here, He provided one fish with one coin in its mouth to pay the poll tax. Peter didn't even have to sell the fish. It was a small but magnificent miracle. Finally, in John 21, Jesus provided a breakfast of fresh broiled fish to feed His hungry disciples. This was in the morning, before the daily fish market was open.

We could spend significant time on these stories. Each one is fascinating and full of insights. But when taken together, they point to the Deity of Christ. He is the Provider. He not only knows your needs, He is able to provide them in extraordinary ways.

On the humorous side, this story might draw a comparison between tax collectors and fish! They are both slimy, bottom dwelling... (LOL ... I will let you finish the sentence.) Ok, I confess, I value the humorous side of life. Laughter is good medicine... It is the only medicine I take daily and often enjoy it in excess. It helps me keep a healthy perspective on life. I believe it is a biblical key to happiness in life. (See Proverbs 17:22)

### **Kingdom Values: Matthew 18:1-6**

"1) At that time the disciples came to Jesus and said, 'Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?' 2) And He called a child to Himself and set him before them, 3) and said, 'Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. 4) Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. 5) And whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me; 6) but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.'

Tragically, the disciples were competing for favored status. They each wanted the top seat in the kingdom of heaven. They wanted to be "number one." They wanted to sit at the right hand of Jesus.

They had totally missed the concept of servanthood. They missed the idea of putting others first. They bought into the worldly notion of "self-promotion." They were embracing the boastful pride of life.

To appreciate what Jesus did next, you need to understand the status of children in Jewish culture. Girls were lowest in cultural status. They were seldom even named in the Old Testament. Boys were not even considered as legal heirs until around age twelve. The first born

was most valued, and like David, those toward the end of the birth order were treated as servants and not even invited to family events.

From this text, Jesus called a child to Himself most likely from the street children. Though not stated in the context, the child may have been an orphan. That would fit the object lesson best.

Then He said, "Whoever humbles himself as this child, he is greatest in the kingdom of heaven." These children were servants of all. Anyone could enslave them or force them to work. They had no rights and no defenders. They often labored all day for a mere piece of bread or a place to sleep in the stable.

The illustration was powerful. Those most despised by society have great value with God! Those the world puts last, God puts first. To despise the most unwanted child or exploit them is an eternal offense. But like the boy David out in the pasture, these boys and girls often developed a simple faith in God. To make one of these stumble defines a tyrant.

By this illustration, Jesus was striking a blow to pride, self-promotion, and rivalry of any kind. The servants of heaven are often despised by the world. They labor to glorify and honor God and not to promote self.

Of the twelve disciples, Judas became the example of greed and self-promotion. He was in the ministry for the money. Most of the others became martyrs for the gospel. Only John lived to die of natural causes associated with aging, and that after years of imprisonment for the cause of the gospel.

Paul said it best in Acts 20:24; "But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God." Any attitude more self-focused than this demotes Jesus and the gospel. It puts self and not God on the throne.

This story cuts me to the core. To embrace Jesus, I must be willing to forsake the world and its value system. I must humble myself. It is so hard to do because self-promotion and pride are natural. We are programmed to subconsciously look out for #1. We live with an eye to self comfort.

Peter and James both state that "God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble." (James 4:6-7; 1 Peter 5:6-10) In both contexts Satan is prowling about seeking to exploit unsuspecting prey. Beware lest your pride and self-promotion devours you.

### **Personal Stumbling Blocks: Matthew 18:7-11**

“(7) Woe to the world because of its stumbling blocks! For it is inevitable that stumbling blocks come; but woe to that man through whom the stumbling block comes! 8) “If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; it is better for you to enter life crippled or lame, than to have two hands or two feet and be cast into the eternal fire. 9) If your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out and throw it from you. It is better for you to enter life with

one eye, than to have two eyes and be cast into the fiery hell. 10) "See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that their angels in heaven continually see the face of My Father who is in heaven. 11) [For the Son of Man has come to save that which was lost.]"

Jesus now talks about a subject that many Christians never consider. He zeroes in on personal stumbling blocks. He encourages every believer to identify the tripping stones in their life and walk with God.

I used to think this referred to those things that cause other people to stumble, but the text clearly points to self. Verse 8 says; "If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble." The verse 9 says, "If your eye causes you to stumble. In other words, "What things have you allowed in your life that are tripping you up, hindering you, holding you back or causing your heart to lust and fall into sin?" Be courageous enough to identify them and remove them!

In these two verses, Jesus talks about your hand, your foot and your eye. I believe He is using them as an illustration of how serious we are to take stumbling blocks. He is saying; "No matter how important or valued a source of personal temptation may be, if it trips you up, get rid of it!"

This might include friends, entertainment, social habits like alcohol, or even a cherished hobby. The list might change from person to person, but be courageous and thorough in setting your standards. Value your relationship with God more than your pleasures in life.

Early in my Christian life, I had to end some friendships because they caused me to stumble. A few of them meant as much to me as my own hand, foot, or eyes. Ending them was painful but retaining them was going to be disastrous for my walk with God.

I also decided early on in my Christian life to remove all alcohol, because it was a family iniquity. I could not afford to leave that door open. It has destroyed countless lives and left some ugly marks on our family tree.

By far the hardest personal stumbling blocks for me to remove were television, movies, and entertainment. I loved them! But they sucked away my time and fed inner lusts, worldly values, and a bent toward anger, revenge, and violence. I could not manage them, because they controlled me. They empowered my flesh and weakened my spirit. Occasionally, I would lose track of time and watch movie after movie both day and night for hours. Finally, I had to remove them completely.

Several times I thought I had them mastered and brought them back into my life in moderation. It wasn't long before they took control of my time, thoughts, and emotions all over again. Through every episode of introducing them back into my life, the Holy Spirit was grieved and my walk with God suffered. The spiritual fruit in my life dried up. I had no choice, I had to "cut them off from my life."

The problem with a stumbling block is that in and of itself, it is not sin. In most cases they have innate value. My friends were all valuable to God. Jesus turned water into wine. There are some great Christian movies. "Value" is not the issue with a stumbling block. The issue is "what harm

is it causing in your life and your walk with God?" "Is it causing you to stumble?" "Is it taking control of your life?" If so, then it is a stumbling block to you! Be bold and courageous and remove all stumbling blocks from your life!

A number of years ago, I made a shocking discovery. It related to a common denominator among the most godly and fruitful Christian leaders that I studied. Surprisingly, they were not "super saints", rather they had courageously identified and removed personal stumbling blocks from their lives. They made their walk with God easier by removing tripping stones from their own pathway.

I recently discovered an amazing illustration of this principle. As I am working on improving my aviation knowledge for my biannual flight review, I read the FAA booklet on risk management and setting personal minimums. It is designed to make flying safer by eliminating emotional or random decisions about flying in questionable situations. It essentially minimizes risk by removing emotional "gray areas" in decision making that contribute to both negative incidence and tragic accidents. It is based on the same logic Jesus used in this context.

The secondary consideration in this text is found in verse 10. It deals with placing stumbling blocks in the life of children. Adults have the power to set the course of a child's entire life! The book of Proverbs was written as a curriculum to lay a solid foundation under the life of children. Embrace this amazing book for yourself and the children under your influence. Children learn morals, values, ethics and attitudes toward God from key adults in their life.

It goes without saying that every parent needs to beware of the teachers they put in charge of the education of their children. The selection of a tutor by orthodox Jewish families for their children was taken very seriously in Bible times. This was so vital that Paul used it as a biblical illustration of the role of the Law in Galatians 3:23-29.

Not to deviate from the text, but the whole contemporary discussion about "school choice" comes down to this conversation about stumbling blocks. At some point, the department of education in the United States shifted its focus away from quality education to social engineering. According to verse 10, God takes this very seriously.

Do yourself a favor and ask God to reveal your personal stumbling blocks. If you are honest with yourself, you know exactly what they are in your life. Then pick them out of your path and throw them in the ditch. Get rid of them. It will make your life easier and will be much safer for the little ones walking in your shadow.

(Stumbling blocks are first mentioned in Leviticus 8:14 where it is prohibited to put such an obstacle in the path of a blind person. In the New Testament, the Greek word is "skandalon" and also refers to the stick that holds a trap open. It is the word from which the English word "scandal" is derived and Isaiah prophesied that Jesus Himself would be a stumbling block to the Jews. (Isaiah 8:14) Faith in Jesus is still regarded as scandalous in many parts of the world.) - dj

**The Responsible Shepherd: Matthew 18:12-14**

“12) What do you think? If any man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go and search for the one that is straying? 13) If it turns out that he finds it, truly I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine which have not gone astray. 14) So it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones perish.”

This parable seems to be connected to the little children from the previous two paragraphs. It is the story of a Shepherd who has a hundred sheep and one of them goes astray. He leaves the ninety-nine and goes in search of the one that is straying.

Look carefully, this story is about the Responsible Shepherd and not the irresponsible sheep that strayed off. I cannot verify this, but it was most likely not a good thing for a shepherd to report on his resume that he had a tendency toward losing sheep entrusted to his care.

The resume of Jesus as a Shepherd is recorded in John 10:27-29 and John 17:12. Of those that belonged to His Father, Jesus guarded them and lost none... except the Son of Perdition. Judas was never of the Father's fold. Jesus has a perfect resume!

Let's face it, sheep have a tendency toward straying. That's why they either need pens or must be under the constant watch of an alert shepherd. Sheep can be trained to hear the shepherd's voice, but even then some wander off.

Sheep are basically defenseless. They are easy prey for nearly any predator. Were it not for the care of a skillful shepherd, sheep would be a buffet meal for a bear, pack of wolves, lions, or coyotes. Unlike the gazelle, they cannot flee fast or far in the face of danger. Worse yet, they are likely oblivious to pending danger. Even eagles have feasted on their share of young lambs.

Jesus made it clear in this text that the responsible shepherd goes after straying sheep. He watches over His own. Matthew 18:14 says, “Thus it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones perish.”

This verse is meant for the comfort of His sheep, but also as a warning to predators. Those who prey on His sheep will discover the wrath side of the nature of God. According to Matthew 18:5-6, those who receive and care for children are blessed, but any who cause even one child to stumble will encounter the wrath of God.

God has a way of providing for orphans and widows. (See Psalm 146:9 & James 1:27) He blesses those who help provide for them! I would strongly encourage you to consider sponsoring a child through GoServ Global. For less than the cost of a cup of coffee a day you can help change the life of a child. (Seriously, I'm not exaggerating!) Call our office for details or look us up on the Web. We are in need of more sponsors.

On a personal note; I am so thankful that Jesus has been watching over me all of these years. I listen for His voice and sincerely try to follow Him, but He has reeled me in numerous times when I have strayed. I am confident there have been many more times that His guardian angels

have protected me from evil or dangers that I was totally oblivious about. (See Matthew 18:10 & Hebrews 1:14)

I praise and honor and credit Jesus for His active care, provision and protection in my life. Even on my best days, I am still a needy sheep that is totally dependent on my Good and Responsible Shepherd. I resonate with David in Psalm 23:1; "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want!"

### **Restoring Straying People: Matthew 18:15-20**

15) And if your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. 16) But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. 17) If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. 18) Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven."

In the previous section, Jesus talked about a shepherd going after a sheep that had gone astray. In this text He talks about a Christian that has gone astray.

He opens this text by saying; "If your brother sins." Nothing is more blinding than personal sin. It can launch a man or woman on a path away from God and away from fellowship with other believers. It is often accompanied by self-deception, rebellion, and bitterness.

As soon as possible, intervention is needed. The first step is to go to the person in private. Reach out in love and open a door of communication. The goal is to address sinful behavior. If the person responds, restoration and positive mentoring can proceed.

If the person does not respond, you need to assemble a small and confidential intervention team. Jesus said; "take two or three others." This should be bathed in prayer. It intrigues me that verses 18-20 talk about prayer, and again the word "two" is stressed. This is not a separate context. It is directly related to Matthew 18:15-17.

Jesus is telling us that breaking down walls caused by sin is serious intervention. As mentioned above, it often involves confronting a spirit of deception, rebellion, and bitterness at this point. The Holy Spirit must be involved at this level. No human is gifted enough to "fix" the problem at this level. This is now a spiritual battle.

If these efforts do not result in a "breakthrough," it is time to get the church involved. Keep in mind, the goal is restoration and not accusation. It is at this level that truth is shared openly to prevent the spread of deception, rebellion, and bitterness. Jesus said in John 8:32; "That you shall know the truth and the truth will set you free."

The two or three witnesses discreetly but honestly share the facts they have uncovered. They must do this lovingly and humbly and call the person to repentance and restoration. This also prevents the spread of misinformation and a spirit of deception, rebellion, and bitterness within

the church. (Notice that I keep coming back to those three schemes of the enemy) Again, this must be bathed in prayer.

Hebrews 12:15 says that a root of bitterness can spring up and cause trouble and defile many people. Satan is in the business of destroying marriages, families, and churches. Make no mistake, all intervention involving sin is spiritual warfare.

Be alert and seek intervention early. Be like the good shepherd and seek the staying at the first sign of a cold heart or distant spirit.

If the person does not respond at this level, it is important to distance them from the church. Why? It is at this point that you turn them over to God for correction and discipline. Let me share the biblical backdrop.

The storm did not become calm for those on the ship until they threw Jonah overboard. Up until that point, they partook in Jonah's discipline. When they cast Jonah overboard they were not abandoning him. They were merely turning him over to God. Paul instructed the church at Corinth to take these drastic measures with the man living openly with his father's wife. (See 1 Corinthians 5 for the full story)

Keep in mind that love, forgiveness, and restoration are always the goal. Paul drove that point home in 2 Corinthians 2:6-11. When the sinful man repented and turned back to the Lord, Paul instructed the church to quickly forgive and restore him. His reasoning is recorded in 2 Corinthians 2:11; "in order that no advantage be taken of us by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his schemes." Paul included himself in the list of those who could be taken in by the schemes of Satan.

Though intervention can be messy, it is also the front lines where God wants to show up with His grace, power, and mercy. We must never forget that God has given us the ministry of reconciliation. (2 Corinthians 5:18-21) When done right, this can be the field and seeds for revival and awakening.

### **Intervention and Prayer: Matthew 18:18-20**

"18) Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven. 19) "Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven. 20) For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst."

Jesus now brings prayer into the mix of reconciling a brother or sister caught in a trespass. We often make the mistake of separating these three verses on prayer from the context.

In the two paragraphs before and the one following these three verses, Jesus was talking about reconciling someone who has been caught up in sin or who is straying from God.

Let's be honest, these verses are often quoted when attendance is small at prayer meetings or a Bible Study. Though it is true that small gatherings do not hinder God from doing big things, this context is talking about when two or three go to a straying brother or sister in an attempt to turn them back to God.

I believe it includes the concept of confidentiality. God wants these encounters to be small, private, and confidential. It is there that Jesus promises to work and pull down sinful strongholds.

All such attempts at reconciliation need to be bathed in prayer. Be biblical, it is the Holy Spirit and not a judgmental critic who convicts of sin. (Please read John 16:7-10) If you approach someone as judge and jury bent on accusations and condemnation, you will cause more damage than good.

The situation may be anchored in a misunderstanding, or worse, you might be acting on hearsay. Invite the Holy Spirit to reveal hidden things and invite truth to reign.

Approaching these encounters in the flesh with presuppositions of guilt and accusation is wrong and sinful. The end result will most likely be disastrous and explosive.

Either way, the enemy needs to be bound in prayer and the encounter needs to be covered with the blood of Jesus. The praying should be limited to the team of two or three involved in the intervention. This praying is not for the church prayer-gossip chain as happens so often in dysfunctional churches.

When approached with a humble attitude and earnest prayer, Jesus promises to show up and amazing things can happen during times of intervention. Misunderstandings can be cleared up, grievances can be set aside, confession and repentance of sin can take place, the enemy can be bound, physical infirmities can be healed (James 5:13-17), strongholds can be pulled down, forgiveness can be extended, reconciliation can happen and fellowship can be restored. These can be powerful encounters that shake both heaven and earth.

Many times during these encounters, the Holy Spirit convicts all present of sin and humility will be needed by all. These small and confidential encounters contain the seeds for revival and awakening. They can inspire deeper prayer meetings, Bible studies and growing movements of God in the weeks and months following. These have the potential to ignite a deep and genuine moving of the Holy Spirit.

For those of you who have attended one of my Freedom Quest Workshops or studied the workbook, you will see the application to the Ten Steps to Freedom in this context of Scripture. Identifying and pulling down "the seven basic strongholds" removes the hindrances to spiritual growth and can fuel the fires of a deep walk with God. The stories of what God is doing are multiplying fast. Jesus wants to set His people free from sinful bondage and fill them with the power of the Holy Spirit.

**Keeping Score: Matthew 18:21-22**



“21) Then Peter came and said to Him, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” 22) Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.”

Peter now approaches Jesus with a sincere question; “How many times shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Then he added; “Up to seven times?”

We’re not sure if his brother Andrew was getting under Peter's skin or if he was talking about people in general, but Peter did have a tendency to keep score. He was counting and adding up everything people were doing against him. He couldn’t let go and give others a fresh start. He was setting himself up as both judge and jury.

Peter had a problem. He was plagued with anger, bitterness, and unforgiveness. This was quickly becoming a greater sin than the offenses of others against him. Forgiven people should become forgiving people. But not Peter, he had a threshold where forgiveness reached its limit.

This is always a problem with legalistic people. They become judgmental of others. At some point they lose their joy and become cold, calloused, and judgmental. Some people avoid religious folks because they come across as old grumps. Peter was well on his way to membership in “The Grumpy Old Bitter Club.”

The answer Jesus gave Peter must have shocked him; “I do not say to you up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.” When Peter quickly did the math, that added up to 490 times.

Peter had lined himself up against two important biblical principles. First, by your standard of measure it shall be measured to you. This directly sets up the second principle: The way you forgive others determines how God forgives you. Jesus had taught both of these principles in His sermon on the Mountain. (See Matthew 7:1-2 and 6:14-15)

I wonder how Peter would have responded had Jesus asked Him the question; “How often shall you sin and God forgive you? Up to seven times?”

I don’t want to be judgmental, but as I read the four Gospels, Peter pushed beyond his own standard in sinning against Jesus. Let me cite a few examples. One time he openly questioned Jesus about casting the nets on the other side of the boat, once He rebuked Jesus to His face, on the Mountain of Transfiguration he offered to build three tabernacles, then he joined the argument about greatness in the kingdom of heaven with the other disciples, he outrightly denied that he even knew Jesus three times, and then he stopped following Jesus and went back to his fishing business while recruiting other key disciples to join him. If I have my math right, Peter was in serious trouble based on his own standard.

So... Let me ask you a question; “How many times do you want God to forgive you for your sins?” What is your standard of measure? What is your understanding of forgiveness?

Stay tuned because this discussion becomes the basis of the next parable Jesus tells His disciples.

## **The King of Mercy and Compassion: Matthew 18:23-35**

“(23) For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. 24) When he had begun to settle them, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. 25) But since he did not have the means to repay, his Lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made. 26) So the slave fell to the ground and prostrated himself before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.’ 27) And the Lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt. 28) But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay back what you owe.’ 29) So his fellow slave fell to the ground and began to plead with him, saying, ‘Have patience with me and I will repay you.’ 30) But he was unwilling and went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed.”

Jesus used the question of Peter about forgiveness to tell one of the greatest parables in the Bible. It is the story of a king who decided to settle accounts with his slaves. There was brought before him one slave who owed him ten thousand pieces of silver.

By today's standards, that would be millions of dollars of unsecured debt. The king ordered him to be sold, together with his wife, family, and all his possessions and the proceeds of the sale to be applied to the debt. His entreaty for patience was foolish because he had a debt he could not pay!

But moved with compassion, the king forgave him the entire debt. You would think that his gratitude would have been life-changing. The grace and mercy given to him was totally unmerited.

But as the story goes, he went out and found a fellow slave that owed him a hundred denarii. By contrast, it was a very small debt. It was manageable. The whole debt could have easily been repaid in less than a year.

The fellow slave fell down and begged for patience. The request was more than reasonable. But the text says he was choked, treated with contempt, and thrown into the debtor's prison until repayment was made. What a tragedy! It would now take him several years to pay back his debt because of greatly reduced wages.

As the story continued, some fellow slaves were watching. They could not reconcile the compassion from the king toward the slave with an insane debt and his irrational treatment of a fellow slave with such a small debt. The rest of the story is profound.

“(31) So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their Lord all that had happened. 32) Then summoning him, his Lord said to him, ‘You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33) Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?’ 34) And his Lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all

that was owed him. 35) My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart.”

There are so many lessons in this story. Let me briefly unpack four insights from this amazing parable. I am sure you can find more.

First, the King is pictured as having compassion. This is a description of God and the gospel. John 3:16 says God loves people so much that He sent His own Son to pay for our sin so that we might be forgiven our debt and saved. We do not work to earn our salvation. Our debt is too big. We merely believe in Jesus Christ and the gospel.

Second, you will never be asked to forgive anyone more than you need to be forgiven. Why? Because your sin is an eternal debt, but their sin against you is temporal. We all have a debt of sin before God that we cannot pay. But toward each other, we are at best fellow slaves. One day we will all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. (See 2 Corinthians 5:10)

Third, those who are forgiven and shown mercy should likewise forgive others and show mercy. It seems that our standard of mercy and forgiveness will be applied to us when we stand before God. It is unimaginable that forgiven sinners have no compassion on others.

Finally, other people are watching! Your testimony is validated or falsified by the way you treat other people. Those who claim to be forgiven have no basis to be critical, condescending, or judgmental. They should be the first to display compassion, mercy, and grace to people living in bondage to sin. They should point others to the King of mercy and compassion.

### **Change of Plans: Matthew 19:1-2**

“1) When Jesus had finished these words, He departed from Galilee and came into the region of Judea beyond the Jordan; 2) and large crowds followed Him, and He healed them there.”

A major geographical relocation now takes place for Jesus and His disciples. He is now bound for Jerusalem from Galilee. To fill in the details of the journey, we must slip over to the book of Luke.

Luke 9:51-56 deals with this same journey but adds significant details. Verse 51 says; “And when the days were approaching for His ascension, He resolutely set His face to go to Jerusalem.”

It appears from the next three verses in Luke 9:52-54 that Jesus intended to travel through Samaria, but they did not receive Him because He was traveling with His face toward Jerusalem. He had actually sent a few messengers ahead of Him in an attempt to make special travel arrangements, but the efforts failed.

This was the occasion that James and John wanted to call down fire from heaven on the Samaritans and Jesus had to rebuke them. It is noteworthy what He said to them in Luke

9:55-56; “You do not know what kind of spirit you are of, for the Son of man did not come to destroy men’s lives, but to save them.”

It amazes me how quickly those in ministry can turn on the very people God has called them to love and reach. They totally missed the meaning of His parable on forgiveness at the end of chapter 18. It takes extra love and patience to build bridges rather than walls with people who initially oppose our mission.

How did Jesus respond? Matthew 19:1 says; “... He departed from Galilee, and came into the region of Judea beyond the Jordan.” In other words, He changed His travel plans. They crossed the Jordan river and took the east route so as not to pass through Samaria. It added some time and distance, but they were able to avoid undue conflict.

Let’s take a moment and ponder this event. It was such a small ordeal that Matthew didn’t even record the tension. This speaks volumes of the calm and flexible demeanor of Jesus. He simply switched to plan B, but James and John were indignant. They became angry and vengeful.

Keep in mind, these two were recently on the Mount of Transfiguration with Jesus and saw Moses and Elijah. They were ready to employ some “Elijah ministry technique.” They were ready to call fire down from heaven.

But there’s more to the story. Within weeks, just before His ascension according to Acts 1:8, Jesus commissioned His disciples to carry the gospel to “... Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, and even to the remotest parts of the earth.” Can you imagine the doors James and John would have permanently closed in Samaria had Jesus not restrained their anger?

This is no small issue! Our attitudes and actions toward other people affect the spread of the gospel. Later in 2 Corinthians 6:3, Paul would admonish believers to “give no offense in anything, in order that the ministry be not discredited.”

Jesus was patient, loving, and flexible because He had an eye on future open doors and fruitfulness in Samaria. The timing for Samaria was not right. Don’t let your anger or small perspective build walls or burn bridges for the gospel!

As a side note, I’m amazed at the change Jesus made in John over time. He was changed from being one of the Sons of Thunder (Mark 3:17), to becoming the Apostle of Love.

So what happened as a result of plan B? Matthew 19:2 is amazing! It says “and great multitudes followed Him, and He healed them there.” Luke 10:1-16 adds huge details. It indicates that ministry became so fruitful that Jesus sent out the seventy to go ahead of Him.

So it’s time for a little chat about closed doors. Because the door to Samaria closed, huge doors opened in Judea! Jesus didn’t skip a beat or sulk over the closed door. He just continued to minister to people in the joy of the Holy Spirit.

When God closes one door it's because He wants to open a different door. Walking by faith invites Jesus to take the driver's seat. Plans might change but ministry remains fruitful when we realign ourselves with God. Jesus displayed amazing flexibility without becoming irritable. I love this story about the life and ministry of Jesus. Unfortunately, I'm often more like James and John, but God is working in me!

### **The Sanctity of Marriage: Matthew 19:3-9**

"3) Some Pharisees came to Jesus, testing Him and asking, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason at all?' 4) And He answered and said, 'Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, 5) and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? 6) Consequently they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate.' 7) They said to Him, 'Why then did Moses command to give her a certificate of divorce and send her away?' 8) He said to them, 'Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way. 9) And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.'"

This encounter between Jesus and the Pharisees became the basis of the clearest teaching by Jesus on the sanctity of marriage in the four Gospels. The Pharisees goal was not to learn about marriage, but merely to get Jesus on record as discrediting Moses and the Law. They wanted a basis to accuse Jesus of breaking the Law.

Their question as recorded in verse 3 expresses how liberal the religious leaders had become; "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause at all?" This was the origin of "no fault divorce", but it was only initiated by man.

According to verse 7, all the husband had to do was give his wife a certificate of divorce and send his wife away. There was no basis for child visitation or custody, no alimony, and no claim to any marriage equity. She could be thrown out and abandoned for no cause and no reason.

This injustice was partially why Malachi 2:13-16 says that God hated the practice of divorce among His people. It had eroded the family and social structure in Israel. They had become worse than the Gentiles. Jesus was condemning this immoral and corrupt practice. He was defending women and the sanctity of marriage.

Jesus responded by appealing to the original design for marriage in Genesis 2:21-25. He went back to the beginning and noted that God created them as male and female, and caused them to cleave together as one.

The concept of "cleaving" is illustrated by gluing or laminating two pieces of wood together. As the carpenter's son, Jesus could speak with authority on bonding. He was an expert at gluing wood together. He knew how to make two pieces of wood into one!

Jesus then issued a strong warning in verse 6. He said; “Consequently they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no man separate.” It’s not that they cannot be separated; the issue is that they cannot be separated without severe consequence.

Let me give an illustration: From the beginning, God joined electrons to protons to make atoms. For centuries mankind left them together. The end results of scientists separating them resulted in the nuclear bomb. The fallout has been disastrous. Bad things always happen when people tamper with God's original design.

When a marriage ends in divorce, there are consequences. Two pieces of wood cannot be separated without marring both pieces. Divorce does the same to people. It leaves serious wounds and scars. The fallout affects a lot of people, especially the children.

The Pharisees could not refute the logic of Jesus, so they refer back to the command of Moses relative to divorce. Jesus pointed out that what Moses said was not “a command” but “a concession” based on hard hearts. In doing so, Jesus exposed the hard and calloused hearts of the Pharisees.

It is at this point that Jesus pointed out in verse 9 that divorce and remarriage amounts to adultery. It had become a loophole in the Law for wife swapping without assigning guilt of anything immoral. The religious leaders had evil and immoral hearts. The practice had become rampant in Israel as a way of legally circumventing the charge of adultery.

Verse 9 also includes what has come to be called “the exception clause.” When Jesus said “except for the cause of adultery” most people believe He was saying that infidelity is an excusable reason for divorce without immoral consequence.

But there are some serious biblical flaws with that view. First, the Greek word Jesus used was not the common word for “adultery”, but for “immorality.” Second, in 1 Corinthians 7:1-7; Paul taught that recourse to “pornea” or “immoralities” was to get married and not to get divorced. Third, Jesus Christ and the gospel is the basis for forgiveness and reconciliation not division and destruction. Finally the permanence of the marriage covenant is a picture of the assurance of salvation for believers. (See Ephesians 5:22-33)

Some scholars believe Jesus was teaching something totally different with “the exception clause.” Let me summarize.

According to the Old Testament, there were numerous immoral relationships that God did not permit. (Read Leviticus 18 & 20) God looks at these relationships as being “immoral.” God does not join them together in marriage because they are forbidden.

According to this view, Jesus was saying in Matthew 19:9; “When the marriage itself is immoral, it should be ended because God did not join those relationships together!” They must be repented from and set aside. When these people later enter into a biblical marriage, it is not adultery because they were never in a biblical marriage covenant.

Coincidentally, the New Testament instructs two marriages to end. John the Baptist told Herod it was “unlawful” for him to be married to his brother's wife. Then again in 1 Corinthians 5:1, Paul disallowed the immoral union of a man to his father's wife. Both were unlawful or immoral marriages. Both were forbidden under the Law. God did not join them together. Both were instructed to end.

Many see the biblical sanctity of marriage being extended to the Gentile church in Acts 15:28-29. The three restrictions summarized in these two verses for Gentile believers come directly from Leviticus 17-20. The Jerusalem Council was instructing the Gentile believers to embrace the biblical sanctity of marriage and holiness.

The usual view of “The Exception Clause” from Matthew 19:9 has resulted in the modern church basically adopting the same values on divorce and remarriage as the Pharisees. In the context, Jesus was doing just the opposite. He was establishing the permanence of the marriage covenant. He was not permitting divorce and remarriage for nearly any cause.

### **Locker Room Dialogue: Matthew 19:10-12**

“10) The disciples said to Him, “If the relationship of the man with his wife is like this, it is better not to marry.” 11) But He said to them, “Not all men can accept this statement, but only those to whom it has been given. 12) For there are eunuchs who were born that way from their mother's womb; and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men; and there are also eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to accept this, let him accept it.””

This text is directly connected to the interchange between Jesus and the Pharisees about divorce and remarriage in the previous seven verses. These verses need to be studied together.

There are two common interpretations of these three verses. The first one suggests the disciples were saying to Jesus; “If marriage conflicts are so common and serious that so many marriages fall apart, it's better to not marry and remain single.” That's a common view today, but the Bible makes no provision for living together outside of marriage. The Bible calls that “fornication.”

To the above view, Jesus might have been saying; “Being single is not for everyone.” This view looks back at God's commentary about Adam; “It is not good for man to be alone.” (Genesis 2:18) Jesus was acknowledging that He created people with a huge capacity for romance, companionship, and intimacy.

The second view held by many notable scholars believes the disciples were saying the opposite. They see the disciples saying to Jesus; “If marriage is permanent and there is no way out of a bad marriage, then it is better not to marry than to be sentenced to endure a life of misery.” The response of Jesus to this line of reasoning might have been; “not all men are cut out for marriage.” (Women, did you hear that?)

I find both of these views to be intriguing and have merit in the context. Either way, Jesus was saying that marriage is a huge undertaking. It comes with the responsibility to provide not only for a wife, but most likely also for children and extended family. When a man says “I do,” he enters into a life-changing covenant to “focus on the family.”

Jesus was by no means saying that being single was a bad thing. He was merely acknowledging that “being single” and “being holy” is very challenging. Being single is not a ticket to sexual freedom and a life of wanton pleasure for the Christian. By no means!

1 Corinthians 7:25-36 presented this case in the strongest of terms. In these verses, Paul says that God calls Christian singles to holiness and undistracted focus to the Lord. Because they have no distractions from other responsibilities in this life, they can be 100% devoted to serving Christ.

But wait just a minute; Paul opened 1 Corinthians 7:1-5 by saying if a Christian single cannot live a chaste and holy life, they should marry rather than burn with sexual temptations. Marriage was designed to be a safe place for sexual fulfillment.

We are now forced to look at the deeper context surrounding Matthew 19:10-12. Ask yourself the question; “Who was in this conversation?” Bingo! Both Jesus and His disciples were mostly unmarried men. Peter was the only one in the group that we can conclusively say was married at this time. Insight: “This was a discussion mostly among young bachelors.”

Jesus used this occasion to have a serious intermission discussion with His disciples about the commitments that come with marriage and manhood. Many Christian singles need this sobering “Locker Room Dialogue” today.

I may be a bit old school, but I believe in the full context of Matthew 19:3-12, Jesus was placing more responsibility on the husband than on the wife for the success and happiness of the marriage. He was saying that husbands need to step up and commit to their marriage and family. Marriage is not a casual commitment. It must be taken seriously!

His comments in Matthew 19:12 about eunuchs can in no way be construed as a call to celibacy. Jesus acknowledged that this lifestyle was commendable but not mandatory for Christian ministry or service.

I have a motto in life that says; “Wherever you are, be there!” If you are serving God as a single man or woman, be there! If you are married, be there! If you go on a short term mission trip, be there! If you have a job or career, be there! Live every moment in the now – be there! When you are with your family, be there! When you read your Bible, be there! When you go to church, be there! When you worship God, be there! When you go on a vacation, be there! The conversation between Jesus and His disciples about marriage boiled down to the commitment to fully “*be there!*”

**Praying Over Infants and Children: Matthew 19:13-15**



“13) Then some children were brought to Him so that He might lay His hands on them and pray; and the disciples rebuked them. 14) But Jesus said, “Let the children alone, and do not hinder them from coming to Me; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” 15) After laying His hands on them, He departed from there.”

These verses have inspired many paintings of Jesus taking time to pray for children. It is common in many less affluent countries for parents to bring their children for prayer and for a blessing. Often mothers form long lines just to get their infants blessed. They are always at the front of the ministry line following a message.

I can understand the disciples becoming annoyed. From outward appearance, the children are too young to listen to a message, respond in personal faith, or even remember the occasion. But the mothers and parents want their children to be blessed by spiritual leaders. It is a spontaneous ritual in many countries around the world and takes significant time.

Frequently, it distracts from those seeking salvation or ministry for what appears to be more urgent needs. But Jesus took time to lay hands on each of these children and pray over them. He made it a priority.

There were plenty of courses in Bible College for children's ministry, but none touched on this spontaneous phenomenon. I never received training on “How to pray over children” or “How to bless children” and yet this occupies significant time after events in many countries around the world.

I confess, it remains a mystery to me and doesn't fit into my “western model of ministry.” We must not equate this ritual with salvation for the children, but it is every bit as important as Hannah dedicating young Samuel to the Lord in 1 Samuel 1-2.

So what can be gleaned from this story in Matthew 19:13-15 and Jesus praying over infants and children? Let's look at a few significant biblical principles that may be anchored in this text.

First, children are important to God. Jesus took time to pray over and bless children. Never minimize the value of infants and children. Jesus welcomed them!

Second, the desire of parents to dedicate their children to Jesus is important. It points the whole family in a Godward direction.

Third, though the intellect of the child might not be impacted, these blessings minister to the spirit of the child. It is like reading Scripture or playing godly music to a child when still in the womb. I cannot explain it, but this has a significant developmental impact on the child.

Fourth, prayer and blessings are powerful. James 5:16 says; “... the effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.” Prayer is not an exercise in futility. Both prayer and blessings have an impact in the spiritual realm. Notice that the text specifically said that Jesus laid His hands on them. I think parents and grandparents should do this as often as possible for their children.

Fifth, Scripture teaches that the spirit of babes can be tuned into the spiritual realm at a very young age. (Read Psalm 8:2, Matthew 11:25, Mathew 21:16 and Luke 1:44.) This might explain why many cults, isms, and even the occult features elaborate rituals and ceremonies over infants and children. For some reason, western evangelical Christians are very negligent and undiscerning in this area.

Sixth, praying over infants and children provides an opportunity to cut off the iniquities of forefathers and dedicate them to godly kingdom influences. I consciously include this in my praying over children in predominantly pagan, idolatry-saturated, or spiritistic countries like Haiti or India. I now pray for a hedge of protection over infants and children from demonic activity and influences in the name and blood of Jesus Christ.

Seventh, this may serve as an opportunity to bless and speak a prophetic over the infant as exemplified by Simon in Luke 2:25-33. I only do this if the Holy Spirit prompts me.

Finally, this is an opportunity to consciously pray for their salvation and walk with God. I ask the Spirit of God to lead them into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as early as possible and guide them into fruitful Christian living.

I am sure there are more insights for praying over infants and children. If God has given you special illumination in this area, please feel free to comment. I am still learning related to this subject.

### **The False “god” of Wealth: Matthew 19:16-22**

“16) And someone came to Him and said, “Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life?” 17) And He said to him, “Why are you asking Me about what is good? There is only One who is good; but if you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.” 18) Then he said to Him, “Which ones?” And Jesus said, “You shall not commit murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; 19) Honor your father and mother; and You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” 20) The young man said to Him, “All these things I have kept; what am I still lacking?” 21) Jesus said to him, “If you wish to be complete, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.” 22) But when the young man heard this statement, he went away grieving; for he was one who owned much property.”

In this story, Jesus exposes the false “god” of wealth. It is important to note that He does not condemn the man for being immoral or ungodly. In fact, he was a very good, moral, and religious man. He had consciously kept the Ten Commandments. There was much to admire about him.

It is a mistake to assume that all wealthy people are bad. To the contrary, people who accumulate wealth by applying biblical principles work hard, have good ethics, and are often very generous. So what was the underlying problem with this man?

He had unconsciously made the pursuit of money his god. Wealth became the basis of his security. Self-confidence replaced any need to trust in God. He had become prideful and self-centered. His time, energy, and attention were consumed by the accumulation of wealth. His identity was connected to things and not to God. For him, wealth translated to influence, power, and value. He saw himself as better than anyone else.

But there was another problem. He was consumed by the worries of the world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desire for things. (Mark 5:18-19) He had become like seed sown in thorns. He was choking on his own money. His life was consumed with worry, stress, and anxiety. Hedonism is a very unhealthy lifestyle!

What you own soon owns you! Things cannot make you happy. The narcotic nature of wealth blurs a true vision of God, self, and others. It takes control of your life. Wealth becomes an all-consuming Master.

When Jesus challenged Him to divest of His wealth and follow Him, his loyalty remained with His money. He loved the values of this world more than Jesus. He became an example of the church at Laodicea that Jesus addressed in Revelation 3:14-22. His wealth blocked him from embracing and experiencing true kingdom values and dynamics. He was religious but empty, devoid of spirit, and lost.

### **True Basis of Salvation: Matthew 19:23-26**

“23) And Jesus said to His disciples, “Truly I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. 24) Again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” 25) When the disciples heard this, they were very astonished and said, “Then who can be saved?” 26) And looking at them Jesus said to them, “With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.””

This conversation between Jesus and His disciples is a continuation of his dialogue with the rich young landowner in the previous several verses. These verses have caused much confusion for some people. They believe Jesus was teaching that wealthy people are bad and cannot be saved.

That is not true. Many poor people also have poor ethics and values. Sometimes their plight in life is the result of slothfulness and poor judgment. Jesus was not saying that a certain social/economic status deserves merit or condemnation from God. So what was He saying?

First, salvation is based on faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ paying for our sins on the cross and not in any works of our own. Jesus was not making the selling of all earthly goods the basis of salvation.

Second, salvation comes from the recognition of personal sin and need. It forsakes self-righteousness and recognizes it is impossible to be saved by self-goodness, religious merit, or personal status.

The rich man in this story thought he was good enough based on his own righteousness and merit to be accepted by God. This was compounded by the Old Testament teaching that “it is the blessing of the Lord that makes people rich.”

Undoubtedly, his wealth was not gained by fraud, but by following the ways of God. He viewed himself like Job, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, and even Solomon. God blessed these men greatly because of their fear of God and biblical work ethic. I concede, in his case, there was some merit to his confidence in his own virtue and goodness. God had blessed him.

Third, salvation involves humility before God to the point of acknowledging personal need and the confession of personal sin and lostness. This sincere act of humility is impossible for some people. They see themselves as truly good and righteous. They line up with Paul’s testimony of himself as a Pharisee in Philippians 3:4-6. I admit, there are some very devoutly good, moral, self-righteous, and religious people out there, but they are not good enough to save themselves.

The idiom of a camel going through the eye of a needle illustrates this point. Some religious buildings were built with extremely short doors that required people to get on their knees to enter as an act of reverence. These doors were referred to as “the eye of a needle.”

Of course these buildings often had another door for the priests, religious elite, and wealthy dignitaries who could not get their clothes dusty or soiled. Their self-righteous status gained entrance through the privileged door. It was the VIP entrance.

It became a common idiom in that region of Arabia and Palestine to express something nearly impossible as “a camel passing through the eye of a needle.” Its natural height, large humps and long neck made it nearly impossible. The saddle and all ornaments would have to be removed to make it possible. It created the picture of being totally prostrate, an intense struggle, and utter desperation.

Jesus used this idiom as an example of what it takes for self-righteous, good, moral, hard-working, religious, and thereby wealthy people to enter the kingdom of God. They assume they have already gained entrance to the kingdom of God through a very large VIP door with a red carpet that acknowledges and even praises them for all of their righteous deeds, acts of benevolence, and religious merit.

What a shock to learn the kingdom of God only has only one door. These too need to humble themselves, being stripped of all self-righteous deeds and religious merit and literally crawl as if destitute and naked through “the eye of a needle” into the presence of God.

Finally, Jesus closed this story by saying; “With men this is impossible, but for God all things are possible.” Salvation is the work of God. It is difficult for devoutly religious and self-righteous people to see themselves as sinful and lost apart from saving faith in Jesus Christ. In fact, it’s easier for a camel to crawl through “the eye of a needle” than for prosperous devoutly religious and self-righteous people to see any need for Jesus Christ and the gospel.

**The Cost: Matthew 19:27-30**

“27) Then Peter said to Him, “Behold, we have left everything and followed You; what then will there be for us?” 28) And Jesus said to them, “Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. 29) And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name’s sake, will receive many times as much, and will inherit eternal life. 30) But many who are first will be last; and the last, first.”

There is a cost involved in following Jesus, especially for those involved in Christian service. Some leave family, friends, homes, businesses, and dreams for the sake of the gospel. Each of the twelve apostles left much to follow Jesus. But it is impossible to out-give God. He has amazing rewards for His faithful followers.

For the twelve apostles who left everything to follow Jesus, they have a special place in the Regeneration. They will rule and reign with Christ in His kingdom. They are the first-fruits. But any who have sacrificed for the gospel will be rewarded.

When we get to heaven, there will be many surprises. Some who are famous and well known here will be obscure. Many who are obscure and unknown here will be held in honor and high regard in the kingdom. Many who we think are first will be last. Many who we think are last will be first. Don’t strive to be famous, strive to be faithful!

### **The Generous Landowner: Matthew 20:1-16**

We now come to a parable about the kingdom of heaven that rubs some people wrong. It is about the owner of a vineyard who went out early in the morning to hire workers. He found some right away and agreed with them for a denarius for the day.

Then he returned several times throughout the day to hire more workers. He went the third hour, sixth hour, ninth hour and likewise the eleventh hour. He marveled that some had stood all day looking for work with no one to hire them. That took faith and perseverance. He sent them also into his fields.

It might be noteworthy that this was harvest time. They were sent out to work in the harvest field because the grapes were ripening fast. Time was of the essence and he didn’t want anything to go to waste. The workforce needed to be expanded.

At the end of the day, he lined up the workers to pay them for their labor. He told his foreman to pay those who labored last to get their wages first. He gave each one the same pay of one denarius. Those hired early in the morning began to grumble thinking they deserved more money because they endured the heat of the whole day.

But the land owner replied that he paid them exactly what they agreed upon. He also said it was his prerogative to issue the pay scale as he pleased.

Admittedly, this parable rubs many people wrong. The owner of the vineyard seemed unfair and unjust. Certainly those hired first earned more! So what can we learn from this story?

First, when it comes to getting into heaven, salvation is the same for all people. It is a free gift based on faith and not works.

Second, many kingdom benefits are based on needs and not merely effort. This includes things like forgiveness, freedom from sin, and access to worship. The pay was not an entitlement. All of the workers spent the same time either working or seeking work, but the needs back home were the same for all workers.

Third, those hired earlier did have more blessings than those hired later. They received more education, more provision of food and drink throughout the day, and much more time to get to know the land owner. It is impossible to put a price tag on these three benefits. Some people pay dearly for these three things. The early workers got them thrown into the deal.

Think about it. Who gained the greatest “know-how” to go out and start their own vineyard? Those hired last or those hired first? Education and contacts are priceless – if you maintain the right attitude! Experience and knowledge are invaluable.

Fourth, this was merely the first day of the harvest. The next day they all had a resume to build on. A good testimony, leadership, and faithfulness are built over time! How long do you suppose the foreman had worked for the landowner? How does he fit into the story?

Fifth, every Christian has the same blessings and benefits “in Christ!” We all have equal access to the Holy Spirit and therefore equal potential for grace, growth, fullness, and fruitfulness. Christianity is an equal-opportunity relationship with God! Make the most of it!

Finally, it is impossible to put a price tag on years of knowing Jesus Christ and walking with God! Yes, in some ways the first are last and the last are first. We are all part of the family of God. But Psalm 4:3 says, “But know that the Lord has set aside the godly man for Himself, the Lord hears when I call to Him.”

I come back to the foreman in the story. He was set aside for a very unique relationship with his Master and there was no mention of pay scale. Like the Apostle Paul, he found a surpassing value in knowing his Master. (Philippians 3:7-11) As the years of knowing Jesus mount, never underestimate the potential depth of your calling. You have so much more to build on!

### **The Preview: Matthew 20:17-19**

“17) As Jesus was about to go up to Jerusalem, He took the twelve disciples aside by themselves, and on the way He said to them, “18) Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn Him to death, 19) and will hand Him over to the Gentiles to mock and scourge and crucify Him, and on the third day He will be raised up.””

Jesus and His disciples now approached the outskirts of Jerusalem. He intentionally pulls them aside and previews what is about to happen once more. He foretold of His sufferings, death, burial, and resurrection over and over again. He meticulously reviewed the components of the gospel.

As you read the four Gospels over and over again, it almost becomes redundant how many times he previewed the gospel with His disciples and yet they were unprepared. This was the focus of His work and mission. His life and work converged on Calvary.

The gospel is simple and yet profound. John 3:16-18 says; “16) For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. 17) For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. 18) He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.”

It amazes me how many times people can hear the gospel and still miss its simple message. Salvation comes down to personal faith in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It encompasses Who He is and what He accomplished on the cross. This simple personal act of belief is the beginning of a new life. It is the essence of being born again.

### **The Presumptuous Request: Matthew 20:20-23**

“20) Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to Jesus with her sons, bowing down and making a request of Him. 21) And He said to her, “What do you wish?” She said to Him, “Command that in Your kingdom these two sons of mine may sit one on Your right and one on Your left.” 22) But Jesus answered, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?” They said to Him, “We are able.” 23) He said to them, “My cup you shall drink; but to sit on My right and on My left, this is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by My Father.””

The timeframe of this request is troubling. They were on the verge of entering Jerusalem for His suffering and two of His disciples are still seeking self-promotion. Such were their motives that they even included their mother in this unusual petition.

Church tradition places a woman named Mary as their mother. She is mentioned in Mark 15:40, 47, and again in Mark 16:1. In each case, she is identified as the mother of James. She was among the inner group that included the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and Salome that seemed to travel on this occasion with Jesus and His disciples to care for the daily details of food and lodging.

It was on this occasion that she approached Jesus privately with her two sons. The story is not clear if she initiated the meeting or was recruited by her two self-seeking sons to make the request. The act of bowing down before Him, proved that they recognized Him as a King. They were paying homage. They also sensed that His Kingdom was near.

Her request is recorded in verse 21: "Command that in Your kingdom these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right and one on your left." This was undoubtedly a reference back to Matthew 19:28 and the mention Jesus made of twelve thrones that awaited the apostles. The twelve became fixated on this prophecy. They were now maneuvering for the greater thrones of honor.

Jesus then asked the two if they were ready to drink from the cup from which He was about to drink. They unwittingly answered; "We are able." It appears they envisioned a cup of honor, but Jesus was referring to a bitter cup of suffering. He assured them that they would drink from His cup, but the thrones were His Father's to assign.

Indeed, history tells us they did drink from His cup of suffering. Acts 12:2 records that James was the first of the Apostles to be martyred. Herod put him to death with the sword. It happened so early in church history that it almost seems like a waste for one of the three that accompanied Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration and then deeper into the Garden of Gethsemane. Why did he die so young and so early in the saga of Christianity?

This is one of the unsolved mysteries of the early church, but is packed with insight for any who dare wrestle with the question; "Why do so many good people die so young?" I offer no easy answer!

According to Revelation 1:9-10, John was a partaker of much tribulation and a prisoner on the island called Patmos. His graphic vision recorded in the book of Revelation was indeed a difficult cup to drink. According to Mark 10:38-39, the cup was also pictured as a baptism. He was baptized into the full tribulation that awaited the bride of Christ through the ages. He was the last of the Apostles to die.

Did you catch the irony? In a strange twist of events, James and John were indeed "the first and the last." They became the book ends of the story of the Apostles.

Another irony is included in this text. The reference is Matthew 20:20. If you want 20/20 vision, you must balance both near and far sight. Present suffering in this life must be factored into future glory. 20/20 spiritual vision clearly sees both near and far! It factors in both present suffering and future glory.

This episode forces us to face a reality that accompanies the Christian life. It is full of both glory and suffering. As Paul testified in Acts 14:22; "... Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." The way to the throne passes through the story of the cross. Paul fully embraced this dichotomy in Philippians 10:10. We need to dance with both "the power of His resurrection" and "the fellowship of His sufferings in this life."

### **Divided Ranks: Matthew 20:24-28**

"24) And hearing this, the ten became indignant with the two brothers. 25) But Jesus called them to Himself and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles Lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. 26) It is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to



become great among you shall be your servant, 27) and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; 28) just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.””

It was happening at the worst possible time. Jesus was about to head into passion week and the ranks were divided. The ten were “indignant” with the two brothers. The rift threatened to go deep and wide.

Jesus had previously made it clear in Matthew 12:25-26 that any kingdom divided against itself is laid waste; it cannot stand. The enemy was at work dividing the camp.

Jesus wasted no time addressing the problem. He called them all together and addressed the sin of pride and self promotion. In the strongest of terms, He disassociated His kingdom from the governance principles of the world.

Leadership in the church was not to be based on the model of power or authority. His shepherds were not to be like the rulers of the Gentiles who play lord over people and exercise strong-handed authority.

By contrast, Jesus laid down the principle of “Servanthood Leadership.” He clearly stated that “the greatest among them must be servant of all.”

According to verse 28, this was the leadership style exemplified by Jesus Himself; “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and give His life a ransom for all.” This was no small lesson.

A few days later, Jesus returned to this theme as the disciples gathered to keep the Passover. John 13:1-20 presents the scene of Jesus laying aside his robe and assuming the role of a lowly servant and washing His disciples feet. The act was more profound than any sermon He could preach. The Savior became their servant!

### **Two Blind Men: Matthew 20:29-34**

“29) As they were leaving Jericho, a large crowd followed Him. 30) And two blind men sitting by the road, hearing that Jesus was passing by, cried out, “Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!” 31) The crowd sternly told them to be quiet, but they cried out all the more, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!” 32) And Jesus stopped and called them, and said, “What do you want Me to do for you?” 33) They said to Him, “Lord, we want our eyes to be opened.” 34) Moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes; and immediately they regained their sight and followed Him.”

As the journey toward Jerusalem continues, Jesus is now on the Jericho Road heading toward Jerusalem. This is the same road Jesus referred to in Luke 10:30 where the victimized traveler encountered the Good Samaritan. It was a well traveled road in Judea. It is about eighteen miles from Jericho to Jerusalem.

Jesus was not walking alone. With Him were His disciples, a small band of women including His mother and a crowd of undisclosed size. This undoubtedly included the seventy Jesus had sent out and numerous others. Because of its proximity to the Passover, there were most likely numerous caravans of people traveling from Galilee to keep the annual festival in Jerusalem. Jesus and His caravan took a break in Jericho before setting out on the final leg of the journey.

The two blind men had likely positioned themselves on this route to beg for alms from those heading down to the Passover. The route departing from Jericho was a prime location for their enterprise, and there were undoubtedly many such people along the road seeking alms.

Upon hearing that Jesus was passing by, they began crying out; "Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David." Their request was not specific. They may have been begging for alms. This seemed to be the interpretation of the crowd who tried to silence them. They were likely fatigued by the many exploiters begging for alms. This often happens to tourists traveling in foreign lands. It can become annoying and exasperating.

But they had other intentions in mind. This was their only chance for healing. If the many stories about Jesus were true, they were within earshot of a miracle. They refused to be silenced, instead they "cried out" all the more.

Let no one silence your petitions to God! Follow their example and be persistent and even border on desperation. Literally "cry out" to God. The Psalms are full of this phrase. God wants us to "cry out" to Him. Be honest with God about your Jericho Road! It appears from the New Testament that Jesus has compassion toward those stranded on this road.

Verse 32 is profound; "And Jesus stopped and called to them, and said, "What do you want me to do for you?" You may be thinking, "That's a foolish question, of course they wanted to be healed!"

Don't be so rash! There are a few potential answers. First, they could have been asking for mercy in their suffering. Many today fail to pray for healing. Instead they say, "Lord, comfort me in my affliction!" This was equivalent to asking for alms. It's a lot easier to believe for comfort than healing.

Second, their request showed they had greater expectations; "Lord, we want our eyes to be opened." They were not double-minded. They wanted the One who created their eyes to heal them! They believed Jesus was the Great Physician and they wanted Him to act from that role.

Notice that Jesus was moved with compassion. He cared! He was moved by their plight. "He touched their eyes, and immediately they regained their sight." The first thing they saw when their eyes were opened was the face of Jesus!

The result was that they joined His caravan. This may sound like an unfair question, but "Where do you suppose they walked?" Did they tag along at the end, or did they go before Him crying out; "This is Jesus the Son of David, He healed us! We were blind and now we see!" Sadly, the text does not say.

But it does set the stage for a few important questions; “How do you follow Jesus?” Are you a silent tag along or are you vocal about Jesus? Do you cry out to Him with your needs or are you timid and wavering in unbelief? I confess, these guys inspire me! Just think, they may have participated in the Triumphant Entry of Jesus into Jerusalem!

This chapter ends the same way it started. They joined the caravan at the eleventh hour and walked right into Jerusalem with Jesus side-by-side with those who came the first hour. It doesn't matter when you come, just roll up your sleeves and follow Jesus!

### **The Triumphal Entry, Part One: Matthew 21:1-11**

“1) When they had approached Jerusalem and had come to Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, 2) saying to them, “Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied there and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to Me. 3) And if anyone says anything to you, you shall say, ‘The Lord has need of them,’ and immediately he will send them.” 4) This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: 5) “Say to the daughter of Zion, ‘Behold your King is coming to you, Gentle, and mounted on a donkey, Even on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.’ 6) And the disciples went and did just as Jesus directed them, 7) and brought the donkey and the colt, and laid their coats on them; and He sat on the coats.”

The full text is too long to cover in one post. This is often referred to as the “Triumphant Entry.” The people wanted to make Jesus King over Israel so He could immediately rule from a throne in Jerusalem. They thought the Kingdom of David was being restored.

This imagery did not go unnoticed by Rome. A few chapters later this became part of His conversation with Pilate. (Matthew 27:11) The whole crucifixion was designed for Rome to mock Him and any claim to a throne or being a King. (See Matthew 27:27-31; 37; 42)

So what did this story accomplish?

First, it gave evidence of His deity. The arrangement of the two disciples to bring the colt of a donkey proved His omniscience. He described in detail what was going to unfold in securing the colt.

Second, the entry into Jerusalem fulfilled prophecy. This specifically fulfilled Zechariah 9:9. The prophecy speaks of both bringing salvation and the total humility needed to purchase human salvation. He was about to be crucified on a scornful cross. Rome was mocking any claim He made to being royalty.

Before proceeding with the story in the next post, we must pause and note two factors from the broader commentary of the entire Bible. First, let's look back.

Even a casual Bible student will see a connection between this story and 1 Kings 1:33; 38-39; 44. When Solomon was ordained King in place of David, part of the ceremony was entering

Jerusalem on David's own mule. The connection to Jesus and His entry into Jerusalem cannot be missed. We could say; "He was mounted on the mule of David."

Second, let's look ahead. When the King of King and Lord of Lord returns, He will not be mounted on a humble mule. According to Revelation 19:11-16, Jesus is coming back mounted on a white horse prepared for battle followed by the armies of heaven also mounted on white horses.

This no longer describes an inaugural event. This is the picture of a well-established conquering King. He is coming back as a warrior to reclaim His kingdom. Note the text says He will be leading "armies" and not merely an "army." His glory and might will far surpass any earthly kingdom at any point in human history. How many armies will He lead? That is a mystery.

From our current vantage point in history, King Jesus is no longer mounted on the humble colt of a mule. That was fulfilled 2,000 years ago. His glorious white stallion is well-trained and ready for battle. The armies of heaven are eagerly awaiting His command.

The outcome will be radically different from His last entrance into Jerusalem. This time, the false kings and rulers of this world will be humiliated. They will bow knees before Him and confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:9-11)

This brings up a crucial question; "which portrait of Jesus do you relate too?" Do you imagine Him as a humble Nazarene on a donkey's colt, or do you see Him as the glorified King of Kings and Lord of Lords mounted on the white conquering horse?

A mistake common to many Christians is perceiving and relating to Jesus in His past portrait on the donkey's colt and not His present glory mounted on His white horse. Your view of Jesus affects the way you live, the way you pray and the way you see the world.

### **The Triumphal Entry, Part Two: Matthew 21:1-11**

"6) The disciples went and did just as Jesus had instructed them, 7) and brought the donkey and the colt, and laid their coats on them; and He sat on the coats. 8) Most of the crowd spread their coats in the road, and others were cutting branches from the trees and spreading them in the road. 9) The crowds going ahead of Him, and those who followed, were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David; Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest!" 10) When He had entered Jerusalem, all the city was stirred, saying, "Who is this?" 11) And the crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee.""

The entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem caused a huge commotion. The crowd following Him, spread garments and palm branches on the road. This was a sign of royal treatment. He entered Jerusalem mounted on the colt of a mule, much like King David and Solomon years earlier.

The crowd accompanying Him cried out, "Hosanna to the Son of David, Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest."

This saying proves that someone had done their research. He was indeed a direct descendant of King David. He had royal blood in His veins. He fulfilled all the prophecies and requirements for being the Messiah.

The crowd participating in the festival was most likely the caravan that accompanied Jesus from Galilee. According to verse 10, the residents of Jerusalem were astonished by the commotion. They were ready for the Passover, but they were not prepared for this spectacle.

It did not go well. Less than a week later Jesus would leave Jerusalem in a very different fashion. Crowds would again line the streets, only this time the mob would be angry and hostile. Instead of a beast of burden carrying Him, He would have the burden of carrying His own cross weighted down by the sins of humanity.

Over and over again He warned His disciples that this fate awaited Him. They were deaf to His words. They wanted a King and not a martyr.

Instead of a crown of royalty, He wore a crown of thorns. Instead of ascending to a throne, He was lifted up on a cross. Instead of acceptance, He was surrounded by rejection.

There have always been two very different crowds when it comes to Jesus. He preached about this in His first message recorded in Matthew 7:13-27.

He warned that there is the wide gate and there is the narrow gate. There are false prophets and true prophets. There are bad trees and good trees. There are religious people who are deceived and lost and there are genuine followers of Jesus. There are bad foundations and good foundations.

The same now comes into focus here at the end of the book of Matthew. There was one crowd that welcomed Him into Jerusalem and a very different crowd that repelled Him out from Jerusalem.

The same is true today! People fit into two very different categories when it comes to Jesus Christ. The same will also be true in the end times when Jesus returns to ascend to His throne. In which crowd do you belong?

(This scene, which we refer to as “Palm Sunday,” took place on the Mount of Olives. The road Jesus and His followers walked leads to The Golden Gate in the wall of Jerusalem. It is the gate through which ancient Jewish tradition says the Messiah will enter Jerusalem at the end of days. That gate has been bricked shut since 1541, presumably to prevent false prophets from entering through it. Zechariah 14:4 says that when the LORD returns, He will stand on the Mount of Olives and it will split in two, “... making a wide valley from east to west.” In 1964, a hotel was built on the Mount of Olives and a geological fault line was discovered, running from east to west. It lines up precisely with The Golden Gate.) -dj.

**The House of Prayer: Matthew 21:12-14**

“12) And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all those who were buying and selling in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who were selling doves. 13) And He said to them, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer’; but you are making it a robbers’ den.” 14) And the blind and the lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them.”

Upon entering Jerusalem, Jesus went straight for the Temple and drove out those intent on commerce. He did not enter with a sacrifice, He was the sacrifice. He interrupted the status quo. He placed the focus back on God!

His zeal was to turn the temple back into a house of prayer and worship. What a novel idea! Can you imagine turning the temple into a place for people to seek and worship God? His Father's House was to be a House of prayer and not a robber's den.

Then just to punctuate the difference between the religious leaders and Himself, the blind and the lame started coming to Him in the temple and He was healing them.

Jesus turned the arrows in the opposite direction. The temple was not a place for giving to God, it was a place for receiving from God. It was a meeting place with God.

### **Cleansing the Temple: Matthew 21:12-14; 1 Corinthians 6:19-20**

“12) And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all those who were buying and selling in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who were selling doves. 13) And He said to them, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer’; but you are making it a robbers’ den.” 14) And the blind and the lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them.”

“19) Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? 20) For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body.” (1 Corinthians 6:19-20)

The story of Jesus cleansing the temple has a direct parallel to the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the life of every believer. Paul called the body of the believer “the temple of the Holy Spirit.”

At the moment of salvation, the Holy Spirit indwells the believer. He immediately starts a work of sanctifying and cleansing. (See Titus 3:4-7) Over time He does a thorough job of cleansing away sin.

I encourage you to cooperate with this process. It is normal and natural for every born-again Christian. After Jesus cleaned the temple, He began healing people in the temple. He turned it back into a house of prayer.

Confessing and removing sin is part of a healing process. (See James 5:13-18) I dare say God wants to do this in your life. It fits the analogy of Matthew 21:12-14. Do not resist the cleansing and healing work of the Holy Spirit in your life.

### **Dumber Than Rocks: Matthew 21:14-17**

“14) And the blind and the lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them. 15) But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that He had done, and the children who were shouting in the temple, “Hosanna to the Son of David,” they became indignant 16) and said to Him, “Do You hear what these children are saying?” And Jesus said to them, “Yes; have you never read, ‘Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies You have prepared praise for Yourself?’” 17) And He left them and went out of the city to Bethany, and spent the night there.”

This now becomes an interesting encounter between Jesus and the chief priests and scribes. According to Luke 19:39-40, the Pharisees wanted Jesus to silence the crowd. He told them if these were silenced the stones would cry out.

Jesus was recognized by the common people, the children and even the stones, but the religious leaders were blind. They became indignant. They were jealous. As a result we can conclude they became dumber than rocks!

That might sound like a strong indictment, but it is often true. When the Spirit of God is not illuminating a heart, people can be void of discernment, common sense, logic, and reason. The god of this world works to blind people to the gospel, truth and the revelation of God. (See 2 Corinthians 4:3-4). The blind came to be healed. The seeing religious leaders became blind. People can be dumber than rocks!

### **The Barren Tree: Matthew 21:18-22**

“18) Now in the morning, when He was returning to the city, He became hungry. 19) Seeing a lone fig tree by the road, He came to it and found nothing on it except leaves only; and He said to it, “No longer shall there ever be any fruit from you.” And at once the fig tree withered. 20) Seeing this, the disciples were amazed and asked, “How did the fig tree wither all at once?” 21) And Jesus answered and said to them, “Truly I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and cast into the sea,’ it will happen. 22) And all things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive.””

The story of this fig tree was also recorded by Mark. (Mark 11:12-14; 20-26) Mark adds the detail that the disciples discovered the fig tree withered the next morning. The withering happened very quickly.

Fig trees are ripe during the Passover, but the harvest often begins in earnest after the holiday. Jesus had every reason to expect ripe figs on the tree, but it was barren. His prophecy over the tree was powerful and effected an immediate miracle.

Some see this story as an illustration of the fruitless state that Jesus found in Judaism and the temple system. According to Mark, He departed from this tree and shortly entered the temple.

He expected to find a house of prayer and a thirst for God, instead He was met by money-changers and empty rituals.

They see in the withering of the fig tree what was about to happen to the Old Covenant. It was about to be replaced by the New Covenant that would bear fruit for God.

It is significant that Jesus wanted His Father's House to be a house of prayer and He used the fig tree as an opportunity to teach on faith as it relates to prayer. The absence of faith is what brought the barren condition of the temple system and the Old Covenant. The temple system and its works-based religion had displaced and obscured God. That which should have produced fruit was barren. Faith had been displaced by works.

I see Jesus using this fig tree to point the disciples to another tree that would produce much fruit. Jesus was about to be crucified on the wood from a tree. The message of the cross mixed with faith always bears fruit. The Lamb of God was about to atone for the sins of humanity. The Holy Spirit was about to be poured out and bear much fruit in the life of every true believer.

Psalms Chapter One was about to be ushered into reality. Every born-again believer is like a tree planted by rivers of water that bears fruit in its season. Faith was about to start moving mountains. Jesus has every reason to expect fruit from our lives. Those who abide in Him bear much fruit. (Read John 15:1-17) Notice that Jesus also concluded the story of the vine and the branches with teaching on prayer.

### **Jesus in the Critics' Den: Matthew 21:23-27**

"23) When He entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to Him while He was teaching, and said, 'By what authority are You doing these things, and who gave You this authority?' 24) Jesus said to them, 'I will also ask you one thing, which if you tell Me, I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. 25) The baptism of John was from what source, from heaven or from men?' And they began reasoning among themselves, saying, 'If we say, 'From heaven,' He will say to us, 'Then why did you not believe him?' 26) But if we say, 'From men,' we fear the people; for they all regard John as a prophet.' 27) And answering Jesus, they said, 'We do not know.'" He also said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things."

It is one of the oldest ploys in the book. If you disagree with someone and cannot match their reasoning ability or effectiveness, just challenge their authority. That's what the chief priests and elders now attempt to do with Jesus. Because they could not discredit His teachings or miraculous powers, they openly questioned His credentials.

It is the same as asking; "What college did you graduate from?" "What kind of degree did you earn?" Or, "Show us your government license and permits to do these things." They were openly mocking Him. By this time they knew He was an uneducated carpenter's son from Nazareth. He had no authority to preach, teach, or lead the people. He was merely a country hick self-taught preacher.



This is a good time to consult 1 Corinthians 1:26-31. God usually uses the foolish, weak, and base things of this world to shame the wise. It is better to have the anointing of God than the credentials of men.

Jesus was suddenly in the critics' den composed of the chief priests and elders of the people. They wanted Him to bow to their authority, but Jesus turned the table on them. He simply asked them a question about the authority of John the Baptist. Was his ministry from heaven or from men? Either answer exposed their hypocrisy and foolishness. The debate was over!

Many times people have no desire to seek God or truth. They merely want to argue or create a diversion. They are insincere. Jesus did not waste time with them or fall into fruitless arguments. He provided everything they needed to find the truth, if they were sincerely seeking. He pointed them in the right direction and quickly moved on!

There is much to learn from this story. There are many who are sincerely seeking for truth and seeking salvation. Don't get distracted by critics or be discouraged by mockers. Focus on your calling to share the gospel, minister to people and lift up Jesus. Don't get stuck in the critics den! Move on and share the good news with more and more people!

You need anointing from God and not credentials from men! Unction is generated in the prayer closet and not the classroom. By all means sharpen your tools, but let the Holy Spirit become your anointing and your genuine relationship with Jesus Christ become your authority.

Those who are connected to the true vine will bear much fruit. Self-appointed critics who carry the mantle of man-made religion become fig trees that bear no fruit. They look good to the eye, but there is nothing there!

The previous paragraph in the book of Matthew and the barren fig tree suddenly takes on new meaning. Jesus wasted no time with the barren fig tree and He wasted no time in the critics' den. Both were fruitless.

### **Story of Two Sons: Matthew 21:28-32**

“(28) But what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, ‘Son, go work today in the vineyard.’ 29) And he answered, ‘I will not’; but afterward he regretted it and went. 30) The man came to the second and said the same thing; and he answered, ‘I will, sir’; but he did not go. 31) Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly I say to you that the tax collectors and prostitutes will get into the kingdom of God before you. 32) For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him; but the tax collectors and prostitutes did believe him; and you, seeing this, did not even feel remorse afterward so as to believe him.”

This is an interesting story. Some translations have the order of the sons reversed, but the results were the same.

Stories of two sons were common in the teachings of Jesus. (See also Luke 15:11-32 and the Prodigal son) Some try to read the Jewish nation and the Gentiles into the story. There could be a general application, but it might be more basic.

I see both stories presenting our Heavenly Father as the God of the second chance. They present great hope to all who have fallen into sin and strayed. God receives all His children who have a change of heart and return to Him in sincerity and truth.

The repentant sinners are more genuine than those who are outwardly religious but inwardly lost. Such was the case of the chief priests and elders of the people who were the recipients of this story. (See Matthew 21:23)

I can imagine the dagger that pierced them when Jesus said; "Truly I say to you that many tax-gathers and harlots will get into the kingdom of God before you." They were the ones who consented to follow God but instead used religion as a veneer to serve their flesh. They looked good on the outside, but were sinful and corrupt on the inside. They were also in need of repentance.

Jesus offers salvation to all people. We all need a change of heart and willingness to follow and obey Jesus. We need to be born-again. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. He is the Lord of the second chance.

Salvation includes a change of heart and a change of direction in life. We set sin and self aside and begin to follow Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. We call this "repentance."

This story also extends grace to those who once followed and then turned away. Like the Father in the story of the Prodigal Son, He runs to meet every child that humbly returns to Him. Maybe that is your call today!

### **The Rented Vineyard: Matthew 21:33-41**

“33) Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard and put a wall around it and dug a wine press in it, and built a tower, and rented it out to vine-growers and went on a journey. 34) When the harvest time approached, he sent his slaves to the vine-growers to receive his produce. 35) The vine-growers took his slaves and beat one, and killed another, and stoned a third. 36) Again he sent another group of slaves larger than the first; and they did the same thing to them. 37) But afterward he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ 38) But when the vine-growers saw the son, they said among themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance.’ 39) They took him, and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. 40) Therefore when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vine-growers?” 41) They said to Him, “He will bring those wretches to a wretched end, and will rent out the vineyard to other vine-growers who will pay him the proceeds at the proper seasons.””

This parable tells the story of the Old Testament. God tried over and over again to glean fruit from Israel, but every time He came up empty. From the Law to the Kings and through the Prophets, they scorned and killed God's messengers.

Finally, God sent His only begotten Son. He met with the same fate. They despised and killed Him. Their condemnation is just. Even the chief priests and elders of the people gave the correct answer. Judgment is coming.

### **Parable of the Wedding Feast: Matthew 22:1-14**

“Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son. And he sent out his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding feast, and they were unwilling to come. Again he sent out other slaves saying, ‘Tell those who have been invited, “Behold, I have prepared my dinner; my oxen and my fattened livestock are all butchered and everything is ready; come to the wedding feast.”’ But they paid no attention and went their way, one to his own farm, another to his business, and the rest seized his slaves and mistreated them and killed them. But the king was enraged, and he sent his armies and destroyed those murderers and set their city on fire. Then he said to his slaves, ‘The wedding is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy. Go therefore to the main highways, and as many as you find there, invite to the wedding feast.’ Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered together all they found, both evil and good; and the wedding hall was filled with dinner guests. “But when the king came in to look over the dinner guests, he saw a man there who was not dressed in wedding clothes, and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you come in here without wedding clothes?’ And the man was speechless. Then the king said to the servants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ For many are called, but few are chosen.””

### **Image Bearers: Matthew 22:15-22**

“15) Then the Pharisees went and plotted together how they might trap Him in what He said. 16) And they sent their disciples to Him, along with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that You are truthful and teach the way of God in truth, and defer to no one; for You are not partial to any. 17) Tell us then, what do You think? Is it lawful to give a poll-tax to Caesar, or not?” 18) But Jesus perceived their malice, and said, “Why are you testing Me, you hypocrites? 19) Show Me the coin used for the poll-tax.” And they brought Him a denarius. 20) And He said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” 21) They said to Him, “Caesar’s.” Then He said to them, “Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s; and to God the things that are God’s.” 22) And hearing this, they were amazed, and leaving Him, they went away.”

This stands out as the most brilliant answer to a critic in the whole Bible. They were setting a trap to accuse Him of insurrection against Rome. They had plotted for some time to come up with this scheme. They thought it was foolproof.

Jesus replied by asking for a coin. Roman coins were minted with a very clear imprint of Caesar on one side. Our modern US coins with presidents on one side are actually patterned after Roman coins.

Upon receiving a denarius, He asked them; "Whose inscription is on this coin?" They responded, "Caesar's". His answer was profound: "Then render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

The implication becomes, "If this coin bears the image of Caesar, what bears the image of God?" Only one thing in all creation was created in the image or likeness of God, and that is mankind.

God is not interested in money, He is interested in people. He so loved the people of the world that He gave His only Son to redeem them. (John 3:16-18)

As a young believer, this text hit me like lightning; "I am valuable to God because I am created in His likeness." I had never viewed myself as valuable. Based on this text, I surrender my life to God without reservation. I had become a Christian a few years earlier, but God used this text to call me to total surrender.

Study this text for yourself. Are striving to earn money or please God? The two are very different. One is based on the world's value system, the other is based on a heavenly value system. God created you for Himself. You are His image bearer! Therefore you have value and purpose. You are His treasure.

(I once attended a Passion Play at a giant church in Guatemala called Fraternidad Cristiana de Guatemala, or "Mega Frater," as it is commonly called. The Pharisees were played by men in black robes, big hats, and tennis shoes with lights in them that flashed in time to the music. It was in Spanish, so I understood very few words. But when the actor playing Jesus took the coin one of the Pharisees had handed him and flipped it twenty feet across the stage, I knew *exactly* what had happened. Ever since, whenever someone tries to take the focus off Jesus and drag the conversation into something political, I remember Jesus flipping that coin and bringing the focus back to the LORD.) -dj

### **Life After Death: Matthew 22:23-33**

"23) On that day some Sadducees (who say there is no resurrection) came to Jesus and questioned Him, 24) asking, "Teacher, Moses said, 'If a man dies having no children, his brother as next of kin shall marry his wife, and raise up children for his brother.' 25) Now there were seven brothers with us; and the first married and died, and having no children left his wife to his brother; 26) so also the second, and the third, down to the seventh. 27) Last of all, the woman died. 28) In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife of the seven will she be? For they all had married her." 29) But Jesus answered and said to them, "You are mistaken, not understanding the Scriptures nor the power of God. 30) For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. 31) But regarding the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was spoken to you by God: 32) 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of

Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead but of the living." 33) When the crowds heard this, they were astonished at His teaching."

The Sadducees now take a shot at Jesus. They did not believe in a resurrection from the dead. They proposed a hypothetical situation to Him intended to mock the idea of a resurrection.

Beware of people who try to establish a theological point with hypothetical arguments. It is usually because they haven't diligently studied the Bible.

The Sadducees' argument was based on a fictitious woman who was married and widowed seven times to brothers without having a child. The question they posed to Jesus was "in the resurrection, whose wife would she be since they were all married to her?" There is no evidence this was a true scenario.

In verse 29, Jesus gave a profound answer: "You are mistaken because you do not understand the Scriptures or the power of God." Both of these will distort the truth. The Bible was written against the backdrop of supernaturalism. If you minimize the power of God, you are left having to twist Scripture and distort biblical reality.

An example might be theologians who claim, "God does not do miracles today," or "Some gifts of the Holy Spirit have ceased." These statements are both contrary to Scripture, but they match the bias and experience of the theologian who has embraced naturalism in the same way the Sadducees had.

Jesus then went on to explain that marriage is an earthly and not a heavenly institution. Actually, if there was marriage after the resurrection there would be a much more basic problem than the one posed by the Sadducees; "What about those married to unbelievers?" Their spouse will not be in heaven. Heaven is a new start.

Jesus then touched on the meaning of death. The soul and spirit do not die. They are eternal. Notice verse 32; "I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' He is not the God of the dead, but of the living."

This is an extension of the previous paragraph in Matthew 22:20-21. People are created in the image of God. The soul and spirit are eternal. It is essential to align yourself with God and His eternal purpose.

When Jesus alluded to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the present tense, He opened the door on another truth. All people who have ever lived are still alive in their soul and spirit. According to 1 Thessalonians 3:15-17 and 1 Corinthians 15:51-56; the transformation into our new and glorified bodies will transpire at the same time for all people despite their time in history. It will happen at the return of Christ. I confess, that thought stretches me!

Jesus used this test by the Sadducees to explain some vital truths. It includes concepts that many have never thought about. It is worthy of careful study.

### **The Foremost Commandment: Matthew 22:34-40**

“34) But when the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered themselves together. 35) One of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, 36) “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” 37) And He said to him, “ ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ 38) This is the great and foremost commandment. 39) The second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ 40) On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.””

This may have been the same dialogue recorded in Luke 10:25-29. If so, Jesus followed this exchange up with the story of the Good Samaritan not recorded by Matthew.

The lawyer was an expert in Mosaic Law. He was undoubtedly prodding Jesus about Deuteronomy 6:4-5: “‘4) Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one! 5) You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” This was commonly held to be the cornerstone of the Law. It was the foremost of the commandments.

Jesus followed this up by quoting from Leviticus 19:18; “You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord.”

Jesus was saying the way you love God will affect the way you treat people. In Luke 10:29, the lawyer tried justifying himself by asking, “... And who is my neighbor?” That question was met by the story of the Good Samaritan.

Many people divorce in their minds their love for God with the way they treat people, but the New Testament makes it clear that the two are closely connected. John, who was one of the Sons of Thunder (Mark 3:17), shared his profound insight on this theme in 1 John 4:7-21. His time with Jesus had radically changed Him. He came to realize that it was impossible to love God and hate people at the same time.

The Pharisees often used their love of God to excuse their hatred of people. They despised anyone who did not live up to their standard of righteousness.

This dialogue between Jesus and the Pharisees was a major indictment against them. When the story of the Good Samaritan is added to the end of this exchange, it becomes very pointed. Our neighbor is anyone in need.

(Deuteronomy 6:4-5 is very important in Judaism. It is known as “The Shema” and it is the central part of morning and evening prayers even today.) –dj

### **Identity Of The Christ: Matthew 22:41-46**

“41) Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question: 42) “What do you think about the Christ, whose son is He?” They said to Him, “The son of David.” 43) He

said to them, “Then how does David in the Spirit call Him ‘Lord,’ saying, 44) ‘The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at My right hand, Until I put Your enemies beneath Your feet?”’ 45) If David then calls Him ‘Lord,’ how is He his son?” 46) No one was able to answer Him a word, nor did anyone dare from that day on to ask Him another question.”

Having the Pharisees and the elders of the people gathered together and asking Him questions about the Law, Jesus decided to return the favor. He asked them, “What do you think about the Christ, whose son is He?”

This was intended to question both their knowledge of the Word of God and their theology. Notice, they were willing to concede that he was the son of David. After all, David had many immediate descendants.

But then Jesus quoted from Psalm 110:1 and launched a huge curve at them; “The LORD says to my LORD: “Sit at my right hand, until I make Thine enemies a footstool for Thy feet.” This is huge!

David not only called Him LORD, but he also acknowledged that He would sit at the right hand of God. This was basically what Jesus replied to Caiaphas the high priest in Matthew 26:64; “Jesus said to him, “You have said it yourself; nevertheless I tell you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven.”” He understood that Jesus was making a claim to Deity. The claim led to His crucifixion.

The significance of the trap that Jesus sprung on the religious leaders in Matthew 22:41-46 might escape the casual Bible reader, but it was brilliant and masterful. They could not claim to be accomplished Old Testament scholars without conceding His point. The Christ was indeed “LORD!” That was exactly what David proclaimed in Psalm 110:1-2.

I believe this was more than a trap. Jesus was planting a biblical seed from the Old Testament that eventually softened Gamaliel (Acts 5:31-42), and led to the conversion of Saul. (Acts 9:22) The early Christians were skilled at using the Old Testament to preach the gospel. (Acts 18:27-28) Jesus took the lead with this style of biblical apologetics.

Can you use the Old Testament to present the gospel? It is an invaluable resource.

### **Jesus In The Judgment Seat. Matthew 23:1-7**

“1) Then Jesus spoke to the crowds and to His disciples, 2) saying: “The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; 3) therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things and do not do them. 4) They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men’s shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger. 5) But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men; for they broaden their phylacteries and lengthen the tassels of their garments. 6) They love the place of honor at banquets and the chief seats in the synagogues, 7) and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called Rabbi by men.”

As we start this chapter, a little flashback to Matthew 7:1-2 may be in order. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warned not to judge lest you be judged. Matthew 22 was composed primarily of the Jewish religious leaders testing and judging Jesus. All of the leaders of the Jewish people had become open critics. They were preoccupied in fault-finding.

In Matthew 23, Jesus returns the favor. The chapter is long and the indictments are many. They were full of hypocrisy. We will proceed slowly so as to let His case against them build.

In Matthew 23:1-7, Jesus accused them of hypocrisy in their teaching of the Old Testament Law. They had seated themselves in the chair of Moses. They most likely stood for the reading of the Law, then sat to explain the Law to the people. This was a sign of authority.

As He opened this chapter, Jesus pointed out that the scribes and Pharisees had four basic follies. First, they would teach one way and then live another way. Second, they would tie up heavy loads for the people to carry with taxes, sacrifices, and detailed obligations from the Law but then excuse themselves. Third, they would dress the outside with extravagant garments including phylacteries with long portions of the Law written out and then totally neglect their inward self. Finally, they would parade around in public seeking to be noticed and honored by others and then totally despise and even shun other people around them.

These are traps of pride and self-promotion common to all in leadership. The first shift is from focusing on God to focusing on self. The second shift is from obeying God to becoming a self-authority. The third shift is from serving others to becoming self-serving. The final shift is putting self on a pedestal and becoming totally blind to God and others.

By verse seven, Jesus was only part way through His opening argument and tension was building fast. Blood pressures were rising. Faces were becoming red with anger. And, it was about to get far worse.

Let's step back and make a broad observation that will help us understand Matthew Chapter 23. Note that Jesus observed that the scribes and Pharisees had seated themselves in the chair of Moses. It is helpful to note that Moses had two seats. First, he occupied the legislative seat where God used him to write and teach the Law. This is the seat the scribes and Pharisees annexed for themselves. But second, Moses also occupied a judgment seat where God used him to judge the people and apply the Law.

In Matthew 23, Jesus gave a foretaste of His future role of sitting in the Judgment Seat. In 2 Corinthians 5:10, Paul warns that we will all one day appear before the judgment seat of Christ. Rather than cheering and celebrating the way He handled the scribes and Pharisees, it might be wise to preview yourself in their sandals. This small exercise might spark a personal revival!

### **The Worship of Self: Matthew 23:6-12**

"6) They love the place of honor at banquets and the chief seats in the synagogues, 7) and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called Rabbi by men. 8) But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. 9) Do not call anyone on earth



your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. 10) Do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ. 11) But the greatest among you shall be your servant. 12) Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.”

Jesus proceeded to unpack the next problem with the Pharisees. They climbed into the seat that John called “the boastful pride of life.” (Read 1 John 2:15-17) This can be summarized as the “Position Sins.”

They viewed value and status in life by earning degrees, climbing the corporate ladder, gaining titles and being in positions of power and influence. They demanded that people honor them because they were ordained as a Rabbi, became a recognized teacher, or influential leader or gained the office of a chief priest or scribe. This power grab is a dead-end road.

Beware my friend, true significance in life comes from our relationship with Jesus Christ and not worldly status. Degrees, titles, and positions do not crown a person with value. God looks at the heart.

Do you have a righteous character? Are you filled with honesty and integrity? Do you have a servant's heart? Is your relationship with God real, sincere, and full of grace and godly wisdom? Are you walking in the Spirit and bearing fruit for the glory of God? Do you serve to be noticed by men or is your life full of secret deeds of goodness known only by you and Jesus?

These are important questions. They separate godly men and women from the Pharisees Jesus was exposing in this text. Beware of self-promotion and let God do the promoting in your life.

Paul captured the essence of Matthew 23:6-12 in his own testimony recorded in Philippians 3:4-11. As a former Pharisee, he had embraced a self-promoting value system. He was gaining fame above his contemporaries... until he met Jesus Christ in personal salvation. Knowing Jesus radically changed His entire value system. It put him on a new path. His new ambition and goal in life became knowing Jesus Christ and sharing Him with others.

This pursuit filled all the voids in His life. It completed him. He became so servant-minded that God used him to literally change the course of human history. How did it happen? Instead of focusing on self, he made Jesus Christ His consuming focus.

If you are stuck in self-promotion mode like the scribes and Pharisees, stop! Hit the brakes! Repent! Run to Jesus Christ and embrace Him as your first love. Those who are lovers of self will crash and burn. The worship of self is the highest form of idolatry.

### **Woe To The Gatekeepers: Matthew 23:13**

““13) But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from people; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in.”

Jesus was standing in the temple after being tested by the scribes and Pharisees who were seeking to discredit Him. As He was speaking to the multitudes, He pronounced eight woes against the religious leaders of the Jewish people. These were His formal judgments against them. We shall take time to look at each of them in depth.

He opens verse 13 by calling them hypocrites. This word was borrowed from Greek theater. It is specifically related to the mask worn by an actor to switch characters or roles during a play. Jesus was accusing them of being fraudulent religious leaders. Jesus was taking their mask away in this chapter and exposing their true nature. They were pretending to represent truth, but they were filled with lies and deception. They were misleading the people.

James warned in James 3:1 that teachers and leaders will incur stricter judgment. They are the gatekeepers of truth and if they get it wrong, God will hold them accountable. The eight woes here in Matthew 23:13-36 are emphasizing the guilt of the religious rulers and their pending damnation before God. Jesus was warning the people not to follow them.

The first woe against them is found in verse 13. They were shutting off the kingdom of heaven from men. What does this mean?

Remember how the public ministry of Jesus began? According to Matthew 4:17, He began preaching and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Jesus came as the Messiah to announce the fulfillment of the Old Covenant and the inauguration of a new system that was promised throughout the Old Testament. He fulfilled all the prophecies. He came as the Lamb of God to fulfill the Law and redeem humanity. He was ushering in a new era of salvation. The kingdom of heaven was at hand.

But, the religious leaders rejected Him! As Matthew 23:13 says, "they shut off the kingdom of heaven from man." They not only ignored the Old Testament Scriptures, they openly fought against acknowledging Jesus as the Messiah. They were intended to be the heralds of truth, but instead they actively tried to shut and lock the gate to the new dispensation of salvation through faith in the Messiah. They were fighting against God!

They did not embrace Jesus as Messiah themselves and they actively opposed and persecuted anyone who was seeing the light for themselves. The gatekeepers were desperately trying to shut and lock the Messiah out! Woe to them! This is a serious indictment against them!

This verse now makes sense. What a tragedy! Their condemnation was justified. But wait, many pastors and religious leaders are doing the same thing today. They are twisting Scripture, obscuring truth, teaching false doctrines, denying the gospel and the ministry of the Holy Spirit, condoning and promoting ungodly living and persecuting those who stand for the truth. They have no spine or backbone as gatekeepers of truth.

Take a moment and read 2 Timothy 4:1-8. Paul pronounced this same warning against any pastor or teacher who distorts the gospel and promotes ungodly living. These modern enemies of the truth stand with the scribes and Pharisees and deserve eternal guilt and damnation. Woe to them!

### **Woe to Religious Predators: Matthew 23:14; Mark 12:40; Luke 20:47**

“[14) Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you devour widows’ houses, and for a pretense you make long prayers; therefore you will receive greater condemnation.]”

Notice the unique markings on this verse. When that occurs, it is an indication that this verse does not appear in the earliest manuscripts. Later versions of the Gospel of Matthew may have borrowed this verse from Mark 12:40 or Luke 20:47. Notice that both of those Gospels include the charge that the scribes and Pharisees made a habit of devouring widows' houses. What does that mean?

Notice that this is tied to the idea of making long prayers for appearance sake. This may have been similar to the practice in the Catholic Church of selling indulgences. These unscrupulous religious leaders would sell their services to say a Mass or pray departed loved ones out of purgatory. They played on the emotions of the widow who would pay huge sums of money to ensure that their loved ones would be spared suffering.

History during the Middle Ages is full of tragic examples where the church literally devoured the full estate of widows. They were easy prey. Biblical ignorance has been exploited by religious leaders throughout history. I include this merely as an example.

It appears that the scribes and Pharisees may have had a similar practice. Jesus was exposing and condemning them. Their long prayers for appearance sake may have been sold to widows for a similar reason. The whole of Scripture gives strong warnings against exploiting widows and orphans.

2 Timothy 3:6 hints that false teachers also preyed on weak women for sexual exploitation. They would “enter into households” and captivate weak women. Though the word “widow” is not used in the verse, it is not unreasonable. They were very vulnerable and therefore “weak.” This kind of exploitation and spiritual abuse is strongly condemned in the Bible.

The addition of this “woe” in Matthew 23:13 has a strong biblical foundation. Woe to any religious leader who uses their position to exploit widows or prey on women and children. The condemnation Jesus pronounced on these religious predators is justified.

### **Woe to Religious Proselytizers: Matthew 23:15**

““Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel around on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.”

This woe is directed toward making followers of self rather than followers of God. The Pharisees were committed to traveling far and wide to find a student, but then they would turn them into disciples of hell instead of disciples of heaven. Religion can be intoxicating.

Saul of Tarsus is a prime example of this system. He was young and zealous and was surpassing his contemporaries in what he thought was service of God, but it led him down the path of becoming a mercenary. He oversaw the stoning of Stephen as recorded in Acts 7:54-8:1. Then he orchestrated a ferocious persecution against the early Christians. (Acts 8:1-3) The entire time, he was deceived into thinking that he was serving God!

His whole understanding of the Law was bent around justifying his actions. (See Philippians 3:4-6) His devotion to "religion" made him an enemy of God. His story stands as an example of this woe Jesus pronounced on the Pharisees. They were religious, but throughout the four Gospels they were the critics and enemies of Jesus. They eventually crucified Him!

Saul's conversion is recorded in Acts 9:1-9. When Jesus appeared to him, he posed the question, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Another way of asking that question might be, "Saul, Saul, why are you fighting against God?"

But wait, Saul was devoutly religious. He had volumes of zeal. How could someone so sincere be so deceived? How did he get so far off track?

We could ask the same question of many religious zealots today. Pick whichever world religion you want and I will show you many proselytes of hell. Like Saul, they lead the charge against the gospel and the true God. They feed on the blood of born-again believers. They may be devout, religious and sincere... but they are tragically wrong. This has been the case throughout history.

"Blind religion" is Satan's playground. He uses it to deceive people and obscure the truth. It is bathed in the blood of the martyrs. So what is the answer?

It boils down to the simple gospel and a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. That's what converted Saul of Tarsus into the Apostle Paul. That is the narrow gate that every true child of God must enter through into heaven. (See Matthew 7:13-14) Don't let anyone or anything block your way through that gate! Woe to the religious proselytizes!

### **Woe to Religious Oath-Breakers: Matthew 23:16-22**

“16) Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘Whoever swears by the temple, that is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple is obligated.’ 17) You fools and blind men! Which is more important, the gold or the temple that sanctified the gold? 18) And, ‘Whoever swears by the altar, that is nothing, but whoever swears by the offering on it, he is obligated.’ 19) You blind men, which is more important, the offering, or the altar that sanctifies the offering? 20) Therefore, whoever swears by the altar, swears both by the altar and by everything on it. 21) And whoever swears by the temple, swears both by the temple and by Him who dwells within it. 22) And whoever swears by heaven, swears both by the throne of God and by Him who sits upon it.”

Jesus now exposes the degree of superstition practiced by the Pharisees. Instead of being bound by their words, they made degrees of binding oaths. For example, if a person swore an

oath by the temple it was nothing, but if he swore by the gold in the temple, he was obligated. (Vs 16-17) Jesus pointed out the utter foolishness of the whole system of oath making that empowered truth-bending.

They were like blind guides for other blind people who were constantly adding new rules as the game went on. Their words could not be trusted. They did whatever they pleased. They applied the Law to others, but they became a law unto themselves. There was no solid foundation under what they taught, how they lived and how it applied to themselves. They became religious truth-benders.

Instead of clearly and truthfully representing God and His Word, they used their position to rule and exploit people. They twisted and changed things to match their own objectives and excuse themselves of any wrong or fault. They used their positions as religious leaders to control and manipulate people. Instead of being Promise Keepers, they were Oath-Breakers.

### **Woe To The Religious Profit-Reapers: Matthew 23:23-24**

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others. You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!”

Jesus now looks at the practice of tithing. Many believe the tithe in the Old Testament amounted to 10% of the annual income, but this was actually collected three separate times annually. Numbers 18:20-24 points out that 10% was given to the Levites to support their temple services. Deuteronomy 14:22-24 says that another 10% was paid to the service of the sanctuary, commonly in cattle or grain. Then Deuteronomy 14:28-29 shows that every 3rd year another 10% was given to the poor to be eaten in their own dwelling. Altogether, nearly 1/3 of the property of the Jews was devoted to religious service by the Law. This was besides the voluntary offerings that were made.

The mention of mint, anise, and cummin becomes intriguing in the text. These were herbs of little value and not considered part of the produce of the land mentioned in Deuteronomy 14:22, but the Pharisees required these as well. They were very meticulous in counting the tithe, but very sloppy with righteous living.

Notice the contrast Jesus set up in Matthew 23:23. They did well with eternal tithing, in fact the bigger tithe became an expression of pride and social status among the Jews. Refer to the story of the poor widow in Luke 21:1-4. The pious religious leaders would linger close to the treasury trying to quickly calculate what was given in the tithe to see who was greatest.

However, Jesus pointed out that they neglected weightier inward provisions of the law that included justice, mercy, and faithfulness. Religion was reduced to an external show that did nothing to change the heart.

Thus Jesus applied a common proverb to the Pharisees. They were guilty of straining out gnats but swallowing camels. Some provisions of the Law like tithing they watched closer than modern IRS agents, but the important things of justice, mercy, and faithfulness were totally ignored.

Do you see what was happening? They were extracting every denarius from the tithe of the poor, because from it they were compensated, but they closed their eyes to justice and mercy toward the orphan, widow, and alien. This is where the previous charge Jesus made in Mark 12:40 and Luke 20:47 becomes so grievous. They were padding their own pockets while exploiting the poor. They were devouring widows' houses.

Though not stated in the text, they may have excused themselves from paying tithes on what they received as support from the tithes of the people. They were not farmers. They did not have crops or cattle from which to tithe.

No wonder Jesus called them hypocrites. They were not promise-keepers, they were profit-reapers. They had cashed in on the tithing system. It had become a scam. They were taking the cream off the top for themselves. Do you see the weight of this woe Jesus pronounced against them?

### **Woe To The Filthy Inward Cups: Matthew 23:25-26**

“25) Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence. 26) You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also.”

This woe exposes the weakness of the Law itself. It was good at making the outside look good, but it did nothing to cleanse and change the human heart. The inside was still sinful and dirty. Conforming to outward legalism does not affect the inward greed, lust, and self-indulgence.

Paul touched on this inherent weakness of the Law in Galatians 3:21-22; “21) Is the Law then contrary to the promises of God? May it never be! For if a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law. 22) But the Scripture has shut up everyone under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.”

The problem was that the outward Law could not impart new life to the inward spirit of man. It made the outward look good, but the inward was untouched.

This woe that Jesus pronounced on the Pharisees was the first exposure of this principle. They tried desperately to arrive at self-righteousness through the Law but could not change their own human nature. They were religious but lost.

They looked like clean cups outwardly, but inwardly they were full of robbery and self-indulgence. You can wash the outside of a pig and dress it in a tuxedo, but inwardly, it is still a pig. The outward bath and nice suit does nothing to change the inside nature of a pig.

So it was with the Pharisees and the Law. They had conformed outwardly, but inwardly they were a mess. Rigid legalism does nothing to cleanse the inside of the cup. Jesus exposed the inward filth of the human heart.

### **Woe to the Stench of Death: Matthew 23:27-28**

“27) Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness. 28) So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.”

Jesus now becomes extremely graphic about the inner moral decay of the Pharisees and religious leaders. He compares them to magnificent and ornate sepulchers that were carved and painted outwardly to appear beautiful, but when opened up were full of decaying bones and rotting flesh. This description could not be more graphic.

The pugnacious nature of this comparison can be illustrated by John 11:39 when Jesus ordered them to remove the stone from the tomb of Lazarus; “... Martha, the sister of the deceased, said to Him, “Lord, by this time there will be a stench, for he has been dead four days.” It was unimaginable. Death stinks.

But this was exactly what Jesus was saying about the scribes and Pharisees in this seventh woe. Outwardly they looked magnificent, but inwardly they were putrid and decaying. They pretend to be righteous, but inwardly were full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

This picture of religion is the opposite of what a personal relationship with Jesus Christ produces. The Holy Spirit imparts inward life and not death to the born-again believer.

Listen to how Paul described the believer in 2 Corinthians 2:14-16; “14) But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place. 15) For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; 16) to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life. And who is adequate for these things?” Paul compared Christians to an aroma of life. Jesus compared the Pharisees and scribes to an aroma of death. They were the stench of death!

### **Woe To You Brood Of Vipers: Matthew 23:29-33**

“29) Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, 30) and say, ‘If we had been living in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’ 31) Consequently you testify against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. 31) Fill up, then, the measure of the guilt of your fathers. 32) You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell?”

With this final Woe, Jesus unloads the full measure of guilt and condemnation on the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees. They pretended to celebrate the past prophets and righteous men by adorning their monuments.

They went so far as to condemn the bloodshed perpetrated by their forefathers against the prophets in an attempt to disassociate from them. But in doing so they condemned themselves. Here is the irony: They were not only sons of those who murdered the prophets, but at this very moment they were plotting the death of the Messiah!

Jesus called them serpents and a brood of vipers. Then He leveled judgment: "How shall you escape the sentence of hell?" Their eternal condemnation sounded certain!

But wait, the same question can be asked of every human; "How shall you escape the sentence of hell?" It is the most serious question you will ever answer for yourself. Make certain you get it right!

There may have been standing in the crowd that day a young Pharisee named "Saul." After his conversion, he became the beloved Apostle Paul. He spent the rest of his life proclaiming the answer of that question to the world. He later wrote the book of Romans which was dedicated to answering that very question.

It is appropriate to close this section by simply quoting Romans 3:21-26. Here is how a former Pharisee answered that crucial question:

"21) But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, 22) even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; 23) for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24) being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; 25) whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; 26) for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus." Romans 3:21-26

### **The Guilty Generation: Matthew 23:34-36**

"34) Therefore, behold, I am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes; some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues, and persecute from city to city, 35) so that upon you may fall the guilt of all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. 36) Truly I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation."

This generation of Jewish religious leaders carried extra condemnation. They not only crucified the Messiah, but they also launched the bloody persecution against the early Christian church



and its leaders. They perpetrated the stoning of Stephen (Acts 8:54-60), the killing of the Apostle James (Acts 12:2), and the arrest of Peter. (Acts 12:3-19)

Much of the violence against the early church was carried out by them. (Acts 8:1-3) There is no record of the full amount of suffering and human blood shed by these religious leaders, but it was surpassed only by the Roman persecution itself that eventually came.

In verse 35, Jesus said the blood guilt of all the righteous from Able (Genesis 4:6-8), to Zechariah the priest (2 Chronicles 24:20-21) was going to be poured out on this generation. Why? What is the connection?

When John 8:44 and John 10:10 are viewed together, we discover that Satan is ultimately behind all death and violence; especially aimed at the righteous. This will culminate with the antichrist and his violent persecution of both Israel and Christians in the end times. They were willing partners with Satan.

But why would a generation of religious leaders carry more guilt? Because they crucified the Messiah! They were willfully blind and ignorant to the volume of prophecies pointing to the Messiah in the Old Testament. Furthermore, they closed their eyes and ears to the manifold signs, wonders and teachings of Jesus during His public ministry.

In a sense, the book of Matthew was written as a formal charge against the Jewish religious leaders of that generation. They chose to ignore the evidence and conspire with the devil in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Read Matthew 27:22-26. Look carefully at verse 25; "And all the people answered and said, 'His blood be on us and our children!'" Jesus granted their request.

### **Lamentation For Jerusalem: Matthew 23:37-39**

““37) Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling. 38) Behold, your house is being left to you desolate! 39) For I say to you, from now on you will not see Me until you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!' ””

It is difficult to read these words without thinking of Psalm 91. God wants to protect His people. He wants them to dwell in the shelter of the Most High and abide in the shadow of the Almighty. He wants to be their refuge and fortress. He wants to cover them with His pinions and let them seek refuge under His wings. (Psalm 91:1-4)

But Jerusalem opposed Him! It persecuted and killed those sent to warn them. It embraced foreign gods and set up many idols. It spurned God and embraced foreign morals and values. Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel all prophesied against them. They were bent on evil and destruction.

Just prior to the time of Jesus they had a little time of reprieve. The temple had been rebuilt and the sacrificial system restored, but wickedness and corruption was boiling under the surface.

The religious leaders were again leading the people astray. They were about to reject and crucify their Messiah.

These verses epitomize how much Jesus loved and longed for His people. He wept over this city. The next chapter opens with His prophecy that the city was about to be destroyed and the temple torn down. Not one stone would be left upon another.

At some point in the future, the Jewish people will turn back to Him. They will welcome Him with open arms. They will cry out; "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord."

### **Destruction of the Temple Foretold: Matthew 24:1-2**

"1) Jesus came out from the temple and was going away when His disciples came up to point out the temple buildings to Him. 2) And He said to them, "Do you not see all these things? Truly I say to you, not one stone here will be left upon another, which will not be torn down.""

This is an unfortunate place for a chapter division. The eight Woes that Jesus pronounced on the Scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23:13-39 were directly connected to His prophecy of the destruction of the temple in Matthew 24:2.

And so it happened. Let me quote from Barnes' Notes on the New Testament. He does an exceptional job of expounding this history:

*"The buildings of the temple. The temple itself, with the surrounding courts, porches, and other edifices. See Barnes " :". Mark says that they particularly pointed out the stones of the temple, as well as the buildings. "In that temple," says Josephus, the Jewish historian, "were several stones which were forty-five cubits in length, five in height, and six in breadth;" that is, more than seventy feet long, ten wide, and eight high. These stones, of such enormous size, were principally used in building the high wall on the east side, from the base to the top of the mountain. They were also, it is said, beautifully painted with variegated colours.*

*There shall not be left here one stone upon another. At the time this was spoken, no event was more improbable than this. The temple was vast, rich, splendid. It was the pride of the nation, and the nation was at peace. Yet in the short space of forty years all this was exactly accomplished. Jerusalem was taken by the Roman armies, under the command of Titus, x. D. 70. The account of the siege and destruction of the city is left us by Josephus, an historian of undoubted veracity and singular fidelity. He was a Jewish priest. In the wars of which he gives an account, he fell into the hands of the Romans, and remained with them during the siege and destruction of the city. Being a Jew, he would of course say nothing designed to confirm the prophecies of Jesus Christ. Yet his whole history appears-almost like a running commentary on these predictions respecting the destruction of the temple. The following particulars are given on his authority:*

*After the city was taken, Josephus says that Titus "gave orders that they should now demolish the whole city and temple, except three towers, which he reserved standing. But for the rest of the wall, it was laid so completely even with the ground by those who dug it up from the*

*foundation, that there was nothing left to make those believe who came hither that it had ever been inhabited." Maimonides, a Jewish writer, has also recorded that "Terentius Rufus, an officer in the army of Titus, with a ploughshare tore up the foundations of the temple," that the prophecy might be fulfilled, "Zion shall be ploughed as a field," Micah 3:12. This was all done by the direction of Divine Providence. Titus was desirous of preserving the temple; and frequently sent Josephus to the Jews to induce them to surrender and save the temple and city. But the prediction of the Saviour had gone forth; and, notwithstanding the wish of the Roman general, the temple was to be destroyed. The Jews themselves first set fire to the porticoes of the temple. One of the Roman soldiers, without any command, threw a burning firebrand into the golden window, and soon the temple was in flames. Titus gave orders to extinguish the fire; but, amidst the tumult, none of his orders were obeyed. The soldiers pressed to the temple, and neither fear, nor entreaties, nor stripes, could restrain them. Their hatred of the Jews urged them on to the work of destruction; and thus, says Josephus, the temple was burnt against the will of Caesar.--Jewish Wars, book vi., chap. iv. 5, 6, 7."*

(If you go to Jerusalem, you will find many people visiting "The Western Wall" of the temple. So, if Jesus said not one stone would be left on another, how does this wall still exist? The Western Wall is not a wall of the temple that was destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D. It is part of a retaining wall for the *foundation* of the temple. It is said that the Roman general, Titus, who led the defeat of Jerusalem, left this one fragment of the temple as a painful reminder of the Roman defeat of the Jews. Others say God left the Western Wall as a fragment for the Jewish people out of His mercy. Note: Although this place was once known as "The Wailing Wall," that name is now considered derogatory.)--dj

### **Times of the End: Matthew 24:3**

"3) As He was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things happen, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?"

Though all the Apostles were with Jesus as He came out of the temple in the previous two verses, it appears now as He sits on the Mount of Olives that only Peter, James, John, and Andrew are in His company. (See Mark 13:3) They question Him privately.

This is a point often skipped over, but of great significance. Though all had equal access to Jesus, only this small group took every advantage of abiding in His presence. They were consistently pictured at His side.

The same is true today. Every believer has an invitation to abide in His presence, study His Word, come boldly before the throne of grace, worship Him and walk by the Spirit, but so few spend significant time with Him. We allow many worthless and mundane things to steal our focus and attention while only a few spend time at His feet in private. Make it your ambition to be in that small group.

They were aware that significant changes were at hand. He had warned them often of His coming death and resurrection. (Matthew 16:21; 20:17-19) They took the occasion to ask Him three key questions:

1. When will these things be?
2. What will be the sign of Your coming?
3. What will mark the end of the age?

These three questions were profound. They were still on their mind after His resurrection. Look at Acts 1:6; “Lord, is it at this time you are restoring the kingdom to Israel?” To this Jesus replied; “(7) ... It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; (8) but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.””

I would suggest the words “end of the age”, “times”, and “epochs” are crucial. The disciples were thinking in terms of an event, but Jesus was speaking of mysteries of a coming age, epoch, or entire dispensations of time.

Though He had hinted about it in John 14-17, at this point the disciples were clueless of the coming age of the indwelling Holy Spirit. This is often referred to as the “age of grace” or “the church age.” It might even be called “the age of the Gentiles.” It has already spanned nearly 2,000 years! But notice, this long “age” was not even on their radar screen!

The Apostle Paul spoke in depth about this mystery in Ephesians 3:1-12. He had unparalleled insight into “the age of grace” or “the Church age.” It behooves us to live and walk in the full benefits of this age of the indwelling Holy Spirit in which we now live! He made this application the focus of praying for believers in the next context of Ephesians 3:14-21. It is worthy of your careful study.

But now let me stretch you with another thought. Like the disciples, I often hear questions about “the end times.” We want a nice and neat explanation of exactly what is going to happen and when! Like the disciples, Christians are searching for a time and date. But what if “the end times” relate more to an age than a specific event? Could it be that God wants us to discern the “signs of the times” rather than looking for neatly packaged events? Are we as clueless as the disciples were about God’s calendar?

I confess, I am thinking more in terms of “the times of the end” than I am “the end times.” For example, the Bible talks about an expansion of international travel, the gospel going to every nation, times of tribulation and martyrdom, Israel becoming a nation, the forging of a one world government system and the rule of antichrist. This will be accompanied by an apostate Christian church that competes with and obscures the revived bride of Christ. Of necessity there will also be an explosion of technology to track the mark of the beast.

Hmm, I have watched many of these things take shape during my sojourn on earth. If I were born a mere 20 years earlier, I could conceivably embrace all of them, including the expansion of international aviation to fulfill the prophecy of Daniel 12:4 and Israel becoming a nation.

My point is that many things blend together in “the times of the end.” The Bible presents this as a gradual time of transition that spans one full generation. This will be followed by the return of Christ to set up His millennial kingdom. (Revelation 20:1-7) Granted, there are numerous views as to how the return of Christ will transpire, but don’t lose sight of the big picture; Jesus is coming again!

I personally believe we are in the times of the end of this age. It has been unfolding right before our eyes in my generation. This will culminate with the next age on God’s calendar. God is still in control! The earth is not going to be destroyed at this time. Jesus is preparing to rule this present earth for a full millennium.

The problem I see is that people blend the end of this age and the end of the world together in their thinking. These two events are very different and are separated by the millennial reign of Christ.

Stay tuned as Jesus unpacks the times of the end in the next two chapters.

### **A Time Of Worldwide Deception: Matthew 24:4-5; 11**

“4) And Jesus answered and said to them, “See to it that no one misleads you. 5) For many will come in My name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and will mislead many. 11) And many false prophets will arise and will mislead many.”

Jesus now starts unpacking the signs that will accompany the times of the end of this age. These verses depict a world filled with lies and deception. And no wonder for John 8:44 says that Satan is a liar, deceiver, and murderer. From the time the serpent tempted Eve in the garden to present, his schemes have always been wrapped and advanced by deception.

But can you imagine a world in which he seeks to rule over human government as the antiChrist. Lies and deception will be the signature of his kingdom. The times of the end will not only feature a false religion, but everything from the education system, to science, to the economy, to the media, to the political structure and to the economy itself will be built on lies and deception. Truth will be lost. Common sense will not be tolerated.

Paul picked up this theme in 2 Thessalonians 2:9-12. Read these verses carefully and take note of the manifold lies and deception associated with the times of the end; “9) that is, the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders, 10) and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved. 11) For this reason God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they will believe what is false, 12) in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness.” (2 Thessalonians 2:9-12)

The antichrist will try to deceive the world into thinking he is the Messiah. He will demand unquestioned obedience. It will be a false religious system in which he will demand worship and unquestioned loyalty. He will attempt to brainwash the masses. Opposing views will not be tolerated. Freedom of thought, speech, and religion will be lost. Lies will be forced on the whole world.

“Impossible”, you say! I beg you to open your eyes. The mystery of lawlessness and deception has crept over the world in recent years to an extent unparalleled in the history of the world. We are now living in times of worldwide deception.

### **Wars and Rumors of War: Matthew 24:6-7**

“6) You will be hearing of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not frightened, for those things must take place, but that is not yet the end. 7) For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and in various places there will be famines and earthquakes.”

War and conflict seems to be part of human nature. The New York Times recently reported that the world has been at peace for only 268 of the past 3,400 years. That’s a lot of death and dying. Granted, many of these were smaller and localized conflicts, but history proves that peace is very elusive to humanity.

Modernization has greatly enhanced the severity of war. Guns, big artillery, tanks, airplanes, ICBM’s, submarines, advanced navies, atomic weapons, biological warfare, electronic warfare, and economic warfare have combined to make the world a very unstable place. I will argue that there has never been a more dangerous and unstable time in human history than today!

These weapons combined with fallen human nature helps punctuate the severity of these words of Jesus. The world is going to become increasingly more unstable and volatile as history rushes toward the end of this age. When we mix in the nature of the evil god of this world, we come up with a recipe for violence, death, and destruction on a global scale never previously known to mankind.

I personally believe there is only one reason mankind has not utterly destroyed this place: “God is in control!” He is not done with humanity yet and He is not done with planet earth yet! Jesus pointed out that wars and conflict will come, but He will supersede so as to accomplish His ultimate plan. In my book, this is strong evidence for the existence of a loving and providential God who watches over His creation.

But I dare not minimize the death and destruction Satan will impose on the world in the end times. He will unleash the full fury of his evil and cause many to be killed. Dark and dreary days are upon us.

As the storm clouds for WWIII mount, there is another cloud seen in prophecy. Jesus will eventually descend from this cloud and set up His millennial kingdom. (See Acts 1:11; 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17; Revelation 20) His reign will usher in a time of global peace. War will be eradicated during this time. He is the Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9:6)

I believe these will be literal events in the end times. I would encourage you not to wait another day before inviting the Prince of Peace into your life. He is the only one who can stop the inner war in your life. You are either aligned with Him or with the thief exposed in John 10:10. The thief brings death and destruction, but Jesus brings life. I fix my trust and hope in Jesus.

### **Beginning of Labor: Matthew 24:7-8**

“7) For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and in various places there will be famines and earthquakes. 8) But all these things are merely the beginning of birth pangs.”

I look at famines and earthquakes as an increase in natural disasters. Many times, biblical prophecies of the end times include plagues or pestilence with war, famine, and earthquakes. (See Revelation 6:1-8)

These have seen a noted increase in the past generation. In the past 15 years, we have seen many thousands of people killed in earthquakes such as in Haiti and Turkey. These have stolen the headlines but smaller earthquakes have also taken many lives. They are now so frequent that smaller ones no longer make the headlines.

Famine is also on the rise in many countries. The prediction of a worldwide food shortage is beginning to be taken seriously. The international food reserve is at the lowest level it's been at for decades. Starvation is real in many countries as I write this post.

It is hard to calculate the total loss of lives from plagues and pestilence in recent years, but the AIDS virus and Covid 19 have been responsible for the death of more than 45 million people worldwide. Some estimates put the numbers much higher. For political reasons, it is nearly impossible to get an accurate count.

I do not want to dwell on these, except to point out what Jesus said in Matthew 24:8; “But all these things are merely the beginning of birth pangs.” Jesus pictured the end times as a woman going through labor. He said it would be painful.

But lest we slip into gloom, let me ask an important question, “According to the full context of Matthew 24, what is birthed through the labor pains?” The answer is found in verse 30; “and then the sign of the Son of man will appear in the sky...” Did you see that? As difficult as the labor pains will be, they will give birth to the return of Jesus to set up His Millennial Kingdom. The book of Revelation points to this same conclusion. (See Revelation 20)

My wife has gone through labor pains eight times and endured one emergency C-section. All of them were difficult, but the resulting baby was worth it all. The labor was soon forgotten because of the new life it brought forth.

I believe the end time labor pains have started. There is no turning back the clock. History is rushing toward a new epoch. God is in control. The return of Jesus is drawing near. We are most likely in the beginning of birth pangs.

So how long before Jesus returns? I don't know. Sometimes, labor goes fast and some drag on for a long time. God is in control of the length of the labor, but it seems self-evident that contractions have started!

### **Storm Clouds of Persecution and Opposition: Matthew 24:9**

“(9) Then they will deliver you to tribulation, and will kill you, and you will be hated by all nations because of My name.”

The next sign Jesus pointed to was tribulation, persecution, and martyrdom. Christians will die for their faith in unparalleled numbers.

Though martyrdom has accompanied nearly every generation of Christianity, it has greatly accelerated since WWII. More Christians have died for their faith in the past 80 years than all of church history combined.

This can primarily be charged to communism, Islam, and the new intolerance of Hinduism. Persecution is mounting worldwide from these three rivals. But something new is happening: Liberal secularism has turned Christianity into its new target.

Because biblical Christianity is socially conservative, we have become the target of woke bullying and scorn. As antichrist continues to embrace the world with his one-world policies, Christianity will be viewed with more intolerance and hatred. Christians will be blamed for every perceived injustice in the world. Hatred needs an innocent victim.

By their very nature, the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness are in opposition to one another. While Jesus calls His own to love and serve their enemies, Satan makes those who oppose him a target for public scorn, ridicule, imprisonment, and death. In the end times, every department of the secular state will be weaponized against Christianity.

The unique characteristic of recent times is that these tendencies are being unleashed in Western culture. Europe, Australia, Canada, and the United States are launching a new wave of open hate and public scorn against Christianity. The goal of this new social experiment is to remove all remnant influences of what is viewed as obsolete conservative Christianity from modern culture.

This push is intensifying. A new wave of scorn and hatred of Christianity is being birthed in Hollywood and propagated in secular media. Modernism is at war with traditional conservative Christian values. A tsunami of persecution is mounting against Christianity. Brace yourself, it is already pounding the shores of western culture. What has been considered as safe and sacred ground for Christianity is quickly losing its innocence. Storm clouds are gathering.

### **The Great Falling Away: Matthew 24:10**

“(10) At that time many will fall away and will betray one another and hate one another.”



Jesus now talks about the apostasy that will accompany the end times. Some call this the great “falling away.”

Paul also warned against this in texts like 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12; 2 Timothy 3:1-9; and 4:1-8. These people will hold to a form of godliness, but deny Jesus Christ as master and reject solid biblical preaching and teaching.

I view this as the emergence of liberal Christianity. They call themselves “Christian,” but they stand in stark contrast to the teachings of Jesus Christ and the born-again gospel message. They ignore, minimize, and reject the Bible.

Many denominations and Christian organizations have become the antithesis of their founding roots. In fact, they will deliver up to persecution and hate any who hold to conservative and biblical Christianity.

Again, as we survey the previous generation of the past 50-80 years, the great “falling away” has happened at an alarming rate and is gaining momentum. Though apostasy has been present throughout the past 2,000 years of church history, the current phenomenon is unprecedented.

We are watching an internal and wide-spread decay and disintegration of Christian morals and biblical doctrines. The secularization of Christianity is unfolding right before our eyes. The great “falling away” that Jesus warned about is engulfing modern Christianity.

### **False Prophets: Matthew 24:11**

“11) Many false prophets will arise and will mislead many.”

The next sign Jesus spoke of was false prophets. The past generation has seen an unprecedented spike in religious cults and isms. There are more false teachers today than any time in history.

But technically, this verse is much broader than just religious false prophets. Jesus was talking about the rise of “heralds of deception.” These people could be secular or sacred.

When this view is adopted, it would include people like Karl Marx, Charles Darwin, John Dewy, Sigmund Freud, George Soros, and Richard Dawkins. The list could go on and on. It would include any teaching or doctrine aligned against biblical Christianity.

The past one hundred years now comes into focus with stunning clarity. This time frame has seen the rise of communism, naturalism, humanism, Freudian psychology, atheism, critical race theory, gender confusion, and woke culture. These are merely the tip of the iceberg. These movements are all aligned against the truth. These constitute another intense labor contraction that summarizes the times we are living in and modernism.

### **Lawlessness: Matthew 24:12**

“12) Because lawlessness is increased, most people’s love will grow cold.”

In this verse, Jesus teaches that lawlessness will greatly increase in the end times. I look at this as a setting aside of biblical morals, values, and boundaries. Society will exchange evil for good, right for wrong, and truth for lies.

Some liberal American cities have decided to cut down on crimes by not prosecuting minor theft or assaults. This has resulted in a dramatic increase in crime and violence and open attacks on law enforcement officers. Crime waves and violence in these cities is now out of control.

Jesus said the end result would be that “most people’s love will grow cold.” When lawlessness is increased, love begins to die. There is no honor, respect, dignity, or personal boundaries left in these environments. It turns into a culture where everyone does whatever they please to whoever they please with no fear of legal repercussion or accountability. There remains no consequences for negative actions.

This becomes a breeding ground for unrestrained human depravity. The process is described in Romans 1:18-32 and Ephesians 4:17-19. Human society enters into a downward tailspin into corruption, wickedness, violence, and exploitation. Life becomes unbearable as lawlessness abounds. The hope for an earthly human utopia apart from God is very elusive.

### **Perseverance of the Saints: Matthew 24:13**

“But the one who endures to the end, he will be saved.”

As things go from bad to worse in the end times, we will see the concept of the perseverance of the saints shine. There will emerge glorious stories of genuine and godly believers remaining faithful to the end of their lives. They will not be bought off, threatened off, or lured off by the world into sin and compromise. They will be like Stephen, the first faithful martyr for Jesus.

“The end” seems to refer to “the end of their lives.” Whatever comes, they will remain true to their Master. They will not be saved by their works, but their works will testify that they are saved.

Though there are many false teachers and much forsaking of the truth in our day, there are also thousands of inspiring stories of the faithful and true forsaking all, including life itself for the love of Jesus. The last one hundred years has added volumes to the story of the faithful and true.

### **All Nations: Matthew 24:14**

“14) This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come.”

Jesus now presents the sign of the gospel being preached to the whole world. Again, as we look at the past generation, this sign has been fulfilled through the modern missions movement. The gospel has been preached to every nation.

In fact, when modern Christian television, radio, and social media are added to the equation, the Word of God is often broadcast worldwide within every 24 hour time period. It might be argued that the gospel is available in every nation every hour of the day, every day of the week all year long.

Some look at every nation, language and tribal group hearing the gospel. This goal is also close to being reached. We are nearing the goal of having key portions of the Bible translated into nearly every language. Certainly, the goal of every major language group has been reached.

When all of these signs are added together, the trumpet signaling the return of Jesus could sound at any time. We are at the door of the imminent return of Christ. No previous generation could make these claims.

I believe the birth pangs are complete. The clock is about to strike midnight. Everything Jesus said in Matthew 24:4-14 has been fulfilled. The return of Christ could happen at any time.

### **All Eyes On Jerusalem: Matthew 24:15**

““Therefore when you see the abomination of desolation which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand),”

Many look at the abomination of desolation as the fulfillment of Daniel 9:26-27. (Please read). This refers to the Messiah being cut off, Jerusalem destroyed, and the temple system cut off. As a result, abominations will happen on the temple grounds.

Scholars are divided on the meaning of these verses. Some look back and say this was fulfilled when the Roman army destroyed Jerusalem and utterly demolished the temple as Jesus inferred in Matthew 24:2.

Others include the takeover of the temple ground by Islam and the building of the Dome of the Rock (a Muslim shrine) on the temple grounds. Many wars and much tension have occupied this site.

Still others look at current times and Israel becoming a nation. They then see the antichrist going into a newly rebuilt temple and offering abominable sacrifices. Hence, this view says Jesus cannot come back until a temple is rebuilt and the sacrificial system restored on the temple site.

My concern is that this view interrupts the doctrine of the imminent return of Christ by focusing on the temple. They look at the significance of Israel becoming a nation in 1948, but are fixated on the need for the temple to be rebuilt.

Still others see this as the last week of the seventy weeks of Daniel 9:24 and conclude that verse 27 is referring to seven years of tribulation and the reign of antichrist. They believe a temple will be built and defiled during the tribulation. They see the tribulation of Matthew 26:21 being very significant.

My view is simply that the Middle East and Jerusalem very specifically are the focal point of end times prophecy. I believe that Israel becoming a nation in 1948 was very significant and the current state of no sacrificial system is profound with Islam holding much of the temple grounds. The tension between Israel and the displaced Palestinians plays heavily into the formula. I fully expect the Gentile nations to step in by force and try to impose a peaceful treaty or solution.

From my perspective, the prophecy of Daniel is being fulfilled right before our eyes and Jesus could return at any time. World attention is definitely on Israel and the Middle East conflict unlike any time in history.

So much so, that consulting notable scholars of the past who lived prior to 1948 is of very little help. Prior to Israel becoming a nation, they spiritualized this whole subject and reduced end time prophecy to allegories. But suddenly "in our generation" the words of Jesus and the book of Revelation can be viewed literally. All of the birth pangs Jesus talked about in Matthew 24:4-15 are converging at the present time. All eyes are on Jerusalem.

### **The Great Tribulation: Matthew 24:15-28**

“15) Therefore when you see the abomination of desolation which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), 16) then those who are in Judea must flee to the mountains. 17) Whoever is on the housetop must not go down to get the things out that are in his house. 18) Whoever is in the field must not turn back to get his cloak. 19) But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! 20) But pray that your flight will not be in the winter, or on a Sabbath. 21) For then there will be a great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will. 22) Unless those days had been cut short, no life would have been saved; but for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short.”

Jesus now describes the Great Tribulation. Many believe that Matthew describes the seven years of tribulation from the perspective of Israel and not the church. It is a view that has strong validity.

Revelation 12:14-16 points out that God has a place in the wilderness prepared for faithful Israel during the tribulation. Meanwhile, 1 Thessalonians 4:16-18 notes that believers will be “caught up” together with Jesus in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. This is commonly referred to as the rapture.

It is difficult to argue against these two positions. God always takes care of His own. When Moses called down God's judgment signs on Egypt in the book of Exodus, those who obeyed God were spared. The same held true for Noah and His family. They were spared from the ravages of the flood because they were “in” the ark.

In the broader context of these verses in Matthew 24, the warning is leveled against those who do not obey. The next chapter repeatedly warns the godly to be ready because the Master is coming back.

It can be observed that Jesus makes a distinction between the “birth pangs” (Matthew 24:4-14) and the “Great Tribulation.” (Matthew 24:15-28) The times of the birth pangs will unfold in one generation. The actual Great Tribulation will be a shorter period of time and will include the manifestation of the antichrist on earth. (See 2 Thessalonians 1:3-12)

So where are we today? If you have been reading my commentary on Matthew 24:4-14, you will note that I believe we have seen all of the birth pangs fulfilled since Israel became a nation in 1948. I believe we are ready for the “Great Tribulation” to start at any time.

This will be accompanied by special but slightly different events for both the nation of Israel and the church composed of all born-again believers. Faithful Israel will have a place prepared for her in the wilderness (Revelation 12:14-16), and the church will be caught up to be with the Lord. (1 Thessalonians 4:16-18)

(On my first trip to Israel I stayed at a place with a view of the Judean hills south of Jerusalem. They are both rugged and beautiful. Israel's development and refinement of drip irrigation is a fulfillment of prophecy found in Isaiah 35 and 43, among others.) -dj

### **End Time Distinction Between Israel and the Church: Matthew 24:16-22**

“16) then those who are in Judea must flee to the mountains. 17) Whoever is on the housetop must not go down to get the things out that are in his house. 18) Whoever is in the field must not turn back to get his cloak. 19) But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! 20) But pray that your flight will not be in the winter, or on a Sabbath. 21) For then there will be a great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will. 22) Unless those days had been cut short, no life would have been saved; but for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short.”

As a young Christian, these verses confused me. I didn't understand how they applied to me. Jesus talked about things like being on a house top and heading to the mountains. There are no mountains in Minnesota and Iowa. Over time, my confusion began to clear. Let me explain.

When studying end time events, I believe it is important to distinguish between Israel and the church. In the above verses, Jesus was describing events that will unfold for the nation of Israel.

Notice, in this text He warns them to flee into the mountains. This is consistent with Revelation 12:14 that says God has prepared a place for the woman, that she might fly into the wilderness to her place, where she will be nourished for a time and times and half a time. I believe that God will not abandon His promises to Israel made in the Old Testament. Jesus specifically says this will be during the tribulation period. (See the full context of Matthew 24:15-28)

Much confusion comes when Christians try to apply Matthew 24 to the church. Nowhere in the New Testament does God instruct the church to flee into the wilderness. Revelation 12:17 does say the dragon will be enraged with the woman and will go off and make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandment of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus Christ.

I do not claim to be an end time scholar, but it appears to me that Israel will make a flight into the wilderness, while the church will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air. (See 1 Thessalonians 4:17-18) I must add that this distinction is still a mystery to me, but I see it clearly taught in Scripture.

Much confusion comes when people try to force the church into texts like Matthew 24-25. Jesus was describing how end time events will unfold from the perspective of the nation of Israel.

The book of Revelation retains this distinction. Revelation 7:1-17 is a prime example. The first half of the chapter is dedicated to the 144,000 who are the remnant of Israel (Revelation 7:1-8) The balance of the chapter talks about the great multitude from every nation that cannot be numbered. (Revelation 7:9-17)

This perspective of the end times may raise questions in your mind, but I believe it is important not to force texts about Israel in the end times into what the Bible teaches about the Body of Christ in the end times. Granted, there will be overlap especially related to the rise of the antichrist and his one world government, but he will war differently against Israel than the church.

This is why it is important to keep an eye on Israel in the news. The Middle East is the stage for much of the end time prophecy.

#### **After The Tribulation: Matthew 24:29-31**

““(29) But immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. 30) And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory. 31) And He will send forth His angels with a great trumpet and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other.”

In these three verses, Jesus talks about the end of the tribulation period. In this message, Jesus mentions nothing of the reign of antichrist, the beast or the one world government. The writings of Daniel, Paul, and the book of Revelation fills in those details. That's part of what makes the study of the end times so difficult. Many portions of Scripture add pieces to the puzzle.

Because we are primarily looking at the book of Matthew in this study, we are not going to dig deep into the various views of the Return of Christ. You have most likely discovered that there are many views and much confusion about the end times. I have found it best to keep it simple and focus on the Great Commission until He returns without getting distracted.

Notice that Matthew 6:29 simply states that “the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.” At the very least we can conclude the principalities and powers in the heavenly places mentioned in Ephesians 6:12 are being pulled down. The rule of the god of this world will come to an end.

From verse 30, the sign of the Son of man will appear in the sky and will be visible to all the nations and tribes on earth. The Son of Man is coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory. This fulfills Acts 1:9-11 that says Jesus will come again just as He ascended into heaven.

According to Matthew 24:31, it is at this point that He will send forth His angels with a great trumpet and gather His elect from around the world. This could be called "the great gathering together." Jesus will gather His people to Himself.

Sufficient to say that Jesus promised in this text to return to earth, end the rule of the god of this world and set up His own earthly kingdom. Revelation 20 talks about the thousand year reign of Christ. It is often called the Millennial Kingdom. It will follow the Great Tribulation period.

The doctrine of the end times would be very simple if we just had this account from Jesus. But we need to factor in many other biblical texts such as Mark 13; Luke 21; 1 Corinthians 15; 2 Corinthians 4-5; 1 Thessalonians 4-5; 2 Thessalonians 2; 1 Timothy 4:1-5; 2 Timothy 3; 2 Peter 2-3; Jude, and the whole book of Revelation. There are also numerous Old Testament passages that speak to the end times.

Trying to synthesize all of these texts becomes very challenging and confusing. It has given rise to numerous views of the end times. You have most likely heard of terms like Pre-Tribulation, Mid-Tribulation, Pre-Wrath, and Post-Tribulation. These refer to different views as to when the Rapture of the church might occur. Others do not believe in the concept of a rapture.

I know and love people who hold to each position mentioned above. Because the end times are such a mystery, I am not emotionally or theologically tied to any position mentioned above. I see biblical pros and cons to each of them. The more I study the Bible the more neutral I have become. I trust my Loving Heavenly Father is in perfect control and things will unfold exactly according to His plan.

Another term sometimes used is A-Millennialism. This group does not believe that Jesus is returning to set up an earthy kingdom but is reigning mystically through His church. I fail to find support in the Bible for this view beyond being generally "Kingdom-minded."

I choose a very simple view of the end times. It can be summarized by saying Jesus is coming back to set up His Kingdom. The birth pangs or signs of the times are all fulfilled. His return is imminent meaning "at any time." He has a future plan for both Israel and His church.

Furthermore, the Bible points to much tribulation for God's people leading up to the seven years of the Great Tribulation when the reign of antichrist will be consummated on earth. Satan is waging relentless war against the church. Very hard times are upon us and greater storm clouds are gathering fast.

However, we are instructed to walk in the Spirit and focus on the spread of the Gospel until He returns. Though we are to prepare for hard times, we are to be salt and light in the world. I believe we are the final leg of the relay race to reach the world with the gospel before the return

of Christ. I view this cause as worthy of any sacrifice. May it be said of each of us; "Well done good and faithful servant!"

### **Parable of the Fig Tree: Matthew 24:32-35**

“32) Now learn the parable from the fig tree: when its branch has already become tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near; 33) so, you too, when you see all these things, recognize that He is near, right at the door. 34) Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. 25) Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away.”

Jesus now gives the parable of the fig tree. You can tell summer is near by watching the trees bud, produce leaves, and develop fruit. It is a sign that a new season is coming.

So also will be the coming of Jesus. All the birth pangs of Matthew 24:4-28 will begin to line up. The big difference according to Matthew 24:34 will be that the signs will span a full generation.

Some define a generation as forty years. I'm more inclined to look at a full life span. That could look more like eighty to one hundred and twenty years. Many Bible scholars believe the clock began ticking in earnest when Israel became a nation back in 1948. I'm definitely not one to set dates, but it's amazing how many end time prophecies have lined up since that notable event.

One prophecy that is especially interesting is found in Revelation 9:16 and 16:12. An army from the east with two hundred million soldiers will march toward Jerusalem. That was absolutely impossible in any other generation, because historically, no nation could field an army with anything close to those numbers. For the first time in human history that is now possible with China, and it is starting to rattle the saber. This explosion of world population has happened in the generation since Israel became a nation.

Finally, Jesus emphasizes the fact God's Word will come to pass and not fail. Verse 35 says that the existence of heaven and earth are not as secure as God's Word is dependable. It is easier for them to pass away than for God's Word to fail. No other generation in history has seen the fig tree of prophecy blossom like this generation.

### **Don't Let A Zebra Pass You By: Matthew 24:36-41**

“36) But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone.”

We are to be aware of the signs of the times (Matthew 16:2-3), but we cannot pinpoint the day or hour of the return of Jesus. It is known by the Father alone. He has not disclosed the timing to the angels or even His Son.

He is very patient, not wanting any to perish but more to come to repentance. (See 2 Peter 3:9 & 15) Any delay is an expression of His love and grace. I read this as a promise of fruitfulness in



sharing the gospel right up to the return of Jesus. Any question about the focus of the church in the end times should be resolved by these verses.

Because of what seems like an endless delay, many mockers will come in the end times. (See 2 Peter 3:3-4) They will point to naturalism as an excuse to explain away the existence of God. They will say; "all things have continued the same since the beginning of recorded history." They will not include the existence of God or Divine Intervention in their world view.

What a description of modern times. The signs of the times will be obvious to those paying attention, but most will be blinded by pleasures, addictions, and worldly pursuits. They will be so focused on here and now they will not notice the storm clouds gathering.

Jesus goes on in the next few verses and uses the days of Noah as an example of the carefree attitude of the majority in the end times. These verses speak for themselves:

"37) For the coming of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah. 38) For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, 39) and they did not understand until the flood came and took them all away; so will the coming of the Son of Man be." (Matthew 24:37-39)

To be fair, some see Noah suddenly entering the ark as a picture of the rapture. 1 Peter 3:20 even talks about the patience of God waiting in the days of Noah during the construction of the ark. Noah obeyed God and built for years without knowing the day or hour. 2 Peter 2:5 goes so far as to say he was a preacher of righteousness. His warnings were falling on deaf ears.

Then the animals started arriving at the ark because God sent them. What an amazing sign of the times! Who could miss that spectacle? Of course, Noah probably utilized some of the beasts of burden in the building process. I'm fairly confident elephants, oxen, horses, and mules were common on the construction site. But who could explain the sudden arrival of deer, antelope, lions, giraffes and zebras? Wait, did I just see a few sloths and anteaters go by? Let's be honest, at some point things started looking very out of the ordinary!

Then one day God said; "Enter the ark!" The Bible indicates that God Himself closed and sealed the door. The day and hour had arrived. However, the people didn't stop their partying until the rains came down and the floods came up. They were oblivious to everything happening around them for many years during the construction of the ark. But Noah and his family were spared from the judgment that came upon the world because they were safely in the ark.

In Matthew 24:37, Jesus said the coming of the Son of man will be just like the days of Noah. There will be many signs to be observed prior to the return of Jesus. Don't let a zebra pass you by without wondering what on earth is going on!

#### **Always Be Ready: Matthew 24: 40-44**

"40) Then there will be two men in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. 41) Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one will be left."

This is frustrating! We get all the way through the chronology of end time events in Matthew 24:4-31 and Jesus gives no clear mention of a rapture, then suddenly in His conclusion or final wrap He includes these two verses. There shall be two men working in a field and one is taken and one will be left. There will be two women grinding at a mill and one will be taken and one left. It certainly sounds like a description of a rapture. But when does it happen?

The reader is left perplexed. Though this sounds like 1 Thessalonians 4:16-18, it has no time attached in the context. Does it happen at the beginning, in the middle or at the end of tribulation? We are left scratching our heads.

It appears like a normal work day for the four people in the parable. They were going about business as usual and suddenly one was taken and one was left. Jesus follows this warning with the next three verses. They deserve special attention:

“42) Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming. 43) But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what time of the night the thief was coming, he would have been on the alert and would not have allowed his house to be broken into. 44) For this reason you also must be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will.” (Matthew 24:42-44)

These three verses are often used to support the doctrine of the Imminent Return of Christ. That means Jesus can return at any time without warning or notice. The day and hour of His return is a mystery. Jesus wants His people to live in a constant state of readiness. He wants us to stay alert.

So, when is the rapture going to happen? When will one be taken and another left? Even after a careful study of Matthew 24, it remains a mystery. Jesus leaves us with the admonition to be alert and always ready. It could happen at any moment!

### **The Contrast of Two Slaves: Matthew 24:45-51**

“45) Who then is the faithful and sensible slave whom his master put in charge of his household to give them their food at the proper time? 46) Blessed is that slave whom his master finds so doing when he comes. 47) Truly I say to you that he will put him in charge of all his possessions. 48) But if that evil slave says in his heart, ‘My master is not coming for a long time,’ 49) and begins to beat his fellow slaves and eat and drink with drunkards; 50) the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour which he does not know, 51) and will cut him in pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Jesus now shares a contrast of two slaves. Each was put in charge of his Master's household to provide food and care for those under his care in the perceived absence of his Master.

One was faithful, diligent, and occupied with His Master's work. He carried out his charge with honor and respect as if his Master was present. Jesus pointed out that when the Master returns, he will be honored, blessed, and promoted.

The second was negligent, abusive, and self-indulgent. He beat and exploited those under his care. He celebrated his Master's absence. Jesus called Him an evil slave and pointed out that severe consequences awaited him upon His Master's return.

So what can we conclude from this story? Jesus was making a strong statement to His disciples. The focus is not to be on figuring out the day or hour of the Master's return. That is a wrong pursuit and mindset. The goal is to faithfully carry out the Master's work no matter when he returns.

Jesus calls us to love Him and serve Him with all of our heart. He calls us to focus on doing our absolute best with the gifts, positions, and work entrusted to us. He calls us to serve in His absence just like we would in His presence.

A number of years ago, it dawned on me that because we are living in the age of the indwelling Holy Spirit, He is not absent. He is absolutely present with each one of us in the person of the Holy Spirit. He has come to set up His abode "in" each one of us. He is here to lead, guide, teach, and empower every born-again believer. We should live, serve, and abide in the conscious awareness of the presence of God.

When I started grasping this point, the day and hour of the bodily return of Jesus became irrelevant. I am as much His bond-servant now as I will be when He returns. I enjoy intimate fellowship as much with Him now as I will when He returns. I look forward to the face-to-face revelation and worship of Jesus Christ at His return, but I enjoy spirit-to-Spirit revelation and worship with Him now. I am working to remove all barriers of abiding in His presence now.

I have come to realize that He does not view me as a slave in our current relationship. He views me as a beloved son. I am continually invited into His presence. There is no limit to the breadth and length and height and depth of the relationship I can enjoy with Him now. (See Ephesians 3:16-19) I can be filled up to all the fullness of God right now!

I have put aside the constraints of theological institutions, doctrines of men, ideologies, traditions, denominations, or the expectations of others to pursue personal intimacy with Jesus Christ. I am engaged in a relentless pursuit of Jesus Christ through His Spirit.

For the child of God who has entered into constant communion with Jesus through His Spirit, the only thing that will change at the return of Christ is His address. It will change from heaven to earth. His reign on earth will radically affect human civilization, but it will not change the potential depth of our communion with Him through the Spirit. Don't wait for His return to draw near to Him or serve Him. Pursue Him now!

**The Bridal Party: Matthew 25:1-13**

“1) Then the kingdom of heaven will be comparable to ten virgins, who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. 2) Five of them were foolish, and five were prudent. 3) For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, 4) but the prudent took oil in flasks along with their lamps. 5) Now while the bridegroom was delaying, they all got drowsy and began to sleep. 6) But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ 7) Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. 8) The foolish said to the prudent, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ 9) But the prudent answered, ‘No, there will not be enough for us and you too; go instead to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.’ 10) And while they were going away to make the purchase, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding feast; and the door was shut. 11) Later the other virgins also came, saying, ‘Lord, Lord, open up for us.’ 12) But he answered, ‘Truly I say to you, I do not know you.’ 13) Be on the alert then, for you do not know the day nor the hour.”

The story of the Ten Virgins has been stretched and twisted to say many things not taught in the text. The basic point Jesus was stressing was to be ready and fully prepared for His return. Don't be caught off guard.

The parable was based on a Jewish wedding ceremony during New Testament times. Upon betrothal, the groom would go and prepare a place for His bride. Jesus stressed this in John 14:1-6 which was based on this same Jewish wedding tradition.

Meanwhile, the bride and her wedding party had no idea of the day or hour the groom was coming for his bride. The cry would be shouted down the street, “behold, the bridegroom cometh.” It was often at midnight. Immediately, the bride and her wedding party would arise, gather for the occasion and trim their lamps for the celebration. The procession to the groom's house was lit by oil lamps. The actual ceremony lasted seven days and then the bride and groom were presented.

The Ten Virgins were the attendants of the bride. Their job was to keep their lamps trimmed and illuminated for the whole wedding march and long ceremony, during which time many guests would come over a seven day period to congratulate the groom. Marriage was a significant event. Those who kept themselves chaste had a major celebration.

Some believe the seven days of the Jewish wedding ceremony are important for an end time analogy of the return of Christ. They see Jesus taking away His bride during the seven years of tribulation on earth. I admit, this is a strong argument in favor of a pre-tribulation view of the rapture. I lament that it is implied and not implicit in any biblical text about the end times.

Note that Jesus performed His first miracle at a wedding in Cana of Galilee. (John 2:1-11) The problem at that ceremony was the wine gave out. The problem for the five foolish virgins was their oil gave out. Both wine and oil are associated with the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Both the head waiter from the groom's party and the five foolish virgins from the bridal party were tragically unprepared.

I would encourage you to be “continually filled” with the Holy Spirit according to Ephesians 5:18. It is significant that this verse is also associated in context to another analogy about marriage and the relationship between Christ and His church. (See Ephesians 5:22-33) Make sure your flask is full.

Because I am not an authority on Jewish tradition, I shun to read too much into this story. But let me emphasize the way Jesus concluded this parable; 12) But he answered, ‘Truly I say to you, I do not know you.’ 13) Be on the alert then, for you do not know the day nor the hour.”

Two questions stand out that every person must answer. First, do you know Jesus? Maybe more important, does He know you? Second, are you ready for His imminent return? I find it sad that half of the close friends of the bride were not prepared. It is equally troubling that the head waiter for the groom was not prepared.

Having Christian parents or friends does not mean you are prepared to meet Jesus. You need to be born-again and not surf on their walk with God. You must settle the issue of your salvation before it is too late!

### **Parable of the Talents: Matthew 25:14-30**

“14) For it is just like a man about to go on a journey, who called his own slaves and entrusted his possessions to them. 15) To one he gave five talents, to another, two, and to another, one, each according to his own ability; and he went on his journey. 16) Immediately the one who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and gained five more talents. 17) In the same manner the one who had received the two talents gained two more. 18) But he who received the one talent went away, and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money.”

We must be reminded that Psalm Sunday was recorded in Matthew 21:1-11. Jesus focused heavily on teaching about the end times and His return during what we call Holy Week. Some look at Holy Week itself as a time table for end time events. His Triumphant entry into Jerusalem celebrated by His followers, definitely started the clock ticking in earnest.

In Matthew 25:14-30, Jesus gives His famous Parable of the Talents. The master about to go on a journey called in three of His slaves and entrusted each of them with His possessions to manage. To one he gave five talents, to another two talents and to another one talent. Then the master departed on his journey.

The one who received the five talents went to work and gained five more talents. The one who received the two talents likewise doubled them. Sadly, the one who received the one talent did absolutely nothing with what was entrusted to him. Instead, he dug a hole and buried it out of sight and out of mind. When the master returned, each slave was brought before him to give an account of their stewardship.

According to the biblical timetable, the return of Jesus will be accompanied by what some call the Rewarding Seat of Christ. It is pictured in 2 Corinthians 5:10. This is when Jesus will reward His people according to what they have done, whether good or bad. It will happen at the

beginning of His millennium kingdom on earth. The rewards may relate to positions or duties in His Kingdom.

This is not to be confused with the Great White Throne Judgement recorded in Revelation 20:11-15. According to the Chronology of the book of Revelation, this happens at the end of His thousand year reign on earth. (Read all of Revelation 20)

Don't worry if this sounds confusing, there is plenty of room for different views on end time events. What is important with the Parable of the Talents is that Jesus makes it clear that His return will trigger a time of accountability for His own followed later by a judgment for all people and all nations. This simple principle holds true both with Matthew 25 and Revelation 19-20. The big difference is that Matthew 25 does not mention the millennial kingdom recorded in Revelation 20:1-10.

So let's stand back and take a very broad look at Matthew 24-25. Keep in mind, this is what occupied the teaching of Jesus during Holy Week. Jesus devoted Matthew 24 to the signs of the times leading up to His Return. His main theme was hard times and great tribulation will proceed His return and He gave strong admonition to be alert and ready.

Then Chapter 25 can be broken into three parts. The Parable of the Ten Virgins and the wedding celebration. He stressed the tragedy that half of the attendants of the bride were not ready. (Matthew 25:1-13) He followed this with the Parable of the Talents and a day of accountability with rewards or shame for His servants. (Matthew 25:14-30) The chapter ends with the Son of Man sitting on a glorious throne judging between the sheep and the goats. According to verse 32, all nations will be brought before Him.

The burning question from the Parable of the Talents is: "Are you making the most of the gifts and talents Jesus has entrusted to you as His servant... or... have you buried them and run off to do your own thing?"

This parable always challenges me. I take it seriously. No matter your view of the end times, you will face a day of accountability as a Christian! You will answer to Jesus for how you built your life with the foundation He provided. (See 1 Corinthians 3:10-15) Don't squander the unfathomable foundation, grace gifts, talents, and potential given to you "in Christ." Make the most of it!

### **Coming Judgment: Matthew 24:31-46**

“31) But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. 32) All the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; 33) and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left.”

Jesus now talks about a coming judgment for the whole world. Notice that all nations will be brought before Him. He will separate people as a shepherd separates sheep from goats.

Read the full context through verse 46. The dialogue is profound and very surprising. A key component in judgment will be the way you treat others, especially “the least of these.”

Look at verse 40; “The King will answer and say to them, ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.’”

Salvation is based on a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Do not mistake that point. But a personal relationship with Jesus radically impacts the way you treat people.

We expect Jesus to base His judgment on doctrine or theology, but He doesn’t even mention that in this context. Instead, He focuses on love and compassion and extending grace, mercy, and help to others. The way Jesus treated others became the standard of judgment.

We now have a rule that surpasses the golden rule. Don’t merely treat others as you would have them treat you, rather treat them as if they are Jesus. Why? Because as Christians, we become His hands and feet in the world.

In the kingdom of darkness, everyone promotes self first. In the kingdom of light, everyone treats others as if they are serving Jesus. The difference is profound.

### **Passover Prophecy: Matthew 26:1-5**

“1) When Jesus had finished all these words, He said to His disciples, “2) You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man is to be handed over for crucifixion.” 3) Then the chief priests and the elders of the people were gathered together in the court of the high priest, named Caiaphas; 4) and they plotted together to seize Jesus by stealth and kill Him. 5) But they were saying, “Not during the festival, otherwise a riot might occur among the people.””

When Jesus had completed His teaching about the end times, He warned His disciples one more time of His coming fate at the Passover. He was indeed the Passover Lamb for the ceremony. He fulfilled every criteria for the unblemished and innocent lamb.

He made it clear that the method of His death would be crucifixion. This may have given false hope to the disciples, because crucifixion was a Roman and not Jewish method of execution.

It was at that time the chief priests and elders of the people gathered together at the court of Caiaphas; and they plotted together to seize Jesus by stealth and kill Him. This action qualified as premeditated murder.

They were using the backdrop of the Passover to kill Jesus. For some reason they failed to notice that their actions were fulfilling the prophetic symbolism of the Passover. They were about to sacrifice the Passover Lamb that takes away the sins of the world. (See John 1:29; 36)

Just as the Passover Lamb in Exodus 12 ended the slavery of the Hebrew people to Egypt, so the death of Jesus on the cross was going to end the slavery of those who would believe in Him from sin and Satan.

According to Matthew 26:5, they did not want it to happen during the festival, lest they cause a riot among the people. It may be that they feared the crowd of pilgrims from His home region of Galilee who were in Jerusalem for the Passover. These represented the bulk of His most devoted followers.

But Divine Destiny was governing the events. A cosmic battle was unfolding of which they had no awareness and over which they had no control. The “time had come” for Jesus to pay for the sins of humanity. The seed of the woman was about to step on the head of the serpent in the most unexpected way. (Genesis 3:15)

(Many people who visit Jerusalem say they want to walk where Jesus walked. That’s a great sentiment, but Jerusalem has been built and rebuilt many times over in the 2000 years since Jesus walked its streets. There are layers upon layers built over the streets where Jesus walked, sometimes 10 or 20 feet thick. But of all the places in Jerusalem, there is one where we are certain His foot touched the ground – and that’s in the dungeon below the home of Caiaphas, which has been excavated and preserved. It’s behind clear plastic, but it is there.) -dj

### **The Home of Simon the Leper: Matthew 26:6-7**

“6) Now when Jesus was in Bethany, at the home of Simon the leper, 7) a woman came to Him with an alabaster vial of very costly perfume, and she poured it on His head as He reclined at the table.”

We are now in the final two nights of Jesus before the Passover. Both Matthew 26:6 and Mark 14:3 mentions that Jesus stayed in the home of Simon the leper in the town of Bethany.

Many scholars believe this was the leprous man Jesus cured in Matthew 8:1-5 when He had come down from the Sermon on the Mountain. Jesus spent His last nights on earth lodging with a former leper.

This former untouchable and His home became the center of activity for the early church. It is a testimony of the redemptive power of Jesus Christ. Jesus redeemed both Simon and his house.

We also know from John 11:1 and John 12:1 that Bethany was the home of Lazarus whom Jesus had raised from the dead, and his two sisters Mary and Martha. These three were friends of Jesus and may have lived in close proximity to the house of Simon. This was a safe place for Jesus and His disciples because they were among friends.

These verses punctuate the importance of good friendships. Jesus invested in positive and deep relationships. It is imperative that we follow His example.



Though not stated in the Bible, it is very probable that these two lodgings in Bethany hosted some of the 120 followers who met continually for prayer prior to Pentecost. Could it be that Simon the Leper and Lazarus were key figures in launching the early church? (See Acts 1:13-14) It appears that the disciples stayed in the upper room in Jerusalem, but many of the 120 may have continued lodging in Bethany.

We now move beyond mere friendship to the Christian concept of fellowship. A close Christian community developed among this group which were a mere Sabbath day walk from Jerusalem. These people and this place was a significant part of the launching pad of the Christian Church.

This text screams of the importance of dedicating your home to Christian service and ministry. In the absence of church buildings, Christian homes became the center of much ministry in the early church. (See Acts 2:42-47)

### **The Tragic Story of Judas: Matthew 26:7-15**

“7) a woman came to Him with an alabaster vial of very costly perfume, and she poured it on His head as He reclined at the table. 8) But the disciples were indignant when they saw this, and said, “Why this waste? 9) For this perfume might have been sold for a high price and the money given to the poor.” 10) But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, “Why do you bother the woman? For she has done a good deed to Me. 11) For you always have the poor with you; but you do not always have Me. 12) For when she poured this perfume on My body, she did it to prepare Me for burial. 13) Truly I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be spoken of in memory of her.””

John 12:1-8 adds some significant detail to this story. We discover it was Mary the sister of Martha who took the pound of very costly perfume of pure nard and anointed the feet of Jesus. It was an act of worship.

It was Judas Iscariot who became indignant at Mary and openly condemned her for wasting the perfume instead of selling it to help the poor. He sounded pious, but his motives were impure. John 12:6 points out that his motives were driven by greed. Judas had calculated the resale value of the nard at three hundred denarii.

This indicates that Mary, Martha, and Lazarus had a good degree of wealth. Simon the former leper may have also had significant financial means because he owned his own home in Bethany. Judas was not concerned about the poor, rather he was a thief and used to pilfer what was put in the money box.

When Jesus rebuked him, Judas became bitter and from that moment sought a way to betray Jesus and profit from his actions. According to Matthew 26:14-15, he went immediately to the chief priests to make a deal to betray Jesus to them. They counted out for him thirty pieces of silver.

From this story we discover that Satan exploited two sinful strongholds in the life of Judas. He was both greedy and he became angry enough when reproved by Jesus to seek revenge. The book of Proverbs warns that ill-gotten gains do not profit.

In the end, Judas could not live with himself. Thirty pieces of silver could not change the fact that he had become a thief, traitor, and accessory to murder. Satan wove his guilt and self-condemnation into a rope and Judas hanged himself. Beware of what you become in the pursuit of what you want!

(To this day, there is a spot of barren ground in Jerusalem next to the home of Caiaphas, the High Priest. It is said to be the place where Judas hanged himself.) -dj

### **The Upper Room: Matthew 26:17-19**

“17) Now on the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Where do You want us to prepare for You to eat the Passover?” 18) And He said, “Go into the city to a certain man, and say to him, ‘The Teacher says, “My time is near; I am to keep the Passover at your house with My disciples.” 19) The disciples did as Jesus had directed them; and they prepared the Passover.”

This story has always impressed me. Hundreds of people were in Jerusalem for the Passover. Space was at a premium and yet Divine Providence had a spot set aside for Jesus and His disciples to keep the Passover and to serve as a meeting place right up to the day of Pentecost.

Notice that Acts 1:13 refers to this as “the upper room.” It must have been sizable. The disciples stayed there and it hosted a daily prayer meeting for 120 persons. Never despise small beginnings.

Christianity started as a home church movement. When 3,000 trusted in Jesus on the day of Pentecost, they used the temple grounds for large open air meetings until persecution mounted. From the beginning they utilized homes for ministry. (See Acts 2:46-47)

Even large churches today have discovered the value of smaller groups meeting in homes. Both the small group movement and the home church movement have recaptured this dynamic in recent years. Christian community and biblical fellowship both thrive in small groups.

I see Acts 2:40-47 as providential. From the beginning of the church age, God wanted Christian homes to be strategic in the spread of the gospel. This includes the practice of hospitality. The Shunammite woman who prepared an upper chamber for Elisha and his servant was greatly blessed by God. (2 Kings 4:9-10). If you want God's blessing on your home, dedicate it to His service. Be creative, there are many ways to serve Jesus with your home and property.

(Tour guides in Jerusalem do take tourists to a place that could have been “The Upper Room” mentioned in these passages. Is there compelling evidence to support that this is the actual location of The Last Supper, or do a few more shekels flow into the hands of a guide who can take you to such a place? I'll let you decide if you go there.) -dj

## **The Demise of Judas: Matthew 26:20-25**

“20) Now when evening came, Jesus was reclining at the table with the twelve disciples. 21) As they were eating, He said, “Truly I say to you that one of you will betray Me.” 23) Being deeply grieved, they each one began to say to Him, “Surely not I, Lord?” 24) And He answered, “He who dipped his hand with Me in the bowl is the one who will betray Me. 24) The Son of Man is to go, just as it is written of Him; but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born.” 25) And Judas, who was betraying Him, said, “Surely it is not I, Rabbi?” Jesus said to him, “You have said it yourself.””

This scene unfolded during the actual Passover meal between Jesus and His disciples. John’s account of the meal goes into much more detail and covers John 13-17. The account of Judas leaving is found in John 13:21-30. Judas was absent for all of the teaching that followed in John 14-17. It did not apply to him. He did not become a partaker of the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

What becomes most instructive is the love and gentleness with which Jesus dealt with Judas. He was not rude or harsh, but He was honest and truthful. He mentioned that one of them would betray Him. According to John 13:26-27, the moment Jesus dipped the morsel of bread and gave it to Judas, Satan entered into him.

Judas opened a door and Satan walked through it. The Bible warns of seven basic sins or strongholds in the life of a believer that can give ground to the devil. Ephesians 4:26-27 is an example of how unconfessed anger can give ground to the enemy. It is sobering that Paul was warning Christians about the consequences of anger and bitterness.

I maintain there is a huge difference between yielding ground in the flesh or soul versus what happened to Judas. A sinful bondage or stronghold is different from demon possession. The text is clear that Satan entered into Judas. It gained control of his body, soul, and spirit.

But notice that Judas did not at all resemble or act like Legion in Mark 5:1-20. Judas was in control. He looked and acted normal, but his deeds were predictable. He betrayed Jesus! I could argue that he was deceived, bitter over the rebuke from the pure nard perfume, full of pride and greed, and overflowing with rebellion. He left the door open for Satan to walk through. Sadly, Judas was even in the inner circle of the twelve disciples with no suspicion or red flags from the other eleven.

Listen carefully to the next observation; “Legion was not Satan’s masterpiece, Judas was the Son of Perdition.” Satan can translate himself into an angel of light. (2 Corinthians 11:13-15) It behooves us to test the spirit and examine the fruit before blindly trusting others. (See 1 John 4:1-6 and 7:13-23) in

Yet, we must not expect perfection from others. Spiritual growth is a process and good people will fail. Peter is a prime example. He denied Jesus three times. I’m not sure if betrayal or denial is worse. Yet in John 21, Jesus extended grace and a second chance to Peter. After Pentecost, Peter became mighty in Spirit. He was a very different man. His failure opened the door for grace, humility, and genuine repentance.

Jesus made provision for human fault and weakness. The Holy Spirit does a deep work of sanctification and transformation in the life of genuine believers. Those who are “in Christ” undergo a deep and thorough transformation. The contrast between Judas and Peter punctuates the difference between the fake and the genuine.

### **The Lord’s Supper Instituted: Matthew 26:26-30**

“26) While they were eating, Jesus took some bread, and after a blessing, He broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, “Take, eat; this is My body.” 27) And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you; 28) for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins. 29) But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father’s kingdom.” 30) After singing a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.”

Jesus used the Passover meal to institute the Lord’s Supper. He took a piece of bread from the meal and broke it saying; “Take, eat, this is my body which is broken for you.” Then He reached down and took the cup of wine and gave thanks, then He said, “Drink from it, all of you; for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins.”

In doing this, Jesus tied His work on the cross to the Passover meal. He was saying; “I am The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” (John 1:29) His work on the cross was about to set people free from sin and slavery. The judgment of death for the sins of humanity was soon to be poured out on Him. He became the sacrificial lamb.

With this act, Jesus tied Himself to the Passover, the Exodus, and eventually the conquest of the Promised Land. These Bible stories are a wealth of spiritual insight and principles for the Christian life. Salvation through faith in Jesus Christ launches the believer into their own Exodus from the old life of sin and bondage and into a lifelong conquest of entering into their new spiritual promised land “in Christ.” When developing this analogy, the Old Testament comes alive with unfathomable treasures of revelation and knowledge about Jesus Christ and the Christian life.

Verse 30 is also significant. Jesus and His disciples closed the Passover meal by singing a hymn. One might wonder what a group of former fishermen, tax gatherers, and blue collar workers sounded like, but this men’s chorus resonated through heaven. It was most likely one of the Messianic Psalms put to music. A relationship with Jesus Christ puts a new song in your heart.

### **The Refining Process: Matthew 26:31-35**

“31) Then Jesus said to them, “You will all fall away because of Me this night, for it is written, ‘I will strike down the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered.’ 32) But after I have been raised, I will go ahead of you to Galilee.” 33) But Peter said to Him, “Even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away.” 34) Jesus said to him, “Truly I say to you that this very night, before a rooster crows, you will deny Me three times.” 35) Peter said to Him,

“Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You.” All the disciples said the same thing too.”  
Matthew 26:31-35

Your relationship with Jesus will be tested. Good intentions and mere religious devotion will not stand the test of fire. Apart from John standing with the mother of Jesus, all of His disciples abandoned Jesus. (John 19:26-27) But it appears that even John gave up hope and joined Peter back at the fishing boats and nets. (See John 21:2-3)

Before becoming too critical with the disciples, two facts must be pointed out. First, this happened before the day of Pentecost. The flesh cannot serve God. When the heat is on, it will always seek self-preservation. Second, after being filled with the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, every disciple remained loyal and all but John died the death of a martyr. The Spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.

The testing itself is a refining process. Of the writers of the New Testament, it was Peter that elaborated on this theme in 1 Peter 1:6-9. Everyone will be tested by trials to prove the genuine nature of their faith.

The word “tested” is intriguing because it can be translated as either “tested” or “tempted” depending on the context. Both take genuine faith and love for Jesus to overcome. Both faith “in Jesus” and love “for Jesus” are wed together in 1 Peter 1:6-9. Both were tragically lacking in the twelve disciples as Jesus endured the cross. A personal weakness exposed is an invitation to seek deeper devotion to Jesus.

To understand the total isolation of Jesus on the cross, in Matthew 27:46 He cried out; “MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAST THOU FORSAKEN ME?” It was not only His disciples that turned away, but even His Father turned His back when Jesus took on the sins of humanity. Yet with all of this... Jesus remained faithful!

Though I have let Jesus down at times, He has never let me down. Some of my trials have been difficult and severe without understanding what purpose they served. There have been times I have drawn back and questioned God. In the end, I have always found Him to be faithful and loving.

As I survey the years, with each test more dross was burned away from my faith. I have not arrived yet, but by His grace I am starting to see more and more pure gold showing up in my walk with God.

I trust you can relate to my story. When Jesus said, “you will all fall away because of me...”, He was including more than the twelve. Every believer will have their faith and love tested. In the end, you will either be exposed as a fraud like Judas or become refined and sincere like Peter.

Let me stress again, that the ministry of the Holy Spirit was the pivot point for the disciples. He was the promised helper. (John 14:16-18)

My early years were marked by formal theological training that minimized and marginalized the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Overcoming this negative bias and inhibition has added amazing grace, strength, power, and intimacy to my walk with God. Never hold the helper at arm's length. It didn't work for the twelve before Pentecost and it won't work for you or me! Marginalizing the Holy Spirit automatically maximizes your self-sufficiency. It's a pathway to failure.

### **“Watch and Pray” Matthew 26:36-46**

“36) Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to His disciples, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” 37) And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and distressed. 38) Then He said to them, “My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death; remain here and keep watch with Me.””

Leaving the upper room, Jesus led His disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane. This story is included in all four Gospels. The Garden was located on the Mount of Olives most likely overlooking Jerusalem.

The word “Gethsemane” is made up of two Hebrew words signifying “an olive press.” The name is fitting, because it was here Jesus was squeezed in agony to the point that His sweat became drops of blood. Luke records that two angels appeared attempting to strengthen Him. (See Luke 22:43-44) He was indeed in an olive press of agony in this deep moment of intercession.

He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee and asked them to “keep watch.” We are here introduced to a kind of intercession referred to as “watching.” It has in it the idea of forsaking sleep to be devoted to intense prayer. During this time, the prayer warrior is to be on “red alert” in the spiritual realm. They are standing in the gap during intense times of unseen cosmic battle in the spiritual realm.

With this story, the prayer warrior's quiver is complete with three kinds of fasting mentioned in the Bible. The first and most common kind of fasting is developed in Isaiah 58:5-12. This is forsaking food for a period of time for devoted prayer. The second is briefly mentioned in 1 Corinthians 7:5. This is a focused time of forsaking sexual intimacy in marriage for a period of time for devoted prayer. The third kind of fasting is mentioned here in the story of Gethsemane. Watching is forsaking sleep for a devoted time of prayer.

The common denominator in each of these disciplines is the denial of a fleshly appetite to focus on the spirit. Notice the small letter on the word “spirit” to distinguish the human spirit. God wants every Christian to become mighty in spirit. It is here, in the inner man, that the Spirit of God bonds with the spirit of man for strength and power. (Review Ephesians 3:14-19)

The reader of this story in Gethsemane is left lamenting over the fact that Jesus twice returned and found His disciples sleeping. What was the problem? In verse 41, Jesus pointed out that “the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.”

The contrast between these same men here in the Garden and their prayer lives in Acts 4:29-31 is astounding. I implore you to research and discover the secret that turned these carnal and sleeping disciples into mighty prayer warriors for the kingdom!

My prayer is that God wakes up the sleeping church of our day as well. As the end times come upon us, we are experiencing greatly intensified cosmic battles. Something highly unusual is unfolding before our very eyes. These are days God is again calling His people to “watch and pray” with keen discernment, focus, and alertness.

### **The Impossible Prayer: Matthew 26:39**

“39) And He went a little beyond them, and fell on His face and prayed, saying, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will.””

As Jesus led His disciples into the Garden of Gethsemane for prayer, His soul was deeply grieved to the point of death. As mentioned previously, “Gethsemane” means “olive press.”

Very likely, the garden itself contained an olive press to squeeze freshly picked olives into fine oil. There was no other way to make olive oil but through the use of the press. What a fitting picture of what Jesus was about to endure.

It was here that He “fell on His face” and prayed the impossible prayer; “Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me.” Being Omniscient, He knew full well what awaited Him in the crucifixion. He knew not only the physical pain about to be inflicted by man, He knew also the soul pain He was about to endure as He took on the sins of the world to satisfy the wrath of God. The ravages of hell were about to be poured out on Him.

This is where the comprehension of the theologian falls short. What Jesus willingly endured for love of humanity cannot be understood by humanity. He was about to endure far more than physical pain. He was about to be crushed in the “wine press of the wrath of God.” (See Revelation 14:19-20)

The redemption of humanity was costly. Only a sinless sacrifice could match the price. In the Garden on His face lay “the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” (See John 1:29) He was wrestling with His Father about the fate that awaited Him.

Prayer is often a time of wrestling. It sometimes includes impossible requests until heavenly peace and tranquility settles the anguish of the soul. Only when submission to the will of the Father comes can the petitioner sincerely say, “It is well with my soul.”

Many times intercession moves the heart of God and the request is granted. But Jesus was pleading an impossible prayer. There was no other way to accomplish human redemption but to be “crushed for our iniquities.” (See Isaiah 53:4-5) The olive press fits the analogy. It awaited Him.

His breakthrough is recorded in Matthew 26:42. His second time of prayer shows the total submission and resolution of His heart; "My Father, if this cannot pass away unless I drink it, Thy will be done." His inner battle was over. He was at peace. He had come to surrender.

But one question remains; why "Gethsemane?" Why an olive press instead of a wine press? For starters, because olive oil was used to fuel lamps. Jesus was about to become the fuel to light the gospel message. His story was about to shine around the world. He is indeed the light of the world. Olive oil was also used in cooking. It was often mixed in bread dough. Jesus is the bread of life. Olive oil also has medicinal value. He is the Great Physician, by His stripes we are healed. (Isaiah 53:5)

There are numerous more insights about olive oil, but by contrast, wine is used for celebration. According to Matthew 26:29, He is not going to drink from the cup of the vine again until we all join Him in His Father's Kingdom. The big day of celebration will not begin until the last lost soul in His flock is safely home.

### **The Purpose of Gethsemane: Matthew 26:45-47**

"45) Then He came to the disciples and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Behold, the hour is at hand and the Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners. 46) Get up, let us be going; behold, the one who betrays Me is at hand!" 47) While He was still speaking, behold, Judas, one of the twelve, came up accompanied by a large crowd with swords and clubs, who came from the chief priests and elders of the people."

Usually prayer is aimed at changing outward circumstances. That's the way the first prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane started. (Vs 39) But not understood by many Christians, the big battle of prayer is often conquering self. That's the way the second prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane ended. (Vs 42)

His communion time with His Father had barely ended when his betrayer arrived. The eleven were sleeping while Judas was guiding a violent mob to deliver Jesus to His destiny on a cross.

We are now forced to wrestle with the question; "Was the prayer encounter in Gethsemane a failure?" It certainly did not detour or change the outward circumstances. Judas still showed up! But I will argue that it utterly ended the inner war raging inside of Jesus. His inner composure through the trial, scourging, and crucifixion defies explanation. Gethsemane is the explanation.

Consider the identity of Jesus. He was the Creator. In Him was the power that created the universe. He is Commander of the angelic armies of Heaven. At any moment He could have summoned the angels to destroy the world and set Him free. He is High Priest forever after the order of Melchizedek, yet He uttered no threat to Caiaphas. He is King of kings and Lord of lords, yet he submitted Himself to be humiliated by Pilate and Herod. He is the very source of Life, yet He voluntarily gave Himself to die on the cross. He is God, yet He yielded Himself to be crucified by man.



I ask again; "Was the prayer encounter in Gethsemane a failure?" To the contrary, it qualifies as the most successful prayer meeting in history. Had it failed, I would not be here writing nor would you be reading this post. At any moment Jesus had the option to destroy the world and spare Himself. Had his inner self not died in Gethsemane everything else would have come to an abrupt end long before He reached the cross.

We now gain insight into an often ignored component of prayer. Prayer is not only about changing outward circumstances, sometimes it's much bigger. Often it's about winning the inner war. It was in Gethsemane that Jesus gained the victory over Himself! He had to die to Himself before He could die for the world.

Until you embrace this component of prayer, you will never gain victory over many of the battles in your life. Often the biggest change is needed within and not without. The purpose of Gethsemane was about conquering Himself and not changing His outward circumstances. Mission accomplished!

You must now answer another question; "When are you going to show up for a Gethsemane encounter with God?" Until you are yielded 100% to His will, ways, and Word, self and not Jesus is Master and Lord of your life. The longer I walk with Jesus the more worn My path to Gethsemane is becoming.

### **The Judas Syndrome: Matthew 26:47-50**

"47) While He was still speaking, behold, Judas, one of the twelve, came up accompanied by a large crowd with swords and clubs, who came from the chief priests and elders of the people. 48) Now he who was betraying Him gave them a sign, saying, "Whomever I kiss, He is the one; seize Him." 49) Immediately Judas went to Jesus and said, "Hail, Rabbi!" and kissed Him. 50) And Jesus said to him, "Friend, do what you have come for." Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and seized Him."

The name "Judas" is of Greek origin. It literally means "praised." After this fateful night, the name became associated with "traitor." It is an example of how the actions of one man ruined a name.

Many wonder what motivated Judas to betray Jesus. The Bible hints at three root causes to his betrayal. The first is anger. Earlier in this very chapter Jesus rebuked him for being critical of Mary anointing Jesus with pure nard. Paul warns in Ephesians 4:25-27 that anger gives ground to the devil. The same plight awaited Able and his anger in Genesis 4:5-7.

The second character flaw in Judas was diagnosed in John 12:6. On the same occasion that Judas openly condemned Mary for anointing Jesus, John points out that he was a thief and used to skim the money from the treasure box. He was full of greed. Money had become his secret god.

The third motivation is the culmination of the first two. These two sinful strongholds made him an easy target for the evil one. John 13:21-27 records the story of Satan entering into him during

the Passover meal as Jesus dipped the morsel of bread and gave it to him. He left immediately to arrange the betrayal of Jesus.

It is noteworthy that Judas was absent from the upper room discourse Jesus gave to the other eleven disciples in John 13:31-17:26. He was neither connected to the true vine nor one of the sheep in the flock. Jesus even made mention of Judas during His priestly prayer in John 17:12. He called him "the son of perdition."

The sign that Judas picked to betray Jesus was a kiss. Proverbs 27:6 says; "Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but deceitful are the kisses of an enemy." Judas added huge punctuation marks to this verse.

Judas is a warning that religious people are not exempt from temptation or evil intent. The Judas syndrome is very prevalent in religious circles today.

Are you religious? So was Judas! Guard your heart from sins like anger and greed. Judas was never born-again. His heart was closed to the gospel. He walked with Jesus only to betray Him. The wrong spirit influenced and controlled his life.

It never surprises me when fleshly Judas shows up in leadership in churches. Fits of anger, a lapse of integrity and a deceitful kiss are usually a sign that Judas is in your presence. Beware!

#### **He Who Has an Ear: Matthew 26:51-54**

"51) And behold, one of those who were with Jesus reached and drew out his sword, and struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his ear. 52) Then Jesus said to him, "Put your sword back into its place; for all those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword. 53) Or do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels? 54) How then will the Scriptures be fulfilled, which say that it must happen this way?"

With one swipe of the sword, Peter almost invalidated the whole mission of Jesus. (John 18:10-11) He almost turned it into a bloody insurrection with the potential of bringing down the wrath of Rome to squash both Jesus and His followers. All of history hinged on what Jesus did next.

First, Jesus restrained Peter and had him return His sword to its sheath. The Christian message is about love and forgiveness and not about violence and death. I tremble at the thought of using this text to defend the use of arms for the purpose of self defense. Other Scriptures may make that case, but Jesus definitely was not promoting resistance or self defense in this context.

Second, according to Luke 22:51, Jesus quickly healed the slave of the chief priest. Think about this scene. He reached down and picked up the bloody severed ear, tenderly put it in place and healed the slave. Time stood still as Jesus lovingly looked into the eyes of the servant while the chief priests, officers of the temple guard and elders watched in dismay. (Luke 22:51-52)

With this act, Jesus proved He was not short of healing power, love, or grace during His darkest hour. In fact, restoring the severed ear ranks as one of the most profound miracles Jesus performed. Other explanations could be proposed for making the blind to see, the deaf hear, or even the crippled walk, but this was indeed a visible manifestation of healing. Jesus instantly restored a severed ear.

His next words were as much for the sake of His disciples as for the mob; “52) ... Put your sword back into its place; for all those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword. 53) Or do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels? 54) How then will the Scriptures be fulfilled, which say that it must happen this way?”

Not only was the grace and healing power of Jesus still intact, so was His position of commander of the hosts of heaven! He could have appealed to the Father for more than 12 legions of angels. Roman legions varied in size from 3,000 to 6,000 soldiers. Either way, the number is staggering. Jesus was making it clear that He had options available had He decided against going to the cross.

Think about this, He had the forces available to destroy the god of this world in an instant, but only enduring the suffering of the cross could redeem humanity from the curse of the fall and change the human heart. Removing Satan and his cohorts would do little to change human civilization or history if the core of human nature remained unchanged.

It was here the impact of His time of wrestling in Gethsemane became manifest. He was resolved with a resolute heart to go to the cross. He would not use His grace, healing powers, or divine authority on Himself. He healed and delivered others, but not Himself. He endured the cross with 100% of His humanity without appealing to His Divine nature.

Biblical prophecy was about to be fulfilled. Jesus was under the authority of Scripture. He was not about to go rogue and change the plan the Father laid down from before the foundation of the world. (Ephesians 1:3-14)

### **The Mob: Matthew 26:55-56**

“55) At that time Jesus said to the crowds, “Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest Me as you would against a robber? Every day I used to sit in the temple teaching and you did not seize Me. 56) But all this has taken place to fulfill the Scriptures of the prophets.” Then all the disciples left Him and fled.”

The details of the mob that arrived to arrest Jesus must be compiled from several texts. Matthew 26:47 says it was a great multitude with swords and clubs from the chief priests and elders of the people. According to Luke 22:52, the crowd was made up of the chief priest and officers of the temple and elders. We know the slave of the high priest was also present. John 18:3 mentions a Roman cohort and officers from the chief priests and Pharisees.

It was likely that the chief priests and elders had gathered and dispatched this group with Judas to bring Jesus back while they remained assembled. The whole arrest may have taken less than an hour. This was the evening of the Passover meal so the streets were empty while every home had gatherings keeping the Passover vigil.

John 18:6 mentions that when Jesus said, "I am He", the whole group drew back and fell to the ground. I see this as a clash between the kingdom of light and darkness. Heaven was making a statement. Had the curtains of the unseen realm been pulled back, formidable forces were undoubtedly gathered on both sides. There was no doubt who was in control. The mob was no match for the glory and authority of Jesus. I am sure the angels that strengthened Him in the Garden and many more were standing vigil with swords drawn awaiting His command. (See Luke 22:43)

As you let this scene sink into your mind, the next statement of Jesus makes sense; "Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as against a robber? Every day I used to sit in the temple teaching and you did not seize me. But all this has taken place that the Scriptures of the prophets may be fulfilled." Then all the disciples left Him and fled.

Two things are clear at this point. First, Jesus voluntarily submitted to His plight. They were not forcing Him against His will. He was the one in control.

Second, many Old Testament prophecies were quickly being fulfilled. Jesus had direct influence on some of them, but the majority were done by others in the story without input from Him.

This point counters the critics who claim Jesus had merely read the prophecies and arranged their fulfillment to make Him look like the Messiah. To the contrary, divine destiny was directing the cast and script. Jesus was merely connecting the prophetic dots as they unfolded around Him. The chief priests, scribes, elders of the people, Pharisees, and Roman soldiers were blind to their role in the prophetic narrative.

Over 150 Old Testament prophecies converged in rapid succession during the last two weeks of the life, triumphant entry, cleansing the temple, last supper, arrest, crucifixion, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. When His birth and full public ministry are included, that number more than doubles. This fact is mind-boggling. It is statistically impossible for random chance to arrange the fulfillment of this prophetic sequence.

Every reader of the Bible whether atheist, agnostic, humanist, spiritist, Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist must wrestle with this phenomenon. No other tradition whether sacred or secular has anything that comes close to this prophetic phenomenon. It places Jesus Christ and the gospel in an exclusive category. This line of evidence alone related to the identity of Jesus Christ demands a verdict. Who is this Jesus?

### **Trial Before the Leaders of Israel: Mathew 26:57-68**

"57) Those who had seized Jesus led Him away to Caiaphas, the high priest, where the scribes and the elders were gathered together. 58) But Peter was following Him at a distance as far as

the courtyard of the high priest, and entered in, and sat down with the officers to see the outcome. 59) Now the chief priests and the whole Council kept trying to obtain false testimony against Jesus, so that they might put Him to death. 60) They did not find any, even though many false witnesses came forward. But later on two came forward, 61) and said, "This man stated, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and to rebuild it in three days.' ""

You will search in vain trying to find anything fair or honest in this trial of Jesus before Caiaphas, the scribes, and the elders. They met with the predetermined purpose of putting Jesus to death. Without them realizing it, they were fulfilling the typology of sacrificing the Lamb of God on the night of the Passover.

These events fulfilled what Moses and the children of Israel instituted in Exodus 12. Jesus was about to destroy the works of the devil and those covered by His blood are spared from eternal death. Indeed, the story of the trial, condemnation, and crucifixion of Jesus Christ was the true Passover story of which Moses and the Children of Israel were a mere foreshadow.

Everything in the crucifixion story fits the Old Testament analogies from Abraham offering up Isaac in Genesis 22, to the Passover in Exodus 12. In fact, there is much to learn about the Christian life from the Exodus of Israel, their wandering in the wilderness, and the eventual conquest of the Promised Land.

Jesus was eventually condemned for blasphemy because He claimed to be the Christ, the Son of God. (Matthew 26:63-66) He was condemned to death not for any wrong or crime He had committed, but solely for who He claimed to be.

Jesus died for the truth. He was and is exactly Who He claimed to be. He is indeed the Son of God, the Savior of the world.

### **The Denial of Peter: Matthew 26:69-75**

"69) Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard, and a servant-girl came to him and said, "You too were with Jesus the Galilean." 70) But he denied it before them all, saying, "I do not know what you are talking about." 71) When he had gone out to the gateway, another servant-girl saw him and said to those who were there, "This man was with Jesus of Nazareth." 72) And again he denied it with an oath, "I do not know the man." 73) A little later the bystanders came up and said to Peter, "Surely you too are one of them; for even the way you talk gives you away." 74) Then he began to curse and swear, "I do not know the man!" And immediately a rooster crowed. 75) And Peter remembered the word which Jesus had said, "Before a rooster crows, you will deny Me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly."

The denial of Peter was progressive. He told the first servant girl, "I do not know what you are talking about." He told the second servant girl, "I do not know the man." Then to the final accuser he changed his character and began to curse and swear as he said, "I do not know the man." Luke 22:60-61 adds the note that when the cock crowed, Jesus turned and looked at Peter.

Immediately, Peter remembered the prophecy of Jesus that he would deny Him three times before the cock crowed. With this realization, Peter went out and wept bitterly. He had not only denied he knew Jesus, but this disciple repudiated His Master of three years by forsaking a loving and gentle demeanor. Instead of becoming like his Master, with this single act of vulgarity of speech, he threw off the robe of Christ-likeness. He sounded and acted the role of a heathen.

Hours earlier he had vowed loyalty to Jesus even if the act brought his own death. (Matthew 26:33) Now a little public ridicule brought both denial and rejection of his Master. Sandwiched between these two contradictions are the words of Jesus in Matthew 26:41; "... the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." The significance of those words now become paramount.

I do not doubt the sincerity of Peter in Matthew 26:33, but he illustrates the point of Romans 8:8 that those who are in the flesh cannot please God. Every true believer needs to move from living in the flesh to living in the Spirit. Romans 6-8 must become the road traveled by every born-again Christian.

Peter standing at distance observing the condemnation of Jesus was very different from the Peter filled with the Holy Spirit after Pentecost. The new Peter became a leader in the early church and a willing and faithful martyr for Jesus Christ. Church history tells us that he was crucified upside down because he did not view himself worthy of dying like His Master.

Paul testified in 1 Corinthians 2:6-3:3 that there is a stark contrast between the Spirit-matured Christian and the carnal Christian. Galatians 5:16-26 drives home the same point. The denial of Jesus by Peter illustrates the futility of the flesh to produce lasting fruit.

But failure was Peter's back door to success. John 21 screams that Jesus was far from done with Peter. He called him to tend His sheep, but he first needed to wait for the promise of the Father. (Read Acts 1:4-8) It does not work to embrace Jesus and hold the Holy Spirit at arms length. This is a recipe for failure and carnality. The arm of flesh will fail you.

If you have failed Jesus, the shortcomings of your fleshly good intentions have been exposed just as Peter's were. Your flesh cannot please God. It is time to welcome the promise of the Father into your life. It is time to repent from your sinful and carnal ways and seek God on His terms. It is time to seek and embrace the inner ministry of the Holy Spirit.

### **The Self-Destruction of Judas: Matthew 27:3-10**

"3) Then when Judas, who had betrayed Him, saw that He had been condemned, he felt remorse and returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, 4) saying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." But they said, "What is that to us? See to that yourself!" 5) And he threw the pieces of silver into the temple sanctuary and departed; and he went away and hanged himself. 6) The chief priests took the pieces of silver and said, "It is not lawful to put them into the temple treasury, since it is the price of blood." 7) And they conferred together and with the money bought the Potter's Field as a burial place for strangers. 8) For this reason that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day. Then that which was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled: 9) "And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of the

one whose price had been set by the sons of Israel; 10) and they gave them for the Potter's Field, as the Lord directed me.””

When Judas saw that Jesus was condemned, he felt remorse. Suddenly his thirty pieces of silver condemned him. It made him feel defiled and dirty.

In his own way, he tried to undo his damage. By returning the blood money he thought he could somehow change the verdict. It was too late. His betrayal led to the condemnation and crucifixion of Jesus.

That was the key difference between Peter's denial and the betrayal of Judas. Peter's denial was an inner condition of the heart that had no outer affect on others. The betrayal of Judas was the action that put the crucifixion in motion. Not all sinful actions carry the same consequences.

Though his confession to the chief priests and elders was sincere, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood," they were untouched. The betrayal of Jesus rested on his shoulders alone. He decided to carry it himself.

He threw the pieces of silver into the sanctuary and went out and hanged himself. It appears that Judas committed suicide before Jesus was crucified. Satan condemned him literally to death. Rather than trusting Jesus for forgiveness, he tried atoning for his own sinful actions.

This was the second major difference between Peter and Judas. Peter took the guilt of his sin to the Savior, Judas let the accuser of the brethren weave his guilt into a rope of self destruction. He rejected Jesus as his personal savior.

It is intriguing that the chief priests and elders used the thirty pieces of silver to buy the Potter's Field as a burial place for strangers. This was most likely a piece of ground previously full of clay for making pots. It had been stripped of all valuable clay and had become a nearly worthless piece of property. Isaiah 45:9 and 64:8 reminds us that God is the potter and we are the clay. He can make beauty of all of us if we trust Him. Judas is an example of a wasted life. He took things into his own hands.

We all have a similar start in life. What we allow God to make of us can be radically different. Judas and Peter had equal opportunities in life. They both were disciples of Jesus, but how radically different the outcomes of their failures.

#### **The Trial Before Pilate: Matthew 27:11-14**

“11) Now Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor questioned Him, saying, “Are You the King of the Jews?” And Jesus said to him, “It is as you say.” 12) And while He was being accused by the chief priests and elders, He did not answer. 13) Then Pilate said to Him, “Do You not hear how many things they testify against You?” 14) And He did not answer him with regard to even a single charge, so the governor was quite amazed.”

The trial of Jesus before Caiaphas was a mockery of justice. His death was determined before the trial began. The trial of Jesus before Pilate had some merit. Pilate concluded that Jesus was an innocent man and that jealousy motivated His accusers. (See Matthew 27:18)

Sadly, there are times when the government is more righteous than religion. Herod even sought a way to release Jesus. In the end, he gave way to political pressure. The will of the people often triumphs over truth and justice.

The full story of the trial of Jesus before Pilate requires a study of all four gospels. It appears that Pilate gained a degree of respect for Jesus and even maintained His innocence.

Church history hints that after falling from his position with Rome, Pilate and his wife may have become followers of Jesus. Only eternity will answer the mystery surrounding the destiny of Pilate, but he washed his hands of the sentence pronounced on Jesus. (See Matthew 27:24-26)

In this exchange, Pilate washed his hands before the people and said, “24)... I am innocent of this man’s blood, see to that yourselves.” To this gesture, all the people answered and said, “25... His blood be on us and our people.”

It is intriguing that twice in the text the blood-guilt of Jesus is assigned on people and once on money. In Matthew 27:4, Judas confessed to being guilty of “betraying innocent blood.” In Matthew 27:6, the thirty pieces of silver were defiled as being “the price of blood.” And now in Matthew 27:24-25 the religious leaders and the crowd said, “His blood be on us and our children.”

We now have an irony about the blood of Jesus. It has both the power to cleanse and forgive and it has the power to condemn and bring eternal death. It is the basis of both the salvation of the redeemed and the condemnation of the lost.

How do you choose the blood of Jesus to be applied to your life? Do you trust in Him for your salvation or reject Him toward your condemnation? The lost have no excuse! They reject the free gift of salvation purchased with the blood of Jesus. (See John 3:16-21) The redeemed believe in the work of Jesus on the cross to pay for their debt of sin.

### **The Great Substitution: Matthew 27:15-23**

“15) Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to release for the people any one prisoner whom they wanted. 16) At that time they were holding a notorious prisoner, called Barabbas. 17) So when the people gathered together, Pilate said to them, “Whom do you want me to release for you? Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?” 18) For he knew that because of envy they had handed Him over... 20) But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to put Jesus to death. 21) But the governor said to them, “Which of the two do you want me to release for you?” And they said, “Barabbas.” 22) Pilate said to them, “Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?” They all said, “Crucify Him!” 23) And he said, “Why, what evil has He done?” But they kept shouting all the more, saying, “Crucify Him!””



The story of Pilate offering Barabbas in place of Jesus serves as an illustration of the gospel. The innocent one was about to die in the place of the guilty one. 2 Corinthians 5:21 says; “He made Him who knew no sin to become sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”

We have no idea of the full crimes of Barabbas. He was simply called a “notorious prisoner.” Luke mentions he was guilty of an insurrection and murder. Pilate was certain the contrast was so huge the people would choose to release Jesus and condemn Barabbas. Who would choose the guilty in place of the innocent?

But the chief priests and elders persuaded the people to ask for Barabbas, and to put Jesus to death. What a picture of the Passover that unfolded that very night. The chief priest condemned the innocent lamb to be put to death so that the people might live. The great substitute was being acted out in real life. The Lamb of God was taking away the sins of the people. (See John 1:29)

### **The Warning of A Wife: Matthew 27:19**

“19) While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent him a message, saying, “Have nothing to do with that righteous Man; for last night I suffered greatly in a dream because of Him.””

This has always been a mystery verse. In the middle of the trial of Jesus, the wife of Pilate sent an urgent message to him to “have nothing to do with that righteous man, for last night I suffered greatly in a dream because of Him.” The New Living Translation says; “... Leave that innocent man alone. I suffered through a terrible nightmare about him last night.”” The reader is left reflecting on “the night of suffering” during that first Passover back in Egypt as the destroying angel passed over the land.

Because of the dream, she knew Jesus was a righteous or innocent man. She did not want her husband to bring innocent blood on himself or his family. The dream or nightmare was so terrifying that it moved her to the extraordinary measure of warning her husband... right in the middle of the trial. Exactly what she dreamed was not disclosed.

Can you imagine the scene? The trial is tense and voices are loud and boisterous. Jesus is standing before the judgment seat. All eyes are on Pilate. Then suddenly a messenger walks over to him and interrupts the trial with either a verbal or written message from his wife. For a moment, time stands still. Wonder comes over the crowd.

What happens next is even a greater mystery. According to Matthew 27:19, the message from Pilate’s wife was entered into the public record. How else did it get into the story? The next verse reads as if the chief priests and elders of the people doubled down on their efforts against Jesus to counter the effect of the message from Pilate’s wife.

Dreams played an important role in a number of stories in the Bible. Jacob, Joseph, Daniel, the stepfather of Jesus, and even Paul had dreams of divine origin. God can and does use dreams

to both warn and direct people. Yet, Colossians 3:18 warns against taking action based exclusively on a dream or vision. I suspect that Satan can also manipulate dreams.

I use a dream as one of several ways to confirm God's leading. It has to line up with the "ways of God as revealed in the Bible." (See Isaiah 6-11) If a dream is contrary to the morals or principles of Scripture, I discard it as being deception. God's Word is always the grid to measure truth.

In the case of Pilate's wife, it is instructive that her relationship with her husband was such that she had access to him even in the middle of an important event. Husbands take note: God can give crucial guidance through the intuition of a wife. Keep the doors of communications wide open, especially when you are sitting on the judgment seat ready to make an important decision.

Though I admit speculation, it seems that the actions of Pilate to liberate Jesus as an innocent man were partly influenced by his wife. I also attribute that the washing of his hands from the blood of Jesus had something to do with this warning from his wife. He tried to distance himself and his family from the condemnation of Jesus.

It appears that Jesus was turned over to crucifixion without a guilty verdict from Pilate. In fact, Pilate maintained His innocence.

Here is a strange twist to the crucifixion story; Jesus became a peace offering to the Jewish leaders to prevent an insurrection or bloody revolt. Look carefully; the Jewish leaders were guilty of the very crime Barabbas was charged with in Luke 23:19. Their actions amounted to insurrection and the murder of an innocent man.

### **The Scourging: Matthew 27:27-31**

"27) Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole Roman cohort around Him. 28) They stripped Him and put a scarlet robe on Him. 29) And after twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on His head, and a reed in His right hand; and they knelt down before Him and mocked Him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" 30) They spat on Him, and took the reed and began to beat Him on the head. 31) After they had mocked Him, they took the scarlet robe off Him and put His own garments back on Him, and led Him away to crucify Him."

We now have reference to the scourging of Jesus by the Roman cohort. This was a form of torture. Up to this point they were charged with protecting Him under Roman law. As soon as He was handed over by Pilate to the cohort, laws no longer applied. There was no restraint.

In the text, because Jesus claimed to be the king of the Jews, the Roman soldiers mocked Him. They put a crown of thorns on His head and then beat His head with reeds. With each blow the thorns cut deeper into His scalp.

The crown of thorns was reminiscent of the ram caught by its horns in the thorn bush in Genesis 22 when Abraham offered up Isaac. In this case, "God was providing Himself as the lamb for the sacrifice." The biblical imagery was being fulfilled.

The scourging also included whipping though it was not mentioned in this text. The prophecy of Isaiah 53 was fulfilled on Jesus during the scourging and crucifixion.

He was returned to Pilate as a beaten and bloody mess. He was beaten in the face multiple times. Both eyes were close to being swollen shut. A modern boxing referee would have stopped the fight. Isaiah indicates that He was disfigured.

With the scourging complete, He was led away for crucifixion. He was already exhausted and dehydrated. He endured it all to redeem humanity from the curse of sin. He Himself was the victim of human depravity.

### **Simon From Cyrene: Matthew 27:32**

"32) As they were coming out, they found a man of Cyrene named Simon, whom they pressed into service to bear His cross."

It started as an uneventful day for Simon. He was in Jerusalem for the Passover. His travels had brought him and his two sons from the city of Cyrene which is in Libya west of Egypt. There were many Jews there who would visit Jerusalem, especially during holidays.

He and his two sons, Alexander and Rufus, were up early taking in the early festivities. As tourists, they did not have the usual family gathering for the Passover. It meant they were free to walk about and take in the sights and sounds. (Mark 15:21)

Suddenly, they heard a ruckus and curiosity beckoned them to turn aside and look. As they turned down a side street toward the sound, they came upon some Roman soldiers leading three men down a street to be crucified. It was a frequent sight, but what was unusual was an angry mob that had gathered to mock and cast insults at the front man. Simon stepped forward to get a clear view.

To his surprise, the front man already looked exhausted and mutilated. People were cursing, swearing, and spitting at Him. On his head was a crown crudely woven from thorns. His back was ripped open and bleeding. It had been torn open by a Roman scourging whip.

Just as He was about to pass Simon, the condemned man stumbled and fell under the load of His cross. A few women who were following and weeping tried to push their way to Him and help, but the Roman soldiers used their spears as a barricade to hold them back.

Then it happened. The Centurion reached out and grabbed Simon by his arm and angrily said, "You, step in and carry His cross." He had no choice. Roman Law allowed a soldier to force any non citizen to carry a load for one mile.

Simon glanced at his two sons and said, "Follow at a distance. I will find you when my mission is complete." With that, Simon stepped in and two soldiers lifted the wooden cross and placed it on him. He was now leading the caravan.

Then they forced the condemned man to His feet and He stumbled after Simon. Around His neck hung a sign that read; "The King Of The Jews!" This provoked the crowd even more.

By this point, the crowd of women following the three condemned men was growing larger. They were weeping and mourning. Then the exhausted condemned man nearly stumbled again. He paused for a moment and then turned back to look at His mourners.

A moment of silence swept over the crowd as He spoke; "Daughters of Jerusalem, stop weeping for Me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For behold, the days are coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.' Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us,' and to the hills, 'Cover us.' For if they do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?" (Luke 23:28-31)

The crowd was astonished! Some wondered if it was a threat. Others said; "No, it had more the ring of a prophecy." The brief words penetrated deeply. It was a gloomy prediction of future events in Jerusalem that would affect many. The words had an eerie resemblance to the mourning in Egypt years earlier during the first Passover when every Egyptian home experienced a death. Was He saying something of that tragic magnitude awaited Jerusalem in the near future?

There was little time for contemplation. The centurion pushed Simon with the butt end of his spear and yelled; "Get moving." Simon knew better than to protest.

Shortly, they ascended to the gloomy place called "Golgotha." The very word meant "the place of the skull!" It was the site of much bloodshed and human suffering. The Romans used it to send a blunt message to the populace that they were absolutely intolerant of crime and rebellion. They opted for public capital punishment rather than silent incarceration to control the populace. It was an effective psychological control tool used by Rome throughout its conquered territories. They were ruthless.

As quickly as it started for Simon, it abruptly ended. After lowering the cross to the ground at the foot of the executioners, the Centurion barked; "You are free to go." Then he sarcastically added; "Thank you for your service to Rome!"

As he turned, Simon's eyes momentarily met the eyes of the condemned man. He was astonished, for it was not the eyes of anger or bitterness that met him. Rather it was the look of love and compassion. He said nothing to Simon, but his lips slightly moved. Simon could not hold back his own tears for he knew exactly what the stranger meant: "Thank you!"

Simon stumbled back through the crowd. His heart was pounding. A few women from the mourners touched him and sent the same glance of gratitude.

His mind was racing. Simon had so many questions; “Who was this king of the Jews?” “Why was His demeanor so different?” “Why me?” His mind was forever imprinted with that brief look into the depths of his soul. He intuitively felt that the condemned man was doing something far greater for him than the momentary service he provided in carrying that rugged cross.

His daze was interrupted by the familiar voice of his two sons. “Dad, Dad... we’re over here.” Then Rufus said; “Do you know who that is?” “He’s the One we’ve been hearing all the miraculous stories about!” He’s the man we were hoping to see during this trip. “That is Jesus the Nazarene!”

### **The Crucifixion: Matthew 27:33-37**

“33) And when they came to a place called Golgotha, which means Place of a Skull, 34) they gave Him wine to drink mixed with gall; and after tasting it, He was unwilling to drink. 35) And when they had crucified Him, they divided up His garments among themselves by casting lots. 36) And sitting down, they began to keep watch over Him there. 37) And above His head they put up the charge against Him which read, “THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS.””

The story of the crucifixion is tragic, but it takes on rapid fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies over which Jesus had no direct input. For example, Matthew 27:34 says; “and they gave Him wine to drink mingled with gall...” Psalm 69:21 says; “They also gave me gall for my food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.” Jesus had no control over the menu.

Verse 35 is also significant. When they crucified Him, they divided up His garments, casting lots among themselves. Psalm 22:18 says; “They divided my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.” Again, this was a prophecy the soldiers fulfilled with no input from Jesus.

As to the charge against Him; “THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS”; there is no specific prophecy about the sign, but many see a connection to Psalm chapter two as a whole. This Psalm pictures the band of evildoers and earthly kings against the Son of God.

I must emphasize that Jesus was not crucified for any crime He had committed, but rather for who He claimed to be. He was indeed the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. And it all happened during the Passover.

(Golgotha is still visible in Jerusalem. There is a bus depot at its base, but it is best viewed by touring The Garden Tomb. This is a British-owned site where a first-century tomb was discovered. No one claims that this tomb is the actual tomb of Jesus, but it is an example of what a typical tomb would look like in the time of Jesus.) -dj

### **Five Bold Taunts: Matthew 27:38-44**

“38) At that time two robbers were crucified with Him, one on the right and one on the left. 39) And those passing by were hurling abuse at Him, wagging their heads 40) and saying, “You who are going to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save Yourself! If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross.” 41) In the same way the chief priests also, along with the

scribes and elders, were mocking Him and saying, 42) “He saved others; He cannot save Himself. He is the King of Israel; let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe in Him. 43) He trusts in God; let God rescue Him now, if He delights in Him; for He said, ‘I am the Son of God.’” 44) The robbers who had been crucified with Him were also insulting Him with the same words.”

At first glance, it is hard to understand the mocking Jesus endured while on the cross. As we analyze these verses, five basic taunts emerge. Each of them represent a bold challenge leveled against Jesus while He was helplessly hanging on the cross. Let's try to capture the essence of each taunt.

1. You said you could destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save Yourself! This could be called “The Religious Establishment Taunt!” We challenge you to change this temple system!
2. If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross. This could be called “The Identity Taunt.” We challenge you to prove your Divine Nature!
3. He saves others, He cannot save Himself. This could be called the “The Great Physician Taunt.” We challenge you to heal Yourself!
4. If you are the king of Israel, come down from the cross. This could be called “The Political Taunt.” We challenge you to overthrow Rome!
5. You trust in God, let Him deliver you now if He takes pleasure in you. This could be called “The Divine Intervention Taunt.” We challenge God to show up and save you!

When you look at these five taunts, they were challenging every office of Christ the Messiah from an immediate human perspective. They wanted Him to do them all right then and right there! That seems to be a common tendency from those who test and provoke God! They want it on their terms.

But wait, as we review these taunts... every one of them was fulfilled. The Temple is long gone! (Matthew 24:1-2) Jesus proved to be the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead! (Romans 1:4) Jesus rose from the dead in a healed and glorified body. (John 20:26-29) Rome had a great fall. (Romans 1:18-32) And Jesus is at the right hand of His Father. (Acts 7:55-56) We could elaborate a long time on each of these and greatly color in each of these points. History is “His Story!”

This stands as a solemn warning to small people who bring big taunts against God! He may put up with you for a short period of time, but He always prevails!

### **The Separation: Matthew 27:45-46**

“45) Now from the sixth hour darkness fell upon all the land until the ninth hour. 46) About the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?” that is, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”

The darkness fell upon the land between 12:00 noon and 3:00 PM. It was most unexpected. It was not an eclipse. It more resembled the plague of darkness in Egypt mentioned in Exodus

10:21-29, only this lasted only three hours. Why darkness? The Light of the World was being crucified. (See John 8:12)

It is at this point that Psalm 22:1 was fulfilled. Jesus cried out with a loud voice and said; “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?” that is, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” Matthew is unique because this is the only saying he quotes Jesus uttering from the cross. Matthew is also the only gospel writer who records this saying.

The separation that took place between the Father and the Son when Jesus became sin was incomprehensible to Matthew. 1 John 1:5 says; “God is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all.” The context is talking about fellowship with God. For the first and only time in the history of eternity, fellowship between the Father and the Son was broken. Sin always separates from God!

According to Genesis 1:4; “God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness.” From this first act of creation, the two have always been separated.

Jesus loves us so much He not only died on the cross to pay for our sins, He was also forsaken by the Father to redeem humanity. The first Adam blamed Eve for his rebellion against God. The second Adam accepted the full punishment of sin to redeem humanity back to God. In this case, the Son did not turn from the Father, rather the Father turned from the Son. The separation was complete.

(“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” is an exact quote from Psalm 22. The entire psalm is an eerie description of what it is like to be crucified – and it was written by David about 500 years before Jesus was crucified. Read in its entirety, it not only conveys the intense agony Jesus suffered, but an unwavering faith in the goodness, power, and majesty of God.) -dj

### **Crucifixion Signs and Wonders: Matthew 27:47-54**

“47) And some of those who were standing there, when they heard it, began saying, “This man is calling for Elijah.” 48) Immediately one of them ran, and taking a sponge, he filled it with sour wine and put it on a reed, and gave Him a drink. 49) But the rest of them said, “Let us see whether Elijah will come to save Him.” 50) And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit. 51) And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth shook and the rocks were split. 52) The tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; 53) and coming out of the tombs after His resurrection they entered the holy city and appeared to many. 54) Now the centurion, and those who were with him keeping guard over Jesus, when they saw the earthquake and the things that were happening, became very frightened and said, “Truly this was the Son of God!””

God is an original. He always writes His own script. The bystanders taunted Him to come down from the cross and save Himself. Jesus had another mission in mind. He focused on saving humanity.

At the point of His death, many signs and wonders happened in rapid succession. These were extraordinary events to underline the significance of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Darkness had already covered the land by midday. That got everyone's attention. Everyone in Jerusalem was exposed to this midday darkness. Wonder escaped none.

The moment Jesus gave up His spirit, Matthew records four more phenomena. First, the thick veil in the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. It was approximately a hand breath thick. The dividing wall between God and man was torn in two signifying that Jesus opened a new and living way to God. The order of a new High Priesthood was inaugurated. (Read the book of Hebrews)

Second, the earth shook. There was no mention how intense this was, how long it lasted or the extent. It seems clear from the text that Golgotha was the epicenter. This was experienced by everyone at the crucifixion site.

Third, rocks were split. One of the roles of Christ is to hold all things together. (Colossians 1:17) Theologians refer to Him as the "Sustainer." He holds the universe and the laws of physics together. When the Sustainer died, the natural realm protested. Creation itself groaned. (See Romans 8:20-23) We can conclude once again that the religious leaders were dumber than rocks! The rocks were protesting while the religious leaders were celebrating.

Finally, Matthew makes mention that tombs were opened; and many bodies of the saints were raised from the dead. They entered Jerusalem and appeared to many. Matthew was the only Gospel writer to record this event. Notice it happened only to the saints and they may have carried out a brief mission. I dare not speculate more about this event because of the lack of historical data, but I am confident their testimony had a huge impact to punctuate the gospel message.

The effect on the centurion and the soldiers standing guard was astounding. They became frightened and said, "Truly this was the Son of God." I am not sure if their confession resulted in salvation, but the seeds of the gospel were deeply planted within them.

Interestingly, Paul makes mention in Philippians 1:12-13 that the gospel made inroads throughout the whole praetorian guard. It appears that many did indeed become believers. The events of the crucifixion and resurrection and the subsequent spread of the gospel was a central topic of conversation among these soldiers.

### **Faithful Women Standing Vigil: Matthew 27:55-56**

"55) Many women were there looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee while ministering to Him. 56) Among them was Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

Each of the four Gospels mentions this group of women who followed Jesus from Galilee and were ministering to Him and His disciples. Though a few were mentioned by name, the actual group was fairly large and included some other acquaintances. (Luke 23:49) It is likely that this



group remained in Jerusalem and were part of the 120 that gathered in the upper room and devoted themselves to prayer prior to Pentecost. (Acts 1:13-15)

According to John 19:25-27, they stood close enough to the cross that Jesus both looked upon them and spoke to His mother entrusting her into the care of John. This was a heart-wrenching scene for these faithful followers.

So the reader must ask, "What won their loyalty?" The answer is simple: Jesus dignified women and treated them with respect. Throughout His ministry, He healed many, set many free from demonic oppression and never belittled any of them. His respectful treatment of women was actually counter-culture for His day.

It must be noted, that by contrast, only John was mentioned as present from among the twelve disciples at the crucifixion scene. But this group remained faithful to the very end without fear of personal safety, reprisal, or repercussions. Each of the four Gospel writers held them in high honor.

The same holds true around the world today. As I visit remote, obscure, and very difficult mission stations, I notice a common phenomenon... godly young men are tragically absent. Standing vigil and faithfully serving are godly women much like this group from Galilee that followed Jesus. They have sacrificed much to follow and serve Jesus. Many of them are young and single. They are the unsung heroes of the modern missions movement.

I am the last to criticize them or argue that women have a lower spiritual status or significance in the church. To the contrary, I join the Gospel writers in acknowledging and celebrating godly women on the front lines of ministry.

Though I recognize the biblical pattern of authority in the church, I do not minimize the ministry importance of godly women. The Holy Spirit indwells, anoints, and distributes spiritual gifts among them as well. They are shining lights in the modern missions movement of the past 200 plus years. I praise God for these faithful co-laborers in the work of the gospel. Thank you a hundred times over!

### **The Burial of Jesus: Matthew 27:57-61**

"57) When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who himself had also become a disciple of Jesus. 58) This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. 59) And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, 60) and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn out in the rock; and he rolled a large stone against the entrance of the tomb and went away. 61) And Mary Magdalene was there, and the other Mary, sitting opposite the grave."

Matthew moves quickly from the crucifixion to the burial of Jesus. John gives a more detailed account of the soldiers thrusting the spear into His side. (See John 19:32-37) He also mentions that Nicodemus came with Joseph to care for the body. (John 19:38-39) It appears that the conversation Jesus had with Nicodemus was very effective. (Review John 3:1-21)

This now becomes intriguing, because both men seemed to be members of the council responsible for the condemnation of Jesus. (See Mark 15:43) Both had become secret followers of Jesus. It seems that Joseph gathered courage quicker to ask Pilate for the body. I commend this public act. Luke 23:51 says Joseph did not consent to the plan or action against Jesus. I am confident there were others in opposition whose voices were silenced. A tragedy of politics is that the minority can easily be silenced.

To their credit, they gathered the courage to ask Pilate for the body of Jesus. The text mentioned Joseph was a rich man. Nicodemus brought 100 pounds of myrrh and aloes. (John 19:39) They wrapped the body in clean linen cloth. Joseph gave up his own newly-hewn tomb. They rolled a large stone over the tomb to seal the entrance.

It appears that Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus were sitting opposite the grave watching the ritual. (Mark 15:47) The body was prepared and placed in the tomb quickly because of the onset of decay. The burial of Lazarus gives insight on the urgent timing of burial. (See John 11:39)

However, we are now confronted with a stunning omission in all four Gospels. I never noticed this previously, but though Jesus had many followers in Jerusalem, He never received a formal funeral service. His family never showed up. His disciples and friends were absent. There was no procession to the cemetery. No one pronounced a eulogy over His grave. There were a scant four people present for a short time and then they faded away.

Ok, I understand it was the Passover and the Sabbath, but there is no mention of anything even being planned for a funeral service. The reader must ask "Why?" I believe it had something to do with His often repeated promise of being raised from the dead on the third day. (See Matthew 16:21) His followers were genuinely caught in a crisis of faith. After all, why conduct a funeral for a man who warned He was not going to stay in the grave?

### **Securing the Tomb: Matthew 27:62-66**

"62) Now on the next day, the day after the preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered together with Pilate, 63) and said, 'Sir, we remember that when He was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I am to rise again.' 64) Therefore, give orders for the grave to be made secure until the third day, otherwise His disciples may come and steal Him away and say to the people, 'He has risen from the dead,' and the last deception will be worse than the first.' 65) Pilate said to them, 'You have a guard; go, make it as secure as you know how.' 66) And they went and made the grave secure, and along with the guard they set a seal on the stone."

Between the burial team of Joseph and Nicodemus and the prevention team of the chief priests and Pharisees, Pilate was kept nearly as busy after the death of Jesus as before. I wonder which of the two groups he favored more? He granted both requests, but he seemed less moved by the malice of the chief priests and Pharisees.

Their request was intriguing. Some had obviously been present when Jesus made mention of His resurrection. They referred to Jesus as "that deceiver" even though it was their lies and

deception that resulted in His crucifixion. “Sir, we remember that when He was still alive that deceiver said, “After three days I am to rise again.”

Their concern was His disciples. They proposed they had a plot to steal away the body and perpetrate a public deception. To the contrary, the disciples were reeling in their own disappointment. The chief priests and Pharisees opted to put their best prevent defense on the field.

Pilate granted their request. They were granted permission to take the temple guard and make the tomb secure against any human disturbance. Some of these were undoubtedly the same soldiers that went to Gethsemane to arrest Jesus. Along with the guard, they placed a seal on the stone.

They failed to consider one possibility; the grave was secure against human malice but not against Divine intervention. There was no power on earth, neither human nor demonic that could prevent the resurrection of Jesus Christ... if God ordained it!

As the reader ponders these verses, an unsettling irony begins to come into focus. The Gospel message is about the death, the burial, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. (See 1 Corinthians 15:1-4) Look deeply at what was happening.

These agnostic religious leaders were spending their time discussing and arguing over the main points of the gospel, but they were totally blinded by the true deceiver. They were knocking at the door of salvation, but were focused on keeping it locked shut. Many throughout the centuries have stood in their sandals. What a tragedy! Grace is the only remedy for a hard and callous heart.

### **The Resurrection: Matthew 28:1-7**

“1) Now after the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the grave. 2) And behold, a severe earthquake had occurred, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled away the stone and sat upon it. 3) And his appearance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow. 4) The guards shook for fear of him and became like dead men. 5) The angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; for I know that you are looking for Jesus who has been crucified. 6) He is not here, for He has risen, just as He said. Come, see the place where He was lying. 7) Go quickly and tell His disciples that He has risen from the dead; and behold, He is going ahead of you into Galilee, there you will see Him; behold, I have told you.””

The word “resurrection” in the Bible is always associated with power. Thus we have the concept of “the power of the resurrection.” (See Ephesians 1:19-20) Comprehending and appropriating the power of the resurrection is the core of the Christian life.

In these verses we see the power of life over death. We see the power of love over hate. We see the power of angels over soldiers. We see the power of good over evil. We see the power of God over Rome. We see the power of forgiveness over condemnation. We see the power of

heaven over hell. We see the power of faith over despair. We see the power of the kingdom of light over the kingdom of darkness. The punch of the gospel is in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Back to the story. As the two Marys approached the grave, a severe earthquake had occurred. The earth shook at His crucifixion. He shakes it again at His resurrection. These were not natural events. Heaven was shaking the earth.

In this case, it was caused by an angel that had descended from heaven and rolled the stone away from the grave and sat upon it. After rearranging the furniture, he used the stone as a chair. I see a degree of heavenly sarcasm in this scene.

His appearance was like lightning and his garments as white as snow. The guards shook for fear at the sight of Him and became like dead men. He was very merciful. In Isaiah 37:36, the angel of the Lord struck and killed 185,000 Assyrian soldiers. I suspect the resurrection was a time for life and not death. The hope of the gospel was extended even to these soldiers.

At that point, the angel spoke to the women and told them not to be afraid. The angel gave them a tour of the grave of Jesus that had become more like a living room. He was not dead, He had risen. He was not there, He was on a mission.

Their next task was to go quickly and tell the disciples that He had risen from the dead. From this moment onward, the four Gospels report much activity and many post-resurrection appearances.

The death, burial, and resurrection combine to form the heart of the gospel message. His death atoned for human sin. His resurrection opened the gates of heaven. These three days fulfilled the Old Testament and changed the course of human history.

I encourage you to wrestle with the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. These three points set Jesus Christ aside from every other religious leader. He is not dead and decayed in a tomb. He is alive!

### **The First Appearance: Matthew 28:8-10**

“8) And they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to report it to His disciples. 9) And behold, Jesus met them and greeted them. And they came up and took hold of His feet and worshiped Him. 10) Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and take word to My brethren to leave for Galilee, and there they will see Me.””

With the record of the four Gospels and the book of Acts, there are numerous stories of post-resurrection appearances of Jesus Christ. This was the first and relates to Mary Magdalene and the other Mary. As the two Marys departed quickly from the angel to report to His disciples, Jesus met them... but there was something unique about this appearance.

Verse 9 says: “And behold, Jesus met them and greeted them. And they came up and took hold of His feet and worshiped Him.” John 20:17 adds a significant detail. “(17) Jesus \*said to her, “Stop clinging to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, ‘I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God.’”

Some believe, myself included, that according to Ephesians 4:8-10, Jesus emptied Abraham’s bosom, and ascended with the Old Testament saints to heaven. (See Luke 16:22) He was glorified and came back for around forty days in His glorified body for the remainder of His post-resurrection appearances. Then according to Acts 1:9-11, He made His glorious ascension.

If this theory is true, the two Marys may have met Him on His way to be glorified. This may explain His reluctance to allow them to cling to Him. He was on a mission and did not want to be delayed. Later, in John 20:27-29 He had no problem inviting Thomas to touch the scars from His crucifixion. It was also during these appearances we see Him in His glorified body. For example, He entered a room with all doors closed. (John 20:19) Some of the laws of physics no longer applied to His glorified body. 1 John 3:1-3 hints that we will one day have a glorified body as well. (See also 1 Corinthians 15:42-53)

No matter your view, these two women were the first to worship Jesus after His resurrection. There was no doubt in their minds that it was Jesus. They were the last to see His body placed in the tomb and they were the first to witness His resurrection. They were the first of many to witness His post-resurrection appearances. The resurrection distinguishes Jesus from every other founder of a world religion. He is in a category all of His own.

### **The Cover Up: Matthew 28:11-15**

“11) Now while they were on their way, some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests all that had happened. 12) And when they had assembled with the elders and consulted together, they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers, 13) and said, “You are to say, ‘His disciples came by night and stole Him away while we were asleep.’ 14) And if this should come to the governor’s ears, we will win him over and keep you out of trouble.” 15) And they took the money and did as they had been instructed; and this story was widely spread among the Jews, and is to this day.”

This story is a shocking contrast to Acts 12:18-19. The soldiers watching over Peter in prison lost their lives over his absence when the angel helped him escape. By contrast, these soldiers got paid off to say they were sleeping when His disciples stole away His body. This would have been a capital offense.

This story in Matthew amounts to the greatest conspiracy perpetrated in history. The soldiers were not in a position to “make a deal.” They failed at their mission.

The other side of the story is that no human agent can stop God's Divine will. He does as He pleases. He is in control. No iron curtain, bamboo curtain, human laws, or Roman Soldiers can stop God from carrying out His purpose in the world.

This story goes a long way to build my confidence in the resurrection. The truth is that these soldiers were bartering for their lives. The chief priests needed a cover story. The soldiers needed advocacy with the Governor. These are the seeds of conspiracy.

### **The Corrupting Power of Money. Matthew 28:11-15**

“11) Now while they were on their way, some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests all that had happened. 12) And when they had assembled with the elders and consulted together, they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers, 13) and said, “You are to say, ‘His disciples came by night and stole Him away while we were asleep.’ 14) And if this should come to the governor’s ears, we will win him over and keep you out of trouble.” 15) And they took the money and did as they had been instructed; and this story was widely spread among the Jews, and is to this day.”

With these verses, we discover that money twice paid a role in the crucifixion and resurrection story. It caused Judas to betray Jesus with a kiss and it caused these soldiers to become deceivers. The love of money not only put Jesus on the cross, it also tried to roll the stone back over His grave. Both groups sold their souls to the devil for some money. Never underestimate the corrupting power of money.

Paul warned Timothy three times about the dangers of a love for money. In 1 Timothy 3:3 he said that overseers are to be free from the love of money. In 1 Timothy 6:10 he said that the love of money is the root of all sorts of evil. Finally, in 2 Timothy 3:2-4 he noted that in the end times people would become lovers of money and pleasure more than lovers of God.

At some point you need to win this battle in your life. Jesus warned in Matthew 6:24 that no one can serve two masters. You cannot serve both God and money. Your loyalty will serve one above the other. Never underestimate the corrupting power of money.

### **Post-Resurrection Appearances: Matthew 28:16-17; Acts 1:3**

“16) But the eleven disciples proceeded to Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had designated. 17) When they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some were doubtful.”

“3) To these He also presented Himself alive after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God.” Acts 1:3

According to Matthew 28:7, the angel that appeared at the empty tomb said that Jesus was going to proceed His disciples into Galilee. The post resurrection scene in John 21 between Jesus and His disciples after a long night of fishing transpired on the Sea of Galilee. Jesus made numerous post-resurrection appearances. During five separate occasions, He gave aspects of the Great Commission. Spreading the Gospel to all people was foremost on His heart.

This occasion in Matthew 28:16-17 was most likely not His ascension as recorded in Acts 1:9-11. Instead, this was likely one of His many post-resurrection teaching sessions in which He taught about the kingdom of God. (Acts 1:3) Prior to His ascension, He sent them back to Jerusalem and commanded them to wait for the promise of the Father.

So what can we learn from these three verses in Matthew 28:16-17 and Acts 1:3? Let's dive into the text.

First, Jesus had providential meeting times and places for His disciples. In this case, it was on a mountain in Galilee. He called the eleven aside to meet with Him.

I am a firm believer in setting aside time daily to meet with God. But in this case, Jesus called them aside for a longer time with Him on a mountain. It lasted over a period of forty days. Be willing to clear your schedule to meet with God!

Second, this was a time for teaching and learning. (See Acts 1:3). His first sermon was given on a mountain. (Matthew 5-7) His final teachings to the eleven also took place on a mountain. I believe the place is secondary to the event of abiding in the presence of God.

Third, He spoke to them of things concerning the kingdom of God. (Acts 1:3) When God calls you aside to meet with Him, humble yourself and let the Holy Spirit teach you! Spend time in His presence with your Bible open. Don't be in a rush. Abide in His presence until all other voices, distractions and worries grow silent. It may take hours... or days... or even longer. Jesus wants to reveal kingdom truth and kingdom ways to you. (Read Isaiah 55:6-12) This was Paul's prayer for every new believer as recorded in Ephesians 1:18-23. Invite the Holy Spirit to be your teacher.

Fourth, this was a time of worship. (Matthew 1:17a) Corporate worship is important, but personal worship is transformational. This moves way beyond being a spectator to becoming a participant. Worship is an action verb. It is something you must actively enter into! It is intimate communion with God! If you cannot enter into meaningful worship and communion with God, you might be religious but lost! Jesus wants us to worship Him in Spirit and in truth. (John 4:24)

Finally, this was a time to resolve personal doubts. (Matthew 28:17b) "... but some were doubtful." This phrase is significant. Some of the disciples had doubts and questions. Jesus was not offended that they were real and honest in His presence. Don't let your hurts or hang ups cause you to run from God! Instead, run to Him! Carve out time to meet with Him for an honest heart-to-heart conversation. Resolving doubts and overcoming personal hang ups seemed to be part of what motivated these post-resurrection appearances. There are both answers and healing in the presence of Jesus.

### **The Preamble: Matthew 28:18**

"18) And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth."

This stands as one of the most important claims made by Jesus in the whole Bible. He said "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth." By this statement He was claiming to be God. No authority in heaven or on earth is higher than Jesus Christ. This is an absolutely profound claim. Why?

Everything comes down to the issue of authority. When Peter and John were brought before the rulers and elders for healing the beggar and preaching the gospel, the question posed to them was; "By what power, or in what name have you done this?" (Acts 4:7) Their authority was being questioned. They quickly pointed to the resurrected Christ. (See Acts 4:8-10) The balance of the chapter is even more profound on the subject of authority.

They recognized the authority of Jesus Christ was higher than angels, demons, human government, religious leaders, and even sickness, disease and physical impairments. They claimed His authority was the basis for both healing and preaching the gospel.

You need to settle the issue of authority or you will forever be timid and wavering. The classic response of Peter and John to the threats and command of the religious leader to teach no more in the name of Jesus Christ brings this issue into focus; "19) But Peter and John answered and said to them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; 20) for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard."" (Acts 4:19-20) They were standing and ministering squarely in the authority Jesus Christ bestowed on them in Matthew 28:18. They did not waiver.

As Messiah, Jesus is the highest spiritual authority. As King of kings, Jesus is the highest political authority. As Savior, Jesus is the only means of Salvation. As the Great Physician, Jesus is the highest medical authority. As Creator, Jesus has dominion over the entire physical universe. As Truth, Jesus is the measure of philosophy. The list goes on and on!

In Matthew 8:5-13, the centurion made the issue of authority the basis of coming to Jesus with the request of healing for his paralyzed servant. Jesus marveled at his insight into His identity. He summarized his view of authority as "great faith." (Vs 10)

In Philippians 2:9-11, Paul made the same observation into the transcending authority of the name of Jesus Christ. He said; "9) For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, 10) so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11) and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." Notice, Jesus Christ is the highest authority in heaven, on earth, and under the earth.

I trust this subject is starting to resonate with you. You will never attempt for God or accomplish anything of lasting value greater than your view of Jesus Christ. This subject of Jesus Christ being the highest authority is the basis of faith, confidence, boldness, missions, power, personal freedom, personal priorities, healthy relationships, prayer, intercession, healing, and miracles.

How pathetic if your focus is on self and your own limited gifts and abilities. This amounts to self-authority. How tragic if your focus is on human programs and strategic planning. This



amounts to policy authority. How hopeless if your focus is on systems of organization or human government. This amounts to structural authority. These all play a small role in success, but our primary fuel must be a relentless focus on Jesus Christ, His authority, and the promise of the Holy Spirit. This translates to Divine authority!

The Great Commission is far too important to entrust to mere human agency and ability. A Divine calling needs Divine provision. That provision rests squarely in the preamble to the Great Commission as delivered by Jesus Himself here in Matthew 28:18. On these words the believer must stand.

### **The Great Commission: Matthew 28:18-20**

“18) And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. 19) Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, 20) teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

We now have what is commonly called “The Great Commission.” This was the formal commissioning service for the eleven apostles. Let’s look at a few key components of this commission.

First, Jesus made this commission based on His authority. (Vs 18) He was sending them out both by His authority and with His authority. Both sides of the coin are important.

Second, the direction of the motion was to “Go! He was sending them forth from Palestine to all the nations around the world. This was a huge expansion from Matthew 10:5-7 where they were sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Look at the geographical expansion of Acts 1:8; Jerusalem - all Judea - Samaria - the remotest parts of the earth.

Third, they were to make disciples of all the nations. The focus was on disciple-making and not merely on preaching the gospel. Christianity at its core is a new life-building movement. The gospel is intended to radically change people into Christ-likeness.

Fourth, they were to baptize the converts in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. I look at this respectively as a baptism of repentance, forgiveness, and power. Look at the progression of Mark 1:8, Acts 2:38 and Acts 1:4-5,8. Baptism in the name of the Father emphasized repentance, baptism in the name of the Son emphasized forgiveness, and baptism in the Holy Spirit emphasized power.

Fifth, they were to teach the followers of Jesus to keep His commandments. They both preached the Gospel and taught the full counsel of God’s Word. They were not to leave people in biblical illiteracy.

Sixth, they were to rest in the continual presence of Jesus. He promised to be with them in and through all things. He was not going to abandon them or forsake them.

Finally, they were to embrace these dynamics of the church age while looking forward to the return of Christ. The apostles were focused on the coming kingdom age in Acts 1:6. He acknowledged it was coming, but first they needed to fully embrace the age of the indwelling Spirit of God and their commission to reach even to the remotest parts of the earth with the gospel. (Study the full context of Acts 1:6-8)

We are still in the church age. This commission given in Matthew 28:18-20 is the job description of the church. I fully embrace the Great Commission. Knowing and loving Jesus Christ has given me a burning passion for world evangelization.

Every local church must fight the tendency to become introverted and self focused. Embracing Jesus Christ translates into a call to reach the whole world with the gospel. The Great Commission is as relevant and binding on the church today as it was when Jesus delivered it to His first eleven disciples. The presence and power of God is abundantly poured out on those who selflessly carry this baton.

### **Conclusion of the Gospel of Matthew**

1) "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham." Matthew 1:1

"20) teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Matthew 28:20

From beginning to end, the book of Matthew is about giving evidence to the skeptic that Jesus Christ is the promised Messiah. The most common phrase in the book is "now all of this took place so that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying..." (see Matthew 1:22) Phrases like this appear throughout the whole book. The author highlights innumerable Old Testament prophecies fulfilled by the birth, life, public ministry, miracles, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Some of these prophecies were done "by" Him, but most were done "to" Him by no act of His own will. This is especially true of the many prophecies fulfilled surrounding His birth and crucifixion. Why is this important? It is impossible for the critic to say Jesus read the prophetic script and manipulated their fulfillment.

The first verse in the book of Matthew begins with His genealogy as a direct descendant of both King David and Abraham. The Messiah had to be a direct descendant of both men.

The last verse in the book of Matthew ends with the statement of the end of the age. The implication is that He is coming back to set up His kingdom. (Compare to Acts 1:6-8) Matthew is implying that His identity as Messiah has been established and therefore His authority and teachings are to be obeyed.

I maintain that Matthew more than accomplished His goal of proving that Jesus Christ was and is the Messiah. But keep in mind, Matthew is merely one of four Gospels about the life and

ministry of Jesus Christ. When these four books are harmonized, we have the most complete historical evidence and proof of authenticity of any religious or secular figure of antiquity or modern origin. No one else comes close!

The claims of His genealogical origin, life, ministry, miracles, teachings, death, burial and resurrection are credibly established beyond all doubt. If you look at the four Gospels as testimony by four eye witnesses in a court trial, they pass the test of authenticity, credibility, and reliability. Though a few of them added details skipped by others, there is zero contradiction in their testimonies. They harmonize in every detail.

The evidence points to only one verdict: Jesus Christ was and is the Messiah, the Son of God, and the Creator of all things. His word is trustworthy and His promise to return and set up His Kingdom must be taken seriously.

The birth pangs of the end times given by Jesus Christ in Matthew 24-25 read like current events and breaking news. The book of Matthew is complete right down to end-time prophecy. The serious reader of the book of Matthew and the four Gospels cannot remain neutral. Your eternal destiny will be determined by your view of Jesus Christ.