

A dramatic, high-contrast photograph of a person standing with their back to the camera, looking up. A powerful, bright beam of light descends from the top of the frame, illuminating the person's head and shoulders. The light creates a hazy, ethereal atmosphere with visible rays and some dust or smoke particles. The background is dark and textured.

# SCANDALOUS **JESUS**

A LENTEN DEVOTIONAL  
THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW, PART 9

EASTBROOK CHURCH

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# INTRODUCTION

I remember seeing a drawing of Jesus in a Bible when I was a child. He looked peaceful and caring with a couple young children near Him. He smiled at them, and they smiled back at Him. It captured my heart and my attention.

As I grew up and read the Bible more, I realized just how true it is that Jesus abounds with peace, care, and real love for humanity. In his gospel, the Apostle John describes Jesus as being sent from God the Father *“full of grace and truth”* (John 1:14).<sup>1</sup>

While it is true that Jesus cares for and loves us, there is something else about Jesus that can create a tension of sorts in our picture of Him. We see Jesus turning over tables and scrambling conventional expectations of the Messiah. He comforts those burdened with the weight of the world and their sin, but He also cuts to the quick with those who are smugly self-righteous or careless toward God.

Jesus is not a tame Messiah. When He entered Jerusalem, the center of political and religious life for the Jewish people, Jesus caused a scandal. From the triumphal entry into Jerusalem through His teaching and into His crucifixion, Jesus shocked an upside-down world with lavish grace and truth from God for all with ears to hear and eyes to see.

Jesus’ scandalous journey parallels our journey of Lent. Lent is a forty-day journey beginning on Ash Wednesday and carrying forward to Easter Sunday when we celebrate Jesus’ resurrection. Echoing Israel’s forty-year journey to the Promised Land and Jesus’ forty days of temptation in the wilderness, Lent leads us into deeper engagement with God through prayerful reflection and reading of Scripture. With particular attention on Jesus’ suffering and crucifixion in Jerusalem, Lent invites us to turn from ourselves, our sin, and our idols in order to more deeply be transformed by God.

The devotional booklet you hold in your hands is a forty-day guide written by people within the Eastbrook Church family to help us draw near to Jesus Christ in Lent. I pray this journey together as a church draws us into a transforming encounter with Jesus—His life, His death, and His resurrection.

+ The peace of the Lord,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Matt Erickson". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Matt" being more prominent and the last name "Erickson" following in a similar style.

Matt Erickson  
Senior Pastor, Eastbrook Church

## HOW TO USE THIS DEVOTIONAL:

Each week of this devotional begins with a Sunday reading written by Senior Pastor Matt Erickson for older students and adults. There is also a version called “Family Talk” written by a member of our NextGen team, intended for families with young children. Each day Monday-Friday has a short devotional thought written by one of our Eastbrookers with questions at the end for deeper reflection. Saturdays are intended for small group discussion and for deeper reflection.

Interact with the digital version of this devotional in a variety of ways: on the Eastbrook App, on Instagram, via daily emails, blog, or PDF. Find these options and links on our website at [eastbrook.org/scandalousjesusdevo](http://eastbrook.org/scandalousjesusdevo).



A pair of dark-colored sunglasses lies broken on a light-colored, textured surface. The lenses are shattered into several pieces, with one large piece on the left and several smaller fragments scattered to the right. The frame is also broken, with one side detached. The background is a mottled, greyish-white surface with some darker spots and shadows.

INTRODUCTION

JOURNEY  
TO THE  
**CROSS**

# BEGIN WITH BROKENNESS

READ JOEL 2:12-17

*"Rend your heart  
and not your garments.  
Return to the Lord your God,  
for he is gracious and compassionate,  
slow to anger and abounding in love,  
and he relents from sending calamity."* (Joel 2:13)

Sometimes what's broken can become more beautiful and stronger than before. In the Japanese art form *kintsugi* broken pieces of pottery are taken by an artist and repaired by mending the imperfections with a lacquer infused with powdered gold. Instead of flaws to be hidden, the imperfections become part of the beauty and strength of the vessel worth highlighting.

Sometimes what's broken can become more beautiful and stronger than before. The prophet Joel calls out to a people sinking in the waves of sin and idolatry. He calls them to turn around from their wrong ways and seek after God. Drawing on the action common with repentance, an outward tearing of garments, the prophet tells the people to tear their hearts, to break them up, before God.

Right alongside his invitation to break one's heart with repentance—turning to God—Joel reminds everyone that God is ready to meet us with His patience, forgiveness, and unyielding love. He takes the broken places of our lives and restores them, infusing these imperfections with His inestimably valuable grace, truth, holiness, and love.

Lent begins with brokenness. It begins with realizing the ways we have strayed from God. We turn back, tearing our hearts open with confession, bringing to Him the places where we are broken, and presenting to Him our lives. Twentieth-century novelist Ernest Hemingway once wrote, "The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places." With Lent, we do not place ourselves at the mercy of an anonymous world, but in the hands of a loving God who graciously remakes us through Christ. Sometimes what's broken can become more beautiful and stronger than before.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- *When have you experienced something being broken and repaired that was more beautiful or stronger than it was before?*
- *As you begin the journey of Lent, what area of your life do you want to give to the Lord for Him to heal, redeem, or restore?*

BY MATT ERICKSON



## FAMILY TALK

Have you ever sat around a bonfire until all the wood is burned and the fire has gone out? What is left? Ashes! Gray, burnt-toast smelling, messy ashes!

In Bible times, people would take cooled-off ashes and spread them on their skin when they were very sad. Yuck! Just like ashes, sin can be ugly and messy. Wearing ashes was like a sign to everyone else that you were going through a time of confessing your sin and praying for forgiveness and a new start with God.

So, hundreds of years ago, when people wanted to mark the beginning of Lent—this special season leading up to Easter—they used ashes. Jesus came to die on the Cross to take on the punishment for everyone's sins, for all time. During Lent we focus our thoughts on Jesus' death—the high price He paid for our sins. Through the season of Lent, we confess our sin. We can also give up food or other things we like, so that we can give more attention to our lives with Jesus.

Sometimes it's hard to think of all the things that we do that separate us from God (sin). Here is one way to help you practice a time of confession, by yourself or with your family. Read each question below. If you answer "yes" to them, repeat the prayer, "Lord, I am sorry" and draw a cross on a piece of paper. Maybe you can even use some ashes or soil mixed with a little water? It will make your hands messy—but that's a good reminder of sin!

When you have finished, crumple the paper and throw it out to remind yourself that when God forgives us, He removes our sin (Psalm 103:12).

**Have I treated others as I would like to be treated?**

*Lord, I am sorry.*

**Have I become angry when I don't get my way?**

*Lord, I am sorry.*

**Have I used my words to hurt others instead of to help them?**

*Lord, I am sorry.*

**Have I disobeyed my parents, teachers, or other grown-ups who care for me?**

*Lord, I am sorry.*

**Have I complained instead of been thankful for God's good gifts?**

*Lord, I am sorry.*

**(Add in your own words of confession.)**

*Lord, I am sorry.*

**God, thank you for forgiving us when we confess our sin to you and for giving us a new start! Thank you that Jesus paid for my sins so I could live forever with you in your kingdom. Amen.**

# FASTING AND FAITH

## READ ISAIAH 58:1-12

Isaiah 58 starts with God's call to Isaiah, asking him to boldly proclaim the sin and rebellion of his people. Verses 1-4 talk about how God's people are doing religious things, such as fasting (giving something up for a period of time) but it's superficial, done for show. The fruit of their religiosity was not good: spoiled with greed, exploitation, quarreling, strife, fighting.

In verse 5, the writer expresses God's true desire for fasting and faith: Don't just do stuff that makes you look religious. It was never meant to be a status symbol or religious performance.

Isaiah 58 also says if we are fasting, or living out our faith in the way that God intended, then our lives will be freed up to contribute to others in meaningful ways. We will care about justice and the well-being of others. We will be in tune with the patterns of oppression and poverty, and we will do and give what we can to make things better.

Fasting, along with other spiritual disciplines, helps us to practice turning from things that keep us from seeing and participating in the Kingdom of God.

And this comes with a promise (vss. 8-12). If we will untangle ourselves from the appetites that control us, and when we are willing to courageously show up on behalf of others; if we will turn from the things that keep us from loving like Christ...

...then our light will shine bright in darkness. We will have greater intimacy with the Lord and He will guide our steps. We will be renewed by His Spirit, day by day. And we will form a community together that is known for repairing and restoring what has been damaged. Amen!

This chapter of Isaiah reminds us of the first message Jesus shared when He began his public ministry. Jesus said *"The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"* (Mark 1:14-15)

Jesus, like Isaiah, calls us to repentance, to turn from the things that keep us from experiencing and sharing the Kingdom of God in our lives. He calls us to follow Him, and not just for show. He wants us to believe that God is doing something profound in the world right now, and we can be part of it if we'd only believe Him.

Let's believe Him together.

### FOR REFLECTION:

- *Why do you think it can be easy to fall into the trap of outward "religiosity" versus truly allowing these spiritual practices like fasting to tune our hearts towards God?*

# CHANGE OF HEART

## READ PSALM 51:6-17

As we begin this Lenten season, my thoughts go back a couple of years to when I was in college. Lent coincided with a class I was auditing, called "The Incarnation of God." One of the truths we were learning was that Christ not only lives in us, but Scripture also says, we are "*in Christ*." I had heard this phrase countless times, but now it struck me differently. During the first days of Lent, God was convicting me of sin in my life, and I was wrestling to believe that I could be "*in Christ*" when my anger, pride, and apathy were being lit up like neon signs. I mentioned my question and confusion to my professor. "It's amazing that Christ lives in me, but I'm having a hard time believing that I can be in Christ when my sin is glaring me in the face."

With no condescension, my professor smiled and simply said, "that's the journey of the Christian life. That's what sanctification looks like."

In an unexpected but powerful way, God was showing me how He works to make us more like Jesus. He illuminates our sin, and by His grace, we begin to see it for what it is: ugly and utterly offensive to God.

Reading this Psalm of David, I hear a man who has been made very aware of his sin. He knows he is guilty of adultery, murder, and deceit, but he doesn't justify his actions or even spout, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'll never do it again" like someone who's been caught. The conviction God brings through Nathan the prophet goes deeper, changing David's heart. He offers the Lord his crushed heart and asks that God will create a pure heart in its place. He brings a broken spirit and prays to receive one that is steadfast and willing. He knows God will not despise this kind of sacrifice, one that reveals true repentance.

### FOR REFLECTION:

- *What sin is the Holy Spirit bringing to your attention? He does this not to shame or condemn you, but to invite you into true repentance, a change of heart, and deeper communion with Him.*
- *Praise God for His faithful love and forgiveness. Praise Him because of His rich mercy and tender compassion!*

# REFLECT & RESPOND

Use this page either by yourself, with one or two other people or with your small group to reflect on how this week's readings have impacted you.

## REFLECT ON YOUR DISCOVERIES FROM THE PREVIOUS WEEK:

- *Based on your reading and reflection this week, what did you discover about the Jesus and what He came to do?*
- *What did you discover about yourself?*
- *What questions are you still wondering about after having read the passages this week?*

## NURTURE GROWTH THROUGH CONFESSION AND REPENTANCE:

- *As you went through the readings and devotions, where did the Spirit lead you to repentance and faith this week? Did you see yourself in any of these readings?*
- *Spend time praying for one another and for the Holy Spirit to help us have faith in the forgiveness and grace of God.*

## ENCOURAGE EACH OTHER TOWARDS ACTION IN RESPONSE:

- *In light of what I have discovered about God and myself this week, what is one thing I need to do differently? What steps will I take to implement this change?*
- *As a disciple-making disciple, who am I impacting for Christ? Who am I praying for? How am I introducing them to the Jesus we see revealed in these readings?*



WEEK 1

# UNLIKELY **KING**

# UNLIKELY KING

**READ MATTHEW 20:17-19; 21:1-11**

*"When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, 'Who is this?' The crowd answered, 'This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.'" (Matthew 21:10-11)*

In 2011 the world's attention was riveted to the royal wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton at Westminster Abbey in London. The extravagant attire and lavish ceremony transcended our everyday experiences, telling us we were seeing something extraordinary. It was certainly difficult not to hear about it in the news or on social media or in a passing conversation. Certainly, in London it would have been amusing for someone to ask, "What's going on here? Who are these two people anyway?"

On the day when Jesus rode into Jerusalem, the air was thick with dust kicked up by shuffling feet and shouts of "Hosanna!" Jesus' reputation had spread like a river flooding its banks, running from the northlands of Galilee toward Jerusalem. Still, some saw this flurry of activity and wondered what was going on. "Who is this guy anyway?" "Is he really a carpenter's son?" "I've heard he's a wonder-worker from the country but why has he come here?"

The disciples knew Jesus was more than most people understood. In fact, Jesus had told them ahead of time that their visit to Jerusalem was not a holiday and much more than a religious pilgrimage. *"We are going up to Jerusalem and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death"* (Matthew 20:18). Jesus was up to something more.

When Jesus began His ministry, expectations were running high for the Messiah's arrival. People expected the Messiah to be a king like David who would restore the nation to its glory and reestablish them in the sight of everyone as God's chosen and blessed people. As people eagerly anticipated that Messianic King, we might wonder what they were looking for. They may have thought, "I'm sure we won't miss him when he comes. We'll know him when we see him." But as Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, there were a lot of voices and dust, but not much pomp and circumstance. Jesus had come, but even His entry to Jerusalem was turning expectations upside down. He was upending not only what the Messianic King would look like but also what the Messianic King would do.

## **FOR REFLECTION:**

- *Why do you think Jesus' entry into Jerusalem might have been surprising to people?*
- *How would the disciples have seen Jesus in comparison to the crowds?*
- *How might you need to see Jesus afresh this Lent?*

**BY MATT ERICKSON**



## FAMILY TALK

How do you describe a king? You might say they wear fancy clothes, a crown, or ride a big, strong horse. Everyone knows who they are and how powerful they are. Jesus is a king too, but up until this point in scripture, He told people to keep quiet about his power and miracles, so He didn't look like what we think a king should be.

Beginning our Lenten journey, I am reminded of the song "The King Is Coming" by Newsboys. It starts off saying "Make a way for the king, the king is coming." We need to ask ourselves, "How are we preparing for King Jesus to come?"

Jesus had His disciples get a donkey for Him that no one had ever ridden, so He came to town with that new donkey smell! He was fulfilling a prophecy found in Zechariah 9:9. Crowds prepared the way by placing coats or branches on the ground and shouted "*Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!*"

It was like a great big parade! If I were to guess, I would say the children had the most fun! Can you imagine running alongside waving a palm branch or just singing songs to him?

The people welcomed Jesus and showed honor and respect, because they wanted Him to rule over them as their king. They expected an earthly king, not the kind of King that Jesus came to be. He is so much more than that!

Jesus is the King of everything. He came the first time to die on the Cross, but one day He will return. He will fix everything that is broken in the world and will reign forever! Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!

### REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

- *Do you have room in your busy life for Jesus?*
- *Have you ever waited and waited, praying for God to help you?*

# JESUS COMES TO JERUSALEM AS KING

**READ MATTHEW 21:1-11**

"I love a parade; The tramping of feet, I love every beat I hear of a drum. I love a parade! When I hear a band, I just wanna stand and cheer as they come!" This song, composed by Arlen & Koehler, expresses my sentiments exactly. I played a snare drum in the high school band and still get choked up when any band comes marching down the street.

I like to think that I would have stood and cheered when Jesus led His parade. I hope I would have been part of His band of disciples. Those cheers came from ordinary folks weary of the Roman military, and also burdened by religious legalism. No wonder they shouted, "Hosanna!" which means: SAVE PLEASE!

It wasn't an ordinary parade. Unlike military leaders who returned triumphantly from war riding a charger, Jesus arranged His parade differently. He fulfilled the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9 by riding on a donkey. Back then, leaders rode horses if they rode to war, but they rode donkeys if they came in peace.

By choosing a donkey, Jesus also emulated the peaceful transfer of power from King David to his son, Solomon, who entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey (1 Kings 1:38-48).

So, for those who awaited the Messiah, if they still had any doubts, Jesus' triumphal entry confirmed His Messianic royalty as well as His humility. "*Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!*"

Today, with all the suffering on earth, I pray "Hosanna/Save Please!" as I try to be part of the solutions and not part of whatever problems we face. While promoting the kingdom of God on earth, I keep one eye on the sky, anticipating the all-time greatest parade: His second coming.

St. Paul encourages us in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, saying that the ultimate parade will be announced with a loud angelic command and the brilliant summons of a trumpet when the Lord Himself comes down from heaven. The dead in Christ will rise first to join the Lord in the air, followed by the living who will meet up with the procession to escort Christ to His everlasting reign on earth, where He will put everything right. What a wonderful parade that will be!

## **FOR REFLECTION:**

- *Do you yearn for Christ's return? In the meantime, will you pray: Hosanna/Save Please!*
- *As you wait, what are you doing to fulfill His will on earth as it is in heaven?*

**BY DIANA OTTERBACHER**

# THAT NAME

READ ZECHARIAH 9:9-13

*"Behold your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey . . . his rule shall be from sea to sea. . ."*  
(Zechariah 9:9b-10b)

One popular early 1970's Christian song contains the lyrics, "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, let all heaven and earth proclaim, kings and kingdoms will all pass away but there's something about that name." Famous kings have famous names.

Some of the remarkable kings and their kingdoms are not mentioned in world history textbooks. Over the years of living in West Africa, I came to learn about some of the famous names of venerated pre-colonial kings—Sundiata Keita (13th cent. Mali kingdom), Osei Kofi Tutu (17th cent. Ashanti kingdom), Oba Oduduwa (8th cent. Yoruba kingdom), and Sonni Ali (15th cent. Songhai kingdom)—all men of great wealth, power, and fame, with extending influence over vast areas and populations of peoples. Kings have power. Kings exert influence over others. That's just what kings do.

During the times of the prophet Zechariah (c. 520-480), Persia was the world power to be reckoned with. Persia's king Darius reigned over his vast kingdom including the little enclave of Judah. Persia (under king Cyrus) had permitted the Jews who had been held in exile in Babylon to return to Judah and to start the reconstruction of the temple. So, during those days, God called Zechariah to encourage the returning Jews to push forward in their re-construction effort.

Zechariah, inspired by the Holy Spirit, writes his prophetic words to the post-exilic citizens of Judah. He writes of a coming king—not the kind of king that nations normally follow and not a king who relishes pomp and power. No, Zechariah calls the Jews to be encouraged and to be emboldened by God's promise of a humble messianic king who will right wrong, who will fight for his people, and whose upside-down kingdom one day will bring peace to the world.

Zechariah reminds us today, just as his words challenged Yahweh's people in the 6th century BC, *"Behold, your king is coming to you"* (v. 9). His promise of a righteous and saving king, King Jesus, motivates us to announce good news to our world needing to hear that the King has taken up residence in His Kingdom on earth. There really is "something about that name," King Jesus.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- *When you stop and think of your life, is there evidence that a king has set up his kingdom in your life? Have you let THE King take over? How is Jesus' reign currently evident in your life?*

BY PAUL SINCLAIR

## SEE HIM

READ EPHESIANS 1:15-23

"Open the eyes of my heart Lord,  
Open the eyes of my heart,  
I want to see you,  
I want to see you."

Recently, Jesus revealed himself to me. I knelt, almost by force, sobbing as the image unfolded: My right hand, petting the soft wool of a gentle lamb. At some point (and this will make sense if you have an affectionate pet) he, the lamb, began to nibble on my fingers. I could feel the sensation, a gentle pressure on my fingertips. My heart was overwhelmed! I couldn't hold back the choked words from my mouth mingled with tears: "Kind! Kind! He's kind! You're so kind Jesus! You're beautiful Jesus!"

This Lamb is our King.

Perhaps strange to us, His power and control radiates from an overwhelming kindness so beyond our own. I'm certain those in Jerusalem found it strange as well. However, when we encounter Jesus Christ, we find that the kindness is not some strange character trait. Our hearts give way to His own almost naturally. He pushes His fingers into the soft clay, forming His image. No wonder it's Paul's prayer that God would give the Ephesians a spirit of wisdom and revelation! We need to become like Him on this earth! The eyes of our hearts need to be opened!

We need to *know* him.

We need to see him.

For, "*When we see him, we will be like him*" (v. 18).

Have you seen Jesus recently? I mean REALLY gotten a good look at Him?

My prayer for each of you, as Paul's, is that the eyes of your heart would be opened. He's beautiful!

**FOR REFLECTION:**

- *When was a time in life you saw Jesus most clearly? What can you do to continue to see Him with that clarity today?*

# WHICH SIDE ARE YOU ON?

## READ JOHN 18:33-37

The fact is that we live in a unique time in American history. A country that was originally founded with Christian morals and values has reached a point where God's Word is no longer at the center of the belief system of most people. I would also argue that at no other time in American history has our country been so gravely divided along countless issues. These issues are also exacerbated by the innumerable amount of "labels" we place on each other such as...conservatives, liberals, democrats, republicans... as you know, the list goes on and on. In John 18:33-37, John highlights a similar time of sunder and labeling during Jesus' time on earth.

In verse 33, Pilate, presiding over Jesus' sentencing, tries to cast the label of "King of the Jews" onto Jesus. Jesus deflects the title (label) and asks Pilate, *"Is that your own idea, or did others talk to you about me?"* Jesus goes on to explain that His kingdom is not of this world. Eagerly wanting to apply a label of judgment to Jesus, Pilate promptly replies, *"You are a king, then!"*

Similarly, today's news media outlets assign labels and develop narratives for those not agreeing with their opinions or agendas; oftentimes as a way of intentionally sowing division and hatred. Conversely, stated in John 13:34, Jesus gave us a new commandment to live by. He said, *"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another."* In our daily lives, we don't need to necessarily concur with everyone around us; however, despite their viewpoint, opinion, or label, Jesus decrees that we "must" love them.

In verse 37, Jesus says, *"Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."* In John, 14:6, Jesus also says, *"I am the way and the truth and the life..."* The "side of truth" is the "side of Jesus." Moreover, John begins his gospel record stating, *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."* Biblical scholars refer to John's reference of the "Word" as Jesus. Suffice it to say, if we want to be on the "side of truth" in any matter, mirror that matter back to Scripture to find the truth indeed.

### FOR REFLECTION:

- *Are our opinions and beliefs formed by testing them against the "truth," the Word of God, or are we blindly responding to labels developed and cast by others?*
- *Commanded by Jesus, do you still love those around you that may be "labeled" differently from yourself?*

# ATTRIBUTES OF A KING

## READ REVELATION 1:4-8

As I read the words, “the ruler of the kings of the earth”, my thoughts immediately go to fictitious characters such as Aragorn, King of Gondor, or T’Challa, King of Wakanda; expanding to fit grand imagery that includes elaborate and intricate thrones, long cobbled walkways, luxurious robes made of silk, and ornate scabbards of leather. I see horses ready for battle and throngs of people waiting to cheer and praise their king. I imagine they would be good and benevolent kings; not bent on conquering nations for the sake of acquired power. They would be competent, strong-minded, and trustworthy kings not persuaded by the winds of culture or ideology.

The characters in my mind are fictitious, of course. Yet, even if those most noble kings were alive and living here on this Earth, right now in Milwaukee in 2022, I would be foolish to think they would *always* be competent, strong-minded, and trustworthy. The history of this world is filled with leaders who have, in their sin and misguided ideologies, brought pain and difficulty. Earthly leaders will fail. They are, unfortunately, ill equipped to “bring me Grace and Peace” or “love me enough to free me from my sin with their blood”.

I love when John harkened back to ancient prophetic words. Words that by their very reference meant “You know who I am talking about!” Jesus, the Messiah. He died and rose again. He *was*, and *is*, and *is to come*! He is no fictitious, imaginary character, nor is he Caesar, Prime Minister, or President, but rather the real King whose dominion and sovereignty comes by virtue of His resurrected, victorious life and has been given “the name which is above every name”.

I, like those in A.D. 95, am living in a world where Earthly powers can create upheaval, discontentment, disappointment, grief, betrayal, anxiety, etc. But, thanks be to God, John’s message given to him by the angel is a Word of Life and Hope. I have a King who is just, omnipotent, faithful, righteous, eternal... All the attributes needed to rise above what constrains and discourages me.

The kind of King I want to serve.

### FOR REFLECTION:

- *As you read John’s description of Jesus in Revelation 1:4-8, which phrase means the most to you? Why?*

# REFLECT & RESPOND

Use this page either by yourself, with one or two other people or with your small group to reflect on how this week's readings have impacted you.

## **REFLECT ON YOUR DISCOVERIES FROM THE PREVIOUS WEEK:**

- *Based on your reading and reflection this week, what did you discover about the Jesus and what He came to do?*
- *What did you discover about yourself?*
- *What questions are you still wondering about after having read the passages this week?*

## **NURTURE GROWTH THROUGH CONFESSION AND REPENTANCE:**

- *As you went through the readings and devotions, where did the Spirit lead you to repentance and faith this week? Did you see yourself in any of these readings?*
- *Spend time praying for one another and for the Holy Spirit to help us have faith in the forgiveness and grace of God.*

## **ENCOURAGE EACH OTHER TOWARDS ACTION IN RESPONSE:**

- *In light of what I have discovered about God and myself this week, what is one thing I need to do differently? What steps will I take to implement this change?*
- *As a disciple-making disciple, who am I impacting for Christ? Who am I praying for? How am I introducing them to the Jesus we see revealed in these readings?*





WEEK 2

THE  
WITHERING  
OF  
**OLD WAYS**

# THE WITHERING OF OLD WAYS

READ MATTHEW 21:12-27

*“Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out all who were buying and selling there... Seeing a fig tree by the road, he went up to it but found nothing on it except leaves. Then he said to it, ‘May you never bear fruit again.’”  
(Matthew 21:12)*

There’s nothing too flashy about gardening. You prepare the soil. You plant the seeds or seedlings. You make sure the seeds and plants receive enough water and sunlight. You do your best to protect against pests. You wait. You take care of things daily. Then, you wait even more. As time goes along you hope to enjoy the fruits of your labor.

As my family has experienced in our gardening endeavors, sometimes things do not go as planned. Some seeds never sprout. From time to time, animals get ahold of the fruit before we do. Occasionally, a group of plants is afflicted by disease or bugs and their leaves or fruit becomes unhealthy. When these things happen, you try to figure out if there’s a remedy for the situation.

But what happens when nothing grows in a spiritual context?

Jesus enters the Jerusalem Temple enacting one of the most memorable episodes of His entire ministry. Turning over tables and casting out money changers, Jesus declares something is deadly wrong with the Temple: *“My house will be called a house of prayer, but you are making it ‘a den of robbers’”* (Matthew 21:13). The heart of worship has evaporated from the soil that is God’s people, leaving the outward form riddled with disease and empty of fruit. When Jesus sees a fig tree barren of fruit on His way out of town, He makes it a living parable of the religion of His day. He curses it and moves on.

This sort of thing can happen in our lives, too. We sometimes forget we were made for life with God. We can lose our sense of what matters most. We let pollutants creep into our lives, hindering God’s fruit from growing in us. Lent is a ready-made remedy for restoration when we find ourselves in these places. Focusing on Jesus, we can walk the pathways of repentance—turning from ourselves and our sin—so God might have His way in us. When the old ways wither away, we can reach out for a renewing touch from God.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- *What part of this text stands out to you most?*
- *How might you need to let God refresh the soil of your life so you can bear fruit?*

BY MATT ERICKSON



## FAMILY TALK

*"Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out all who were buying and selling there. . . Seeing a fig tree by the road, he went up to it but found nothing on it except leaves. Then he said to it, 'May you never bear fruit again.'"*  
(Matthew 21:12)

Have you ever planted a garden before? It takes careful planning if you want to see good results! You need to select the seeds, prepare the soil, and make sure that it's getting the right amount of water and proper sunlight. All of this needs to take place in order for the tiny sprouts to push through the dirt and begin their journey to producing fruit.

But the task is not yet complete! If the gardener wants to reap a bountiful harvest they must keep a watchful eye on their growing garden to make sure that it continues growing healthy and strong. If they forget to water, the hot sun will eventually dry it all up! Sometimes rain pours and winds blow and plants get knocked down. Sometimes hungry critters sneak in and steal the fruit or vegetables before they even ripen. It takes a lot of work to make sure that a garden is able to actually do what it was intended to . . . produce FRUIT.

Did you know that each of us are like mini gardens? We were created to grow good spiritual fruit in our lives. Remember the fruits of the spirit? Things like love, joy, peace, and kindness are just a few! However, if we aren't watering our hearts with good things like truth from God's word, we'll start to become spiritually dry. If we allow the worries of the world to enter our minds and hard circumstances to steal our joy, we'll begin to feel so stuck that fruit won't be able to grow. How sad would that be?

Jesus calls us to be like a healthy tree or garden that bears beautiful fruit to bless the world around us! That is how they will know that we are His disciples!

### REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

- *What are some examples of good fruit that you can produce in your life?*
- *What are some things in your life that keep you from bearing fruit?*
- *What habits can you create to help keep your garden growing healthy and strong?*

# EMPTY PROMISES

READ MATTHEW 21:18-22

*“Seeing a fig tree by the road, he went up to it but found nothing on it except leaves.” (Matthew 21:19)*

I grew up in the embrace of Christian faith, raised by loving, godly parents (mom plus pastor dad). When I was in kindergarten, I chose to ask Jesus to forgive my sins. That’s good news!

But there’s bad news too. Growing up in church meant I’ve always known just what a Christian ought to “look like.” I’m continually tempted to pursue good actions—not to please God, but to earn the esteem of others or prop up my perception of myself. When I’m operating out of my own strength and plan instead of Christ’s, the results fall short. I may say, “I’ll pray for you,” and then barely do it. I may seem friendly and then not follow through. I may volunteer for a ministry and then feel dry.

Jesus was hungry; a fig tree by the road had leafed out early and seemed to promise a treat. Normally fig leaves and fruit emerge at the same time. But when Jesus looked closely, He found no figs—not even tiny ones that would ripen later. The promise was empty.

The barren tree may have symbolized Israel’s attempts to please God without faith in Jesus. But it can also illustrate a danger for believers who try to do the right things on their own and for the wrong reasons. We’re showing leaves, but the fruit is not there!

The remedy for “empty promises” is to be in communion with Christ and draw on His strength. Jesus said, *“I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing”* (John 15:5).

The disciples are amazed at Jesus’ ability to make the fig tree wither. He tells them, *“If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer”* (Matthew 21:22). We’re weak on our own, but Jesus has power!

When I do rely on Christ and His Spirit, He brings forth the fruit He desires in me and through me. We all need to be *“rooted and established”* in *“the love of Christ”* who is *“able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us”* (Ephesians 3:17-20).

## FOR REFLECTION:

- *What are some practical ways you can stay “rooted” in Jesus?*
- *How does the promise of verse 22 encourage you in your prayers?*

BY SUSAN GILLILAND

# TO BE FULLY KNOWN

READ MATTHEW 21:23-27

As mom of two wonderful, rambunctious kids I have often said, “Hold on! I’m talking—I’ll be with you in a moment.” When reading this passage in Matthew, this phrase stands out to me: “...while He was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to Him” (v. 23). It appears they asked Jesus a question while He was teaching. If there was ever a time to say, “I’ll be with you in a moment,” this could have been it! And yet, Jesus responds to their question with patience, wit, and strength.

I’ve heard it said that the divinity of Jesus was revealed in the way He responded to people. In moments of being on the road (Matthew 9:27, 19:1-2), in stepping away to pray or rest, and even when leaving a dangerous situation (Matthew 12:14-15); Jesus still took the time to listen, heal, answer, restore. This is not a human reaction, y’all.

Jesus’ authority over His own emotions and the questions of naysayers, and the compassion He shows in the midst of being desperately misunderstood is incredible. Plus, check out what He says in response to the religious leaders’ question! It’s clear these men planned this moment so they could immediately deny the validity of Jesus’ response. In essence, they asked, “Who gave you the right to act this way?”

In moments where I have felt wrongly judged or misunderstood I have fought like crazy to be understood. To justify what I think to be true of myself. And yet, the truest Person who ever lived did not fight to be understood. In His counter response, Jesus was not evading a hard question... He was shining a light on the religious leaders’ motive. Somewhat ironically, the answer to Jesus’ question about John’s baptism was also the answer to the religious leaders’ question. Both John’s baptism and the authority of Jesus came from heaven—from God the Father!

One of my favorite songs by Audrey Assad, entitled ‘I Shall Not Want,’ includes the following lines: “From the need to be understood, and from the need to be accepted... Deliver me, O God.” May Jesus continually reveal in my heart the moments where I feel the need to be understood. Take a moment and ask Jesus to help you stop striving to be known by others, and to simply rest in His beautiful authority. How good it is to be fully known by Him.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- *Where are you most tempted to fight to be “known” by others?*
- *How can you increase in your ability to rest in being fully known by Jesus?*

BY JAMIE CHAPMAN

# FAITH, HUMILITY, AUTHORITY

## READ MATTHEW 8:5-13

Jesus spent much time in Capernaum as He ministered in Galilee. Here, Jesus was asked by a centurion to heal his servant who was suffering greatly. Under Rome and having command in their military, the centurion well understood authority. With faith in the divine authority and power of Jesus, he called Him "Lord." In humility, he stated his unworthiness to have Jesus in his home. He believed and the word of Jesus healed his servant. Jesus was astonished at his faith and marveled about it to His followers, telling them of separation from God for those who chose not to believe in Him.

Later in the Gospel of Matthew, we see that it is the Roman governor Pontius Pilate who was amazed by Jesus. Betrayed, beaten, mocked, falsely accused and on trial before Pilate, Jesus remained silent instead of defending Himself. In authority, Jesus chose excruciating pain, suffering and horrible death on a Cross. Jesus demonstrated ultimate love and humility, taking God's wrath for all sin upon Himself to bring forgiveness, healing and life with God forever to all who believe. In God's power and authority Jesus was raised from the dead and ascended to heaven. In authority, Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to live in His followers and sends them to all nations to do His work.

God commands all believers to submit to the authority of Jesus in every area of our lives. He moves us to humility and loves us unconditionally. He increases our faith in Jesus and grants wisdom, power and love for His glory and all of our good. During a time of my own suffering and trial, Jesus gave me His Word to exalt Him, humble myself to His authority and receive His divine healing. By God's mercy and grace His work in me continues. Galatians 2:20 is my life verse: *"I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me."*

### FOR REFLECTION:

- *How does the account of the centurion encourage your faith in Jesus' authority in all things?*
- *How is Jesus calling you to live by faith, humility and in His authority today?*

# AUTHORITY TO GET AT THE ROOT

READ MATTHEW 9:1-8

As I turn 70, I am more motivated to learn about longevity research findings! So many things that I thought were true about health are wrong, and the mixture of old guidelines and new is confusing. According to experts, aging is the root problem, not disease.

Jesus, who not only knows our thoughts but our organism on a micro-cellular level, knows that our root problem is sin. Not just individual sin, but the whole world is off-kilter in fundamental ways. Jesus holds the solution—forgiveness that brings us into His peace and wholeness.

In our passage, Jesus was back in His hometown, in a crowded home. It was so crowded that men lowered a paralyzed friend to Jesus' feet by destroying the roof! Jesus saw their passion and the man's need—for to be paralyzed was to be stuck and at the mercy of others' care. Jesus saw the men's persistent faith and called the hopeless man "*my son*." He pronounced his sins as forgiven. Did the man and his friends have an internal response like, "Uh, that's nice, but not exactly what we came for"? If they did, Jesus knew it because He also knew what the Jewish religious leaders were thinking—forgiveness of sins was God's domain alone and that He was blaspheming.

Jesus demonstrated His authority over nature, sickness, and evil. These miracles led to controversy because they were visible manifestations of God's power and revealed deity. To claim to have the ability to forgive sin was invisible—who could prove it? So Jesus healed the man's paralysis, using the "lesser" miracle to confirm the "greater." He is one with God.

But the opposite is often true for us. When we don't experience answered prayer for healing or when we don't feel like we are forgiven, we doubt God's power, love, and awareness.

This story has several implications for us:

1. Bring others to Jesus in prayer and faith.
2. Know that wholeness includes forgiveness and healing, but forgiveness is our root need.
3. Be on the alert for the erosion of faith. Jesus has authority to forgive and heal; He knows our root need.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- *Are you more in need of forgiveness or healing today? Bring your answer to Jesus.*

BY LISA SINCLAIR

# AMAZING ANSWERS

## READ MARK 1:21-28

Mark 1:21 says: *"They went to Capernaum."* In the previous verses, Jesus had just called Simon, Andrew, James and John to be His disciples. *"They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach."* Jesus taught with authority and the people were amazed at His teaching.

Then Jesus showed His authority over an impure spirit. I once watched a drama of this scene, as the demon possessed man spoke (v. 24). The man who portrayed the man possessed by the impure spirit, brought this Scripture to life for me. It showed the evilness of a person possessed. I'm sure that the demon that possessed the man was so much worse than this man could portray. Then Jesus says *"Be quiet! Come out of him!"* It was amazing to watch this drama and portrayal of the impure spirit coming out of the man, and the man being made whole. It was amazing! The people in the synagogue were amazed and asked each other, *"What is this? A new teaching—and with authority!"* Jesus was bringing new teaching to the Jews with authority—the old ways/teachings were indeed withering!

When I see and hear of answers to prayer and what God has done in my life and other people's lives, I must admit I don't always tell God: thanks for answering this prayer—your answer is amazing. I have a friend who recently told me how God never ceases to amaze her in His answers to our prayers.

*"God, please help me to give You the glory You deserve for each and every answer to prayer that I receive—that each answer, no matter how large or small is AMAZING! You are an amazing God! Your teaching in Your Word is amazing also. Help me to approach my Bible study and reading of Your word with anticipation that you are going to teach me something amazing! Your Word also shows me Your authority, power, truth and so much more. Verse 28 says 'News about Him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.' Help me, Jesus, to spread the news about You to others around me."*

### FOR REFLECTION:

- *What amazing things has Jesus done in my life and others lives?*
- *How can I spread the news about God and His amazing deeds and words, to others this week?*

# REFLECT & RESPOND

Use this page either by yourself, with one or two other people or with your small group to reflect on how this week's readings have impacted you.

## **REFLECT ON YOUR DISCOVERIES FROM THE PREVIOUS WEEK:**

- *Based on your reading and reflection this week, what did you discover about the Jesus and what He came to do?*
- *What did you discover about yourself?*
- *What questions are you still wondering about after having read the passages this week?*

## **NURTURE GROWTH THROUGH CONFESSION AND REPENTANCE:**

- *As you went through the readings and devotions, where did the Spirit lead you to repentance and faith this week? Did you see yourself in any of these readings?*
- *Spend time praying for one another and for the Holy Spirit to help us have faith in the forgiveness and grace of God.*

## **ENCOURAGE EACH OTHER TOWARDS ACTION IN RESPONSE:**

- *In light of what I have discovered about God and myself this week, what is one thing I need to do differently? What steps will I take to implement this change?*
- *As a disciple-making disciple, who am I impacting for Christ? Who am I praying for? How am I introducing them to the Jesus we see revealed in these readings?*





WEEK 3

THE  
PICTURES  
OF THE  
**KINGDOM**

# THE PICTURES OF THE KINGDOM

**READ MATTHEW 21:28-22:14**

*"Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to people who will produce its fruit." (Matthew 21:43)*

We are people who live by stories. We have cultural stories that motivate us to action, like the American Dream or hero narratives. We have family stories that give us a sense of identity, such as those of our hazily remembered ancestors or family memories from years gone by. We have stories playing inside our hearts and minds, some good and others not so good, which shape the way we live our daily lives. We live by stories.

The Christian faith is a storied faith. Rooted in the great histories of the people of Israel, we live our faith in light of Abraham and Sarah's pursuit of God from Ur to Canaan, Moses' response to God at the burning bush, Ruth's faithful return with Naomi to her homeland, David's battle with Goliath, and more. These stories shape our view of God, our understanding of ourselves, and our sense of what God is doing in the world.

Because we live by stories and our faith is a storied faith, Jesus often taught through parables. Parables are little stories drawn from everyday life, thrown alongside teaching to bring it to vibrant life in a riveting and often shocking way. In this section of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus tells three piercing parables to push back against His hearers' distorted view of God, themselves, and their world. Knowing they were living by distorted stories, Jesus stops them in their tracks so He can lovingly lead them into real life with God. Some who heard the parables welcomed the disorientation of Jesus' stories, while others became angry or checked out.

What about us? Do we live by Jesus' story of the kingdom of God? Or have we substituted something else, such as a false story about God, ourselves, or the world? Maybe this Lent, we can ask Jesus to pierce us afresh with His parables of the kingdom.

## **FOR REFLECTION:**

- *What is one of your favorite Bible stories and why? Maybe you can retell it to someone.*
- *Based on what you read in these parables how would you describe the kingdom of God?*
- *What captures your attention most in these three parables?*



# FAMILY TALK

In today's Bible passages, Jesus is speaking to the chief priest, Pharisees and the elders of the Jewish people. These were people who spent a lot of time reading and thinking about the Old Testament. They thought they had a clear view of God, his kingdom and themselves, but they were wrong.

Jesus used stories called parables to confront the elders and to reveal how the kingdom of God was different than their expectations. These stories help us, too. Parables challenge our expectations, beg questions, and give us glimpses of God's kingdom.

*Parents, you may want to read and discuss one parable a day over the next three days.*

## **The Parable of the Two Sons**

- Before you read: A son says that he won't obey his father. What do you think will happen?
  - Read: Matthew 21: 28-32
  - Question: Who obeyed the father? How was that different than your expectation?
- The elders expected that they were obeying God. They followed a lot of rules – some from the Bible and some extra ones that they added. They thought they were pleasing God, but Jesus is pointing out that everyone has sinned and what pleases God is repentance.

## **The Parable of the Tenants**

- Before you read: What should happen at a farm?
- Read: Matthew 21:33-46
- Question: What happened at this vineyard? How was that different than your expectation?

The elders had been leaders of the Jewish people for a long time. Jesus is telling them that their job was to produce fruit – show God's glory, love and goodness to the nations around them and lead people to repentance, and they hadn't done it.

## **The Parable of the Wedding Banquet**

- Before you read: Who would you expect to be at a fancy party?
  - Read: Matthew 22:1-14
  - Question: Who came to the king's party? How was that different than your expectation?
- The Pharisees and the elders expected that only the right sort of people (them) would be invited to join the king. Jesus shows them that all sorts of people are invited to come to the kingdom.

## **REFLECTION QUESTIONS:**

- *What other questions did you have from the parables?*
- *What do you learn about the kingdom of heaven? How is it different than you expected?*

# DOES GOD FIND ME FAITHFUL?

**READ MATTHEW 21:33-41**

This parable has always puzzled me and to be honest, it makes me agitated. Why does the landowner send his son? Surely, he knows it won't end well! Is the landowner more interested in profit than in the life of his son? These questions swirl in my mind as I try to come to some sort of understanding of what God is trying to teach me. Holy Spirit, please illumine my mind!

So today, I'm going to try another tack and ask, do I resemble the first set of tenants? Am I greedy? Do I refuse to give the Master His due? Do I respect those the Master sends, or do I destroy them? Am I working the vineyard and regularly giving the Master His share? Am I a good tenant?

As we journey to the Cross, we must come to grips with the fact that God did indeed know that His Son would be killed, but He sent Him anyway. In truth, Jesus came to die. The Heir of the Father was killed by mere renters. The King of the Universe murdered by sinful man.

We know from the Bible and church history that down through the ages many have been persecuted and killed for their faith. Those whom God has sent as emissaries have been mistreated, tortured, and martyred because others do not want to listen to what He says or respond in obedience. This penchant of going one's own way is dangerous. Remember: the evil one has come to steal, kill and destroy. Be on the alert!

If God gave Eastbrook a farm to tend, would we do a good job? Would we build the soil and nurture the seedlings? Would we water and weed and apply compost? Would we stake the plants that need staking and prune those that need pruning? In short, would God find us faithful? Would we have a bountiful harvest to show Him as well as a healthy, fertile, bio-diverse landscape? God gave the ultimate gift for us so that we could have abundant life. What is our response? A hymn has Jesus asking, "I gave My life for thee, What hast thou done for Me?"

## **FOR REFLECTION:**

- *What emotions well up in you when you read this parable and why?*
- *When God asks for His share of the harvest or Jesus asks what you have done for Him, what is your response?*

**BY KATHERINE RIEBE**

# WORD BEFORE WORLD

**READ JOHN 5:31-47**

It seems every generation has its defining moments, events of historical significance that evoke the phrase, “I remember where I was when...” Everyone can recall precisely what they were doing and who they were with when said event happened—September 11th; the moon landing; the assassination of JFK.

It seems we’re always playing witness to history. Newscasters in particular love to remind us of this in the moment, as we watch teams win their first title, national leaders pass the torch to their successors, or once-in-a-lifetime natural phenomena rack entire cities. In the future, they say, these are the moments that will fill history textbooks as well as the stories we pass on to our children and grandchildren.

Each year during the season of Lent, we’re also a witness to the redeeming power of God’s love for the world. This observation may not feel as grand as those “big” moments we watch on television...and that is kind of the point.

In today’s passage, Jesus points out that our preoccupation with worldly confirmation gets in the way of our belief. The Word of God was not an active force in the lives of the people with whom Jesus was speaking (v. 38); they wanted further evidence in the form of earth-side witnesses to vouch for the work He had sent Jesus to do.

If, like these people, we are always looking for affirmation, or doing things to be included in the history books, we are missing the bigger picture. Just like Jesus, God has put each of us here to do His work. Maybe our purpose is meant for the world’s stage, or simply for the eyes of those we love—or not at all. Either way, our lives are to be committed to Christ, not to receiving the praise and attention of others.

Whether the moments that fill our lives be big or small, whether they change the course of history or just the course of someone’s day, may we be filled with trust in the Lord’s plan. For *“without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to Him must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him.”* (Hebrews 11:6)

## **FOR REFLECTION:**

- *When is it easiest for you to trust in the promises of God? Pray earnestly for God to increase your faith in His faithfulness!*

# KING OF TRUTH

READ JOHN 18:33-37

So much is packed into these chapters about the crucifixion of Jesus. When I read it, I get overwhelmed and want to just skip past Thursday, Friday, and Saturday to the part where Jesus is raised from the dead and no one can believe it, but it's true, and then later Jesus has this great breakfast fish fry and heart-to-heart on the beach with Peter, James, and John... I love all that.

But we're still deep in the hard parts, where God invites us to slow down and listen even to things that are difficult to listen to. By John 18:33, Jesus has eaten dinner with His friends the night before, prayed in the garden, been betrayed by Judas and then by Peter, was bound, questioned and slapped in the face, brought to the high priest, and now brought before the Roman governor Pilate to be questioned again. It's been a long night, and the Jews who arrested Jesus are outside Pilate's palace early in the morning. (See why I wanted to skip past this? It's sad, lonely, and cold.)

Then, Pilate invites just Jesus inside to have a chat. He wants to know who Jesus really is (he's heard Him called "The King of the Jews") and what He did to end up on death row. Jesus answers Pilate with a sort of confusing statement. He says, *"My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place... You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."*

I don't blame Pilate if he was a little lost, but then he asks just the right question, albeit a rhetorical retort, *"What is truth?"* before marching back outside.

There's so much about the kingdom of God and the words of God that I may never understand. I'm sure I have things wrong right now that I think are right, but I can trust God to set me straight about what matters. As we seek to understand the ways of Jesus' kingdom, let's draw closer to Jesus, who is the giver of truth.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- *Where do you need clarity and truth right now? Ask God for understanding and for the truths you need to hear.*
- *Ask God to prepare and humble your heart to listen to truth, especially when it unearths that something you've believed or done was not aligned with His truth.*
- *Pray for the Church to draw nearer to Christ and listen, that we'll be "on the side of truth."*

BY ISABELLE LUNDSTROM

# COME TO THE GREAT FEAST

READ LUKE 14:6-14

What is the greatest invitation you have ever received? Maybe as a kid you received a spectacular invite in the mail to your best friend's birthday party, and you dreamed about it for weeks ahead of time. Maybe as an adult you were invited to watch or take part in the wedding of a lifelong friend, and you awaited the day with flourishing joy.

In this story, Jesus uses an illustration to describe what He came here to do. His plan to save His people began with an invitation to the Jews, then an invitation to all Gentiles. What is so surprising is the point He makes to honor the *"poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame."* These are specifically the people Jesus wants invited to His feast—those most ignored, disdained, disadvantaged, and uninvited.

Take a moment to notice the way Jesus describes this invitation. The story says the man sent out many initial invitations (vs. 16), then sent his servant to invite more people again and again (vs. 22). *"There is still room,"* the man says. He is determined to fill his house with any who will come, and each time the servant returns, he sends him out for more! Notice in verse 23 the attitude with which he sends his servant...he compels and urges them to come. He is not just obliging to invite the marginalized, he is actively pursuing them and inviting them on purpose. Don't miss what they are being invited to—in verse 16 it says he has prepared a great feast and verse 17 says the feast is ready now!

In John 10:10, Jesus says clearly, *"I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."* There is something wonderful and big that Jesus is inviting you to, His kingdom feast, which is ready now. Notice from this story that our job is to respond to Jesus' invitation. He will fill His house with anyone who wants to come, and His feast is not delayed or diminished by those who make excuses not to come.

Do you find yourself in the list of people ignored and disdained, disadvantaged or uninvited? Try quieting your mind for a minute to imagine the feast Jesus prepares for you. What does it look like? Who is there with you? Picture the delight on Jesus' face that you have responded to His invitation and now celebrate with Him in His home. Is there someone else you want to invite to this feast with you?

## FOR REFLECTION:

- *Why do you think some reject the initial invite to join the feast? How does it impact you to know God will go to such lengths to make sure everyone is invited to join Him?*

# THE BREAKING, CRUSHING, HEALING STONE

**READ MATTHEW 21: 42-46**

Today's passage is quite an unsettling one. In fact, this whole chapter is on the violent side, a scathing rebuke of the Pharisees. The Pharisees knew the Law and the Prophets; they were familiar with the True and Living God and His ways. And yet... when they saw prostitutes and tax collectors repenting of their sins and coming into the kingdom, they did not cry out from the heart "How marvelous!". And when they saw the compassion and power of Jesus—to heal and to transform lives—they did not respond with faith.

So Jesus tells them, clearly and openly, that there are consequences to not responding to God's lavish and unmerited gift of life. The consequence is death. It is a law not dissimilar to gravity. If you let go of a porcelain cup, it will fall and it will break. If we choose to reject God and His ways, we have chosen death.

Those poor, deluded Pharisees. What were they thinking? How foolish to fight against God; how foolish to choose death instead of life!

And yet... is there not something I recognize in them? Is there not some small similarity between their hearts and mine? How often do I create a storyline for my life that makes sense and is pleasing to me, and then I ask God to work along those lines? To flip that around, how often do I see the surprising things the Lord does and instead of saying, "This is marvelous!" I say, "This isn't what I wanted!"

Sometimes I fear we romanticize Jesus. We think He was some ultra-cool rabbi who did passionately wonderful things that we ourselves would surely have recognized for the works of God that they were. But the reality is that He often spent time with the dirty, the uneducated, the poor, the sick, and some who were leading very immoral and broken lives. The prostitutes and tax collectors weren't romantic figures; they were lost and possibly very unattractive people. But the Lord saw their as-yet unearthed beauty, and when He called to their hearts, they responded. They said to the Lord, "You are marvelous! We will follow you!" and they were transformed. They became whole and beautiful. This Stone that can break and crush, this is the Stone that saves and heals.

## **FOR REFLECTION:**

- *Sit quietly with the Lord and ask the Holy Spirit to give you eyes to see the surprising and unexpected things He is doing in and around you. Ask Him for the grace to agree with Him that His ways are marvelous.*

**BY CHRISTINA WINRICH**

# REFLECT & RESPOND

Use this page either by yourself, with one or two other people or with your small group to reflect on how this week's readings have impacted you.

## **REFLECT ON YOUR DISCOVERIES FROM THE PREVIOUS WEEK:**

- *Based on your reading and reflection this week, what did you discover about the Jesus and what He came to do?*
- *What did you discover about yourself?*
- *What questions are you still wondering about after having read the passages this week?*

## **NURTURE GROWTH THROUGH CONFESSION AND REPENTANCE:**

- *As you went through the readings and devotions, where did the Spirit lead you to repentance and faith this week? Did you see yourself in any of these readings?*
- *Spend time praying for one another and for the Holy Spirit to help us have faith in the forgiveness and grace of God.*

## **ENCOURAGE EACH OTHER TOWARDS ACTION IN RESPONSE:**

- *In light of what I have discovered about God and myself this week, what is one thing I need to do differently? What steps will I take to implement this change?*
- *As a disciple-making disciple, who am I impacting for Christ? Who am I praying for? How am I introducing them to the Jesus we see revealed in these readings?*





WEEK 4

# QUESTIONING **JESUS**

# QUESTIONING JESUS

**READ MATTHEW 22:34-40**

*"Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" (Matthew 22:26)*

Like many parents, I can remember days when my young children would ask unending questions about the world. "What is that animal called?" "When can I get that new toy?" "Can my friend come over to play?" "Where do babies come from?" "When will we get there?" "Why can't I see God?" Some of the questions were easy to answer while others required a lot more effort, time, and attention.

We all have questions. Our questions reveal what we care about, whether that is trying to understand someone we're talking with, our pursuit of knowledge on a subject matter, or our longing to connect with God in a meaningful way.

Questions often express our deepest desires, but they can also be used in other ways. When Jesus enters Jerusalem, He is a welcome guest to some people but a despised intruder to others. The religious leaders, unfortunately, tend to view Jesus as an unwelcome troublemaker. In the passages we'll explore this week, the religious leaders use their questions as tools to trick, coerce, and control Jesus. Their questions are false forays toward Jesus, while they steadily entrench themselves like an enemy army behind a fortress. They want to domesticate Jesus and keep God at arm's length.

The religious leaders aren't so unique in this approach to Jesus. We can all do this at times. We do it when our deepest desires have been disappointed, when we've been hurt, or when we don't really want to look at something we know we need to explore. We may find ourselves trying to domesticate Jesus like a house pet, while keeping God at a safe distance.

But what would it look like to lay our weaponized questions down and turn to Jesus with our deepest longings? What might happen if we brought our real selves to Jesus, open and vulnerable, hungry and longing for things we rarely admit or name? What questions would we put to Jesus in that sort of state?

What might we hear Him say?

## **FOR REFLECTION:**

- *What is one way you may need to set down your questions to truly hear from Jesus?*
- *What is one question you wish you could ask Jesus?*

**BY MATT ERICKSON**



## FAMILY TALK

What were the first words you learned to recite about God? Was it John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son . . .”? Or, maybe it was “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so”?

When young Hebrew children were growing up, the first thing they learned to recite was a passage called the **Shema**. “Shema” is a Hebrew word that means “hear” or “listen”, and it is the first word of these verses:

*“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.” (Deuteronomy 6:4-5).*

Faithful Jews would recite the *Shema* first thing in the morning, and the last thing before they went to sleep.

One day Jesus was approached by the Pharisees—the prideful group of temple leaders. They tried to trick Jesus by asking him which law of the Bible was the most important. They believed that all of the laws were equally important, so if Jesus chose just one, He would be wrong. But Jesus knew what they were up to! Instead of a long, complicated explanation, Jesus recited the *Shema*—the simple truth that even Hebrew children knew!

Loving God first, and loving everyone else the way we love ourselves is so important, because all other good actions, choices, and words come from these two truths! If we love God, we want to please Him, and our choices will show that. If we really love others, then we can’t help but to be fair, kind, and truthful. All of the commandments and teachings from the Bible are summed up in these two statements (Matthew 22:40).

### REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

- *Think of an ordinary day. How do you show that you love God first (“with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your strength”) as you get ready for school? While in class? While playing with friends?*
- *How can we learn to love God more?*
- *Close by reciting the Shema together as a family. Decide to memorize it together.*

# ASSUMING THE BEST OR WORST

READ 1 JOHN 4:7-21

*I assume good intentions  
& sometimes get burned  
But it's better to try than  
To spend a life assuming  
The worst & not believing  
In love.*

I don't know about you, but sometimes I assume the worst. Maybe it's a self-protective mechanism based on fear. Fear of being rejected or left out. Fear of losing friends. Fear that people will run away once they get to know me. Sometimes, those things do happen. I am misunderstood and left out. But sometimes, it works out.

I can love others, even though there is pain involved. It's not ideal, fraught with challenges, unknowns, grief, and loss. Yet also on this journey, I find others who are like-minded and love back. I find those who are like me, searching for belonging like myself. We all want to belong. We all want to be loved.

Our fears have roots. If we aren't growing in soil that's being fed a message of truth and love, then we can't grow back love. Our growth will be stunted or thorny, and that is what those around us will get from us: thorns.

It struck me one day to ask myself if I believe God also has good intentions toward me. Truly, does He? Because admittedly, sometimes I'm not sure. Is God love? Does He intend good for me? In these verses, the word "love" is mentioned 29 times. So I'm asking myself this question: What is love and what does it mean to me? Who do I think God is? Did love come from God? If not, where did it come from? What does God want to give me and what does He want me to give to others?

The specifics will be different for each one of us, but the one thing that we will have in common is love. It's hard to love. But, I'd rather people remember me for love than the opposite.

I'd rather live my life assuming the best, that people do have good intentions and want my good more than they don't. To live any other way is exhausting and lonely. I know that a few people will take advantage of that. I know that the fear of getting hurt is real. Believing this doesn't take away the reality, but not living from a place of love is a life of poverty.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- *When you think of the potential cost in loving others (as God has loved us), what promises of God can you count on to sustain you through this effort?*

BY PRASANTA VERMA ANUMOLU

# GIVE TO GOD WHAT BELONGS TO GOD

**READ MATTHEW 22:15-22**

The Pharisees' question to Jesus was entirely malicious. In their minds, there were only two possible answers: he would either have to condone supporting a corrupt, defiled institution and all of its abominable practices, or condone picking and choosing when to support the government that maintained order and peace in the region. But instead, our Lord in His divine wisdom provided the simple, yet powerful answer: *"Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and give to God what belongs to God."*

If you are like me, you may have glossed over this in the past simply concluding, "Cool. Thank you, God, for clarifying that I still ought to pay taxes even though the American government funds fill-in-the-blank." That is indeed helpful. However, don't you wonder why the Pharisees marveled at His response? It probably wasn't because they had never thought about paying Roman taxes before. Rather, I think they marvel at His response because it is on a completely different plane of thought from their own and that it immediately gives a safe answer that also swiftly convicts the Pharisees.

When we see things the way God sees them, we no longer *"think as men think."* Instead, we begin to *"have in mind the things of God"* (see Matthew 16:23). What do we see of the heart of God in Jesus' response? I think we see so much more than getting an ethical question correct. We understand that the Lord fiercely wants us all to give Him the things that belong to Him. The Pharisees were certainly not doing this at all. His response is so marvelous because He exposes them not giving God what belongs to God.

What then "belongs to God?" Romans 12:1 helps us understand: *"Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship."*

Heroes of the faith like Corrie Ten Boom hid Jewish neighbors in Holland during the Nazi occupation, brought encouragement and hope to her fellow women in the labor camp, and even found the spiritual strength to forgive one of the guards face-to-face years later. Her pure desire to worship God as a living sacrifice, come what may, is giving to God what belongs to God. Goodness in a sea of evil was born out of worship. Can you see why Jesus would be so frustrated with the Pharisees' question?

## **FOR REFLECTION:**

- *Where in your life would you say it is sometimes hard to give to God what truly should be His?*

# TRICK QUESTION

READ MATTHEW 22:23-33

I loved riddles and mental tricks when I was a kid. I remember one Christmas party at my house, with 40 members of my dad's college choir, where one of the students brought up a crazy mental trick having to do with describing a Christmas tree. It would be too hard to explain it here, but let me tell you, there was a lot of fun and laughter as, one by one, people figured out the trick. I was one of the last to figure it out and I still remember my "aha" moment.

But the Sadducees didn't devise their trick question for fun, although I'm sure they thought they were quite clever. They designed it to embarrass Jesus by its absurdity, and thus force Him to admit that the idea of resurrection from the dead was ridiculous.

Jesus, as usual, replies in a shocking, disarming way. He exposes the Sadducees' arrogance and ignorance, and reminds them of a Scripture they know like the back of their hands. God says, *"I AM the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,"* not *"I WAS the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob."* So those men of faith are alive. As Pastor Marc often preached, "God doesn't have any dead friends." Hallelujah! The Lord didn't give us the details of how our resurrection will work, but He repeatedly assured us it would happen. And in the afterlife, there will be no death, so no need for procreation, and thus no marriage. So Jesus disabled the Sadducees' trick question. What a Savior we have!

As we draw nearer to Holy Week, let's remember what Jesus said to Martha when her beloved brother Lazarus died: *"I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die"* (John 11:25-26). Brothers and sisters, this is incredibly good news! Let's worship our Lord for all He has done for us.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- *In what way or ways do you think the crowd was astonished at Jesus' teaching?*
- *Jesus said the Sadducees did not know the power of God. What do you think He meant, and how can you have a correct understanding of God's power?*

BY RUTH THOMPSON CARVER

# LOVE AND TAXES

## READ ROMANS 13:6-10

Submit to the authorities. Submission is not a sentiment most Americans favor, no matter their background or perspective. In many circumstances, I bristle at being told to do, say, or pay something when I don't want to do, say, or pay it. It's my autonomous, independent spirit. And yet, here, Paul emphasizes why we should submit to the authorities and our obligations. Pay taxes, pay what you owe, and respect and honor those in charge. It may be difficult when we don't agree with them and I'm not sure when civil disobedience is called for but, in our current government, it makes more sense to submit since officials are elected and the government is 'of the people.' God knows our world, the deceitfulness of it and our role and responsibilities in it and to it. The command here and our act of submission is honoring God's watchfulness and order established by Him. Even when we don't understand or agree.

When we grasp our priorities, what seems easier is often more difficult. To love. Taxes and debt are firm obligations, but love? What does it mean to love? I don't think of love as a debt but putting it in those terms, it's my responsibility to pay. Paul shows us that the ten commandments are the basic start of showing love. It is the start of choosing well. The next and more difficult test to me is the everyday love we are called to express, in action and deed, with those in close proximity. Community, neighbors, friends and family are those that see the results of our expressions of love. The debt that was paid for us, and expressed at the Cross, can never be fully repaid. How could we?

Maybe we need to start by giving the forgiveness to others that we have received. It continues as we live in submission to the one who paid the debt and, hopefully, our lives will reveal the truth that was paid by Him. Jesus' life and work is the example to follow. Do what is right and you will be commended. Love your neighbor as yourself.

### FOR REFLECTION:

- *Do you need to make changes that will make the expression of your love more evident?*
- *Are there debts or obligations that remain unpaid that we must focus on to make the expression of love have more impact and clarity?*

# KEEPING IT REAL

**READ MATTHEW 22:41-46**

Before reading and discussing this passage recently with a few dozen young men, I asked the question, “What is meant when we say ‘Keep it real?’” Their answers centered on truth and honesty, even if accepting the truth may be costly to the way we may wish to live.

Jesus confronts the Pharisees with the reality of who He is, a reality the Pharisees so pridefully refuse to acknowledge, when He asks them of the Son of David, “*How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him ‘Lord’?*” On this first day in April, when we are familiar with practical jokes, you might be tempted to wonder if Jesus is asking a trick question. No. At the same time, the preceding verses of this chapter tell us that the Pharisees had learned from the Sadducees what happens when attempting to trick Jesus. So now the Pharisees are doubly silenced, while still unwilling to acknowledge Jesus’s Lordship.

Jesus our Lord does not force His rule in our lives. Instead, today’s passage prepares us for what is to come in Matthew’s gospel — Jesus, the King, is not the sort of Messiah the Pharisees had eyed. Instead, He is the Suffering Servant, our Savior, and the One to whom we, joining the faithful of His day, can cry out to for mercy and healing.

## **FOR REFLECTION:**

- *Is Jesus Lord of your life today? In what ways might you be resisting his authority?*

# REFLECT & RESPOND

Use this page either by yourself, with one or two other people or with your small group to reflect on how this week's readings have impacted you.

## **REFLECT ON YOUR DISCOVERIES FROM THE PREVIOUS WEEK:**

- *Based on your reading and reflection this week, what did you discover about the Jesus and what He came to do?*
- *What did you discover about yourself?*
- *What questions are you still wondering about after having read the passages this week?*

## **NURTURE GROWTH THROUGH CONFESSION AND REPENTANCE:**

- *As you went through the readings and devotions, where did the Spirit lead you to repentance and faith this week? Did you see yourself in any of these readings?*
- *Spend time praying for one another and for the Holy Spirit to help us have faith in the forgiveness and grace of God.*

## **ENCOURAGE EACH OTHER TOWARDS ACTION IN RESPONSE:**

- *In light of what I have discovered about God and myself this week, what is one thing I need to do differently? What steps will I take to implement this change?*
- *As a disciple-making disciple, who am I impacting for Christ? Who am I praying for? How am I introducing them to the Jesus we see revealed in these readings?*



WEEK 5

THE WOES  
OF THE  
**RELIGIOUSLY  
MISGUIDED**

# THE WOES OF THE RELIGIOUSLY MISGUIDED

**READ MATTHEW 23:1-4; 13-15**

*“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.” (Matthew 23:13)*

When I prepare for a trip, I often feel a little anxious that I’m going to forget something or not to leave in time to catch my flight. I can become so concerned about the preparations—packing the right clothes, bringing my toothbrush and toothpaste, making sure I have snacks, checking in for my flight—that I lose sight of where I’m going or what the point of the trip is.

Have you ever become concerned with the wrong thing? Have you ever lost sight of the point of something because other troubles, worries, or inclinations overtook you?

Jesus’ rebuke of the teachers of the law and the Pharisees is right on point here. They work in the territory of the sacred and the holy, of God’s glory and God’s mercy, of true humanity and the meaning of the world, but they have lost sight of the point of it all. Like a captain of a ship full of passengers who forgets the way to the destination, these religious leaders shipwreck themselves on the rocks of their own prideful power, leaving devastation in the lives of those who follow them.

Jesus is anything but gentle with these folks. Why is that? It seems they should know better. This is their area of specialty and knowledge. They read God’s book and trade in the treasures of divinity all day long. They should know God and His ways. They should recognize God’s chosen One when He shows up in front of them. Instead, they gallivant around, captivated with themselves and their dangerous adventures in missing the point.

Of course, we might be tempted to say, “Those religious leaders are so foolish and lost. I am so glad I’m not like them.” But, of course, that is just as dangerous. What if we, too, tend to miss the point? What if Jesus has a word for us this Lent—a word which is loving but not entirely gentle?

## **FOR REFLECTION:**

- *What stands out to you about Jesus’ words to the teachers of the law and the Pharisees?*
- *How do you think they or others who were nearby would have responded to Jesus’ rebuke?*
- *How might you be in danger of missing the point in your own life?*

**BY MATT ERICKSON**



## FAMILY TALK

Do you keep your room clean? Think about a time when your room was VERY messy. You might have had dirty dishes, food wrappers, mountains of toys and smelly, sweaty soccer gear in your room. Instead of putting everything in its correct place and washing what was dirty, you decided to “clean up” and cram all of your stinky socks, dirty dishes, and overflowing garbage under your bed or in your closet. Is your room REALLY clean? Or does it just look clean? What would your mom or dad say?

In Jesus’ day, the Pharisees were the ones who tried hard to follow God’s laws. Or, at least, it seemed that way. Jesus talked to his disciples and the crowds about the Pharisees. He called them names like “pretenders” and “poisonous snakes.” That doesn’t make the Pharisees sound very godly! Why was Jesus using such harsh words? The problem with the Pharisees is that they were like that room that seemed clean, but actually did not have all of the gunk cleaned out. They wanted to look good in front of the other Israelites but their hearts were sinful. Jesus even says *“On the outside you seem to be doing what is right. But on the inside you are full of what is wrong. You pretend to be what you are not”* (Matthew 23:28b, NIV). What is even worse is that they lead others away from God. Jesus was trying to help the people to see what God says is really important.

Sometimes we act like the Pharisees. We try to look good on the outside but have sinful thoughts or behave in a sinful way. None of us is able to clean out our sinful heart by ourselves. The first step is to see things the way Jesus would. Think about what thoughts or actions are “messy” in your life. Is it lying, or acting unkindly toward your friends or brother and sister? Is it not talking to your parents respectfully or wanting to be treated better than someone else? Talk to Jesus about it.

Remember . . . Jesus is moving closer to the Cross, where He will put sin to death forever!

### FOR DISCUSSION:

- *Why might Jesus point out the Pharisees’ sin? How would that help us know why we need Him?*
- *As you clean your room this week, think about what is “messy” in your life. Talk to Jesus about it. Ask Him to help you turn away from your sin and follow Him.*

# DON'T EXALT YOURSELF!

**READ MATTHEW 23:5-12**

The God of the Universe wants a relationship with us and desires that we meditate on Him and His Word. In several passages of the Old Testament, God admonished the Jewish people to remember His commandments by tying them on their hands and foreheads (Deuteronomy 6:8-9). The Pharisees took this literally and wore prayer boxes with scriptures (phylacteries) on their left arms and foreheads. However, they liked to wear extra wide prayer boxes not to honor God but to show how pious they were. Jewish men also wore tassels with a blue cord attached to the four corners of their robes to remind them to obey God's commandments and to be holy (Numbers 15:37-41). However, the Pharisees wore extra long tassels to attract attention to themselves and not to glorify God.

They loved the best seats at banquets and in the synagogue. Seating at banquets and in synagogues was assigned to guests based on social status. This desire for recognition is a common temptation for all people.

When I worked in medical care, it was common to desire recognition, promotions, positions of leadership or the even the best office. We were encouraged to work for these rewards. To be honest, I was tempted to seek this type of recognition. I prayed about this and God reminded me that *"whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters. It is the Lord Christ you are serving* (Colossians 3:23, 24b). Every day before work, I would pray and ask Jesus to help me to do my best job that day for my patients and my co-workers.

The Pharisees also loved to be greeted with respect. It is not wrong to give honor to those who deserve it but it is wrong to seek it for yourself (Romans 13:7). Jesus goes on to state that we are all brothers and have one Teacher, Jesus Himself, and one Father, the Lord God. Jesus' followers were to lead by serving others in sharp contrast to Israel's religious leaders. In order to be great, they needed to be servants. Jesus clearly demonstrated servanthood the night before He was crucified by washing the feet of the disciples (John 13:12-16).

Finally, Jesus tells us that *"those who exalt themselves will be humbled."* I do not want God to have to humble me! But those who humble themselves will be exalted.

## **FOR REFLECTION:**

- *Do you agree that the desire for recognition is a common temptation for people? Why or why not? When have you been tempted to exalt yourself?*
- *How is God asking you to serve Him?*

**BY BONNIE TESCH**

# BLIND GUIDES

**READ MATTHEW 23:16-22**

We've heard the spiritual heed many times before: "Be careful not to become like the Pharisees!" These were the early teachers of the Law whose decisions and actions were led by pride, and who started with good intentions but were distracted by their habitual patterns of works-based faith. They are described as hypocritical, self-righteous, and judgmental. In short, well-known villains of the New Testament and enemies of the Gospel of Christ.

The Pharisees were setting up unnecessary standards and rituals, and in verse 16 Jesus actually rebukes these phony pedagogues by referring to them as "blind guides" to the people of that day. They were more concerned about constructing strict and precise formulas for following law but careless and loose when it came to weightier priorities. They were missing the point, and in this passage Jesus is illuminating the hard reality of where their ritualistic efforts had gotten them. Picture someone dressing a dead body for burial. A grim analogy, I know, but all of the embellishing and adorning of the grave is for show. In an attempt to lead a squeaky-clean life that followed all the rules to a "T," people were beginning to become blind to the true state of their hearts before God.

They were more concerned about the way their devotion and service to God looked on the outside rather than humbling themselves and allowing the altar of their hearts to be cleansed from the inside-out. How easy it is to become so distracted by the dos and don'ts of Christianity that we forget the "newness of life" that is ours when the inward spirit is made clean by the power and cleansing of the Holy Spirit. *Lord, instead of hearts that are striving to appear like we already "have it all together," give us humble and contrite hearts to lay at your throne!*

This begs the question, what have you allowed to blind your eyes and clutter your heart?

## **FOR REFLECTION:**

- *When have you found yourself working to check off the Christian to-do list perfectly, yet still hungering for more? Turn your eyes to the One who gave you the gift of a new day, and be reminded of the reality of newness of life that is given to us not because of our works, but because of the finished work of Jesus!*

## ALIGN MY HEART

READ MATTHEW 23:23-28

How easy it is for me to skim this passage and make the assumption this couldn't possibly apply to me! There are no passages I can think of in the Gospels where I want to compare myself to the Pharisees in their conversations with Jesus. I often can't move on fast enough from Confrontational Jesus, priding myself that I'm not on the receiving end of that. However, there is an invitation here to look closer, to sit with this uncomfortable passage and ask ourselves, could Jesus' words here be directed at me?

Upon closer inspection of this passage, I feel convicted of how often I carefully curate my external image, prioritizing how I am perceived instead of looking within, as the Pharisees are accused of doing. I need to ask myself: In which areas am I neglecting justice, mercy, and faithfulness? Where am I full of greed and self-indulgence? The answers to these questions are often more unpleasant than I'm willing to admit or dwell on.

Jesus has strong words of warning to the Pharisees who look one way to the world, but internally are not aligned with God's heart. Jesus calls them "blind guides" (verse 24); how dangerous it is when we are leading others or have people looking to us for guidance and direction and our hearts are not aligned with God's heart. We all are 'guides' to someone—perhaps our children, nieces, nephews, students, employees, or even in non-formal guide roles like with our colleagues and coworkers, friends, and peers. Especially when other hearts are involved, we should take Jesus' words here seriously.

God invites us to have lives that reflect the things close to God's heart: justice, mercy, faith, generosity, serving others in love; leading a holy life. All of these are the opposite of the things Jesus was calling out in the Pharisees hearts (and ours). I believe part of the invitation for this passage is to sit with it, choosing to reflect on our internal spaces that do not align with God and then confessing those areas. Realigning our hearts with God's heart begins with honesty, humility, and confession.

Perhaps you will join me as I pray: *Where, O Lord, have I neglected justice? Where have I chosen not to show mercy, O Merciful God? Holy Spirit, where have I acted without faith? Point out the areas to me where I have been greedy and self-indulgent, where my life has not reflected the Life it was meant to, Jesus. Forgive me and align my heart with Yours.*

**FOR REFLECTION:**

- *Pray the prayer suggested above. Where in your daily life can you better reflect the life Jesus calls us to?*

BY MAC LITTEL

# STRAIGHT TO THE HEART

**READ MATTHEW 23:29-26**

In this final, “woe to you” statement Jesus makes to the teachers of the law and Pharisees, He emphasizes the obvious hypocrisy found in their pronouncements and actions and the state of their hearts. These men show an apparent reverence for the prophets and the righteous advertised in the decoration of their graves, and the words they speak in solidarity with them, but Jesus sees through this show and straight to the hearts of the Pharisees and teachers of the law. These men are the ones who will eventually kill Jesus: the ultimate fulfillment of the prophecies, and the only truly righteous man to ever walk the earth. He speaks boldly and with condemnation to this group of men, warning of the destruction that will come if they continue on the path of their ancestors in persecuting and killing the Lord’s real servants.

Even though these words are addressed specifically to the teachers of the law and the Pharisees in Jesus’ time, the warning should ring in our ears even today. It can be so easy to think, “If I would have been there, I would have been following Jesus, not the Pharisees,” but this is exactly what the Pharisees said about their ancestors, and they ended up as the driving force behind Jesus’ crucifixion.

Jesus was a radical, normal-looking, homeless man who traveled around healing people and hanging out with “sinners,” all while telling those He was with that He was the Son of God. How many of us today could honestly say we would have been following Him and not in the synagogues with the other skeptical religious elites trying to figure out how to get rid of Him?

We can’t truly know where our hearts would have been in that context, but we can choose to respond now by asking God to rid our hearts of a prideful, judgmental, or pharisaical spirit and open our eyes to how He is at work around us through unexpected people or methods that don’t fit our conception of how Christianity should look.

*Lord, humble us and help us to see you and follow you in what you are doing instead of getting stuck in our own ways and conceptions of how things should be.*

**FOR REFLECTION:**

- *When has your concept of Christianity been most challenged by unexpected people or situations? How did you grow from this?*

**BY MIRANDA STARK**

# JESUS' LAMENT

**READ MATTHEW 23:37-38**

You can just hear the sadness and longing in Jesus' words: lamenting over the city, the people. This whole chapter, He has been laying into them HARD and now we hear His tenderness, emotion, sorrow...we hear His heart. He loves these stiff-necked people. He gave up His heavenly home for them. He knows that in three days He will die a brutal death for them.

He likens Himself to a mother hen wanting to gather her chicks under the protection of her wings. But they were not willing!

Why would they refuse shelter, care, inclusion, warmth, love?

A mother hen actually warns her young when she sees danger by letting out a squawk and then they instinctively run for cover under her wings. He has warned them but predominantly they just get more and more enraged at His attempts to rescue them.

It's tragic. I live in this city today. I have lived in East Jerusalem for almost ten years. What I see is not far from what was breaking the heart of our Lord almost two thousand years ago. I see people who are dazzled by an event/production (see triumphal entry in Matthew 21), they are blinded by religion, they are calcified in tradition, they are impoverished by pride. Judaism, Islam and Christianity—all of them fall into these traps. Yes, even the Christians stone those who are sent to them. We have heard about traditional Christian leaders saying they would prefer their parishioners become Muslim rather than be born again! Their houses are left desolate!

All of us can fall into these traps. This lament is not only for Jerusalem. We can become those "religious" people who have all the answers and don't heed the warnings in Scripture or the squawking of the Holy Spirit in our lives. I know there have been times in my life that I thought I had everything figured out and forfeited the protection and joy that can only be found under the shelter of His wings! Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem! Oh Terri! Oh Eastbrook! Oh \_\_\_\_\_ (add your name)! In what ways are we unwilling? In what subjects are we refusing? In which areas of our lives are we resistant? Are we drawn to the parade? Bedazzled but not transformed by the One who longs for us?

## **FOR REFLECTION:**

- *Has there ever been an area of your life you've been unwilling to turn over to Jesus? Pray that Christ can have control over all of your life!*

**BY TERRI PLANT**

# REFLECT & RESPOND

Use this page either by yourself, with one or two other people or with your small group to reflect on how this week's readings have impacted you.

## **REFLECT ON YOUR DISCOVERIES FROM THE PREVIOUS WEEK:**

- *Based on your reading and reflection this week, what did you discover about the Jesus and what He came to do?*
- *What did you discover about yourself?*
- *What questions are you still wondering about after having read the passages this week?*

## **NURTURE GROWTH THROUGH CONFESSION AND REPENTANCE:**

- *As you went through the readings and devotions, where did the Spirit lead you to repentance and faith this week? Did you see yourself in any of these readings?*
- *Spend time praying for one another and for the Holy Spirit to help us have faith in the forgiveness and grace of God.*

## **ENCOURAGE EACH OTHER TOWARDS ACTION IN RESPONSE:**

- *In light of what I have discovered about God and myself this week, what is one thing I need to do differently? What steps will I take to implement this change?*
- *As a disciple-making disciple, who am I impacting for Christ? Who am I praying for? How am I introducing them to the Jesus we see revealed in these readings?*





HOLY WEEK

# SCANDALOUS **JESUS**

# AND SO, IT BEGINS

**READ MATTHEW 26:1-5; 14-16**

*“As you know, the Passover is two days away—and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified” (Matthew 26:2)*

I remember it well. That time in 6th grade when I told my friend, Eddie, about the girl I liked in our class. Not too many days later a note was slowly passed across the classroom from a good friend of that girl, asking me to mark “yes” or “no” about whether I liked that special girl. How did she know?! There could only be one answer: *Eddie!*

Have you ever felt betrayed by someone? I don’t mean simple 6th grade romance betrayals, but something deeper than that: a friend turning away from you, private and damaging information shared with someone by a trusted confidante, a spouse cheating on you, an authority figure misusing their power, or something else?

Jesus’ Holy Week journey begins with betrayal. He says, *“the Son of Man will be handed over”* (Matthew 26:2). We know, as the story continues, that Jesus will be handed over by one of His own. Judas concocts a scheme to turn Jesus in. While Judas’ motivation for doing this may seem unclear, at rock bottom it is a basic human betrayal that cuts deep.

It is surprising to realize Jesus’ greatest work, the crucifixion and resurrection, begins with something as basic as this. He takes that everyday human experience of betrayal and walks inside it Himself. He steps inside real human experience. His reconciling work on our behalf begins with ruptured relationship.

What is astonishing about this simple, human betrayal is that it is one part of the way that Jesus takes all of human experience upon Himself, and thereby redeems all of it. There is no part of human existence which cannot be healed, saved, and redeemed because Jesus, the Healer, Savior, and Redeemer has lived it and returned it perfectly to God.

As we begin this journey of Holy Week, may we fix our eyes upon Jesus and bring all of who we are back to Him.

## **FOR REFLECTION:**

- *When have you experienced betrayal, whether as the betrayed or the betrayer, in your life? Have you brought that to God for healing and forgiveness?*
- *When you think about Jesus’ journey from Palm Sunday to the Cross, what do you find most powerful about that for yourself?*

**BY MATT ERICKSON**



## FAMILY TALK

Young Farouk and his family fled Syria, spent time in Jordan and eventually came to the United States. All of this happened while Farouk was suffering from cancer. It was difficult and costly to treat his illness in Jordan but his family found a skilled and free hospital in the US. He is now cancer-free, speaks English well and loves pizza!

Life is full of different circumstances; some are easy to manage and some are tough. Jesus was no stranger to challenging events and our scriptures for this week show us his choice to obey God as He willingly moves to the Cross. (Hebrews 12:2 in part says *"He suffered there because of the joy he was looking forward to."*)

Jesus tells His disciples, *"As you know, the Passover Feast is two days away. The Son of Man will be handed over to be nailed to a cross"* (Matthew 26:2 NIV). Jesus already knew what the outcome looked like—the Cross and death. He knew that the chief priests and elders of the people were scheming to arrest Him and kill Him. He knew that His friends didn't understand why a woman was pouring very expensive oil over Him like a preparation for burial. Sadly, Judas began his journey to betray his friend for 30 pieces of silver. *"From then on, Judas watched for the right time to hand Jesus over to them"* (Matthew 26:16 NIV).

What can we learn from Jesus as He goes through these very trying times of His life on this earth? We know that He knew God's plan for Himself and for the rest of the world. We know that Jesus continued forward with God's plan even when some obstacles came up like the evil conspiring of the chief priests and the judgments of His friends when they saw the expensive perfume being poured over Him. Jesus was fixed on obeying God, His Father, giving up His life to take on our sin on that Cross in order to provide a way to restore us back into the family of God. God may ask us to do things that are difficult. We can know that whatever happens that God has a safe place for us to live with Him forever.

### FOR DISCUSSION:

- *What are some of life's circumstances that each of you have gone through that were difficult but ended well?*
- *What ending in our lives does Jesus promise?*
- *How have you or do you respond to Jesus' call for you to accept His gift of salvation?*
- *How can you continue to follow Jesus in your life so that you can know God's plan for your life and be obedient just like Jesus?*

# JESUS CALLING

READ MATTHEW 26:6-13

As I reflect on today's passage, I see Jesus, the woman, and the disciples. Jesus knows that His time to die is near. His sole purpose for coming to earth was to reconcile the world to God through His death. He has told the disciples, but the information doesn't mean much to them. Then comes the woman with the expensive oil. She had Jesus as her priority and wanted to worship Him with her precious possession.

The woman's act didn't make sense to the disciples. They imagined that Jesus would like them to provide for the poor. And they were right. Jesus loves the poor; He spent a lot of His time caring for and healing them. But at that moment, the disciples missed the priority; they didn't catch what Jesus wanted in real-time. Their eyes might have been on duties and not on Jesus.

I look at my walk with God and see times when I have focused on Christian duties rather than having my eyes on Jesus. I confused "good works" with God's heart. Let me say that I was sometimes self-absorbed, thinking that my calling was to step into bad situations and save the day. I was wrong. Our Sovereign God oversees the universe, and He can do anything and everything without us, but He chooses us to be part of His mission story. I have found that when I focus on God, He purifies my motives in the place of worship. He also gives me instructions on the "good works" that matter to Him at each moment.

I also see in the passage that Jesus gave the disciples a spoiler alert; people would remember the woman's deed when talking about Him. Talk about a legacy. If we are honest, we may admit that we sometimes do good works for recognition. I wonder if that was one of the disciples' motivations to help the poor.

Jesus is calling us to be devoted to Him. He calls us to love our God with all our hearts, souls, strengths, and minds. He calls us to focus on Him always and not be engrossed by the thought of saving the world.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- *Reflect on your current walk with God. Are you focused on God or on "Christian duties"?*
- *Ask God to purify your motives and have Jesus as your focus daily.*

# BETRAYAL

READ MATTHEW 26:17-25

This passage, along with parallel passages in the other gospels, gives us a pretty good understanding of what is happening. The twelve original disciples were together celebrating the beginning of Passover. Culturally, they were doing what most Jews were doing at that time of the calendar year. But as important as it was, they were about to learn that their world would be turned upside down.

For the previous three years, they had been chosen by Jesus and taught what God was really like. They had witnessed Jesus healing, doing miracles, and challenging the teaching of the religious leaders of the day. Jesus had brought them together and they lived as a close-knit family. They did most things together. But as close as they were, in verse 25, Jesus predicts that Judas will betray Him and turn Him over to the religious authorities in order to have Him arrested for teaching blasphemy, which is punishable by death. "Betrayal" is defined as "the act of exposing or delivering someone to an enemy through disloyalty," and also as "the act of disappointing a person's trust, hopes, or expectations."

It was believed that Judas only addressed Jesus as "Rabbi," never as "Lord." Many think that he did not believe Jesus was the Messiah or the Son of God, because He was not planning on trying to overthrow the Roman government and free the Jews from their captivity.

As hard as it is to understand how Judas could have done such a thing, it occurred to me that I can relate to this, having grown up in a pretty dysfunctional family and feeling betrayed by those closest to me. My parents were very unhappy and struggled throughout my childhood. My two older brothers physically abused me as I was growing up. A trusted religious leader also physically abused me on one occasion. I also had a number of friends in my neighborhood and in high school who betrayed me.

I believe those experiences led me to make poor choices as a young adult. I struggled with a poor self-image and I struggle with this even today. Thankfully, the Lord Jesus, through His Spirit, extended His grace and mercy toward me and sent some people into my life who helped me come to know that Jesus really was who He claimed to be. My life has never been the same after reaching out by faith and saying, "Yes, I do trust You."

## FOR REFLECTION:

- *Do you have a family member or former friend whom you need to forgive? Someone you need to tell about the way the Lord has shown you forgiveness and given you new birth into the family of our Lord?*

BY ROBIN TRULEN

# A PIECE OF PEACE

**READ JOHN 16:17-33**

Shalom. I am a cancer-fighting mother and grandmother and my latest daily agenda of events had me on a search for peace. There was the corona virus that was shaking up our world, and everything that went along with it, in addition to the life that was already present before corona came on the scene. I gathered my family for an afternoon movie and a nice luncheon. As we were eating, I explained how I was going away for a few days, but I would return better for me and them. This was quite the news to my grandsons, because this would be over a holiday. "Wait, what is she saying? Nana won't be here for Christmas?" My grandson asked.

I was in search of a piece of peace.

Does this sound familiar? I can relate to this passage of Scriptures so well and it hit close to home for me. I can remember the pain that I went through before and during the birth of my two sons, but after my eyes looked into those beautiful baby eyes, that moment quickly took me to another place. So often I want and need to feel the peace that I have learned about since I was young, and believed existed. My dear mother would often say, "there's nothing like peace of mind. The world didn't give it and the world can't take it away."

As we listen in on this conversation between Jesus and the disciples, we see that we can ask anything in the Father's name. Peace is such a precious jewel to have and it's ours, if we ask and seek the Father.

Jesus Christ has overcome the world! That includes corona, cancer and every trial and tribulation. I'm sure it's not the same, but I can see my grandsons trying to understand why I had to leave, like the disciples were trying to make sense of what Jesus was telling them. But when I took time away, some intimate time with my Father, I found that peace. Be of good cheer, knowing that the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Shalom.

## **FOR REFLECTION:**

- *What does peace mean or look like to you? Pray for the Prince of Peace to bring His peace into your life today!*

**BY PATRICIA WHITE**

# THE LORD'S SUPPER

READ MATTHEW 26:26-35

Jesus began the Passover meal by telling His disciples He had longed to eat it with them. The Passover follows the ancient *Seder* (or order). On this night, Jesus revealed the Passover as a remembrance, not only of the delivery of God's people from slavery in Egypt, but also of His delivery of those who believe in Him from sin, suffering, death and eternal death.

Following the rituals of the Passover meal, Jesus took the second of the three whole pieces of unleavened bread and broke it. The larger of the two portions was hidden for the end of the meal as it represents the full redemption, still future, to be brought about by the Messiah. Jesus then took the smaller part, blessed it and broke it apart to share with His disciples and said *"Take this and eat it, for it is My body,"* soon to be broken for us.

Progressing through the Passover script, Jesus came to the sharing of the third cup of wine, the Cup of Redemption. As He passed the cup to the disciples, Jesus said *"Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the New Covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."*

Jesus thereby established the New Covenant, prophesied by Jeremiah (31:31-34). This new covenant, long hidden in the Passover Seder, was now revealed by Jesus as the provision for the forgiveness of sins and soon would be sealed by Jesus' poured-out blood. Establishing this covenant by His death was the very reason Jesus came to earth, to make a way for sin to be forgiven and for humanity to have a restored relationship with the Father in heaven.

After drinking the fourth and final cup of the Passover, Jesus said *"I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."* Then Jesus will be recognized as the Messiah and full redemption will be realized. After this they sang one of the *Hallel* hymns (Psalms 115-118; 136) and departed.

For us, the Lord's Supper means we are forgiven of all sin. Jesus' shed blood promises this to all who believe in Him.

Luke and later Paul tell us Jesus said when we partake of the Lord's Supper, we are to do it in remembrance of Jesus' suffering in His body and spilling of His blood at death. In celebration of the Lord's Supper, we proclaim Jesus' death until He returns.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- *Do you fully believe that Jesus has forgiven every one of your sins?*
- *How do you prepare to receive the Lord's Supper?*

BY TIM TESCH

# THE CUP OF SUFFERING

**READ MATTHEW 26:36-56**

*"Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour." (John 12:27)*

Have you ever experienced deep grief? Have you ever found yourself in prayer asking, Lord, how can this be part of your will? Will you please take this away? Maybe you have watched someone battle cancer, or faced physical suffering yourself. Perhaps you have lost a loved one or witnessed tragedies you would rather not remember. In these seasons of my life, I have asked God these questions, but I have taken comfort in knowing that Jesus relates to us in our suffering.

Today, we find Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, which in Hebrew means the place of the oil press. The symbolism of oil-making is perhaps a foreshadowing of the anointed Messiah who would be crushed for our iniquities.

Darkness has fallen, and Christ is confronted with the coming Cross.

We watch helplessly as His disciples fall asleep at the time He needs them most. We see the sweat like drops of blood (Luke 22:44) drip down His face as He falls to the ground in agony. We hear Him cry out in His humanity to the Father, the One who said *"This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased"* (Matthew 3:17). We look on in disbelief as Jesus is betrayed into the hands of sinners with a kiss. And we feel the isolation as His disciples desert Him.

How must the Father's heart have broken! How must Jesus have felt? How could the Father's good and perfect will allow His beloved son to take on the sin of the world?

Jesus is faced with a cup of suffering. We see Him in His full humanity as He prays three times for the Father to take it from Him. And yet, He knows He has come into the world for this very purpose: to fulfill the scriptures and bring salvation that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16). Ultimately, Jesus submits to the Father's will as he prays *"Not as I will, but as you will."*

He drinks the cup of wrath. For me. For you.

## **FOR REFLECTION:**

- *Are you willing to trust, even when faced with suffering, in the Father's good and perfect will?*

**BY RACHEL SANFELIPPO**



## FAMILY TALK

By now you've heard some of the Bible passages that describe Jesus' suffering and death. The gospel writers spent a lot of chapters describing these events because they are the most important in the whole Bible. And, they can be hard to read! It's sad to think of how Jesus' friends ran away, how He was mocked, beaten, and then crucified on the Cross.

So then, you are wondering: *Why do we call this day "Good" Friday? Shouldn't it be "Horrible Friday" or at least "Super-Sad Friday"?*

What is "good" about Good Friday? God's "good" plan to save us! Jesus Himself was totally "good" or sinless. And, because He was totally good, He could pay for all sins, for all time by dying on the Cross—something we could not do for ourselves. The punishment for our sins was put on Jesus, and He bore them all on the Cross. Because of this, God looks at us and sees us as "not guilty" — the way to Heaven is open to us! This was God's good plan all along. (Genesis 3:15). When you think of that, maybe you want to call it "Great Friday" or "Amazing Friday"?

When we believe that Jesus has died in our place and we want to be forgiven of our sins—we just have to tell Him. We can pray something like this:

*"Dear God, thank you for making this awesome rescue plan! Thank you for sending Jesus to die for my sins, so that I can live forever with you and your people in Heaven. Help me to know you better and to follow you closely all of my life. In Jesus' name, Amen."*

# A HOLY DAY

READ MATTHEW 27:57-66

Today is Holy Saturday, the last day in the sober season of Lent before the paschal season of rejoicing begins tomorrow. Growing up, I didn't know about this day. I remember Good Friday, with its somber music, dramatic reimaginings of Jesus' crucifixion, and my discomfort of sitting with the death of Jesus. I also remember singing songs like "Christ the Lord is Risen Today" and the Hallelujah Chorus on Easter Sunday as dancers with brightly colored banners proclaimed the joyful resurrection of Christ. But at some point in my young adult years, as my faith was really becoming my own, I remember reading through the Gospel accounts and realizing that those three days between Good Friday and Easter Sunday must have been so disorienting for Jesus' disciples, followers, and loved ones, and realizing that in some other Christian traditions, this day is recognized and set aside as a holy day.

Each year now, I like to set aside today as a holy day. I spend Holy Saturday in contemplative reflection on those days, two thousand years ago, between Jesus' agonizing, brutal, humiliating death on the Cross and His glorious resurrection. It is always a day where I wrestle with my own faith: How would I have responded if I were alive back then? Would I have put myself to work doing practical tasks, like Joseph and the two Marys mentioned in today's reading? Would I have been absent from the narrative like the disciples? Would I have responded like the Pharisees—calling Jesus a "deceiver" with my mouth, but still obviously fearing Him enough even in death to put a plan in place to prove me right? Would I have just gone about my regular Sabbath routines as if it was just another day?

Each year, God meets me on this holy day in a different way. This year, I have been struck by the presence of women at the foot of the Cross as Jesus dies, and how they carry the narrative of Holy Saturday as mentioned in Mark 15-16, Luke, 23-24, and John 19. Last year, I remember God leading me into a reflection on the stillness of this time between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. I want to challenge you to sit with these Gospel accounts today and to allow God to speak to you on this day of discomfort, unknowing, stillness, and death. It is a day of holding the tension between doubt and faith; it is a day of trusting that what God has said He will do is what God will actually do. It is a day of being present to the discomforts of the reality of what is, and at the same time, to be hopeful for what will be.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- *As you prayerfully read these verses today, what is God bringing to your heart and mind to reflect on?*

BY LIZ CARVER

A black and white photograph of a cave entrance. The cave is dark and rocky, with a bright light shining through the opening, creating a strong contrast. The light illuminates the interior of the cave, revealing some rocks and debris on the floor. The overall mood is one of hope and discovery.

EASTER SUNDAY

RISEN  
**SAVIOR**

## THE BEGINNING OF THE END

READ MATTHEW 28:1-10

*"After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb." (Matthew 28:1)*

Shadows stretched long and deep from the sunrise  
on that day,  
tracing the rough-hewn stone edge of the tomb.  
On that day,  
Mary's somber footsteps shivered with surprise  
in the way  
the Savior's silent tomb became a womb,  
In the way  
the angel's earthquake language shook her life  
on that day.  
The death grip rescinded, new life subsumed  
on that day  
grief and joy, loss and gain. All revived  
in the way  
Jesus struck death down in dying at noon;  
in the way  
divine power enfleshed, emerges alive  
on that day.  
No words from Mary's lips, her vision trued  
in the way  
the beginning and the end were circumscribed  
on that day  
in flesh and bone through heaven's glorious wound.

BY MATT ERICKSON


 FAMILY  
TALK
**Based on Matthew 28:1-10**

Trudge, trudge, trudge. Mary put one foot in front of another as she and her friend, also named Mary, climbed the hill in the dark early morning. They walked in silence, because they had no words left. Last Friday, they had watched Jesus die, and they knew that he was quickly buried and placed in a stone, cold tomb. Their hearts were heavy. Their foot-steps were heavy. And their arms were heavy with pounds of burial oils.

*Can't we see Jesus just one more time?*

*Can't we do something?*

The answer was "no, of course not." But their hearts kept on asking.

Then, one Mary said to the other, "There is *something* we can do. Jesus never was given a proper burial—the kind with clean linen and nice-smelling spices. We could go, on the first day of the week, and wrap his body the right way. At least we could do that."

And so now, here they were. Trudge, trudge, trudge.

Suddenly, a flash of light ahead! A deep rumble of earth beneath their feet. A massive grinding stone rolls past the cave entrance. First one armed guard slumps to the ground, then the other. Now what? *Really, what more can happen?*

The women approach, and see the dazzling angel, sitting on top of the massive stone. "Don't be afraid!" he calls to Mary and Mary. "I know you are looking for Jesus!" And then the angel grins, "He is not here! He has risen—just like He said He would! Now go, tell the disciples."

Without a word, the women turn to run back to town. *Could it be? Could Jesus really be alive?*

And then . . . Jesus shows up! "Greetings!" He says.

The women drop their armloads of spices and fall to their knees, reaching for Jesus. After a few moments, Jesus helps them to their feet. "Don't be afraid!" He says, "Go, tell my disciples to meet me in Galilee."

The sun beams over the horizon, lighting their path. *Jesus is back!* The women laugh, and cry, and dance!

Sin only leads to sadness and death, but because Jesus paid for sin—for all time—He has put death into reverse! He wins! And because Jesus has won over sin and death for all time, we can know that, for God's people, death is not for keeps. We will rise, just like Jesus did, and will live with Him forever!

(1 Corinthians 15:20, 21)

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## **WORKS CITED**

1. All Scripture quotations are taken from the New International Version (NIV) unless otherwise noted. *The Holy Bible*, New International Version. Grand Rapids: Zondervan House, 2011.