

Armando Rodriguez

The Narratives of Christ

The Gospel

Unsearchable Riches

THE NARRATIVES OF CHRIST

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To my wife Teresa and children for their love and support

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Preface

The apostle John declares, “No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared *him*.” (John 1:18) The writer to the Hebrews states that Jesus is “the brightness of *God’s* glory, and the express image of his person. The apostle Paul tells us that in Christ dwells all the fullness of the godhead bodily. In Christ states Paul, “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. The gospels portray a Christ who unveils the eternal, invisible and immortal God. Jesus Himself declares, “If you have seen Me you have seen My Father.”

The four accounts of the gospel are both a declaration and an unveiling of God in the person of Jesus Christ. I hope this reflection of the Narratives of Christ will stir you to seek and experience His unsearchable riches.

Dedication

This book is dedicated to the memory of my brother and mentor. For many years, I had the wonderful privilege of meeting with him at 5:30 a.m. in order to enjoy a cup of coffee and read the Bible. One of the things I enjoyed most about our time together is the way he would light up when discussing Biblical narratives. He loved reading and sharing his newfound faith. Our meetings in the morning were a consistent source of renewal and refreshment. Every session would begin with a long prayer in which he would say,

“Father, You who are present in heaven and every place, please bless my wife, my Arnulfo, my Aurora, my Anna, my Armando, my Abel, my Alicia, my Arturo, my Aida and my Rosa. Bless their husbands, wives and children. Help them to honor you today. Help them to seek you and discover the joy of your presence. Help them to remember that it is only in union with Christ that things will fall into their proper place. Forgive us where we fail you. Help us now as we seek You in the pages of this book... In Jesus’ name we pray.”

Dad believed that one of the ways to seek and hear God was by reading the Bible. After our prayer, we would open the Bible and read one of the narratives of Christ. We would then observe, interpret and apply our reading to life. We had the opportunity to read through the four accounts of the gospel several times. My father believed that the whole Bible was a revelation of God.

Why this book? My father lamented that he was unable to communicate the treasures that he had discovered in the Bible. He would often say, "I tried to share, but I did not do a good job. I was judgmental, I bored them or I turned them off." I had the opportunity to listen to him share his faith many times. He did well, but He was his own worst critic. When we studied the narratives of Christ, he suggested that I should be the spokesperson. We studied each story and I delivered our findings to a group of people. He attended every single meeting in which I shared our findings. After the meeting, he and I would gather at a restaurant to discuss and critique the delivery of the message. It was wonderful. He would say things like:

“Son, you are rushing through your speech, slow down. Keep it more positive. People need to walk away with hope. You need more examples.”

It was pure joy to serve God alongside my father, Arnulfo Rodriguez. I hope the following reflections of the Narratives of Christ will help you capture our joy.

CHAPTER ONE

Preparing the Way for the King

(Repent, Confess, Be Baptized, Bear Fruit)

Scripture Reading: Matthew 3:1-8

Seven hundred years prior to the birth of John the Baptist, the prophet Isaiah spoke about the coming of a man that would prepare the way for a king. John's primary task was to prepare God's people for the coming of the Messiah. His message would focus on restoration and introduce a new day in the history of God's people.

John's Background

Many of us have read about his miraculous birth. While his father offered a sacrifice of incense, the angel Gabriel appeared to Zachariah to inform him that he was to have a son. Zachariah and his wife were past the age of childbearing. No doubt, they were excited about the angel's message. Their son was to play an important role in the history of the world. If you were 80 years old and an angel descended to notify you that you and your wife would have a child, what to name him and how to raise him, you would probably expect great things from that child. As the child grew, you would have told him/her the story about the angel a million times.

Zachariah was a priest and had his own ideas about what God was going to do with his son. He took his son to the temple often. He would remind him of the special purpose God had for his life. However, on John's twentieth birthday, instead of going into the priesthood, John disappointed his parents and went to live in the desert. How many of you think Zachariah might have been confused? He probably envisioned all the plans he had for his son, but things did not work out. How many of you know that God always has a greater plan? He is intimately aware of all the details of our life. He rules over all the affairs of men and can be trusted! While John was in the wilderness, he received a divine message for the world.

Our reading consists of John's sermon. His message is not only for the people of his time, but is also relevant to those reading this book. The heart of John's message is simple. If you want to be ready for the coming of your King; if you want to experience God's manifested presence; if you want to live a satisfied, fulfilled, and happy life, there are four things you must do. They are as follows:

1. Repent
2. Confess
3. Be Baptized
4. Bear Fruit

These are the four major ideas included in his message and they will be the focus of this study. John is going to tell us how to enjoy God's best!

Repentance

The first point of John's message deals with repentance. The Bible informs us that John preached in the wilderness of Judaea saying:

"Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

John urges the multitudes to repent. How many of us want to see God manifest Himself? How many of us want to experience God's joy and live a full and happy life? If we want to experience the kingdom and rule of God, we must repent!

That sounds simple enough! The idea of repentance includes two important steps. **First**, it includes a setting aside of our sin. **Secondly**, we are to embrace God. We often run into a problem when we define repentance as only the setting aside of our sin. We assume that repentance is equivalent to becoming a moral or ethical person. We convince ourselves that good conduct is enough, but someone can be moral, ethical, religious, and still not know repentance because setting aside sin is only half the process. We must then move on to embrace God. We must seek and run after Him!

Have we repented? Have we set aside our sin? Are we seeking God's face? Repentance is the first step toward a happy and abundant life. Without it, we cannot enjoy God's manifested presence and rule. We cannot experience joy. Biblical repentance includes setting aside our sin and embracing the God of the Bible.

Confession

The second point of John's message deals with confession. The Bible reports that all Judaea and Jerusalem went to John confessing their sins. How do we set aside our sins? We confess them to God! The apostle John states,

"if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. "

When we confess our sins to God, He erases them. We set our sins aside by confessing them to God. What happens when we confess our sins to God? The prophet Isaiah states,

"God takes our sin and hurls it into the depths of the sea!"

Again, the same prophet states that God will cast our sin "as far as the East is from the West." What is the prophet saying? God erases our sins. The word forgiveness means to erase. If we desire to experience God's presence, joy and happiness, we must acknowledge our sins and confess them to God! After repentance and confession, John introduces us to his third point.

Baptism

After repentance and confession, we then move on to baptism. Baptism does not save us. God saves us when we receive His gift of salvation. Baptism symbolizes a burial and resurrection.

What do we do when someone dies? We bury them. Baptism has a two-fold meaning. First, it declares to God, the world and the devil that we are now dead to our old self. Baptism in water buries our past. We bury our sin. We bury our failure. Baptism also makes a declaration to God, the world and the devil that we have decided to live in newness of life. We have embraced Jesus – our eternal life.

Have we buried our past through baptism? Are we enjoying newness of life? After repentance, confession and baptism, we then move on to fruit bearing.

Fruit Bearing

The fourth and last point of John’s message is fruit bearing. Luke 3:7 states that John exhorted the multitude to “bring forth fruit meet for repentance.” John tells the crowd, you have repented; you have confessed your sins and have been baptized. The last thing you must do is bear fruit.”

Often, this point is very confusing because we limit fruit-bearing to church related activities. We make people feel guilty because they have not led anyone to Christ, passed out any tracts, or because they have not sung in the choir. John introduces us to a different idea of bearing fruit. He speaks to four groups of people regarding fruit bearing.

First, He speaks to the religious Pharisees and Sadducees. He says to them,
“You generation of snakes!”

Why did Jesus call them snakes? They thought they could get to heaven on the merits of Abraham. This is equivalent to the assumption that we are Christians because someone in our family tree was a Christian. We say, “My mom and dad are Christians, therefore I must be a Christian.” I have heard some say, “My grandmother is saved therefore; I don’t need to repent, confess and be baptized.”

John addresses the religious and informs them that it is not enough to be related to someone spiritual.

We must love and seek God for ourselves. We have to embrace Him for ourselves. Fruit bearing begins with a personal relationship with God. We must bear our own fruit. We cannot depend upon the fruit born by one of our ancestors. The religious thought that they were secure before God because one of their ancestors “walked with God.”

John addresses three other groups of people. They asked, “What must we do?” John said,

- Share your food with those who need it.
- Be honest with your boss.
- Do not steal from others.
- Do not hurt others.
- Do not lie about others.

- Be satisfied with what is provided for you.

I want you to note something in the text we have read. John is moving through some of the 10 commandments. John is basically stating,

- Do not steal.
- Do not kill.
- Do not lie.
- Do not covet.”

I recall Jesus being approached by a scribe. The Scribe asked him, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus mentioned two very important ideas. Jesus said, you must love God and love your neighbor. Jesus teaches that living a full life consists of maintaining two important relationships defined by the Ten Commandments. The first 4 commandments define what it means to love God and the last 6 focus on what it means to love our neighbor. John tells these three groups of people that they are to bring forth fruit by loving God and loving their neighbors!

What does it mean to bring forth fruit? Love God and seek Him for yourself. Love your neighbor by being practical. The Decalogue speaks to the matter of bearing fruit. Fruit flows out of our love for God and our neighbors.

Concluding Remarks

We have discussed four things that will prepare us for the coming of our King. The four points are...

- Repentance
- Confession
- Baptism
- Fruit bearing

What is the message of John? We must prepare ourselves for the coming of Christ. If we want to enjoy God’s manifested presence and rule in our life; if we want to experience God’s joy and happiness, then we must repent, confess, be baptized and bear fruit.

CHAPTER TWO

Four Components of the Ministry of Christ

(The Axe, Baptism of Holy Spirit, Baptism by Fire, the Fan)

Scripture Reading: Luke 3:9, 15-18

The opening pages of the New Testament introduces the reader to John the baptizer. John is sent by God to introduce Jesus to the world. As the antecedent, he is responsible for preparing the way so the believer can enjoy the presence, rule, fullness and joy of Christ. John's message to the people of his time includes both a human and divine component. In all God's activity, there is a divine and human element.

There are many examples of this in the Scripture.

- We lay hands on the sick; God heals.
- We preach the gospel; God saves.
- We seek His face; God refreshes, renews and revives.

In our previous study, we saw that human activity consists of repentance, confession, baptism and fruit bearing. These allow us to experience God's blessing and power.

In this study, I will focus on the divine component of John's message. John's message emphasizes four things that Christ has come to do.

John reveals four things Jesus will do depending upon our response to Him.

1. Verse 9 – Jesus with **an axe** in His hand
2. Verse 16 – Jesus as **the baptizer of the Holy Spirit**
3. Verse 16 – Jesus as the **baptizer of fire**
4. Verse 17 – Jesus with **a winnowing fork** in His hand

These represent four divine activities of Christ. These four pictures of Jesus will be the focus of our attention.

A Picture of Jesus with an Axe in His Hand

The Bible informs us that the Christian ought to present evidence of conversion. That evidence is repentance, confession, baptism and fruit bearing.

In this first picture, John the Baptist again emphasizes fruit bearing. Jesus declared, "I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abides in me, and I in him, the same brings forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing." (John 15:5)

John teaches that those who abide in him will bear fruit. If we are not bearing fruit, there are only two possibilities. The first is that we are not abiding in Christ! The apostle makes it clear. If you abide, you bear fruit. Again, Jesus states,

"... He that abides in me, and I in him, the same brings forth much fruit " (vs. 5)

The second possibility is that we do not belong to God and are standing outside the grace of Christ. If we choose to stand outside of Christ, He will reveal Himself to us as **the Christ with an axe in His hand**. He is going to cut down the tree that does not produce fruit.

Those that do not belong to Christ, cannot and do not want to produce fruit. What about the Christian? Jesus will do some trimming, but no chopping. The picture of Jesus with the axe in His hand is related to the nonbeliever. Why did Jesus threaten to chop down the religious leaders of His time? They had religion, but not a relationship. They worshipped with their lips, but their heart was far from God. They had a form of godliness, but denied God's power. They were playing church. The power and presence of Christ had not influenced them. The truth had not changed them.

The religious leaders of the time were in a state of rejection and thought it was all about political and religious connections. Their relationship to Abraham gave them false hope. John said to them, God is angry with you. God is going to chop down your tree. The religious leaders did not repent, confess, receive baptism, nor were they bearing fruit. There was no evidence of conversion in their lives. It was to these men that Jesus came with an axe.

Is there evidence of conversion in our life? Are we abiding in Christ? Have we buried our past and welcomed new life? Are we producing fruit?

The Second Picture: Jesus as the Baptizer of the Holy Spirit (16)

In the second portrait, Jesus reveals Himself as the one who desires to fill and saturate us with His life and divine nature. John the Baptist states,

"...All I can do is baptize you with water, but Jesus is going to baptize you with the Holy Spirit!"

What about us? Have we been baptized with the Holy Spirit? Along the same line, Paul states,

"Wherefore be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is. And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but **be being filled with the Spirit.**" (Ephesians 5:17-18)

We can experience being filled with the Holy Spirit every day. This passage reveals that it is the will of God to fill us with the Holy Spirit. In fact, God commands us to be filled. The question remains. Are we allowing Jesus to fill us with the Holy Spirit? He is here to fill us. He is here to quench our thirst. The picture of Jesus as baptizer of the Holy Spirit is for the believer.

If we have repented, confessed, been baptized, Jesus now wants to fill us. There are several ways in which Jesus fills us.

- He fills us during our time of worship.
- He fills us when we break bread.
- He fills us during the time of preaching.
- He fills us during the invitation.
- He fills us during the time of prayer.
- He fills us when we read the Scripture.
- He fills us when we sing a song to Him.
- He fills us when we gather with His people.

Are we being filled. Are we enjoying the baptism of the Holy Spirit every day?

The Third Picture: Jesus Baptizes with Fire

Have you ever been tried by fire? There are times that God allows us to go through the fire in order to refine and draw us closer to Himself. James states,

“That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perishes, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise, honor and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 1:7)

We do not always understand why, but we do see the results of the trial. God draws us closer to Himself. Sometimes, God allows our work to be tested by fire to assure that we are building according to His will. Listen to the words of the apostle Paul.

“Every man's work shall be ... revealed by fire...” (1 Corinthians 3:13)

John reveals Jesus as the purifier. Fire is used to prepare us for divine use. God's fire is sent to improve us, not to destroy us. God's fire will conform us to the image of His Son. It makes us better, not bitter. God can be trusted! He has our interest in mind!

Other commentators interpret the fire in this passage as a reference to the eternal destination of all those who reject Christ. I have chosen to focus on the sanctifying work that God performs in the life of the believer. God causes all the negative things that come into our life to shape us into a masterpiece.

The Fourth Picture: Jesus with a Shovel in His Hand

The fourth portrait refers to the process of sifting wheat for the market place. Jesus is presented as one holding a winnowing fork in His hand. A winnowing fork was like a shovel used to throw wheat into the air. The wind would blow away all the trash in the wheat. This is how the wheat was prepared for the market. Jesus reveals Himself as the one who hauls away all the trash from our lives. Sometimes Jesus stirs things up in order to blow away the dross. Has Jesus stirred anything up lately? Sometimes God allows certain things to happen in order to reveal to us the need for change. It is important to remember that we are not alone as we go through this purifying process. God loves us! God is intimately concerned for all the details of our life. He is ready to infuse us with divine strength and comfort.

Concluding Remarks

We have discussed four pictures of Jesus. He is present today. He may have an axe in His hand. He is ready to cut off those who refuse to repent and surrender. He is present to fill and baptize us with the Holy Spirit. He may have a winnowing fork in His hand. He is ready to purify us and carry off all those things that keep us from serving Him. We must surrender daily and benefit from the sanctifying work that Jesus would like to carry out in our lives.

CHAPTER THREE

The Temptations of Christ

(The First Test)

Scripture Reading: Luke 4:1-4

In this study, we come to a portion of scripture in which Jesus is being tested. How many of you know that tests are important? Recently, I had to administer a six weeks exam. Some of you who are attending the university have to take exams. Does anyone here like tests? I don't like them. There is too much anxiety, but they are important because they inform the teacher or professor if the student is ready for the next level. Tests are provided to improve us. If we pass the test, God promotes us into a higher plane of service. Have you noticed? There are many tests administered in the Bible?

- Adam and Eve were tested. (Fall)
- Noah was tested. (Ark, Vine)
- Abraham was tested. (Ishmael, Isaac)
- The Children of Israel were tested. (Journey)
- Jesus was test. (Temptations in the Wilderness)
- And yes, we will also be tested

In this study, we will focus on the first temptation faced by Jesus immediately after His baptism. I want to ask three questions regarding this passage.

1. How did Jesus face and overcome trials and tests?
2. What is the meaning of the first temptation?
3. How can we apply that meaning?

How did Jesus face and overcome trials and tests as a human being?

Luke informs us that Jesus prepared for temptation. He did not just walk into it without any preparation. He was full of and under the leadership of the Holy Spirit. (vs. 1) He was in prayer and fasting. He was full of the Word of God. He kept declaring, "It is written." In these passages, Jesus teaches us how to face or overcome the trials we endure.

How do we react when the trial arrives? Often, we murmur and complain. We become bitter. We doubt God's sovereignty. In verse one, Jesus teaches and models how we are to overcome temptation. When we face a trial, it is time to be filled with the Holy Spirit. When we are met by tribulation, it is time to submit to God's rule and allow God's Word to indwell us

richly. When the test comes, it is time to begin praying and fasting. Jesus met the temptations that came into His life in this manner. Let's review the first test Jesus faced.

The First Temptation

The Bible informs us that the first temptation took place in the wilderness. Jesus had fasted for six weeks. Many theologians believe that Jesus may have been tested multiple times, but when he spoke to His disciples, he focused on only three temptations. Jesus is teaching His disciples that if they are going to become involved in divine work, it is necessary that we pass three tests.

If we desire to be useful in the kingdom of God, we must also face and overcome the three tests faced by Jesus. The Bible reports that when Jesus became hungry, the devil approached Him and said,

"If thou be the Son of God, command this stone that it be made bread."

Jesus gave the enemy a scriptural response,

"It is written, man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God."

Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 8:3. He declares to the devil. "**This man** is not going to live by bread alone. **This man** is going to live by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God." Jesus reveals in this passage that there are two ways to live as a human being.

First, we can live by bread alone. This test reminds me of an example I heard:

An elderly man questioned a young person,

"What are you going to do with your life?" The young man answered, "I am going to finish school, go to college, get a job, find a wife, have children, start a business, and retire with dignity and then die I suppose." The old man asked, "Then?" The young man answered, "I don't know. I did not make any plans for eternity."

How often are we tempted to live for time without any consideration for eternity? We focus on the earthly and forget the heavenly. We become so occupied with the human and forget the divine. Our entire focus becomes the here and now. The apostle James touches on this point when he describes the brevity of life.

"What is your life? It is even a vapor, that appears for a little time, and then vanishes away."
(James 4:14)

Time is like a drop of water in comparison to the ocean of eternity. We are just passing through and we will shortly have to move on. We are to live for the cause of Christ! This week I heard someone render his own version of the golden rule.

"He who has the most gold wins."

This is an example of living by bread alone. Listen to Paul's words to Timothy.

“For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. (1 Timothy 6:7)

Solomon declares,

“Oh, yes. You can live like you want, but remember, at the end, you will have to give an account for your life.”

I walked through a cemetery recently and noticed that death has no respect for age. We all have an appointment that cannot be canceled. We will all appear before the judgment seat of Christ. As I read the tombstones, I was reminded. The cold hand of a dead man only takes with him what he has given away for the cause of Christ. Are we living by bread alone? Does our whole existence revolve around our dreams, our goals and aspirations? Remember, God has marked us for divine use. God has a purpose and plan for our life.

Jesus spoke to the devil about **a second way to live**. There are those who live by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God. They put God first. They seek first His kingdom and righteousness and God supplies all their needs. They delight themselves in the Lord and He gives them all the desires of their heart. God prospers those who live by every word that proceeds out of His mouth. Who are those who live by every word of God?

- They live with eternity in view.
- They are governed by a higher power and live for a higher purpose.
- They are ambassadors of the King of Kings.
- They serve the Lord of Lords.
- They live within the context of God.

When Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 8:3, he was making a statement. “I have made a choice! I will not live by bread alone. I will live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.”

What does all this mean to us?

Have we passed the first test? How are we going to live? What choices are we going to make? Will we live by bread alone? How do we know if we have failed?

- Is our thinking consumed with our future; our goals and our aspirations?
- Do we seek God only on Sunday?
- Do we read God’s Word?
- Do we enjoying the company of God’s people?

These things are evidence that we have pushed God out of our life.

Concluding Remarks

Jesus has taught us how to face and overcome temptation. We have been challenged to make a choice. How will we choose to live? God will not move us into a higher plane of service until we pass this test.

“What is your life? Just a vapor!

It appears for a little while

and then vanishes.”

(James 4:14)

CHAPTER FOUR

The Temptations of Christ

(The Second Test)

Scripture Reading: Matthew 4:5-7

We have already noted several things about temptation. It prepares us for service.. Until tested, Jesus did not perform any miracles. It was only after He was tested that He began His ministry. Jesus had to face and overcome three temptations before He could do divine work. Is it possible that we have to follow the same pattern as Jesus? What have we learned thus far? Jesus did not walk into temptation empty handed.

- He was full of the Holy Spirit.
- He was led by the Holy Spirit.
- He prayed and fasted.
- He was full of the Word of God.

In the first temptation, the devil recommends living by bread alone. The devil's message is, "Live for the moment." How does Jesus respond to those that choose to live for the moment? He states,

"Is not the life more than meat for what will you profit, if you gain the whole world, and lose your soul?" (Matthew 16:26)

Again, in the gospel according to Luke, Jesus states,

"Your life does not consist in the abundance of the things that you possess." (Luke 12:15)

Jesus also speaks about the results of living for the moment. Jesus states,

"When you live for the moment, the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other thing enter in and make you unfruitful." (Mark 4:19)

The wise king Solomon challenges us to live life with eternity in view. We have been born into this world for a special purpose. God has a plan that He desires to accomplish through us. God has created us in His image and likeness and has called us to be His ambassador. Now, we come to the second temptation. In this study, I want to do three things with this passage.

1. Observe
2. Interpret
3. Apply

We are informed that the devil transports Jesus to Jerusalem. Jesus is set on a pinnacle of the temple. What happens? The devil begins to preach. He quotes Psalm 91:11-12. He knows how important the Bible is to Jesus. He quotes a messianic passage. The devil does not pull the

verse out of context, but he does fails to apply it correctly. The devil's message is as follows, "Does not the Bible say that God is going to give the angels charge over you? Does not the Bible say that the angels are going to protect and hold you up if you fall? Why don't you jump so you can prove that the Bible is true."

How does Jesus respond? "**This man** is not going to tempt God." Jesus echoes the words of the prophets.

"If God said it, He will do it.

If He spoke it, He will bring it pass."

How should we interpret this passage? What does it mean to tempt God? Jesus is quoting Deuteronomy 6:16. If you recall, the people of God were in need. They did not know what to do. They began to complain about God's authority. Moses is not a good leader, because he is not meeting our needs, they said. They question God, "Are you among us or not? The people tempted God in two ways. First, they tempted Him when they doubted that He was present. Secondly, they tempted Him when they doubted that He had the power to meet their need. Listen to the questions they asked. (Num. 14:22)

"Can God furnish a table in the wilderness?"

"Can God give us bread?"

"Can God provide flesh?"

How do we tempt God. We tempt Him when we doubt that He is present in our situation. We tempt God when we doubt that He has the power to meet our need.

How many of us have ever been transported into a high place by the devil? I have never had the experience of being transported, but I have been tempted to doubt that God is present or to doubt that He has the power to meet my need?

I can relate to this temptation! I have gone through situations that cause me to wonder! What should we do when faced with this test? Imitate the Master! It is time to be filled and led by God's Spirit. It is time to pray and fast. It is time to meditate on God's Word. When doubt creeps into our life, it is time to run to God. It is time to pull out our spiritual history book and review God's faithfulness in the past. God's Word reports that God is sovereign. He is aware and intimately concerned for all the details of our life. His plan is full restoration. Remember the words of Jesus.

"Not a sparrow falls from the sky without Father's awareness.

"All the hairs of your head are number."

The children of Israel had a problem. They wanted God's benefit, but not the responsibility associated with it! **We are no different!** We are satisfied with what God gives as long as He makes no demands upon our life. We want the gift, but refuse to bow to the giver! We want healing, but not the healer! We want the joy of God, but not the God of joy. We want the peace of God, but refuse to live for the God of peace. We want the blessing of God, but

refuse to live and obey the God of the blessing! God does not want to be our divine Santa Clause; He wants to be our Master.

We would be heart-broken if our children doubted our ability to care for them. We would be saddened if our children worried about their next meal. Children should not have to worry about where they are going to sleep. We break God's heart when we doubt He is present. We break His heart when we doubt He has the power to act. Jesus told the devil, "I do not have to test my father." I trust Him!

God's message is clear. He is intimately aware and concerned for all the details of our life. He is not going to let our hand go! When things do not make sense, do not forget, He is present. Trust HIM!

Concluding Remarks

Some of us are being tested. It is time to surrender. It is time to run after God. Our doubt will disappear when we see His face. He has not forgotten us.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Temptations of Christ

(The Third Test)

Scripture Reading: Luke 4:5-8

How many of you know that God has good intentions toward us. I have to remind myself almost daily. God loves me. God desires to bless, restore, and renew us. He wants us to experience joy unspeakable and give us a peace that surpasses all understanding. He has opened up His treasure house and wants to fill us with good things. We must appropriate all that God has given? Are we ready to receive?

God spoke to Abraham and called him out of Ur of the Chaldeans. He promised to make him a channel of blessing to the world. God called Israel out of Egypt and promised to bless nations through them. I would venture to say that every Old and New Testament character has one thing in common - A call to become a channel! How many of you know that God wants to do the same with us?

Jesus told Philip, "You are going to see greater things than this." Later, he told His disciples, "He that believeth on me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go unto my Father."

Why does God expect great things from us? John states, "Greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world." (1 John 4:4)

Abraham was a channel. Israel was a channel. Jesus was a channel of divine life and power. We are called to be a channel as well. Let me remind you. Before Jesus ever healed the sick, cleansed a leper, raised the dead, or cast out devils, He had to be tested. Before we can do divine work, we must also be tested. In this study, I will focus on the third temptation of Christ.

I will deal with three points:

1. Make some observations
2. Interpret a couple of things
3. Make some connections

The Context of the Passage

Jesus is transported to a high mountain. We are informed that the devil shows him the kingdoms of the world. Satan displays the wealth of nations and makes Jesus an offer. Satan declared to Jesus, "I will give you all this wealth, if you will kiss my hand. I will give you all these kingdoms if you will bow and serve me." Satan offered power, prestige, position, and possessions. How did Jesus respond?

“Get out! I worship and serve only God!”

Again, we see how Jesus uses the Scripture in order to defeat the enemy. The Bible informs us that Jesus overcame this temptation. The devil left him until a more opportune time and the angels ministered to Him.

An Interpretation of the Text

What is the temptation in this passage? The devil wants Jesus to stop worshipping and serving God. What does it mean to us? The devil wants us to take our eyes off the Creator and put them on a creature. Satan wants the creature to stop bowing and viewing God as the Source of life. Satan wants us to stop submitting to the will of God. The devil has two things in mind with this temptation. First, he wants Jesus to **stop** worshipping or serving the Creator. Second, he wants Jesus to **begin** worshipping and serving him. How many of us have been tempted to worship the devil? What about the temptation to stop worshipping and serving God?

Application

How much money would Satan have to offer us in order to get us to stop worshipping or serving God? The devil told Jesus, “if you stop worshipping and serving God, I will give you position, power, prestige, and possessions!” Our problem is not that we are kissing the devil’s hand. **OUR PROBLEM IS** that we do NOT worship or serve God at all. We have failed the test. The Bible provides many examples of men who have stopped worshipping and serving God. The Bible reports that some of us worship and serve at the altar of self, money, sin, pleasure, and lust. The apostle Paul states that men choose to serve the creature rather than the creator.

Over 500 years ago, a group of godly men were asked to speak to the issue of worship and service. Their response was as follows.

“You cannot worship or serve an unknown God.

Be diligent to seek the God of the Scriptures.

Be a diligent student of the Bible and allow God to reveal Himself.

When the God of the Bible reveals Himself...

Love Him.

Seek to discover all the vast dimensions of His character.

Seek to understand His Will as revealed in the Bible.

Fear Him. Do not trifle with Him.

His love will motivate us.

His fear will guard us against the enemy.

Get rid of any competitors. He is a jealous God.”

Do not give money, ambition, aspirations, pleasure, the pride of life, the lust of your eyes or yourself the first place; that place belongs to God alone! He will not tolerate a divided allegiance.

If we divide our allegiance, God will have to use the rod of discipline. We may think. God is harsh and selfish to demand first place.

Question: Will your husband or wife tolerate others into your relationship? Is she harsh and selfish to expect total commitment? God is not a creature, He is the Creator.

He has exclusive rights! We belong to Him. We are His servants. Have we forgotten? We are brought into this world to fulfill His plan, not our own. We are here to build His kingdom, not ours!

Concluding Remarks

We have discussed three temptations. We cannot do divine work until we pass these tests. We cannot enjoy God's best, until we live by God's word, trust Him with our life, worship and serve Him alone. If we are to become a channel of His blessing, life and power, we must overcome the temptation to live for the moment, overcome the temptation to doubt God's presence and power, and overcome the temptation to worship the creature rather than the Creator.

Take note of the following examples of what it means to worship and serve to God.

WORSHIP AND SERVE GOD ALONE

O come, let us worship and bow down: let us kneel before the LORD our maker. (Psa. 95:6)

“And thou, Solomon my son, know thou the God of thy father, and serve him with a perfect heart and with a willing mind: for the LORD searches all hearts, and understands all the imaginations of the thoughts: if thou seek him, he will be found of thee; but if thou forsake him, he will cast thee off forever.” (1 Chron. 28:9)

“Thou hast avouched the LORD this day to be thy God, and to walk in his ways, and to keep his statutes, and his commandments, and his judgments, and to hearken unto his voice.” (Deut. 26:17)

How do I worship and serve God?

- a. Think about Him (Mal. 3:16)
- b. Remember and Meditate upon Him (Psa. 63:6)
- c. Highly Esteem Him (Psa. 71:19)
- d. Honor Him (Mal. 1:6)
- e. Adore Him. Bow the knee and confess His Name (Isa. 45:23)
- f. Choose Him (Josh. 24:15)
- g. Love Him (Deut. 6:5)
- h. Desire Him (Psa. 73:25)
- i. Fear Him (Isa. 8:13)
- j. Believe Him (Exod. 14:31)
- k. Trust Him (Isa. 26:4)
- l. Hope in Him (Psa. 103:7)
- m. Delight in Him (Psa. 37:4)
- n. Rejoice in Him (Psa. 32:11)
- o. Be Zealous for Him (Rom. 12:11)
- p. Call upon Him and thank Him (Phil. 4:6)
- q. Yield all obedience and submission to Him (Jeremiah 7:23)
- r. Be careful in all things to please Him (1 John 3:22)
- s. Be sorrowful offending Him (Jer. 31:18; Psalms 119:136)
- t. Walk humbly before Him (Micah 6:8)

(Credit: Arthur W. Pink, The Ten Commandments)

CHAPTER SIX

A Wedding in Cana

(When the Joy Runs Out)

Scripture Reading: John 2:1-11

One of the blessings I enjoy every day is rising early to meet God. I love to look at the sky before the sun rises. All I can say is Father, thank you for the beauty you allow us to freely enjoy. Something else I enjoy doing is praying the prayer Jesus taught to His disciples.

“Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come,

Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

The prayer informs us that God wants to bring heaven to the earth. He desires that we taste eternity in time. He wants us to experience the glory of heaven here and now. We do not have to wait to die in order to enjoy the unsearchable riches of Christ. It is all available to us now! Jesus tells us that He has come that we might have life in abundance. It all begins when we surrender our lives to Christ and walk with Him. The day we are born again, the angels in heaven rejoice. On various occasions, Jesus told His disciples, “I want your joy to be full.” (John 15:11) The prophets repeatedly spoke of God’s good intention. Isaiah declared, “God’s people have become the joy of many generations.” Jeremiah tells that God’s we are the joy of the whole earth. Moses informs us that God wants to open up His treasure house to us. Malachi speaks of God’s desire to open the windows of heaven to pour out a blessing we cannot contain. The apostle John states that God will heap upon us gift upon gift and grace upon grace. If God wants us to be so happy, why is the human race so miserable? In our study today, this is what we hope to discover.

We have read a story about a Jewish wedding. There are three things I want to do.

1. Make Some Observations
2. Interpret the Text
3. Make Some Applications

The story in this study deals with one of the most important events in the human experience. A wedding represents the beginning of a journey. The Jewish wedding was the cause of great feasting, dancing and celebration. But as we move into our story, it immediately reveals a *problem*. (3) They ran out of wine. Traditionally, this was humiliating to the bride and bridegroom. It was like running out of food. The story moves to *introduces us to a solution*. (3-7) Apparently, Mary, the mother of Jesus was made aware of the situation first. She had no power of her own. She was unable to solve the problem. Mary did something every mother ought to remember. When faced with an impossible task, there is only one thing to do – TAKE

IT TO JESUS. Mary makes Jesus aware of the problem. She tells the servants to obey Him. The servants are instructed to fill six pots with water. Jesus then performs a creative miracle and solves the problem. The miracle is confirmed. (8-10) The governor of the feast gives testimony regarding the quality of the wine. The servants are witnesses. The disciples are aware of the creative act. This is the first (miracle/sign) performed by Jesus. (11)

According to verse 11, there is a deeper meaning hidden in the passage we have read. The miracle is called a “sign.” It points to something. It calls the reader to move beyond the literal and discover a spiritual meaning. What does this sign mean? I think it speaks to us in various ways. God wants to participate in all the events of our life. When we allow God to be part of our celebrations, He will not crash the party; He will bless it with His presence. He already observes all these areas, now he wants to participate.

Often, we entertain misconceptions. We think that God is only interested in the religious department of our life. He would like to also be invited into those areas of our life that we consider important. (i.e. Friends, Family, Work, Entertainment, School, etc.) I cannot help but think of my mother when I read this story. She loves to clean. Sometimes, when she comes over, she can’t help herself. She starts to make everything beautiful. She doesn’t wait for permission. If you invite her to your house, she is probably going to clean it. We took my parents to eat at a restaurant in Corpus Christi. They put peanuts on each table and allow you to throw the shells on the floor. I looked at my mother and asked her, “What are you thinking?” She said, “Oh, I wish I had a broom to clean the floor.” It is in her nature to beautify things. She is simply expressing one of God’s attributes. This is the way Jesus is! When you allow Jesus into the events of your life, He will improve them. Everything he touches, he transforms. You may not be happy when He begins, but you will be glad when He is done. Jesus not only wants to be present, He would also like to participate. The bride and bridegroom at this wedding were glad Jesus was present.

The second possible application we see is related to the fact that the wine ran out! In the Bible, wine represents “joy.” When someone runs out of wine, it symbolizes a loss of joy. In the Jewish wedding, running out of wine was embarrassing because it caused others to wonder if the groom was going to be able to support the bride. What does this mean to us? When we run out of wine, it means we lose our desire, motivation and drive to continue. We lose the joy to move ahead! What do we do when joy disappears from our relationship with God, our spouse, work, our service to God. Well, we can follow Mary’s example: She called Jesus when the “wine” ran out. When the joy runs out, we are instructed to call upon the one who can work the creative miracle. David ran out of Joy! He stormed the gates of heaven and pled with God when he prayed “restore unto me the joy of my salvation. (Psalm 51:12) What can we do when the “thrill is gone?” Call on God! David states, in thy presence is fullness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore. (Psalm 16:11) God is the source of unspeakable joy!

This story reveals that not only is God willing to participate in the details of our life, but He is also willing to fill them with His joy. Why do we lose our joy? Sin robs us of joy. Joy is the fruit of the Spirit. When we detach ourselves from God, the first thing that disappears is joy. When we stop walking with God, joy vanishes. When we set aside obedience to God, we lose our joy. Sin is like a “warrant.” I am reminded of an experience I had a few years ago. I forgot to pay for a traffic ticket and I got a warrant for my arrest. Everywhere I drove, I had this cloud of fear hanging over my head. When I saw a policeman, I would break into a sweat. I would get

nervous. I knew that at any minute, I would go to jail. I had no joy. This is not the way God wants us to live. Once I paid the ticket, my joy was restored and the police became the good guys again. Jesus paid for our ticket (sins). We no longer have to fear God's wrath. The implications of the narrative about the wedding are profound. Without God, life eventually loses its joy and meaning. Everything becomes shadows and dust. Life becomes void of reality.

Concluding Remarks

There is good news. God wants to be part of our life. God wants to work a creative miracle of restoration. He wants to restore the joy and motivation that we have lost. He wants to revive our zeal. He wants to recover all that we have lost because of our sin or failure. All we have to do is "Take it to Jesus" and receive his provision.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Jesus Cleanses the Temple

Scripture Reading: John 2:13-17

As I read these passages, I thought of how God spoken in the past. Pharaoh heard the voice of God through Moses. He laughed and rejected God's Word. He failed to understand that God would not be ignored. He thought he was in charge and was the captain of his own destiny. But God's wrath was kindled and He sent ten plagues to get his attention. Consider the price Pharaoh paid pay for his rejection. God chopped down his family tree – cut off his descendants. What is the message? There is no future for those who move God out of the picture. Why did God become angry with Pharaoh? He corrupted God's purpose. Israel, God's people were being abused! In this study, we come to a passage of scripture that bears some resemblance to Pharaoh and God's dealings with him.

In this narrative, we read about the anger of Jesus. He was angry because the religious leaders were corrupting God's purpose. God's people were being abused. The temple was built as a meeting place between God and his creatures. The religious leaders lined their pockets by using God's house for personal gain. I want to focus on three words that summarize our story: anticipation, abuse and assessment.

Anticipation: A Context

Thousands of people traveled to Jerusalem every year. They journeyed in caravans and as they moved toward the holy city they would break out into song. History reports that about three million people attended this yearly event. The occasion was the Passover. They came to Jerusalem for several reasons:

First: They came to Jerusalem to thank God for material blessing. Their worship included a tithe which was brought to the temple.

Second: They came to Jerusalem to celebrate their birthday as a people. This is the day in which a crowd of slaves became God's great nation.

Third: They came to Jerusalem to worship God for a new beginning.

There was great anticipation. We are no different today! Every week, we gather to celebrate as well! We congregate in a house of worship to meet with God! To thank Him for material blessings! We bring Him sacrifices of praise. We celebrate our relationship and thank Him for saving us from our bondage. We gather with anticipation in my heart. We meet with believers to see, hear, experience and worship God. There was anticipation in the hearts of those 3 million people who came to the Passover celebration. They came with great joy, but there was a problem.

Abuse

After a long journey, the abuse would begin upon arrival. The multitudes would stand in line to enter the temple. They would firstly pay a Temple Tax (approximately \$100.00). If they had to exchange money, they would pay a \$40.00 fee. If they brought their own animal, there would be a \$12.00 fee. If the animal brought did not meet the standard, the priests would provide you with a sacrifice at an outrageous price. Do you think people felt like worshipping after all the abuse? Worshippers were probably disheartened and distracted. It was this abuse that causes Jesus to become angry. What was the problem? The people had come to meet with God, but they encountered distractions.

Do you think churches have this problem today? We arrive with great anticipation to meet with God and then we become distracted. We gather to hear a word from God and thank Him for the blessing he grants. We gather to give Him a gift, a tithe or a sacrifice of praise. We gather to celebrate. I am often surprised to discover the reasons why God's people meet. When we come seeking the giver, He may give us a gift. When you come seeking the healer, He may extend His healing power. When we come seeking His face, He will renew and restore. There is wonderful chorus I enjoy singing.

“Just forget about yourself.

Concentrate on Him.

Worship Him!”

David said, “Soul, I command you to praise God!” Why does he do this? The mind is easily distracted. We must often fight to focus on God. How did Jesus respond to the problems imposed by the religious leaders of his day?

Assessment

He assessed the situation. He saw the anticipation of the worshipper. He saw how the purpose of the temple had been corrupted. He saw how the worshipper was being abused. I imagine that Jesus had fire in His eyes. He made a whip. He drove out the abusers. He poured out their money and turned over their tables. The participants probably wondered about the commotion. Jesus judged them and said,

“You have made my Father's house a house of Merchandise. You have corrupted God's original purpose. You have made my Father's house a den of thieves and robbers.”

He calls them thieves and robbers. Why did Jesus accuse them? They had missed the point. The whole purpose of the Jewish celebration was to meet with God, thank Him for material blessing, give Him a sacrifice of praise, celebrate their relationship and worship Him for a new beginning. The religious leaders transformed the temple into a money-making machine.

I see Jesus with a whip. He is driving out of the church everything that competes with God. He is driving out of the church everything that discourages the worshipper. He is driving out all those who have come for the wrong reasons. He is closing down all those churches who have become social clubs and is drying up all those places that are no longer a meeting place between God and men. I see a whip in His hand. He is driving out sin that keeps us from God

and relationships that keep us from seeking His face. He is throwing out good things that keep us from serving God.

Concluding Remarks

We have lost much of God's blessing because we have forgotten the purpose for gathering with God's people. I want Jesus to drive out all those things in my life that keep me from serving Him. I want Him to remove all those things that have become obstacles to growth. I want to see Him, hear Him, and enjoy His presence. I want to be renewed, restored and changed. Are we ready to receive? He is ready to give.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Ten Lepers

(The Key that Unlocks God's Heart - Thanksgiving)

Scripture Reading: Luke 17:11-19

Every year, churches across America celebrate a tradition that emphasizes the giving of thanks. Thanksgiving Day is a tradition that focuses on the attitude that was present in the pilgrims, the puritans, the governors and presidents of this nation. They set aside a day to acknowledge God's providence. He is the source of all we possess. He is the God of blessing. Millions gather to say, "Thank You!" We have not gathered to discuss the pilgrims who were blessed by God. We are here to meet with the God who blessed the pilgrims. How many of you know that the God who opened the windows of heaven to the pilgrims in 1621 is present. Like the pilgrims and millions throughout history, we are here today to thank God.

In this study, we address a portion of scripture that provides us with an example of thanksgiving. Ten men received the blessing of healing, but only one returned to thank Jesus. This man was greatly rewarded. I will address three points in this story.

1. The Human Condition
2. The Divine Solution
3. An Invitation

The Human Condition

The text introduces us to a group of men with serious issues. As Jesus walked into a village, he was met by ten lepers. From a distance, (about 50 yards) they shouted, "Master, have mercy on us!" These men faced multiple issues.

Firstly, they faced social problems. They were tired of living as outcasts. They had lost their families and friends. They were not allowed into the temple and were rejected by the general populous. They were frowned upon because they were considered to be under the curse of God. When they walked into the city, they were required to shout, "Leper, Leper" so others could run for fear of contamination. Their problem moved beyond a social setting.

Secondly, they were plagued with physical problems. They probably resembled monsters. Their voice was hoarse and their eyes were sunken. Their skin was falling and they smelled bad. Their hair, nose, lips and ears were gone. Their fingers were missing. Can you imagine the sight? These are the lepers that begged for mercy when Jesus walked into this village.

What does all this have to do with us? This story points to the human condition. Our community is full of people like this - Men, women and children who are tired of living, are

friendless, lonely and empty. Their lives are characterized by chaos and confusion. No joy, peace or happiness.

According to the CDC, (US STATS)

In 2013, 88,000 people drank themselves to death.

In 2010, Suicide was the 10th leading cause of death.

There were 38,364 suicides - an average of 105 each day.

An estimated 2.2 million adults were so tired of living, so lonely, empty and confused that they made plans to end their lives.

21% of our youth suffer from severe emotional health disorders.

Do you know anyone like this? Our community is full of them! We know how the lepers felt. I am glad the story does not end with a picture of the fallen human condition. The story introduces us to a Divine solution.

Divine Solution

How did Jesus respond to these men? Well, the Bible reports that he saw and heard them. How many of you know that God is aware of all the details of our life. He knows all about our pain. Jesus saw right into the heart. He was moved to compassion. He commanded them to show themselves to the priests. (Mosaic law required it) As they went, they were healed! How many of you know that there is healing in obedience? Jesus told them,

“Go, and show the priests your miracle!”

This seems to be a strange request considering they had not been healed yet. If I had been one of the lepers, I would have said, “What miracle?” Their miracle began with obedience. Their obedience released God’s power. Jesus said to them, OBEY and you will experience your miracle. I wonder how many miracles are awaiting our obedience. The text reports that Jesus performed a miracle of healing on behalf of these men. He healed them and their issues disappeared. They were no longer monsters. They were transformed into new men. They were no longer considered as cursed by God. They no longer struck fear in the heart of the general populous. When they walked into the market place, they no longer had to shout “leper!” “leper!” Their family life was restored and their social life was recovered. They become productive human beings once again.

I rejoice with them. The ten lepers were excited about their new life. BUT, there was something wrong. They were so excited about the miracle that they forget all about the miracle worker. They forgot all about the source of the blessing. The text informs us that only one returned to thank Jesus.

Invitation

I want you to notice something important. The leper that returned to say thanks received an addition miracle. The Bible reveals that the Samaritan leper glorified God with a loud voice. He fell on his face at the feet of Jesus. He gave Him thanks.

“Where are the other nine, asked Jesus. “Arise! Go your way! Your faith has made you whole!

Jesus met his eternal need as well. Jesus wants to give us much more than earthly things. He wants to give us eternal gifts. Jesus makes reference to the leper’s faith. He is concerned about our faith in Him. Nine lepers walked away with healing, one leaper walks away with the healer.

Concluding Remarks

What offer does Jesus make us today? Firstly, He wants to meet our physical need. He desires that we prosper and be in health. He cares about the details of our life, but He would like for us to move beyond the earthly so he can give us a heavenly gift. Thank Him for your temporal gifts and He will offer you eternal blessing. What happens when God hears us say “thank you”? God is moved to give more! Maybe this is why Paul says:

“In everything give thanks, for this is the will of God.”

Thanksgiving is the key that moves God to give. How can I release the power of God into my life? - SAY THANK YOU! Do you want the key that opens God’s treasure house? Then we must learn to express gratitude! One leper had the key! He walked away with an eternal gift! Let me read one of my favorite poems for occasions such as this:

"Count it all Joy"

(James 1:2)

Count your blessings instead of your crosses;
Your gains instead of your losses.
Count your joys instead of your woes;
Your friends instead of your foes.
Count your smiles instead of your tears;
Your courage instead of your fears.
Count your full years instead of your lean;
Your kind deeds instead of your mean.
Count your health instead of your wealth;
Count on God instead of yourself.

CHAPTER NINE

The Fullness of the Times

(The Incarnation – Paxa Romana)

Scripture Reading: Galatians 4:4-5

Every year, we set aside time to focus on one of the greatest events in human history – the Incarnation. It is a time where we celebrate God’s change of address. Before Jesus came into the world, God visited the human race. Yes, God is omnipresent, but his permanent home is in heaven. When Christ came, God moved from heaven to live among us. You see, God has a new address! If we have embraced Jesus Christ, we become God’s new residence. Ever since the incarnation, God has been knocking on the door of human hearts. Will we become His new address? This is what all the excitement is about! This is the reason for the season! Immanuel: “God with, in and among us!”

The passage we have read deals with the “the fullness of the time.” Jesus came into the world born of a virgin in order to rescue humanity from the power and effects of sin. He then brought us into the royal family of God. In this study, I will focus on the phrase “the fullness of the time.” Last year at this time, we were out shopping because we had a baby on the way. We prepared for the baby’s arrival. We budgeted. We bought a crib. We purchased some clothing and a lot of diapers. Some of you know what I am talking about. When a baby is on the way, many preparations have to be made. Well, God had to do the same thing for the birth of Jesus. The verses we have read deal with how God waited for the perfect time before sending Jesus into the world. Everything had to be just right when Jesus appeared on the scene of history. What did God do in preparation? Well, God had to raise up several nations and men to introduce His Son. As we review the pages of world history, we will see God’s hand at work.

The **first event** in which we see the hand of God is the rise of the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire came to power during a time in which the world was in a state of chaos and confusion. God raised the empire to restore a measure of order to the world. For a 100 years, there had been no peace. The world was insecure. There was constant war among nations. But, soon after the Romans conquered, the wars came to a halt. Why is this important? It seems as if God was saying, Be silent! My son is about to be born. “Stop the bickering!” God brought about a general peace in Rome. This peace came to be known as the Paxa Romana. God raised up a nation to restore peace in preparation for the birth of Christ.

The **second event** in which we see the hand of God at work is Rome’s inspiration to build. Even though the wars had stopped, the crime rate was high. For hundreds of years it had been dangerous to travel. Many of the people who traveled would write their will before they left. They would kiss their children and say good bye to the wife not knowing if they would ever return. There were many bandits on the Roman roads. They would rob, beat and often kill. The roads were not secure. Rome was inspired to build new roads and make them safe from bandits. As soon as Rome did this, people began to travel. Commerce opened up. Cities began to develop. People from all over the world began to gather and share information with each other. These are the roads that Jesus and his apostles would later use to take the gospel to other

nations. As people from many nations gathered in these big cities, it was now possible to share good news with the whole world at once. Why is this important? It seems as if God was saying “Rome, I want you to build roads so my people can travel safely on them. I want you to build roads so my servants can carry my message to the world.” God inspired men to build roads and secure them in preparation for the coming of Christ.

The **third event** in which we see the hand of God is found in the learning of a common language. Under the influence of Alexander the Great, Rome was moved to teach its people the Greek language. This took several hundred years. Since the tower of Babel, the races of the world had been divided along linguistic lines. There were hundreds of languages that kept the nations of the world from communicating with each other. But all that changed when all the conquered nations were forced to learn Greek. When Jesus began His ministry, He was able to speak to the whole world in one language - Greek. Do you see the hand of God at work? God raised up a ruler to teach the world a common language. During this time, the Old Testament was also translated into Greek. Now, all the world could hear the Bible in the Greek language. Why is this important? It seems as if God was saying “Rome, I want you to teach all the people one language so when my Son arrives, everyone can understand His message. I want you to teach them Greek so they can all understand the Bible.” God prepared the world so His Son could communicate with it.

The **fourth event** in which we see the hand of God is related to the Jewish Dispersion. During the time of the Roman Empire, the Jews had been scattered throughout the world. In every city, the Jews would build synagogues. They would gather and worship one God. When Jesus and His disciples preached, they went to these places. The first converts came out of these synagogues. Every synagogue became a center of truth. Every synagogue had one thing in common. They were taught to wait for the Coming of the Messiah. Why is this important? It seems as if God was saying, “I am going to allow my people to be scattered throughout the whole world so they can set up mission stations. These groups will become channels of truth to the world. When my Son arrives, He will visit and speak the truth to all those gathered in these centers of learning.” This is why the Bible states that Jesus preached in all the synagogues. The synagogues had all been sovereignly built and prepared by God.

The **fifth event** and last event in which we see the hand of God is related to the human condition of the world. Even though there was a general peace in the world when Jesus was born, most people were a walking civil war. The Greeks had lost their faith and confidence in their gods. Those conquered by Rome felt lost and isolated from their culture. Families had been separated by Rome and were plagued by loneliness. The Romans were discontent with the political promise of prosperity. The spiritual and psychological state of the people was bankrupt. They felt powerless, oppressed, helpless and hopeless. The masses were ready for a change. Why is this important? It seems as if God was saying “I know your condition. I know you feel helpless, hopeless and empty. I know you are lonely. But, I have good news! My Son is on the way to rescue you!” This is God’s message today.

Concluding Remarks

We have seen how God was at work in the pages of human history. He was preparing everything for the coming of Jesus. You may be asking, what does all this history have to do with us? Well, God has been at work in our personal history. God understands all the details of

our life. He knows all about our pain! He is aware of our condition! We are not alone. Two thousand years ago, God was reaching out to the nations of the world. Today, He is reaching out to us! He wants to restore, renew and revive us! He has a gift to share with us! The message is not a history lesson about the Greeks and Romans. The lesson is about God's offer of a new beginning. He is offering us a new life and a sense of purpose. We know how most Jews and Romans responded to God's offer 2000 years ago. How are we going to respond? God is knocking on the door of our heart. Have we opened the door? Have we received His gift of pardon and abundant life? The prophet said,

“God stretched out His hand all day long!” He is waiting.

CHAPTER TEN

John's Discoveries About Jesus

(Declaration One – The Origin of Jesus)

Scripture Reading: John 1:1-5, 13

We have seen how God prepared the world for the coming of His Son. Before God's GIFT could come into the world, certain preparations had to be made. God brought about a general peace in Rome. He inspired men to build roads and make them safe. He moved human governments to teach a common language. He stirred the Jewish community to translate the Old Testament into Greek. He used the Jewish Dispersion to raise mission stations in which Jesus and His disciples would later teach and preach. In the fullness of times, God sent forth His Son.

I have always been amazed by God's wonder-working power. It seems that every page of the Bible reveals something wonderful about Himself.

- In creation, we see His omnipotence.
- In the world of Noah, we see His great wrath as He destroys the whole known world.
- At the tower of Babel, we see Him confound the human race.
- In Sodom and Gomorrah, we see Him burn them because of their sin.
- In the desert, we see Him open up the earth to swallow those who rebelled against His authority.

There are multiple examples of God in action found in Scripture. We read about His mighty acts, but is it possible to know Him personally? This is the question that John answers in the passages that we have read. As John walked and lived with Jesus, He made several discoveries about Him. The verses we have read are basically his report of his findings. Chapter one of John's account of the gospel makes three wonder declarations about Jesus. The first declaration reveals three things about the nature and origin of Jesus.

After walking with Jesus for 70 years, John made three discoveries about the origin of Jesus? What are they? Jesus is eternal. He is creator and source of all. He is making us an offer.

Discovery One: Jesus is Eternal. (1)

In verse one, John shares his first discovery.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

What does this passage relay to us? Jesus was present in the beginning. (eternity past) He was present before the foundations of the world. John speaks to us about the pre-existence of Jesus. Even though He was born as a human, He is eternal and has no beginning. John states, “the word was God.” What is John saying? Jesus is God. Can you hear John's excitement?

John seems to be saying, “I lived, walked, ate, slept and worked with God Himself.” When I leaned against His breast, it was God.” Jesus is not only a human, he is divine. Jesus is not only man, but true God. Why is this important to us? If you want to know God, you must become familiar with Jesus. Jesus himself declared,

“I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man comes to the Father, but by Me.”

There is something else we need to consider. He knows all about our pain. He understands the details of being human. As a human being, He can relate to us. BUT, Jesus is also divine. He not only understands our condition, but can also minister to our need. What is the first discovery? Jesus is both human and eternal.

Second Discovery: He is the Source of All. (2-5)

As we read verses 2-5, John informs the readers that Jesus is not only eternal, (and the word was God) He was not only present in eternity past, but he is also the creator and source of all. Look at verse three.

“All things were made by Jesus.” (3) “In him was life; and the life was the light of men.” (4)

John declares that Jesus is both the life and source of all things. What does all this have to do with us? As the source, He has the resources to meet all our human and divine needs. Without him, it is not possible to be happy. Without him, we will never know peace, joy and satisfaction. Without Jesus, we will never quench our thirst or fill our hunger. That is John’s declaration!!! This is our message to the world. Without Jesus, life is empty!

John continues to unpack his discoveries. He states that Jesus is the light of life. What is he saying? Without Jesus, the human race is in darkness. Without Jesus, life has no meaning. Without him, there is no rhyme or reason to human existence. The message is clear! It is only within the context of a relationship with Jesus Christ that we find ourselves. After sharing these wonderful discoveries, John speaks to us about rejection. I know that there are some who will reject this truth or premise.

“the light shines in darkness; and the darkness comprehends it not.” (5)

The religious leaders of that time rejected the message delivered by John the Baptist. (6-11) Jesus was the creator and His creatures pushed Him away. He was a Jew and the Jews rejected Him. John moves on to a third discovery.

Third Discovery: Jesus makes an Offer. (12-13)

Jesus makes a promise to those who receive him. If we surrender and embrace Jesus, there are several things that He will do for us. First, he will give us power to become children of God. (12) We have no power to make ourselves members of God’s family. All we can do is surrender to him. All we can do is confess our sin, reach out and accept God’s gift – Jesus. Why is this important? Many people struggle. They think that becoming a member of God’s family is about cleaning up their act. God wants us to come as we are. God wants to be the one that transforms and renews our life. Masterpieces can only be produced by the Master. All we can do is surrender and allow God to do the work.

Concluding Remarks

We have discussed three discoveries made by John.

Discovery #1: Jesus is eternal. (“the word was God”)

Discovery #2: Jesus is the source and creator of all.

Discovery #3: He offers us power to become His.

We have no power of our own. John states, Not of blood, not the will of the flesh, not the will of men, but of God “

CHAPTER ELEVEN

John's Discoveries About Jesus

The Incarnation of Jesus – His Divine Task)

Scripture Reading: John 1:14-18

We have read three verses of John's prologue. They focus on three declarations. In this study we will discuss the first of three declarations. What are John's three declarations?

The 1st declaration focuses on the origin of Jesus. (1)

The 2nd introduces the incarnation of Jesus. (14)

The 3rd speaks to us about the divine task of Jesus. (18)

Why are these three declarations important? They explain who Jesus is and why He has come into the world. These are the truths that John discovered during his 70 year journey with Jesus.

In the first declaration about the origin of Jesus Christ, John announces three things.

- He is the eternal.
- He is the Creator and Source of all.
- He offers us power to become new beings

What does all this mean to us? As eternal, Jesus has authority to act on our behalf. As creator and source of all, Jesus has the resources to meet all our needs. As divine, He has the right to offer us power to become life-time members of His family.

The implications of these truths are profound? The bad news is that without Jesus, we are lost and without hope. The good news is that Jesus is offering us the power to rise above our condition. What are we going to do with that power? Many have rejected it! Jesus says, "If you embrace me, I will give you power to become a members of the divine family. If you surrender to me, you will not have to worry about your eternal destiny. If you trust me, you can start enjoying heaven today." These are some of the implications of the first declaration made by John. He informs us about the GREATNESS of God and emphasizes God's transcendence. Now we come to John's second declaration?

God's Change of Address

It is a simple message. It is about God's change of address. God could have said, "I am going to run things from up here." Instead, God chooses to leave behind the glory and splendor of heaven. He chose to step off His throne and leave behind perfection. He walks away from angelic beings and makes the choice to MOVE INTO THE 'BARRIO. This is what all the excitement is about. God is no longer far away. God in Christ is now living among us. God has

taken residence in us. WHERE IS GOD? Is He in heaven? Is He on earth? He is both here and there? God became like one of us! He was born in the person of Jesus. He wrapped Himself in human flesh and came into our world. He became hungry, thirsty and sleepy. He laughed and cried like us. He knows what it means to be human. What is John saying? For 3 ½ years the world watched HIM. They did not know that He was God. God was living among His creatures and they did not recognize Him. John later writes,

“We saw Him with our own eyes. We gazed upon Him. We touched Him with our own hands. He was the Word of Life.”

Can you hear the excitement in John’s voice? What does all this mean to us? We are not alone. God has changed His address. We are His new residence! John is saying, “The eternal and invisible God used to be way out there, but now He is in here.” What happens after we become God’s dwelling place? (Look at verse 16)

- God transfers his fullness into us.
- God transfers his abundance into us.
- God pours out one spiritual blessing upon another.
- God grants gift upon gift.
- God heaps favor upon favor.

What is John telling us? **When God moves into us, He brings with Him all His wealth.** This is what we mean by the incarnation. When Jesus moved into the neighborhood, it was God Himself. He brought unsearchable riches with HIM. This is the REASON for the SEASON. God has moved; He has opened His treasure house; He is offering us all HIS wealth in Christ!

The Divine Task of Jesus (18)

“No man hath seen God at any time, the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.”

In this verse we see John’s explanation for the coming of Jesus into the world. Before Jesus came into the world, “no man had seen God.” God was invisible and incomprehensible. He was an impenetrable mystery. BUT NOW,

- Jesus has declared Him.
- Jesus has made the invisible God visible.
- He has made known the incomprehensible.
- He has revealed the mystery.
- He has brought God out into the open.
- He has interpreted Him.

John is saying? Jesus is the revelation, full explanation, and total expression of God. Do we want to know God in ALL His vast dimensions? We must become acquainted with Jesus. We must adhere to, trust in and rely upon Jesus because God's explanation, expression, definition and interpretation are all wrapped up in His gift to the world - Jesus. This is why Jesus said,

“I am the way, the truth and the life. No man comes to the Father but by Me.”

Do we know why Jesus came into the world? He came to reveal, explain, express, define and interpret God. We cannot know God apart from a total surrender to Jesus Christ.

Concluding Remarks

We have reviewed three declarations. We have discussed the origin of Jesus, the incarnation of Jesus and the divine task of Jesus. May God grant us to understand the offer He is making us. He does not want to hide from us. God wants to manifest Himself. He wants to take residence in us. He has opened His treasure house. He wants to fill us with His wealth. We have nothing to lose.

- We came into this world with eternal death – He offers us eternal life.
- We came into this world under the curse of sin – He offers the blessing of righteousness.
- We came into this world empty – He offers us His fullness.

He desires to make all things new. Are we ready to receive?

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Birth of Jesus

(Three Characters and their Response to Jesus)

Scripture Reading: Matthew 2:1-12

There are many examples in the Scripture regarding the way in which God elicits a response from men. When God speaks to us, He demands a response. Noah preached while he built an ark hoping that someone would respond to God's message. No one outside the immediate family repented, so they were all destroyed in the great flood. In the book of Isaiah we see a beautiful picture of God reaching out to men. (Isa. 1:18-20)

“Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.”

When God speaks, He expects a response! This fact is confirmed in the portion of scripture we have read. In our study, we will deal with how three Biblical characters respond to the birth of Jesus Christ.

1. Herod's Response
2. Judaism's Response
3. Wise Men's Response

Herod's Response

Herod has an interesting background. He became king of Jerusalem about 40 years before Jesus was born. (40 B.C.) He was an Idumean Jew and was despised by the people he ruled. He was a people-pleaser and did everything in his power to gain the approval of the Jews. He married into the Jewish Hasmonean family. He built the temple. He granted the Jewish people favors. In spite of all this, he was hated by his subjects. It is this hatred that shaped him. Herod was moved by suspicion and fear. All his life men tried to take his power, prestige, and position. All his life, Herod feared losing control of his empire, his life and of his possessions. His suspicion and fear transformed him into a monster. History informs us that his suspicion moved him to kill his wife's grandfather, poison his father-in-law, murder his mother-in-law, kill his brother-in-law, execute his uncle and his brother, drown the high priest, executed his best friend, kill his wife Mariamni, murder his oldest son, assassinated two other sons and murder 300 of their friends. On one occasion, a group of people knocked over a golden eagle in his palace and he had them burned alive. When Herod was dying, he invited all the prominent people in Jerusalem to a party and told his guards to kill them as soon as he died. His suspicion and fear destroyed him. The emperor of Rome, Octavian, said, “It is safer to be Herod's pig than to be his son.” This is the Herod we read about in our text. How does he respond to the birth of Jesus? The Bible states that he was troubled when the wise men told him that a king had been born. Herod told the wise men to search for Jesus and return with his address because he wanted to worship the new king. Do you really think he wanted to worship Jesus? To Herod, Jesus

represented nothing more than another competitor. Do you think there are men like Herod today? They say,

"If I surrender to Jesus, I am going to lose my power, prestige and position. If I surrender to Jesus, I am going to lose control of my life. Jesus is going to rob me of living "the good life."

I think we have misunderstood. Jesus is not interested in our temporal trash; He wants to give us His eternal treasure. He does not want our passing pleasure; He wants to give us real joy. Herod thought Jesus was going to take something from him, but he was wrong. Jesus does not come to take, He is here to give and give and give again. The Bible states that Jesus became poor so we could be rich.

In summary, Herod rejects Jesus. He chooses to embrace his suspicion and fear. Eventually, he loses everything. History reports that all the inhabitants of Jerusalem rejoiced when he died. Now we come to the second group of characters in our story.

The Religious Leaders

How did Judaism react or respond to Jesus? They also have an interesting background. Even though they were the keepers of a 2000 year old religion established by God Himself, they allowed themselves to become steeped in racial pride. In this story, they are depicted as arrogant and apathetic. Their head was full of information. They knew where the Messiah was to be born. (6 miles from Jerusalem) They worship God with their lips, but their heart was far from Him. They had a form of godliness, but they denied God with their life. They were apathetic when it came to the birth of Jesus. They were satisfied to sit on their past accomplishments and laurels. They were spiritually lazy. They had religion without a relationship.

Do you think there are people like this today? Religious, but empty! Their head is full of information about God, but they have no relationship with Him. They rest on their own merits. Many are deceived into thinking that a Christian is someone with a ticket to heaven. I think the Bible is clear. If you are not embracing Jesus, you are lost and without hope in this world. Recently, someone told me. "I would die for Jesus." My question is, would you live for HIM? In this story, the Jews quoted the verse about where the messiah was to be born, but they did not make the 6 mile journey with the wise men. Let's take a look at the third group of characters in this story.

The Wise Men

How did the wise men respond to the birth of Jesus? We do not know much about their background. History speculates that they may have been philosophers, astrologers or possibly even kings. Some believe the wise men travelled with a large number of people because Herod was troubled at their presence. They have interesting characteristics. They are seekers! They do not have the Bible. They do not have a religion. They have no history with God. All they have is a star. They sacrifice to search for Jesus. They travelled on camels. Many believe that they travelled for about a year. They were determined to find Jesus. What happens when they find Him? They bowed before him, worshipped him and gave him gifts.

- They gave Him gold – This is a gift pointing to his kingship. Jesus is our king!

- They gave Him frankincense – This is a gift pointing to his priesthood. Jesus is our High Priest!
- They gave Him myrrh – This is a gift that points to His death. It was used to prepare a body for burial. It points to Jesus as Savior. He died so we can live.

Concluding Remarks

Herod reacted with suspicion and fear and lost everything. The religious respond with apathy and lose God's gift. The wise men seek, give him gifts and find the Savior of the world. We do not have to travel far to find Jesus. He is present. How are we going to respond to Him today? Will we push Him away like Herod because we are afraid He is going to take something from us? Will we become satisfied with a religion void of a relationship. Or, will we be like the wise men who embraced Him? God has granted the gift of His Son. The greatest gift we can give Him is our heart.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Birth of Jesus Christ

(The First Christmas)

Scripture Reading: Luke 2:1-7

Churches across the globe set aside a day to share a familiar message - the story of the birth of Jesus. This celebration has been called Christmas and focuses on the incarnation of Christ. Why is it so important to us? God breaks out of eternity past and walks into our present. He leaves the splendor of His glory and moves into our neighborhood. God changes his address in the person of Jesus. He has come to the earth and now indwells the heart of those who embrace Him. We saw that before Jesus was born into the human race, there was a great gulf between God and the human race. Jesus bridged that gulf. He came to reveal the invisible God. He made God comprehensible. He revealed the impenetrable mystery.

John 1:18 states that Jesus “brought God out into the open.” Jesus charged into the human race to reveal, explain, express, define and interpret God to the world. What does Scripture tell us? If we want to know God in all His fullness, we must embrace Jesus Christ.

In our study today, we journey back in time. We return to the first Christmas recorded in history. I will focus on three points:

1. The Context of His Birth
2. The Circumstances of His Birth
3. The Invitation of His Birth

The Context of His Birth

The first Christmas takes place in the Roman Empire. Caesar Augustus was the emperor. An edict had been established. By law, every individual under the rule of Rome had to be included in a census. (1) The tax was levied when Cyrenius was governor of Syria. (2) Verse 3 informs the reader about how the inhabitants of Roman were affected by this decree. Everyone had to return to his or her hometown to pay taxes and be included in the census. Considering that the decree was established by the emperor, it was law. Anyone who disobeyed would have to suffer the consequence. The people fear Rome and obeyed.

These first 3 verses paint a picture of the context of the first Christmas. Millions travelling to their home town. Every city was packed. Homes were full of relatives who had returned to pay their due. All the “hotels” say “Sorry, No Vacancies.”

This sounds very familiar. During the Christmas holiday, we have relatives coming in from all over? Our homes are full of visitors? The malls are packed. No room to park. There are long lines at the airport. You hear complaints about the traffic. You hear complaints about having to buy gifts for everyone. We worry about the forgetting someone’s gift. On the other

hand, we are happy to see friends and family again. I think we know what Bethlehem was like during the first Christmas day. But, when we come to verse 4, the author shifts the focus. He does not focus on the emperor of Rome. He does not focus on the millions that travel. The author directs us to observe a lowly carpenter and his wife.

The Circumstances of His Birth

We are introduced to the circumstances dealing with the birth of one child. The carpenter, Joseph, is joined by his wife. The journey takes them from Nazareth to Bethlehem. (4) They travel 80 miles on a donkey. Mary is 9 months pregnant. (5) Can you imagine an 80 mile trip on a donkey while 9 months pregnant? Mary is probably not having a good day. It is a miracle she even got to Bethlehem. What happens as soon as they arrive? Mary begins to have contractions. Can you sense the tension and anxiety in the narrative? Joseph went from place to place looking for lodging. He had no relatives that would provide him with hospitality. The hotels of the time are all full and the hospital is closed. I think Joseph might have been concerned. He may have been embarrassed because he could not find a place for Jesus.

What does Joseph know about this baby? He knows Jesus is the savior of the world. He knows Jesus is Immanuel “God with Us.” He knows Jesus is the Son of the Most High. He knows that Jesus will have a throne. He knows he will reign. Talk about pressure! Can you picture it?

Joseph and Mary know their baby deserves a palace, but they do not have much to offer Him. Can you imagine how Joseph and Mary felt on the night when the Savior of the world was born? They were going to have a baby, but there was no room for him. Listen to the passage again,

“And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.”

There was no room for Jesus in Bethlehem! Joseph knocked on many doors looking for a place in which Mary could give birth. The time has not changed much. Many of us attend several Christmas parties during the holiday. There is no mention of Jesus. We see beautiful lights. We see Rudolph, Santa, gifts, pine trees and mistletoe. NOT A WORD ABOUT THE REASON FOR THE SEASON. There is no room for Jesus. Everybody is too busy with the festive activity. We forget the object of our celebration. We forgot whose birthday we are observing. What about us? Do we make room for Jesus? Do we tell our children about Jesus? I want you to note something. Ninety years after this experience at the inn, we see another incredible picture. Listen to the words of the apostle John as he utters the words of Jesus,

“Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him and will sup with him, and he with me.”

Jesus does the very thing Joseph had done in Bethlehem. John tells us that Jesus is now knocking on the door of the human heart to see if there is room for him. This is what Christmas is all about. Jesus wants our heart to be His home! As we go about our celebration. As we drink our eggnog, reminisce with our friends and family, as we open gifts and laugh, is there room for Jesus? Or has Jesus been crowded out of our lives?

The Invitation

Christmas brings blessing and offers a new beginning. Christmas brings us forgiveness and offers to erase our sin, forget our failure and wipe away our past. Christmas offers to fill our lives with meaning. God sets before us His greatest gift – Jesus. Is there room?

Concluding Remarks

When Joseph knocked on the doors of Bethlehem, there was no room. Now, over 2000 years later, Jesus knocks on the door of our heart! Will we offer the Savior of the world a place? Will we receive His gift of salvation? The angel told Mary, Jesus will save the people from their sins. All we have to do is surrender to Him. He does all the rest.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Nicodemus # 1

(You Must be Born Again)

Scripture Reading: John 3:1-9

The Bible paints a beautiful picture of the human race before being contaminated by sin. The first couple was shining with the glory of God. They were assigned the responsibility of executing the divine task of dominion over all God's creation. They enjoyed His presence, lived under His blessing and possessed a great inheritance. But that first couple was deceived. They had a tragic experience. The enemy lied to them. Satan promised them more. He offered them autonomy. He caused them to question God's authority.

“Why should you live under God's rule when you can rule yourself?”

The devil offered equality with God.

“Why be a creature when you can be a creator? You don't need God! You can be the master of your fate and the captain of your own destiny!”

What were the results of the devil's deception? Our ancestors lost their divine inheritance. They lost the capacity to communicate with God. They lost the dominion and authority God had given them to rule on His behalf. They lost the glory of God. They lost the blessing of God and opened the door to the curse of sin. Since the fall, we have been plagued with emptiness. We have been haunted by sorrow and guilt. We have felt abandoned.

This is a portrait of the human condition. We want a new life, but do not know how to acquire it. We want to quench our thirst, but are not able to locate the fountain. I have good news. The new life sought by the world is precisely what God is offering to give us. We have read a story about a man who is searching. Externally, he possesses everything, but internally he is empty. In this study, we will focus on the following three points:

1. A Declaration
2. A Human Need
3. The Divine Solution.

A Declaration

This passage introduces us to Nicodemus. Who was he? We know four things about him. **First**, he may have been wealthy. John reports that Nicodemus brought about 100 pounds of a compound to the tomb of Jesus for His burial. Only a wealthy man could offer 100 pounds of myrrh and aloe. **Secondly**, Nicodemus was a Pharisee. He was educated. As a Pharisee, he made a promise in the presence of three witnesses to observe and practice the traditions of the Jew. **Thirdly**, he was a member of the Sanhedrin – the supreme court of the Jews. As a member of this elite court, Nicodemus had religious rights over every Jew in the world. **Lastly**, it is

believed that he belonged to an affluent and distinguished family in Jerusalem. History informs us that he was known by the Roman government. He was a man who enjoyed political prestige. Let's summarize. Nicodemus had all the ingredients necessary for happiness. He was wealth, educated, possessed religious authority and political prestige. BUT, even though he had all these things, he expressed a profound need.

Do you know anyone like this? They smile, but inwardly they are falling apart. They drown their sorrows with drugs, alcohol, and entertainment. They are silent weepers. Nicodemus was no different. He had a need just like us. The Bible informs us that he declared several things about Christ. Nicodemus stated,

We know you are a teacher.

We know you come from God.

We know God is with you.

We know you work miracles.

Nicodemus had accurate information! But, it was not enough. Something interesting happens. While Nicodemus was beating around the bush, Jesus interrupts him in order to discuss his need.

A Human Need

Jesus does not waste any time. He moves to the heart of the matter. Jesus says to him, "You need to be born again!"

Nicodemus, you have power, prestige and possession, but you are empty. Jesus spoke to him about his need. You want to be a new person! You have tried to change yourself! You have failed. There are many people in our community like Nicodemus. It seems like the entire human race lives under a plague. We attempt to fill our emptiness with many things. I hear people say, If I could only...

Win the lottery, things would be different.

Be Don Francisco, I would be happy.

Have a college degree so my family would accept me.

Have a better job and more prestige; I would then be satisfied.

Have more control.

Have a newer car.

Have a bigger house and the list goes on!

We are looking for satisfaction in all the wrong places.

I love to tell the story. A few (many) years ago, when I was in high school, I was sitting in my art class when the teacher gave us a piece of clay and thirty minutes to create something beautiful. I proudly worked away on my clay, but when I saw the teacher's master-piece, I crushed my work. I was embarrassed. There was no way I could duplicate her work. Sometimes, we do the same thing with God. We work on ourselves and create something undesirable. We say, "I don't need God, I can do this on my own. I can change myself! I'm the captain of my own destiny! What happens? We create a monster instead of a master-piece." Nicodemus, created something good, but he was still empty. I like how the story ends with a solution.

The Divine Solution

Jesus not only revealed a need; he also offered a solution. He told Nicodemus, "You must be born again!" and then moved to provide him with the first of several explanations regarding the meaning of the new birth. Jesus said to him,

- You have received life from your mother, now you must receive LIFE from God.
- You have received human life, now you need Divine Life.
- You have been born of water. Now, you must be born of the Spirit.

What is the message of Jesus? Your successful human life with all its bells and whistles has left us empty. ONLY God's life can bring fullness. Only divine life can satisfy the longing of the heart.

Concluding Remarks

Some of us are seeking. Our heart has been broken. We are disappointed with ourselves. We smile, but inside we are weeping. Jesus is present. He wants to mend our broken heart. He wants to revive our hopes and dreams. He is ready to quench our thirst and fill our emptiness. He is offering divine life. Are we ready to receive?

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Nicodemus # 2

(Explanations of the New Birth)

Scripture Reading: John 3:7- 10

In this study, we return to a dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus. We are familiar with the story. Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night. He is wealthy, educated, possesses religious prestige, and enjoys political power, but there is a problem. Even though he possesses all the ingredients necessary to make him happy, there is something missing. There are many examples in scripture of men and woman looking for happiness in all the wrong places.

- a. The king of Babylon looks to power – He goes crazy.
- b. The Pharaoh looks to his own will – He loses his paradise.
- c. Solomon looks to pleasure and loses his kingdom.
- d. The woman at the well is looking for the right man – She tries five of them and gives up.
- e. The rich fool looks for happiness in financial security. He dies before he can enjoy his wealth.
- f. Herod the king looks for happiness in self-glory and control – He is eaten by worms.
- g. Judas seeks satisfaction in politics – He hangs himself.

Where are we looking for happiness and satisfaction? We return to a story in which Nicodemus looks to Jesus for a solution. Jesus tells him, “I have an answer for the question you have not asked.” You want to see and enter the kingdom of God. You want to experience God’s best and enjoy His fullness. You want to know His blessing. What solution does Jesus offer?

“You must be born again!”

In His **first explanation**, Jesus tells Nicodemus, “You received human life, now it is time to receive divine life.

- You received something temporal. It is time to receive something eternal.
- You received something earthly. It’s time to receive something heavenly.”

Jesus is making the same offer to us. We must open our heart to receive. He wants to take our EMPTINESS and replace it with His FULLNESS. I want you to note something. As we take a closer look at the dialog between Jesus and Nicodemus, you will discover that Jesus explains the new birth repeatedly. His first explanation is found in verses 1-6.

In this study, I would like to focus on a **second** explanation of the new birth. After explaining the idea of the “New Birth,” Nicodemus informed Jesus that he did not understand.

He wanted to know how the “new birth” worked. He analyzed the words of Jesus. Can you see the wonderful patience of the master? He does not give up on him.

He takes the time to explain the new birth a second time. Jesus states, the new birth is like the wind. It blows where it wills. You hear its sound. You don’t know where it comes from and where it is going. This is what the “new birth” is like. Jesus makes a very important point. Can you control the wind? Can you see it? Do you know where it comes from and where it is going? What is the point of the example? Men cannot control the new birth. There is only one thing that men can do! Repent and receive God’s gift! All we can do is say yes to God’s offer of a new life.

As I read this passage, I am reminded of a personal experience. I was preaching in Barquesimeto, Venezuela. A woman did not understand all my talk about the new birth. She was like Nicodemus. She kept saying “I don’t understand.” Finally, I got an idea. There was a pile of trash on her front lawn. I said to her, I want to do two things for you. **FIRST:** I want to haul away your trash – **SURE**, she said. **SECOND:** I want to come back and plant a beautiful garden. She loved the idea. **THIS IS WHAT JESUS IS OFFERING TO DO FOR YOU.** She immediately understood and Holy Spirit made her aware of her need. As we review our story, we discover that Jesus makes another attempt to clarify the message to Nicodemus. How does Nicodemus respond? – Look at verse 9. “How can these things be?” This is the second time Nicodemus tells Jesus that he did not understand.

What did Jesus do? He patiently explained again! If Jesus had to explain the new birth to Nicodemus several times, how many times do you think we are going to have to explain the new birth to our community? We are not as patient as Jesus. What do we say? Oh, I gave him a tract. Oh, he knows where the church is. Oh, I have already told him. Thank God, Jesus models the patience that should flow through us! I have to constantly ask God to give me examples so I can explain. The first mission of the church is to introduce Christ. May God grant us a burden and the patience to share the good news. We need wisdom so we can know how to package our message.

Last Tuesday, I walked into a restaurant at 5:00 a.m. to read. I sat next to a young man who was on his computer. I could tell he was excited about something. He kept saying, **WOW!** After a few minutes, he turned his computer in my direction and began speaking to me. He showed me a 2 minute clip about the depletion of the ozone layer and the green-house effect. He showed me another clip about alien engineering. For one solid hour I was captivated. And then he talked to me about universal consciousness. His conclusion? There is no God! He preached his gospel to me. When he was walking away, I asked him, “If there is a design in the universe, do you think there might be a designer? He looked at me for a moment and said, “I am the designer!” Obviously, the young man was very confused. I was delighted by his zeal. God wills that all men come to the knowledge of truth. God does not desire that any should perish. We must pray that God will give us the wisdom to share the gospel to the next generation. Earthly knowledge will never quench spiritual thirst. This is what Jesus is saying to Nicodemus. “You are a master of Israel, and know not these things?” The answer to your questions will not be found in religion. (10) Nicodemus has to experience salvation. (12) He has to move beyond basic knowledge about the new birth and appropriate it. Jesus tells Nicodemus, I know what I am talking about. I am talking to you about divine things! My message is from heaven, Jesus

says. Nicodemus, will you trust me? Knowledge is important, but it is only the first step. God seeks our surrender to Him. He works the miracle of the new birth in us.

Concluding Remarks

God is offering us a new life. His desire is to pour “divine life” into us. His desire is to make all things new. The message of the new birth is simple, Jesus is willing to haul away our trash – Old Life. Jesus is ready to give us His treasure – Divine Life.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Nicodemus # 3

(Another Explanation of the New Birth)

Scripture Reading: John 3:14-17

We come to the final study related to Nicodemus. Why is the “new birth” so important? Without the new birth we cannot see or enter the kingdom of God. Without the new birth we cannot enjoy and experience God’s best. We cannot know eternal joy or peace.

The new birth:

- Brings to us God’s fullness and removes our emptiness.
- Brings divine life and removes our eternal death.
- Makes all things new while the old passes away.
- Brings the blessing of God and removes the curse of sin.

Do you know anyone that needs a fresh start? Do you know anyone that feels empty, is dissatisfied, and cannot find his or her way in life? Do you know anyone who wants to exchange their sorrow for God’s joy, to exchange their past for God’s future or trade in their trash for God’s treasure? This is what comes with the new birth.

In this study, we continue to review a dialog between Jesus and Nicodemus. Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night. He wants to enjoy and experience God’s best. Jesus moves to the heart of the matter and gives him several explanations regarding how to receive a new life. (vs. 5, 8, 12-13, 14) We come to the last explanation Jesus gives Nicodemus. The last explanation focuses on three points:

1. A Problem
2. A Solution
3. An offer

A Problem

In this explanation, Jesus takes Nicodemus on a journey to the Old Testament. Jesus reviews the history of God’s people. Nicodemus is reminded of a time in which Israel was in the wilderness? (Number 21) Israel was on a journey to greatness. They travelled to gain possession of God’s promise. While they traveled, King Arad the Canaanite attacked Israel and took some prisoners. Israel sought the face of God. They made a vow to Him. The Bible informs us that God fought for His people and rescued them from the enemy. Those rescued were beside themselves because God had rescued them and granted them a victory. But then they ran into problems! Israel soon forgot all about God’s miracles. They begin to complain

about God and His ways. They doubted God's sustaining power and His ability to provide. The people offended God and incurred His wrath.

Jesus gave Nicodemus a history lesson! "What happened to them Nicodemus?" They offended God. God judged them by sending out serpents to kill them. (Snakes started to bite the complainers) God fought against them because of their sin and unbelief. God became their enemy for a time. The context of this passage is still the new birth. What does Jesus communicate to Nicodemus? Nicodemus, you are no different than those people. Because of their sin and rebellion, God became their enemy. Because of their failure, God became angry. Nicodemus, all have sinned and come short of God's glory. Nicodemus, this is why you feel empty and are not satisfied with your successful life. You feel like something is missing. You are not right with God. Jesus discussed the source of Nicodemus' problem. Jesus explained the reason for his emptiness. He does not end the story of Israel with a problem. He then moved on to discuss how God's people are rescued.

A Solution

The people repented and put away their sin. The Bible reports that Moses made a bronze serpent and put it on a pole. Anyone who gazed upon the bronze serpent was saved from the poison of the snakes and the wrath of God. Everyone that looked to the brass serpent was restored to health and to a right relationship with God.

I have a question for you. Do you think they deserved to be rescued from death? No! They deserved to be judged because of the way they treated God and His servant Moses. They deserved to be punished. But, God, moved by love forgave their sin and failure. He looked beyond their weakness and rescued them from certain death.

NOW, with this story in mind, Jesus said, THIS is how God loves the world. They deserved death, but instead God gave His only begotten Son. Nicodemus, if you believe (look to Me), you will not perish. In the Old Testament, they were rescued, but they did not receive eternal life.

Today, Life that is Eternal in nature is available to us. What is Jesus saying to Nicodemus? You have sinned against God. Your life is in danger of eternal death because the snake (Satan) bit you. You are an enemy of God because of your sin. You deserve judgment. But, God loves you! He is about to give His only begotten Son! If you look to Him, you will not perish from the snake bite of sin, but will have everlasting life. This is a wonderful story. The is the master saying to us? The new birth is all about the forgiveness of our sin. The new birth is all about rescuing us from eternal death and the poison of sin. The new birth is all about restoring our relationship with God. Though we deserve judgment, God has given us the gift of His Son. God has chosen to restore, renew and revive us.

An Offer

Nicodemus, do you understand? You are no different than those people in the wilderness. You have sinned against God. You feel empty because the poison of the serpent is running through your veins. From the time of Adam and Eve, every human being has been under the curse of the poison. Nicodemus, you need to be rescued from the effects of that

poison. Israel looked to a symbolic serpent. **NOW**, you must look to the **ME** to be rescued from the curse of sin. We find here an invitation. Jesus is saying,

- ONLY I can rescue you from God's wrath.
- ONLY I can restore you to right relationship with Him.
- ONLY I can give you a new life.
- All you have to do is fix your eyes on **ME** and receive forgiveness!
- Do this and I will give you a **LIFE** that is eternal in nature.

God's intention has never been to condemn the world. His heart is to rescue us and put us back on a path to greatness. His heart is to bless us beyond belief and give us a new life, a new birth.

Concluding Remarks

We have discussed three points - A Problem, the poison of sin and the wrath of God, a Solution – brass serpent on a pole and the gift of Christ and an offer to **BELIEVE AND RECEIVE**. Maybe you are in need of new start. Jesus is present and offers to renew, revive, and restore you. All you have to do is surrender and allow Him to work in you.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Samaritan Woman

(He will Quench Your Thirst)

Scripture Reading: John 4:13-14

As we follow Jesus through the four accounts of the gospel, it is interesting to see how he seizes every opportunity to bless people. We see Him in various contexts. We see Him at a wedding, in the temple, in the synagogue, in a home, by the sea, in the desert, on the street and many other places. What does this say to us? Jesus is willing to meet us ANYWHERE.

We also see Jesus communicate the message to every class of person. He speaks to saints and sinners alike. He addresses the religious, sits with the politician and interacts with the tax collectors. He blesses children, and interacts with the sick, lame, and the blind. He even speaks to the dead (Lazarus, Tabitha and the son of the widow of Nain) What does this say to us? Jesus has a message for ALL.

In this study, we have read a passage that deals with a dialog between Jesus and a woman. I would like to focus on three points:

1. A Problem,
2. A Solution
3. An Offer.

The Problem

As we read verse 7, we are made aware of a problem. Scripture reveals several things about a woman. She comes to the well at noon. Usually woman draw water in the evening when the day is cooler. Several commentators suggest that the woman lives in Sychar and has to walk ½ a mile to Jacob's well. She is probably ostracized by her own people due to her questionable lifestyle. She is probably the talk of the small village. So in order to escape the painful rejection and ridicule of others, she walks ½ a mile in the hottest part of the day. She wants to avoid human contact. The Bible informs us that it is at Jacob's well that this woman encounters Jesus. He is a stranger to her. As she draws water, the stranger makes a request for a drink of water. Immediately, the Samaritan woman recognized his Jewish accent.

Note that Jesus allows her to vent her issues. Jesus listens to her. He does not argue with her. Jesus patiently waits while she pours out her pain. The woman has a lot to say. She speaks to Jesus about racial problems. She has been hurt by the prejudice of the Jews. Her accusations flow. She tells Jesus, "Your race has insulted me and my people; they call us "dogs." Your people call us half-breed and consider us unworthy. What does Jesus do? He allows her to share her resentment? The woman's pain is 700 years deep. She unravels a 700 year old feud. You did something to my parents. Her past experiences had caused her to become bitter. Bitterness

caused her to become sarcastic. The woman asked Jesus, “Are you going to contaminate yourself by drinking from my cup?”

Do you know anyone like this? They are people hurt by the past. They have been molded and defined by a painful experience. They feel trapped. They have lost hope. They have become bitter. Their failure has caused them to close the door to God.

Jesus is not here to judge us. He is not here to magnify our failure. He is not present to highlight our sin. The same Jesus that reached out to the Samaritan woman 2000 years ago is reaching out to us today. He is not here to hurt, but to heal. He is not here to curse, but to bless. This is what Jesus does for the Samaritan woman. He looks beyond her issues. (problems) He looks beyond her anger. He looks beyond her bitterness and sarcasm. Jesus does not give up on her. He offers to work a miracle on her behalf.

The Solution

Sometimes Jesus has to dig through a lot of hurt in us before HE can get to the heart of the matter. He has to dig through our pain, our disappointments, our failure, and our past. Jesus does not focus on the woman’s sin, He moves on. Listen to the words of Jesus!

“Jesus said to the woman, “If you knew the gift of God, and who is saying to you, Give me to drink; you would have asked of him, and he would have given thee living water.” (10)

How is Jesus helping this woman? First, He allows her to confess her pain, hurt and bitterness. How many of you know that God is a wonderful listener? After she empties herself, Jesus then reveals His plan. Don’t set up camp around your failure. If you would just move beyond your differences, there is a gift waiting for you on the other side. If you set aside your bitterness, God will pleasantly surprise you. There is eternal blessing waiting for you on the other side of your sin. Jesus said, If only you understood, you would be asking me to give you living water.

An Offer

In the dialogue between Jesus and this woman, an offer is made. God has opened His treasure house to the human race. He is offering His best. There is ONLY ONE obstacle between us and that treasure – SELF. We want God’s blessing and riches, but we are unwilling to set aside our “secret sin.” There is only thing between us and the gift of God. Jesus said to the woman: “On the other side of your bitterness, anger and hate there is a gift with your name on it. Take note of the offer Jesus makes to this woman. Jesus explains to the woman that there are two wells. There is the earthly well called the “well of Jacob,” and there is a heavenly well.

Well #1: Jacob’s well:

If you drink from it, you quench your thirst for a little while, but then you have to return. (A vicious cycle)

Well #2: What Jesus Offers:

If you drink from it, you quench your thirst eternally.

Well #1

Well #2

Meets earthly needs

Meets eternal needs.

Is in the earth

Fountain flows from within

What is Jesus offering the woman? She has a thirst that nothing can quench. She has an emptiness nothing can fill. Jesus looks beyond her physical need for water and focuses on her spiritual need for God's kind of LIFE. Jesus offers her a divine life that will quench her spiritual thirst forever. The woman fails to understand so Jesus provides an object lesson. Jesus tells her, "OK, let's start over. Go get your husband! The woman probably got a little nervous. She did not want to discuss her personal affairs with a stranger. Jesus tells her, I know all about your lifestyle."

How many of you know that Jesus is aware of our lifestyle. He knows all about our secret sin Jesus tells her, You have had five husbands and are shacking up with the man you have now. This is what I am talking about! You had a need for love, companionship and friendship. You got one husband, but you still felt empty. You got a second husband, 3rd, 4th, 5th and you are now drinking your 6th relationship and you are still thirsty." What is the POINT:

- Earthly things cannot quench your spiritual thirst.
- ONLY JESUS CAN MEET YOUR NEED.
- ONLY JESUS CAN QUENCH YOUR THIRST."

People do crazy things when they feel empty. Some make money an idol and worship at its altar, but in the end they are empty. Some pursue formal education, but in the end realize they are still thirsty. Human beings have an emptiness that can only be filled by Divine Life. People are thirsty and they try to quench it with sin. This is what this woman does. Quenching spiritual thirst with sin is like drinking sand to quench physical thirst.

Concluding Remarks

How do we quench our thirst? We have seen a woman with a need. Jesus says to her, "I want to meet your need. I want to quench your thirst. I want to fill your emptiness." How many things have you tried? Today, if we surrender to the Savior, we will discover that He will not judge us. He will not magnify our sin, weakness or failure. He will satisfy us completely and eternally.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Samaritan Woman

(Confess – Receive - Give)

Scripture Reading: John 4:28-29; 39-42

We have been reviewing how Jesus shared good news in various contexts and to different people groups. In this study, we will see how the master communicates the gospel in different ways. His message does not change, but the methods used vary depending upon the individual and context of the situation. When speaking to the Samaritan woman, Jesus spoke about “living water” and “thirst.” In this study, I will focus on three things done by the woman as a result of her encounter with Jesus.

1. Her Confession
2. A Position to Receive
3. Her Desire to Give

Her Confession

The first thing we see in this story is the fact that the woman acknowledges and confesses to Jesus her anger, bitterness, thirst, emptiness, frustration, and sin. This is an important point! The prerequisite to receiving “FROM GOD” is a realization of our need. My father often shared his testimony and tell about the times he would wake up in the morning after terrorizing his family. He felt ashamed of his drunkenness and violent behavior. He would record dates on the wall indicating that he was going to change. He would say, “I am going to be a different man!” Unfortunately, things remained the same. One morning, after a chaotic night, he awoke and asked me about the events of the previous night. He stared at the wall and saw a list of the dates he had recorded and said with tears, “Son, I cannot change myself.” It was not long after that confession of his total inability to change that his life turned around. God sent my older brother to reap the seed he had been sowing in my father’s life for years. He embraced Jesus Christ as Savior and began his journey and walk with God. He had to confess and embrace his inability, before he could experience the transforming power of God. This is what happens to the woman at the well. She confessed and Jesus transformed her life.

Are we able to confess? Can we speak to God openly? Are we able to tell Him about our sin, our failure, our weakness? Are we able to confess our inability to change. Sometimes we choose to remain in a state of denial about our condition. There are many organizations that help people with problems related to alcohol, drugs and gambling. Many of them will not offer help until the person admits that he or she has a problem. God is waiting for our confession. The Samaritan woman confessed and was able to experience the life-changing power of God. Confession moves God’s heart to act on our behalf. When we confess, God works the miracle we need.

In a Position to Receive

What happened after the woman confessed? She positioned herself to receive. She trusted Jesus. She received the gift of God. She first acknowledged that her way was not working, then she surrendered to God's way. The woman was able to receive from God. She not only became aware of her condition, confessed her need, but also appropriated the blessing.

Her Desire to Give

After receiving God's gift, the woman was infused with a desire to share the good news with others. She left her water pot. (28) She went into the city and told them about her experience with Jesus. She said, "Come see a man. He revealed the secrets of my heart. He must be the Messiah." The woman was on fire. What moved this woman to action? She had a personal encounter with Jesus. She heard His voice. Her thirst was quenched. It is interesting to see that Jesus did not have to say to the woman, "OK, now that you have received the gift, go share it with other. It's your responsibility to reach out to the community. Do you think there might be others in Sychar who "are empty?" NO!!! The woman dropped her water pot and ran! She couldn't wait to share her new found joy. She was excited about her experience.

What about us? Are we excited about sharing the wealth? Is the fire of God's Spirit burning in us? Paul tells Timothy,

"Fan to flame the fire."

We have to do the same! How can I be on fire for God? The answer is in verse 42. Listen to their testimony. The Samaritans said to the woman, "We use to believe because of what you told us about Jesus. **Now**, they said, we believe because of what we have experience for ourselves. **They had firsthand experience.** They had a personal encounter with Jesus. Do we have firsthand experience? The process began with a realization of a need that led to a confession of sin. The confession prepared the woman to receive God's gift. The woman's passion to share good news followed her confession. Can we say like the woman, I met a man who revealed the secrets of my heart? Some of us believe because of what others have told us. But have you met Jesus for yourself? There is a beautiful song that makes this point.

"Have you seen Him, heard Him, known Him?

Is not thine a captured heart."

Before, we can become givers, our heart must firstly be captured by a vision of Jesus.

Concluding Remarks

We have read about a woman who had an encounter with Jesus. She confessed her sin, received God's gift and was moved to action. How are things working out for us? Some of us have been headed in the wrong direction for a long time. Some of us are discouraged and have given up hope. Some of us carry burdens that are heavy. We are tired. Confess it? God is ready to meet you.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The Nobleman from Capernaum

(The Human Need that Points to the Eternal)

Scripture Reading: John 4:46-54

We continue to follow Jesus through the four accounts of the gospel. His message was for all. He was willing to speak to the religious leaders of Israel as well an immoral woman searching for happiness in all the wrong places. **Jesus is a friend of sinners!**

He is not afraid to “reach out.” He is not concerned about being contaminated by others. He is not inconvenienced by the weakness and failure. He is drawn to the need of the human race. How many of us believe that Jesus is present? He has not come to observe; He is here to minister. He has already heard our prayer! He knows all about our need! He understands all the details of our situation. He is not going to abandon us. He is here in response to our prayers. Do we believe this? As I review the verses we have read, I am reminded again of David’s psalm. It is familiar to many of us.

“Bless the LORD, O my soul: and all that is within me, bless his holy name. Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits. (Psalm 103:1-2)

David then proceeds to outline the benefits that follow:

- a. He forgives
- b. He heals
- c. He redeems
- d. He crowns
- e. He satisfies
- f. He renews
- g. He protects
- h. He reveals His ways
- i. He is merciful
- j. He is gracious

Many of us love this passage! We enjoy verses like this because they inform us about the benefits which we have received as a result of our relationship with God. But, how many of us know that sometimes we become so caught up with the blessings of God that we forget to respond to the God of the blessing. We become so excited about the benefits of God that we forget the God of the benefit. In this study, we read about a nobleman. He approaches Jesus to

get healing, but gets the healer. He approaches Jesus to get a gift and gets the giver. The Nobleman discovers that God wants to give him far more than he expectrf.

I would like to do three things:

1. Review the story
2. Interpret some of its components
3. Make some applications

A Review

The action in this story takes place in two cities. The first city is Cana of Galilee. The main character in Cana is Jesus. The second city is Capernaum. The main character in Capernaum is a nobleman. The Bible informs us that Jesus is approached by a nobleman who is a royal officer in Herod's court. He is the proud owner of the three P's – power, prestige and possessions. He lives in a palace. He has many servants. Again, like Nicodemus, this man seems to possess all the ingredients necessary for happiness, but has a great need. His son is sick to the point of death. He has called in the best doctors, but they have failed. He is at wits end. He feels helpless. He is powerless to meet his own need. It is at this point in his life that he begins to look up. Before this experience, he may have been too busy for God. He may have been preoccupied with his power, prestige and possessions. All this changes when his son becomes ill. The Bible paints a dark picture of this man's hopeless and helpless situation.

Someone in his household tells him about Jesus. For the first time in his life, this politician takes a spiritual journey. If we consider that God is sovereign, there are several things that stand out in this story. God is trying to get this man's attention. God wants to give this man more. God used human need to draw him in and gave him something divine. How many of us know that many of our problems are a blessing in disguise.

Too often, we become satisfied with the earthly, the temporal and the human. We forget that GOD wants to give us something heavenly, eternal and divine. What did God have to do in order to get this man's attention? He had to touch someone he loved very much. God wants to move our gaze from the temporal to the eternal. I wonder how many things come into our lives because God is trying to get our attention. I wonder what God is going to have to do before we start seeking His face.

The nobleman began his 25 mile journey to Cana. He found Jesus. This is an interesting turn of events - a rich ruler looking for a humble carpenter. The Bible tells us that when he found Jesus, he repeatedly begged Him. The nobleman informed Jesus regarding his son. What does the politician want Jesus to do? He wants Jesus to travel 25 miles to Capernaum. He wants Jesus to heal his son by laying hands on him. How does Jesus respond? Jesus corrects the nobleman. You come seeking for a sign. (earthly, temporal, human) I have so much more to give. You come looking for healing, but what you need is the healer. What a difference. The nobleman wants Jesus to work a miracle. He wants Jesus to travel. He wants to see a sign. But, Jesus gives him a WORD.

The Bible states that the nobleman took Jesus at his word and left! The nobleman needs a little miracle. Jesus gave Him the GREATEST MIRACLE A MAN CAN RECEIVE! This is the reason why Jesus said, "You seek for a sign and wonder." How many of you take an Aspirin every day? Aspirins are good when you need them. God is like an aspirin to many people. He is good when you are in a fix. The nobleman had a temporal need. Jesus made him aware of his eternal need. It seems like Jesus is saying, "All your earthly needs point to something eternal." When a human need arises, seek to discover the eternal need God wants to meet!

Concluding Remarks

We see a nobleman approach Jesus. Jesus meets two needs - a temporal need for healing and an eternal need for salvation. What is God doing today? He wants to get our attention. He wants to move us beyond the earthly, temporal and human. He has blessed us with the temporal, but now he wants to bless us with the eternal. He has granted us human blessing, now he wants to give us something divine. He has given us earthly benefit; now He wants to dispense His heavenly wealth. Paul told the Christians,

"God wants to give you much more, but you are unable to bear it."

God wants to move us to higher ground! He wants to bring us into a deeper relationship with Himself. Do not settle for a little magic when He wants to give you the unsearchable riches of Christ. Listen to the words of this wonderful song:

Once it was the blessing, now it is the Lord.

Once it was the feeling, now it is His Word.

Once the gift I sought for, now the giver own

Once it was the healing, now Himself alone.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Jesus in the Synagogue of Nazareth

(His First Sermon)

Scripture Reading: Luke 4:18-22

As we move through the four accounts of the gospel, we see an all-inclusive Christ who does not focus on sin, but the sinner. He is not distracted by weakness, but remains faithful to offer hope to those in need. He is patient and willing to reach out. Jesus has not changed. His hand is still extended! He continues to offer hope! He has not come here to condemn us. He is not present to magnify our weakness. He is here to restore, renew and rescue us from our condition. What a wonderful savior! He knows the secrets of our heart. He understands the motives that drive us. Yet, He is willing to draw us near.

In this study, we come to the second year of the ministry of Jesus Christ. We focus on the first sermon Jesus ever preached.

Now, by human standards, he did not have much success. Imagine with me. You are invited to give a speech. You're on fire. The audience is amazed at your ability. Their mouths are wide open. THEN, when you come to your closing remarks, the crowd drags you out of the meeting place and tries to kill you. This is what happened to Jesus. I would like to focus on three points related to the first sermon Jesus preached in Nazareth.

1. It's Context
2. It's Message
3. It's Offer

The Context of the Story

The Bible reveals several things about the context of the passage. Jesus is visiting the place in which he was raised. (16) This is the place where he played as a child and worked as a young man. As a carpenter's son, he probably worked with many of the inhabitants of Nazareth. He may have built some of their homes. This is the city where Jesus and Joseph visited the synagogue on the Sabbath. These are the people with whom Jesus travelled to Jerusalem. Jesus is no stranger to Nazareth. Today is an important day for Him. Jesus will preach his first sermon in the synagogue of Nazareth where he is a member. Everyone is familiar with he and his family. We are told that by this time Jesus was famous and was praised by all. Luke indicates that Jesus arrived in the power of the Spirit. (14) He walked into the synagogue and was probably greeted by many. The service began and after the law and the psalms were read, Jesus was then asked to read some verses and share His thoughts. I believe the audience was happy to see Him, but his sermon change everything. Let's take a closer look.

The Message

Jesus stood to read the book of Isaiah. He read two verses in Isaiah 61:1-2. Luke gives us a picture of the facial expression of the crowd.

“Their eyes were fixed on Him.”

Jesus begins his sermon by informing the crowd that He is going to share good news. His sermon addressed five problems:

1. Broken hearts
2. Slavery
3. Blindness
4. Oppression
5. Debt

We do not have a word for word rendering of His message, but we are provided with the main points. I want you to imagine Jesus preaching!

POINT ONE: “Today, I have come here because some of you have broken hearts – I am here to mend them. You are disappointed or frustrated with where your life has taken you. You have been rejected by someone you love. You feel like nobody cares. You do not understand why God has allowed you to suffer? Your world is falling apart. I am here to put the pieces together. I am here to heal you on the inside. I want to restore your heart. Are you ready?”

POINT TWO: “Today, I am present because some of you are slaves – I am here to set you free. Your life has become a vicious cycle. Your slavery keeps you from enjoying an abundant life. You may say, ‘BUT, I DON’T HAVE ANY CHAINS!’ What about the chains of anger, bitterness, and resentment? What about the chains of sin? “I am here to break your chains. “I am here to set you free from those things that enslave you. Are you ready?”

POINT THREE: “Today, I am here because some of you are blind. I am here to restore your sight! You may not be physically blind, but you are plagued by spiritually blindness. You are blind to the things of God. You are blind to the purpose of God. You are blind to the reason for your existence. You are blind to your need for God. You are blind to your lack of love and zeal for Him. You are blind to your sin. “I am here to open your eyes! Are you ready?”

POINT FOUR: “Today, I am present because some of you are oppressed. I am here to deliver you! I am not talking about the Roman government. Some of you are being oppressed by the devil. You view others as your enemy. You face internal and external pressures. You feel like you are suffocating. You feel paralyzed. You don’t understand the source of your depression and emptiness. “I am here to undo the oppressive work of the enemy.” “I am here to rescue you from your condition. Are you ready?”

POINT FIVE: “I am here today, because some of you are drowning in debt. I am here to cancel your debt. You live under the weight of guilt and sin. You are not living right and you know it. The world is falling in on you because of your rebellion against God. The problem is your sin debt. You can be debt-free! I am ready to take your sin, mistakes and failure and cast

them into the depth of the sea.” I am ready to forget all about your past. “I am ready to start over.” Are you ready?”

What does Jesus want to do for His audience? HE WANTS TO BLESS THEM. He offers to mend broken hearts, free them from slavery, heal them from blindness, deliver them from oppression, and cancel their debt.

If the sermon is so positive, why do the listeners want to kill Him? They ask, “Is not this the son of Joseph?” This is an important text. They rejected Jesus even before he spoke. Jesus understood this. Why did they become upset? They became angry because Jesus told them that God is about to pass them up.

Jesus made reference to two Old Testament characters. He mentioned the widow of Sarepta and the leper of Syria. Both examples show how God passed up the chosen people in order to minister to those they thought were outside the boundaries of God’s grace. What is the message to the Jews? God is going to pass you over. God is going to give your blessing to those you consider unworthy. (24-28) “You are too comfortable. You honor me with your lips, but your heart is far from me.” The Jews could not handle the idea that God was going to set them aside. The Bible states that they became angry and made an attempt to kill Him. JESUS MADE THEM AN OFFER, BUT THEY REFUSED IT. What does all this mean to us? When Jesus makes us an offer, set aside your pride. Repent! Surrender! It may be the last offer you get.

Concluding Remarks

Jesus continues to preach the same sermon today. He wants to mend our broken heart. He wants to break the chains that bind us. He wants to open our eyes. He wants to rescue us from oppression and cancel all our debt. WARNING: If you refuse, he may move on to someone else.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The Impotent Man by the Pool at Bethesda

(Jesus Heals One Man)

Scripture Reading: John 5:1-9, 14

Jesus was often involved in what others might consider questionable activity. We find him in Cana making wine for a wedding, in Samaria interacting with an immoral woman, in Capernaum speaking to a demon possessed man, in Galilee touching an infected leper and in Peter's home forgiving sins. People either loved or hated Him. As we move through the four accounts of the gospel, those who hated him accused of being a drunk, a glutton, demon possessed, blasphemous, a law breaker and even being insane. Note that His accusers never healed the sick, cleansed a leper, or raised the dead. The religious never gave sight to the blind or made the deaf to hear. Instead, we see them continuously criticizing Jesus. They had no power to restore. It is noteworthy to see that Jesus was not concerned about what others were going to say. He was a man of action. He did not avoid sorrow and pain. He actually loved people. In the passage we have read, we see yet another example of the love and mercy of Christ. In this study, I will focus on three points:

1. The Human Condition
2. The Divine Solution
3. The Invitation of Jesus

The Human Condition

The Bible informs us that Jesus visited a place in Jerusalem called the pool of Bethesda. As he approached that place, he encountered a great multitude congregated around the pool. Who were these people? The text describes them as a crowd of impotent folk. The word impotent means "lacking in power." It is a crowd of powerless people. They were the rejects of society. They were the ones who were never invited to the party. They were not on the wedding or birthday list. They are the disposable and unwanted lot of the human horde.

To the religious leaders of the time, they represent those cursed and abandoned by God. The Bible uses the following words to describe those at the pool: sick, impotent, blind, halt, and paralyzed. Misery was their common lot. They suffer together. They hoped together. The passage reveals that they are all waiting for something to happen. I believe this story paints a picture of the human condition. Nothing has changed. Our community is full of impotence. People waiting for a miracle, waiting to be changed, tired of their old life, tired of emptiness, tired of guilt and shame. They are people who feel powerless to realize their own transformation. Their hope is dead. They cannot even imagine being normal. The story does not end here. The sad story takes a turn for the better. THE IMPOTENT man had an encounter with THE OMNIPOTENT CHRIST.

Divine Solution

The Bible informs us that Jesus focused on one man. He saw him. He knew His condition. He took action. What do we know about this man? He is sick because of his sin. He is in this condition because of his life-style. Sin had made him impotent. He lost the power to live and act. He lived in this condition for 38 years.

What does Jesus do? Does he highlight his sin? Does he condemn him? Does he read off a list of all his failures? What a wonderful friend of sinners. He focused on the man's restoration. He focused on renewal. He gives him the power to rise and walk. What happens? **THE OMNIPOTENT CHRIST EMPOWERED AN IMPOTENT MAN.** Listen to the words of Jesus.

“Do you want to be healed?”

The Man does not answer the question. Instead, He tells his sad story. “I have been trying for 38 years. I want to, but I can't. When the angel stirs the water, there is nobody to throw me in. The miracle is there, but I can't take advantage of it. I can't make it mine!” How many of you know that Jesus is present today. Why has he come to our pool? The omnipotent Christ is ready to heal our impotent. The man in the Bible tried changing things for 38 years. What does the man do? He finally realizes he has no power to change. He realizes he cannot do it alone. He realized he needs help. What about us? How long have we been trying to change ourselves? I have good news? Jesus is visiting our pool of Bethesda today. We do not have to wait 38 years for our miracle. He has come to heal. He is here to empower. He is present to renew. He is ready to restore. Are we ready to receive?

Note that Jesus gave the man His miracle. Jesus asked him a question. “Do you want to be restored?” This is the question He is asking us today. We do not have to explain our situation to Jesus. He knows all the details. His heart is to re-make, and renew. He is not present to magnify our sin or failure. Note how Jesus warns this man.

“Sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto thee.”

Jesus warns the man to protect his miracle. Jesus is saying, “When you receive your miracle, do not let sin steal it. When I restore you, do not give away your blessing.

Sin is a thief! Sin will keep you from becoming all God intends? Jesus is warning us! Do not make the mistake of investing your life in sin. You may lose the blessing of God. Jesus tells the man three things:

Get up!

Go home to your family!

Let's start over!

The Offer

What offer does Jesus make? He invites us to receive. If we are powerless, he wants to infuse us with strength! If we need a miracle, he is ready to work it. If we need to be changed,

he is present to transform. Do you need a new life? He is here to give it. Have you lost your blessing because of sin? He wants to restore it.

Concluding Remarks

Again, you do not have to wait 38 years to receive your miracle. Jesus is directing the same question to you that he asked the impotent man over 2000 years ago. “Do you want to be restored?” Stop trying to work the miracle in your own strength. He is present to act.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The Last Days of Christ

(Expectation - Confusion - Compassion)

Scripture Reading: 1 Cor. 15:1-4

We have read a portion of scripture in which the apostle Paul summarizes the good news: Jesus died, Jesus was buried and Jesus rose again. These three events sum up the work that Jesus Christ accomplished while he was on earth. Now, you might ask, “What do these three events have to do with us?” These three events are responsible for the benefits we enjoy today. Before Jesus accomplished his work, only one man a year could stand in the presence of God. The High Priest would enter into the holy of holies and intercede for God’s people. Today, because of the finished work of Christ, we can walk before God’s throne a thousand times a day without fear of rejection or death. It is the death, burial and resurrection which have made this possible.

What other benefits did Christ secure for us as a result of His work? If we are Christians, Jesus has taken our sin and granted us his forgiveness. He has exchanged our failure for his success. He has replaced our past with his future. He has removed our sorrow and has brought us his joy. He has taken our old heart and has given you a new one. He has taken our eternal death and has given us his eternal life. He has taken that curse that was hanging over our head and has given us his blessing. The list goes on. There are many other examples of what Christ accomplished for us. In this study, we will focus on three words that summarize the last few days of the Savior’s life. Those words are as follows:

1. Expectation
2. Confusion
3. Compassion

Expectation

The disciples had great expectation in regard to Christ. They had been taught that God would send the promised one and restore order to the world. Their understanding was that when Messiah came, he would make Israel great again. Well, the promised one arrived and selected his disciples. The disciples were amazed at the way he spoke and worked. At first, they had their doubts about Jesus, but as they followed him, their understanding would be altered. They watched Jesus for 3 ½ years. Listen to their testimony:

“We saw Him!” We were there!”

Jesus demonstrated His power before them. In Cana, he turned water into wine. In Samaria, he revealed secrets. In Capernaum, he commanded demons. He cleanse lepers. He made the lame to walk and the blind see. The deaf heard. He calmed the storm and silenced the wind. He walked on water, feed thousands and even raised the dead. Can you see why the disciples were full of expectation? The disciples were excited about Jesus. They had no “doubt”

that He was the promised one. They had no “doubt” that He was going to be a king. They were ready for the new world that was about to be ushered in by Jesus. What would you have thought if you were one of the disciples? I would have felt pretty important. I would have been a proud follower of the man who had power over nature, the devil and death. BUT something bothered the disciples! Jesus was always talking about His death. This perplexed them. Men of great hope, were cast into great confusion.

Confusion

Why were they confused? They were unwilling to believe that their hero had to die to accomplish His great work. They could not understand WHY it was necessary for Jesus to die. In the last week of His time on earth, Jesus made several attempts to explain why He had to die.

The first time was in Bethany. They were visiting Lazarus, who had been raised from the dead. (12:1) They all sat around the table. They were excited about the future. They were honored to have supper with a man who had been raised from the dead. They were in awe because Jesus had overcome death in Lazarus. While they ate supper with their “hero,” something strange happened. A woman took a pound of ointment and began to anoint the feet of Jesus. The woman then took her hair and began to wipe his feet. (3) The disciples were stunned. They asked, “Mary, what are you doing?” What bothered the disciples? Jesus explained to the disciples that Mary was preparing Him for the day of His burial. The disciples left the table confused again. They could not believe their hero was talking about “burial. They could not conceive of a dead king. They needed Him.

Another occasion in which Jesus deals with His death is while He was in Jerusalem. As Jesus walked into Jerusalem, a multitude of people began to make a path for Jesus using palm branches. The multitude began to shout

“Hosanna: Blessed is the King of Israel that cometh in the name of the Lord. The disciples probably said, now, we’re talking. Our Jesus is a king.”

The disciples probably thought, “This is the way he is supposed to be treated.” The disciples were excited because, not only were the Jews worshipping him, now the Greeks wanted to see him as well. The disciples probably thought that something big was about to happen. When they all looked to Jesus, He said,

“The hour is come, that the Son of man should be glorified.”

There was probably a big smile on their face. The hour is come. They had waited a long time to hear those words. They knew their hero was going to become a “king” and that He would be glorified. Their excitement soon vanished. Jesus continued,

“Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit.” I will be lifted up from the earth, and will draw all men unto me.”

Jesus spoke about His crucifixion. AGAIN, the disciples were confused. “Wait a minute Jesus, You can’t die. We have plans for you. What about our kingdom?” The disciples refused to believe that Jesus had to die. They seemed to be in denial.

Now we come to the last time in which Jesus deals with His death. They are eating supper and Jesus speaks about His body being broken and his blood being shed. On the one hand, the disciples had great expectations, yet on the other, they were confused. This is the condition in which we find the disciples during those days leading up to the death of Jesus. What does Jesus do? He does not leave them in their sorrow. The last thing we see is the Great Compassion of Christ.

His Compassion

Jesus says to them,

"Let not your heart be troubled. Believe in God. Believe also in me."

What is Jesus saying to them? I know you are confused and are not able to put the pieces together. Trust me! Have you ever felt like the disciples? God allows something to come into your life and suddenly you are cast into a state of confusion. This is what the disciples were experiencing before Jesus died. They knew something great was about to happen, but things seemed to get worse instead of better. What do you do when things don't make sense? Do you complain? Do you give up? Jesus invites men to trust Him. Jesus comforts His disciples by letting them know that in the darkest moments of their lives, He is present. Jesus said to them, "I will never leave you nor forsake you. What I am doing may not make sense to you. You may be confused because you cannot make any connections. I want you to trust me! Cling to Me! Adhere to Me! Rest in Me! If you do this, you will enjoy all the benefits of my work.

Concluding Remarks

We have focused on three words: expectation, confusion and compassion. What is God saying to us? We are never alone! Life does not always make sense! "I know you have dreams, goals, and aspirations. I know you are sometimes cast into confusion. I want you to trust ME" Jesus is saying, "I am in control of all the details of life." I want to make the desires of your heart a reality."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Resurrection

(The Victory of Jesus)

Scripture Reading: 1 Corinthians 15:3-4

Every year, Christians across the globe meet to celebrate one of the greatest events in human history – The Resurrection of Christ. This is the day in which a new creation was brought into existence and death was conquered. It is a day in which every human being was given the right, power and privilege to become a son and daughter of God.

From time to time, I enjoy reviewing the life of great men who have conquered nations and accomplished great feats. It is a long list. The list includes men who the world considers heroes. The pharaohs of Egypt make the list. It includes Assyrian, Babylonian and Persian kings. The Roman emperors are highlighted. Hundreds are listed. They are great men, wielding great power. Some of them are wealthy beyond belief. Multitudes both admire and even worship them. Every one of these men and women have one thing in common? They have all been conquered by death! Not a single one escaped! All their power and prestige could not save them from the king of terror. Death entered like a wolf and devoured them all. Death showed no pity to the young and no mercy to the old. Every hero we find in the annals of history were conquered by a same enemy - death.

Why have we gathered? We are here to celebrate our HERO. What is so unique about our HERO? He conquered death! He conquered the king of terror. Death could not hold Him down. Death could not conquer Him. Our king rose victorious. We are here not only to declare, but also to celebrate the victory. I would like to focus on three points regarding the work of Christ.

1. The Victory Won by Jesus
2. The Benefit Received by Us
3. The Privilege we Share

The Victory of Jesus!

The passages we have read summarizes the good news. Christ accomplished a great victory through His work. When Jesus said “It is finished,” He was declaring both the completion and success of His work. Paul informs us that Jesus did three things - He was crucified. He was buried. He rose again. We have already discussing these aspects of His work. Let me summarize. Through His crucifixion and burial, Jesus took away our sin, our failure, our crimes against God, our sorrow, our sadness, and broken heart. What did Jesus do with all these things? Well, he nailed them to the cross and then buried them to be forgotten forever. So, in his **crucifixion and burial** Jesus **carried away all our oldness which was brought into the world by the curse of sin**. But this is only half the story! He also brought many things into our lives!. What benefit did we receive because of the resurrection?

The Benefit

The **resurrection** of Jesus **brings positive elements into our lives**. The resurrection delivers His newness. Let me summarize. The death, burial and resurrection of Christ have accomplished two wonderful things for us.

1. His crucifixion and burial remove the curse
2. His resurrection brings eternal blessing.

The whole idea of the death, burial and resurrection are summed up in Paul's words:

“old things are passing away, behold all things have become new!” The old is passing away! - The new is coming!

Let me give you a few examples of this truth:

Death / Burial Took Away

Resurrection Brought

Our Curse	His Blessing
Our Failure	His Success
Our Weakness	His Power
Our Sorrow	His Joy
Our Emptiness	His Fullness
Our Eternal Death	His Eternal Life
Our Confusion	His Order
Our Disease	His Ease
Our Poverty	His Wealth
Our Oldness	His Newness

These are only a FEW of the benefits of the resurrection. Jesus closed the door to the famine in our life and opened the door of his abundance. He closed the door to our past and opened the door to his future. This is what we are celebrating today! Now we come to the last point of this message: What is our privilege?

Our Privilege

Jesus did all the work! He took our oldness. He brought His newness. There are only two things left for us to do – Receive and share the wealth! Now, we have the awesome privilege of sharing our new found treasure with others. Do not horde it! Right before Jesus left this world, He told His disciples, “I have received all authority and power.” Now, I want you to go to the nations and share what you have freely received. In chapter two of Ephesians, the apostle tells us that the same power that raised Jesus from the dead is now working in us. Jesus

has given us resurrection life and power so we can overcome eternal death. Now, it is our responsibility to share that life and power with others so they too can escape eternal death.

Do you think it would be cruel if I had the cure for a deadly disease and kept it a secret. The Bible informs us that humanity is headed to judgment and eternal death. If we have surrendered our life to Christ, He has deposited into us resurrection power that overcomes eternal death. Don't keep it a secret! Share it! Give it away! It works! This is our privilege!

It is said that Ponce de Leon traveled to Florida in 1513 in search of the fountain of youth. History is littered with examples of men looking to cheat death. We know of only one man in human history who overcame death – That man is Jesus! He is our fountain of youth! Only Jesus can give eternal life! Only Jesus can take something old and transform it into something new! We have the privilege of sharing the good news with the world.

Concluding Remarks

We have discussed three points: The victory Jesus won, the benefits we received and the privilege we share. Have we allowed Christ to carry away our oldness? Have we allowed Him to bring in His newness? Jesus wants us to walk away from our sin, our sorrow, and our failure. On the positive side, He wants us to receive His gift of forgiveness, joy, and victory. What a wonderful offer!

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Jesus Teaches at the Synagogue in Capernaum

(The Demon Possessed Man)

Scripture Reading: Mark 1:21-28

In this study, again, we find Jesus in the synagogue. If you recall, the last time He preached in a synagogue, His audience tried to kill Him. This did not keep Him away. He traveled 20 miles to Capernaum and started again. Imagine with me, You visit a church. You are invited to share a few words. You speak and the people are amazed at your teaching ability, then suddenly, in the middle of your message, there is an interruption. Someone stands up and says:

“HA! What business do you have here? Why don’t you let us do our work? Have you come to destroy us?”

There was a demon-possessed man in the audience. How would you handle a demon? This is what happened to Jesus. In our story, Jesus in fact comes face to face with a crowd of demons. I say demons because the demon that possessed the man asked “what have you to do with us?” Today, we will learn how Jesus deals with the enemy. I would like to do three things with the narrative:

1. Observe
2. Interpret
3. Apply

Observe

I am amazed with the arrogance of our culture. We are educated. We say we have evolved. We live in the information age of electronic superhighways. Our young people have been labeled the digital generation. We live in the age of genetic engineering, robotics and nanotechnology. But, if we mention demons, devils and spirits, people laugh. Many assume that demons are the stuff of Hollywood fiction. Hollywood has reduced the devil to an idea. But the Bible introduces us to Satan, demons, devils and spirits. Throughout human history, God remains constant. The devil and his servants have not changed. Man still needs a savior. What happened to the demons? Do you think they are all gone? Are they all in the abyss? Has judgment day arrived? No, there are as many demons today as there was at the time of Jesus. Today’s devil seems to be more educated and cultured. We do not see much of “the Hollywood” version. We do see, however, the results of Satan’s work. Let’s move on to the story.

Jesus is preaching. It is God’s day: the Sabbath. It is God’s house: the Synagogue. It is God’s Word being preached, but, the synagogue has a visitor. He is observing God’s day. He is meeting in God’s house. But, he does not like what Jesus is preaching. Let me ask you: Is this God’s Day? Are we congregated as God’s house? Are we preaching God’s Word? I wonder if there are any demons present? There may be. What did the demon say to Jesus? Leave us

alone! There was more than one. It was a horde of demons. They asked, “What business do you have with us? Have you come to destroy us? (undo our work) They told Jesus, Let us do our work.” (24)

Interpret

What work are the demons talking about? The Bible gives several examples of why demons are present. We may not see them, but we are witnesses of their work. They are here today. The Bible outlines the work of the enemy. These are just a few examples:

1. They seek whom they may devour.
2. They steal “the word” from the heart in order to hinder action.
3. They are here “to blind men” from their need for God.
4. They are here “to darken” the mind.
5. They are here to “tempt, oppress, and deceive.”
6. They have come with the intent to kill, steal and destroy.
7. Demons are the authors of chaos and confusion.
8. The enemy has one goal: Keep you from walking with God.

Do you see evidence of the enemy’s work anywhere? I venture to say that the enemy is at work in the lives of many. How do we know if he is at work in our lives?

- If we are not walking with God
- If we have lost our love and zeal for God
- If we have turned our back on God and are living in sin
- If we never think about God
- If we are depressed, or have suicidal tendencies
- If there is fear in our life
- If our life is out of control
- If we are slaves to alcohol, drugs and immorality

Now, I have not seen a red devil with horns, a tail and a pitch fork in his hand. What I have seen is evidence of his work! When we come face to face with the work of the devil, what should we do? Imitate Jesus!

- He recognized their presence!
- He commanded them to flee.

We are called to command the enemy to flee in the name of Jesus. This reminds me of an experience. A member of the church asked me to intervene for him because his boss would not pay him his wages. I went to his place of employment. A BIG man came out “What do you want?” he asked. Honestly speaking, I was a little intimidated with his size. I am about 6.2 inches in height. This man must have been 7 feet tall and weighed about 400 pounds. (all muscle) I was also very concerned about his defiant attitude. I was thinking, what did I get myself into? What happened next, I consider nothing short of a miracle. As the man squared off in front of me, someone walking by recognized me and said, “Mr. Rodriguez, how are you? Do you still work with the government?” The big man heard this and melted. He became like a little kitten. The big man paid the employee immediately and was very apologetic. He wasn’t afraid of me. When the word “government” was used, his attitude changed from bold defiance to fear. This is what happens when we say “in the name of Jesus.” We stir up the kingdom of darkness. We incite terror in the heart of any demon present. Let’s take a look at the text again. Jesus is interrupted by demons. The demons have two questions: What do you want with us? (Why have you disrupted our work?) Have you come to destroy us? Jesus issues two commands. Shut up! Come out of the man! I believe there is a message for us in this passage.

Application

Two things are evident. Jesus wants to do something **for** and **through** us. He has the power to rescue us from the oppression of the devil. Jesus is here to save us from our chaos and confusion. He is here to rescue us from the power of sin. He wants to set us totally free, but He also wants to work through us. He wants us to set others free. There are many examples in the Bible of how Jesus works through His servants. He gave his apostles power to cast out devils, heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, and raise the dead. He said freely ye have received, freely give. (Matthew 10:8) When Jesus gave 70 disciples power to cast out devils, He told them,

“Behold, I give unto you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy: and nothing shall by any means hurt you.” (Luke 10:17-19)

He has given the church power to cast out devils. (Mark 16:17) Before ascending into heaven, Jesus said to his disciples,

“And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils.”

Demons tremble and are terrified at the presence and name of Jesus. Demons will tremble in the presence of those who work in the name of Jesus. The Bible informs us that the multitude was amazed at the obedience the demons rendered to Jesus. Jesus said,

“don’t be surprised when they obey you.”

Concluding Remark

Is the enemy at work in our lives? Is he wreaking havoc? Has our love grown cold? Have we lost our hunger for God? Jesus wants to undo the work of the enemy! He wants to make us a channel of His blessing and power. Restoration begins with a total surrender to him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

One Sick of the Palsy – Borne by Four

(The Place of Faith)

Scripture Reading: Mark 2:1-5, 11-12

As we review the pages of the Bible, we find the word faith used over 230 times. Its repeated use indicates that it is an important theme in the Scripture. The author to the Hebrews informs us that

“Without faith, it is not possible to please God.”

In the gospel, we find Jesus asking his disciples about faith. "Where is your faith", he asked them. Why are you afraid? Why do you worry about what you will eat or drink? Why do you doubt? Jesus often reprimands them for their lack of faith. Have you ever been lacking in faith? How many of you know that our measure of faith is determined by our vision of God. If we have a great vision of God, we will have great faith. If we have a small vision of God, we will have small faith. A few years ago, I was asked by an agnostic, “Can you buy a loaf of bread with your faith?” Actually, we can do much more than that!

When we exercise faith, we can move mountains and cast them into the sea! We can heal the sick and cast out devils! We can do the impossible! The author to the Hebrews provides us with a catalog of what faith can buy. Through faith,

- we inherit promises,
- we subdue kingdoms
- we work righteousness
- we stop the mouths of lions
- we quench the violence of fire
- we can escape the edge of the sword
- out of weakness we are made strong
- we stand valiant in fight
- we turn to flight the armies of the alien
- we receive our dead raised to life again

Our faith overcomes the world and protects us from the fiery darts of the enemy. It establishes, justifies and saves us. This is a short list of what we can buy with our faith! My question to the agnostic was: What can you buy without faith?

We have read a story that once again reveals the importance of faith. How many of you know that before we can receive a miracle, faith must be present? In this study, I will focus on four points:

1. The Context of the Passage
2. The Human Condition
3. The Divine Solution
4. Our Assignment.

The Context of the Passage

Jesus returned to Capernaum and was provided hospitality in Peter's home. People discovered He was present and soon filled the house. Why was Jesus present? He came to preach the Word. Luke informs us that the power of the Lord was present to heal. Nothing has changed. Why is Jesus present in this place? He is here to speak His word to us. His power is present to restore and heal! The question is, are we ready to receive? The narrative we have read immediately introduces us to a problem. We are made aware of a man who is totally paralyzed. He cannot feed himself. He is unable to bathe or dress himself. He is totally dependent on the charity of others. The Bible informs us only that he is carried by four men. What is this man's mental state of being? I think we can safely assume that he is depressed and discouraged. He is unhappy. He has no future to speak of. What do we see in this paralytic?

The Human Condition

I see a picture of the human condition. Things are no different today. There is a lot of unhappiness, dead hope, disappointment and discouragement in the world. Look around you. We see wars, uncertainty, and fear. Men find themselves in a maze of confusion and frustration. I believe this story speaks to our situation. The story does not end here. We are introduced to a divine solution.

The Divine Solution

Imagine the scene. Four men are walking down the street. They cannot heal their friend, but they know the solution is in the presence of Jesus. They cannot get in the door because of the crowd. They go up the external stair case and dig a hole in the flat roof. Jesus is interrupted by falling tile, dirt and hay. How does Jesus respond to these men? He was not concerned about who was going to clean up the mess or repair the roof. He saw their faith. He encouraged the paralytic and gave him hope. He removed his sin. He restored and healed Him. This same Jesus is present today.

What will Jesus do if we approach Him? He will not turn us away. He will focus on our restoration, not our failure. He will erase our sin, our past, our shortcomings, and our shame. He will work a miracle. How many of you know that the power of God is present to heal? He is ready to act! What moved Jesus to manifest His power in the life of the paralytic? He saw faith! He saw men expecting to receive! That is the secret. **Faith moved Jesus to apply His power to human need!** Can God see our faith? The story is simple. A man in need encounters a savior with the power to grant a miracle. Again, things have not changed. Jesus is present to work on our behalf. All we have to do is believe.

The Assignment

The story also introduces us to an assignment. The four men that carried the paralytic serve as a wonderful model. They did not need a miracle for themselves. They sought the miracle for their friend. They introduced their friend to the miracle-worker. They exercised their faith for another. How many of you know that our faith has the power to work a miracle in the life of others? Exercise it! God is seeking for men, women and young people who will exercise faith on behalf of others. This is what the Bible calls intercession & prayer. Do you exercise your faith for your family, the lost, or the hopeless? We have received the ability to exercise faith for the healing of others. Do it without doubting. Will we deliver His message? What did Jesus communicate to the man in need? Jesus told him,

“Be of good courage! Your sins are forgiven!”

God offers a fresh start! Jesus healed the man and wants to completely restore us! Again, our assignment is to exercise faith for others and communicate God’s message!

Concluding Remarks

We have reviewed four important points regarding the passage of scripture. We reviewed the context, discussed the human condition, introduced the divine solution and touched on our assignment. How many of you know that there are many paralytics in our community. They are waiting for us to exercise our faith and deliver a positive message. They feel powerless and empty. Their heart is full of fear and frustration. God wants to heal and restore them. God wants to give them a new beginning. You and I are called to carry the paralytic to Christ. How do we carry someone to Christ? It begins with prayer and intercession. Do you know someone who cannot come to Christ? Exercise your faith. The paralytic is waiting for you to become God’s channel of blessing.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The Widow of Nain

(Compassion that Raises the Dead)

Scripture Reading: Luke 7:11-15

A woman visited New York City and saw on the sidewalk a ragged cold, and hungry little girl, gazing wistfully at some of the cakes in a shop window. She stopped, and, taking the little one by the hand, led her into the store. Though she was aware that bread might be better for the cold child than cake, yet, desiring to gratify the shivering and abandoned one, she bought and gave her a cake she wanted. She then took her to another place, where she purchased for the girl a shawl and other items of comfort. The grateful little girl looked at the woman right in the eyes, and with precious simplicity asked, "Are you God's wife?"

The woman did not lecture the child about the definition of love. She did not preach a sermon about the meaning of compassion. The woman modeled these attributes. The child saw love and compassion in action. This is what we see in the four accounts of the gospel. Though we find the word compassion used 12 times, Jesus does not preach about it. Instead, he repeatedly demonstrates it. He fed, healed, restored sight, cleansed lepers and cast out devils because he was full of compassion. Jesus was affected with the same feeling as others.

He had the ability to feel what others felt. I want you to know that today Jesus is present and He can feel your pain, loneliness, sorrow, frustration, despair, broken heart. Jesus is not only present, but is also ready to take action! Our story deals with compassion. In this study, I would like to emphasize three points.

1. The Human Condition
2. A Divine Solution
3. Our Task as the people of God

The Human Condition

Jesus traveled 25 miles to arrive at Nain. The text reveals a wonder scene. Jesus walks into the city with His disciples and a multitude following behind. The crowds had been watching Jesus exercise power over demons. They had seen him cleanse the leper. They had seen the lame walk. They had been blessed by the manifest presence of God. They were certain that there was nothing impossible to the man Jesus. This happy crowd is led by the master.

As Jesus was entering the city, he was met by a weeping crowd of people. It was a funeral procession. The flute players were playing a somber tune. The criers wailed. The crowd was led by a woman with a broken heart. She walked before a coffin. In the coffin was a young boy – her only son. Imagine the hopelessness of the situation. The widow has already buried her husband. Today, she will bury her only male child.

Who will support her? Who is going to protect her? She will have to depend on the charity of others! Her future is gone. Can you sense the despair? I cannot imagine the emptiness she must have felt. What a dark picture! I believe the story unveils the human condition. Since the curse of sin entered the world, there have been many funeral processions. We live in a world where uncertainty prevails, a world full of broken hearts and shattered dreams. We have become a community of silent weepers. Without Jesus, the human race is just a funeral procession headed to a burial. But the story does not end here. Jesus walks into the darkest moment of this widow's life and we are introduced to the divine solution. How many of you know that in the darkest moments of our life, God is present? We are never alone.

The Divine Solution

The Bible informs us that Jesus felt compassion for the woman. As Jesus peered into her eyes, He could feel what she felt. Maybe Jesus remembered Joseph's funeral. Maybe He remembered the look in Mary's eyes when they buried him. Jesus could feel the widow's pain, sorrow, despair and insecurity.

It was compassion that moved the master to act. What did Jesus do? I want you to notice the three unpopular things Jesus was moved to do.

1. He told the woman to stop crying!
2. He touched the coffin – This was offensive.
3. He spoke to the dead young man and said "Get up!"

Imagine being at a funeral and telling the grieving family to stop crying. Or imagine someone standing by the coffin and telling the corpse to get up. I think we would have called security. Jesus was not concerned about what others were going to say. His compassion moved him to act! Do you think Jesus feels compassion for this community? Do you think that He wants to revive the dead in this community? He is waiting for us to take action! How do you think the widow felt when Jesus raised her dead son?

Our Task

He restored her hope and revived her dreams. He calmed her fears and turned her mourning into dancing. Jesus transformed the funeral procession into a welcome back party. He wants us to do the same today. There is a message in this text. Jesus models the work we are called to do. He wants our compassion to flow into the community. Jesus told His disciples - "Go out and raise the dead." Jesus was willing to move beyond himself. He was willing to leave himself open to criticism. He was willing to do the unexpected. The crowd had two things to say. They glorified God. They realized that God had visited them. When Jesus was present, people felt they had been visited by God. How do others feel in our presence? These verses speak to us about our divine task. I believe that Jesus models how the compassion of God should flow through us. The first epistle of Peter tells us that one of the five virtues of the Christian is compassion. Can we feel what others feel? Does the compassion of Christ flow through us?

There is a very important point here. The power of Christ flows through vessels who can feel compassion. We must ask God to restore our emotions. Sometimes we are afraid to feel!

We are afraid to weep! We are afraid to express emotion! We think it is a sign of weakness! We worry about being criticized, but without compassion, the power and blessing of God cannot flow through us to others. What can I do when I no longer feel?

In Mark 5:19, Jesus had just delivered two men from a legion of demons. Listen to the words of Jesus:

“Go home to your friends, and tell them how great things the Lord has done for you, and how he has had compassion on you.”

Maybe we cannot express compassion because we have forgotten that God has had compassion on us. We must revisit our history and review “how great things the Lord has done for us”

Concluding Remarks

We have touched on three points. 1) The Human Condition – Apart from Christ, we have no future. 2) The Divine Solution – The compassionate Christ is ready to meet our need. 3) Our Task - We are called to display and model the compassion of Christ to others. The multitude said, “Today, God has visited us.”

I believe that God is visiting us! Today, the compassionate Christ knows all about our situation. He feels our pain, sorrow, frustration, despair, and broken heart. He is present to give us a hand. Take it! Some of us have lost the ability to feel. We have a cold heart. He is here to restore our compassion. He is ready to give, are we ready to receive?

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The Woman with an Issue of Blood

(Faith that Makes Whole)

Scripture Reading: Luke 8:43-48

All the events in the life of Jesus communicate a message. He never worked a miracle to impress or entertain a crowd. His words and works always revealed something about His person and character. We have reviewed several examples of this point. When He healed the multitudes, He demonstrated not only His power over sickness, but His compassion. When he calmed the sea of Galilee, He not only demonstrated his power over nature, but also revealed His desire to lead His disciples into a higher plain of faith. When he approached the region of the Gadarenes and terrorized a legion of 6,000 demons, He not only demonstrated His power over the spirit world, but also revealed His love for humanity. Often, as believers, we do not have a problem believing Jesus possesses power! Our problem is the inability to appropriate the power present in Christ. The text under discussion shows us how a certain woman appropriated the power of Christ. In this study, I would like to focus on three points:

1. The Human Condition
2. The Divine Solution
3. The Invitation

The Human Condition

The text reveals a woman with serious issues. Firstly, we are informed about her physical and financial situation. For 12 long years, she had been bleeding internally. She had gone from one doctor to another. She had suffered much at the hands of various physicians. The Bible quickly summarizes the problem by stating that she had spent all her money, yet her condition was getting worse. She was declared to be incurable. (Of course, only after she had spent all her money) She was broke.

The woman had social and emotional problems. Scripture informs us that she had an "issue of blood." She was losing blood. She was considered ceremoniously unclean and was not allowed to visit the temple. According to the law of the time, everything she touched was unclean. The religious of the time considered her as an impure woman. She was a social outcast. The woman had physical problems. Due to her loss of blood, her face was probably pale in color. Her eyes were sunken and she was always tired. The doctors said she was incurable. The religious said she was unclean. She felt helpless, inferior and possibly unworthy. You might be asking: "What does all this have to do with me?"

I believe this speaks to the human condition. There are many people in our community that probably feel like this woman. They feel hopeless, helpless, unclean, unworthy, and depressed. They have financial problems, social problems, emotional problems, and self-esteem problems. They feel like they are suffocating. They feel like there is no way out.

Recently, I read a report entitled, “Mental Illness in America,” It indicated that about 19 million adults in the US suffer from depressive disorders. The National Institute of Mental Health informs us that 30% of the women in the US are depressed. According to the institute, 54% of the people suffering from depression see it as a weakness and are embarrassed to talk about it. 80% of those with severe depression disorders do not seek help. The report also indicated that depression plagues our children as well. One study done by Harvard indicated that depression among children has increased 23%. Our children are being called pill-poppers by other countries. When children misbehave, I often hear parents say, “He didn’t take his medicine today.” Why are so many people depressed? Reports indicate the following sources for depression:

- Emotional
- Physical
- Sexual abuse
- A lack of being touched
- Over-criticism
- Conflict in the family such as violence
- The sense of being trapped
- A sense of hopelessness
- A sense of feeling ugly or unworthy.

Do you think there are people like this in our community? The Center of Disease Control tells us that 38,364 people killed themselves last year. (105 suicides a day) An estimated 2.2 million adults were so tired of living, so lonely, empty and confused that they made plans to end their lives.

What can we do for these people? We can give them Prozac, Paxil, Zoloft, and other drugs, but these are band aide solutions. We live in a community with major problems. Our text introduces us to a woman with issues. I am glad the story does not end with the problem. How many of you know that there is a divine solution to the dark human condition?

The Divine Solution.

Jesus was preaching and teaching the multitudes. His power was present to heal. He was filling empty hearts. He was feeding the hungry. The text informs us that the woman heard about Jesus and devised a plan. She thought within herself.

“I’ll go behind Him and touch the borders of His robe.”

Why was she afraid? She thought she was going to be rejected. She thought she might contaminate Jesus. The law told her she was unclean. She took a risk. I want you to notice the woman’s attitude. She was proactive and persistent. She did not wait for the miracle to come to

her. She went to get her miracle. Faith moved her to action. She knew there was power in Jesus. She appropriated that power by being persistent.

Today, some of us need a miracle. Are we persistent? There is a good example in the Old Testament about persistence. Jacob wrestled with an angel. The angel told him, "Let me go". Jacob persisted and told the angel, "No, I will not let you go until you bless me." We know that Jesus heals. We know He saves. But we are lacking the persistence of this woman! Instead of focusing on the power of Jesus, we complain. We throw a pity party. We say: "My situation is different." "My case is impossible." "I am unworthy." "I am impure." "God is punishing me." Forget about your condition. Focus on the virtue present in Jesus. Touch Him in faith. How did Jesus respond to the woman? He did not reject her. He did not say, "get away, you unclean thing." or "Get away, you are going to contaminate me." He embraced her. There is good news here. The same Jesus who healed this woman over 2000 years ago is present. The Bible states that Jesus felt virtue and power came out of Him. "Who touched me, asked Jesus." The disciples were confused. Everybody is touching you, they replied. "Jesus, can't you see the crowds pressing upon you?" What was different about the way this woman touched Jesus? She touched Him in faith! There's the secret. The way to appropriate the power present in Christ is by touching Him with persistent faith.

The Invitation

The woman bowed before him. She was afraid. She trembled. She told him all the truth. She did not hide anything. Jesus told her, "Your faith has made you whole." Jesus invites us to appropriate his power. Many of us know that Jesus heals. We know he can calm the storms of life. We know he has power over demons. All that remains is to appropriate his power?

Concluding Remarks

He knows all about our situation. There are no impossible cases for Christ. I invite you to pray. His power is present to heal. Will you exercise your faith to apply divine power to your need?

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Sermon on the Mount #1

(Secrets to Success, Happiness and God's Joy)

Scripture Reading: Mathew 5:1-4

We continue with a series of studies related to the Life of Christ. We now turn to what has been called "The Sermon on the Mount." In fact, it is not really a sermon, but a collection of sermons that summarize the teachings of Jesus. We will call it a sermon. Various theologians have called this portion of Scripture "The Constitution of the Kingdom of God." It is said that it identifies the attributes that Jesus produces in a life that is surrendered to Him. A few days before this sermon was preached, Jesus selected His twelve disciples. Now He is going to prepare them. He is going to equip them to carry out the great commission. Remember, these words are also spoken to us. I would like to do three things with this portion of scripture.

1. Observe
2. Interpret
3. Apply

Observations

The sermon begins with the word "blessed." This word is repeatedly used throughout His sermon. What does it mean? Historically, it referred to someone who had experienced success. A blessed person is said to be happy and prosperous. The word also described "God's kind of joy." To be blessed meant to experience a serene joy, a joy that could not be moved or affected by circumstances or the trials of life. Jesus refers to this joy in John 16:22. He tells his disciples,

"your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man takes from you."

In his sermon, Jesus is sharing secrets with His disciples. He is showing them how to be happy, prosperous, have success in life and experience God's kind of joy. The sermon is a **roadmap** that reveals how to experience the fullness of God. I do not know about you, but I want to prosper, have success in life and know divine joy! In these passages, God opens His heart to reveal His secrets. Verses 4-12, provides us with a list of blessings. Now, let's take a look at the secrets this passage reveals.

Secret #1

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

What is the reward in this passage? The reward is the kingdom of heaven. God is offering us a kingdom. I don't know what is included, but this sounds wonderful. If I tell you that you have just inherited the kingdom of Transylvania, how would react? Jesus is offering his disciples a kingdom. Jesus is teaching his disciples how they can inherit the kingdom of God.

How many of you want to know how to inherit a kingdom? What is the prerequisite to possessing the kingdom mentioned in this text?

The passage states, "Be poor in spirit." What does this mean? It does not refer to external poverty or an oath to poverty, but to an internal condition. The word "poor" describes a person who is totally destitute and has realized that no one can help him with his or her condition. It describes a person that has come to the end of his or her own resources. In the last lesson, we discussed a woman who had an issue of blood. She had suffered for 12 years. She had spent all her money. All her attempts to be healed were in vain. But then, she came and touched the border of Jesus' garment. She was fully restored. This woman is an example of being "poor in spirit." She had come to the realization that men could do nothing for her. When she emptied herself of hope in the ability of men, she received her miracle. When she embraced Jesus, she experienced her miracle. Jesus tells his disciples, "Do you want to experience the blessing of God? You have to surrender. The world will never fill your emptiness. The world cannot rid you of your loneliness. The world cannot give you eternal joy and happiness. All this and much more is found only in Jesus.

Are we poor in spirit? Have we recognized our need for God? Are we ready to trust Him? If the answer is yes, then God promises a kingdom! But, this is only one blessing.

Secret #2

Verses 4-12 not only outline the blessings God wants to grant, but also describe the result of God's work in our lives. They provide us with a list of attributes God is developing in us. Jesus teaches His disciples not only how to enjoy a blessed life, but also reveals to them who they will become as a result of their relationship to God. We have just discussed the first attribute, "poor in spirit." Now let's take a look at other attributes on the list. Jesus states, "Blessed are those that weep, because they shall be comforted."

When we surrender our life to God, we will soon begin to feel the way God feels. We begin to hate what God hates and love what God loves. Christians are different in contrast to those who stand outside of faith in Christ. Have you ever tried to do something contrary to God's word? What happens? We lose our peace. Our conscience begins to bother us. We cannot sleep. We know we are doing something wrong. Nobody has to tell us. Why does this happen? When we receive God's life, we inherit the ability to love what God loves and hate what He hates. If this is not our experience, it is possible that we have religion without a relationship. Jesus said to His disciples, "Do you want to be blessed, prosper, and be happy in life? Allow God to awaken this attribute in your life." We will see things from God's point of view. What happens when we see things from God's perspective? We both rejoice and weep! We discover that God has a wonderful plan for the human race, but also see the sad condition of the human race. We discover that too often we become satisfied with too little.

This week, I read a report about the condition of America. We are home of the world's largest pornography industry. We consume more marijuana, cocaine and other drugs than any other country on the planet. Last year the U.S. census bureau reported that Americans spend half their lives watching TV, surfing the internet and listening to music. Half our life is spent on entertainment. What are we going to say to God when we give an account regarding our time on

earth? " I SPENT HALF MY LIFE-TIME ENTERTAINING MYSELF!" It seems like we live in a world where everyone is competing for our time! We are bombarded by multiple mediums of communication. The world is shoving its philosophies down our throat and pushing God out of the picture. Do the math, we work, sleep and are entertained. Where is the family? Where is God? The world is sucking up all our time. How are we going to change the world if every waking moment of our life is spent on me, myself and my entertainment. There is a story in the Bible about a man who was guilty of pushing God out of his life. What did Jesus say to him? (Luke 12:20-21)

“You fool, tonight, your soul will be required of you: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided? So is he that lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.”

When we see the condition of the world, God weeps and so do we! We have a message for this community! God has a better plan. He wants to restore, renew and recover. He wants to bless you beyond belief. He has good intentions. We do not focus on sin; we focus on His forgiveness. We do not focus on failure, but on His success. We are in the business of reviving dead dreams. We offer hope. We know the miracle worker. We know the man that can transform a monster into a masterpiece.

Concluding Remarks

What is God’s message to us today? He wants to give us a kingdom. He would like for us to share His point of view. God wants to open his treasure house to us. He would like for us to know happiness and success. He wants to share His joy with us. All we have to do is approach Him. He is waiting.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Sermon on the Mount #2

(Secrets to Success, Happiness and God's Joy)

Scripture Reading: Matthew 5:1-6

The Bible is a wonderful book. It paints a before and after picture of our condition. The before picture describes us prior to our conversion to Christ. It reveals our need and poverty. Before Christ came, we were being carried away by the currents of this age. Our life was dominated by the prince of the power of the air. The spirit of disobedience was at work in us. Scripture identifies us as strangers, illegal aliens, sons of wrath, and enemies of God. This is a very brief description of our life before Christ came to rule on the throne of our heart. If we are without Christ, this is our condition.

The second picture describes our condition after Christ comes to rule our heart. The Bible states that in Christ we are now carried by the power of God's Spirit. Our life is dominated by the will of the omnipotent God. We are no longer sons of wrath, but sons and daughters of God. We are no longer strangers, but members of the divine family. We are no longer illegal aliens, but are now heavenly citizens. We have access to all God's resources!

These are the two pictures portrayed by the Bible. Which picture describes our life? Have we been transformed by the power of Christ? Have we surrendered our life to him? Does He rule our heart? God wants the best for us? This is what the Sermon on the Mount reveals. Jesus gathered his disciples! He provided them with a list of secrets! They are the secrets to living a happy and full life. How many of you want to know the secrets of success? In this chapter, we will discuss two additional secrets revealed by Christ in his sermon.

Secret #3

In verse 5, Jesus deals with another characteristic that will cause us to prosper in life. Jesus said,

“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.”

What is the greatest gift you have ever received from another human being? Twice, I received a car. I have received money, clothing, two cross pens, and a house. What would you say if I left you a whole planet as your inheritance? In verse 3, Jesus tells His disciples, “if you become poor in spirit, I will give you a kingdom. In verse 5, He tells them, “If you will be meek, I’ll give you a whole planet.” Read it for yourself. The verse states that if you are meek, you inherit the planet – earth. What do we have to do? We have to be meek. What does this word mean? It refers to a person who has his instincts, impulses and passions under control.

Meekness is the result of allowing God's will to govern our instincts, impulses and passions. Meekness describes a person who lives by God's Word, and not by self. There are many examples of meekness in the Bible. In the book of Numbers 12:3, **Moses** is said to be

“...the meekest man on the face of the earth.”

Why is Moses considered meek? He does everything according to the pattern of God's word. He is a man governed by God's thought.

In Matthew 11:29, Jesus says,

“Learn from Me for I am meek.”

How is Jesus meek? He does ALL the will of His father. He states that he does nothing of himself, but only what he sees Father do. How do I become meek? We become meek by our obedience to God's Word! We become meek when we align ourselves to God's will. Jesus tells His disciples “the meek will prosper.” Are we meek? Who is in control of our life? Who is the decision-maker? A meek person is someone ruled by the Word of God. Jesus tells His disciples, the key to happiness, prosperity, and success is to be governed by the Word and Will of God. The opposite also applies. If we disregard the Word of God, we will inherit the wind. We will be miserable. We will become a failure? We will be empty? Our life will become a vicious cycle.

Let me give you the formula for failure:

- Pretend that you are in control.
- Pretend that you are the captain of your own destiny.
- Avoid God's word.
- You will have your reward.

That reward will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, torment, fire that is not quenched, the worm that does not die, darkness, and chains. The worse part of rejecting God is the loss of His presence for eternity. God offers two paths.

1. Meekness gives you access to God's blessing.
2. Rebellion gives you access to God's curse.

Be governed by God's Word. You will inherit the earth!

Secret #4

"Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness for they shall be filled."

Jesus speaks to His disciples about the importance of hunger and thirst for righteousness. The reward in this passage is satisfaction. Jesus relates truth about how to be satisfied in life. Have you noticed that someone can have money, power, prestige, and still not be satisfied? The world is full of men and women seeking eternal satisfaction in temporal things. Jesus tells the disciples, the only way to fill your hunger and quench your thirst is to give your life to the divine cause. Have you noticed that earthly things do not satisfy for long? This passage speaks to us about our love and zeal for God. William Barclay, the famous English scholar translates the passage in the following manner: “O what a blessing to be hungry and thirsty for the presence

and word of God ... you will be satisfied by God.” What is Jesus saying to His disciples? There is no real satisfaction apart from a living relationship with God.

Some time ago, I got an ear infection. It was so severe that I lost my balance and was unable to walk in a straight line. I would stagger back and forth. When God is not present, the same thing happens to our balance. We become disoriented. Without God, we eventually become aimless. The psalmist David acknowledged his need for God when he stated,

“My soul is thirsty for God, for the living God... (Psa. 42.2)

What about us? Are we hungry and thirst for God? I cannot get enough. I enjoy the presence of God all day. In the middle of my appointments, sometimes I say “thank you Lord.” When I am in the middle of a presentation, I often say, Lord, you satisfy completely. When we seek the face of God, we discover that we can be content in whatever state we find ourselves.

The text indicates that we are to hunger and thirst for righteousness. This word points to God's standard. We are to hunger and thirst for God as well as seek to live by His law-word. Jesus lived a righteous life. When we become recipients of God's nature, we develop a desire to align ourselves to God's moral standards. We do not grudgingly seek to keep His every command; we willingly do so. Our life is characterized by hunger and thirst for all that is God. He then satisfies us.

Concluding Remarks

What does Jesus teach His disciples in the verses we read today? Be meek by allowing God's Word to govern your life. Allow God to bring your instincts, impulses and passions under control and you will inherit the earth. Be hungry and thirsty for God and seek to align your life according to His standards. You will be satisfied. You will be content.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Sermon on the Mount #3

(Secrets to Success, Happiness and God's Joy)

Scripture Reading: Matthew 5:7-12

The Sermon on the Mount is found in chapters 5-7 of Matthew. Jesus did not send His disciples into the world without first preparing them. The same applies to us. We have been set aside for divine use. God has put us in this world because He has a plan. After His resurrection, Jesus gave us a commission, an order, a command! In Matthew 28:18-20, Jesus commanded His disciples:

“Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.”

Jesus sent his disciples to conquer nations. He is sending the church to do the same. But, we must be instructed before we go! What did Jesus teach His disciples? He spoke to them about happiness. We all want to be happy, to prosper, to be a success and experience God's Joy! We all want to know the secret!

In verses 3-11, Jesus shares a list of secrets. Nine times, the master uses the word “Blessed” and then shares a key. Take note of the secrets we have discussed thus far.

1st Empty yourself (Be poor in spirit)

2nd Understand your desperate need for God. (Weep)

3rd Allow God to take control of your life. (Be Meek)

4th Allow God to restore your hunger and thirst for righteousness.

If we are unwilling to empty ourselves of sin, acknowledge our need for God, allow Him to control our life and restore our hunger, then we cannot know true happiness. The foolish man says: I do not need God in order to prosper and be happy. I am the captain of my own destiny. The fact is that without Jesus, all we can enjoy is shadows of joy and happiness. In this study, we will deal with the last four points on Jesus' list of those things that will allow us to experience God's fullness.

Secret #5

“Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.”

In this verse, we are informed that in order to be happy, it is necessary for us to learn how to forgive. Jesus uses the word mercy. That word refers to putting ourselves in the place of

another. It calls us to demonstrate compassion for others because we understand our own condition. Mercy is willing to forgive others because it has felt the pain of failure. Again, mercy points to forgiveness. How many unhappy people do you know who suffer because of their unwillingness to forgive a wrong. They are unwilling to let go of the past. They are unwilling to let go of failure. It is interesting to note that often, we are willing to give God our list of sins, but unwilling to release the sin of others. We plead to God that He erase the sins we commit against Him, yet we want Him to remember the sins that others have committed against us.

Where is your mercy? We must empty ourselves of our sins as well as the sins of others. Stop hauling around everyone's trash. Have you noticed that there are many archeologists in the church. An archeologist digs up antiquities, bones and things of the past. We sometimes like to dig up failure and sins. Not just any sin, we dig up even forgiven sins. What does God want to do with our sin? He wants to remove it. The psalmist informs us:

"As far as the east is from the west, so far hath God removed our transgressions from us. (Psalms 103:12)

Jesus tells us: Do you want to be happy? Do you want to prosper, have success and experience God's joy? Stop collecting the sins of others! Stop collecting trash! God is merciful with you. Be merciful to others. When we receive God's life, we are granted the ability to release the sin and failure of others. We cannot enjoy God's best if we fail to show mercy.

Secret #6

In verse 8, Jesus provides us with another secret for happiness.

"Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God."

This passage speaks to us about our motives. The phrase "pure in heart" refers to someone who is not divided in his or her affections to God. We need to examine our lives. Why do we serve Him? Some serve God because they want to walk on streets of gold. Others serve Him because they want to escape the flames of hell. How many of us serve Him because we love Him? I tell my friends, if Jesus is not in heaven, I don't want to go there! Do you know why I don't want to go to hell? Jesus will not be there. Many times, we are not happy, because our heart is not pure. Our heart is divided. Our heart is in love with the world instead of its creator. We are in love with the blessings of God, but not the God of the blessing. Only God can make our heart pure. If we surrender to Him, He will not only purify our heart, but will also reveal Himself to us. In this life, we will see Him with our spiritual eyes. In eternity, we will see Him face to face. That is the reward of the pure of heart – YOU WILL SEE GOD! When we receive God's life, we are granted the ability to see God in all things.

Secret #7

Verse 9, reveals another secret to happiness.

"Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God."

The word peace in this verse refers to two things. It refers not only to the absence of problems. It also refers to the presence of good things. The peacemakers is the one who

maintains an environment that is conducive to growth and development. Kenneth Wuest translates this passage as:

"Blessed is the man that leaves this world a better place for others."

Happiness does not grow on the soil of sin. If there is hidden sin in our life, we should not expect to flourish. We must allow God to remove those things that hinder our development. Jesus came to save us from our sins. He knows that sin is a thief. Daily, it robs people of happiness, prosperity and joy. God knows that sin transforms us into a walking civil war. As the peacemaker, Jesus has come to rescue us from things that keep us from flourishing in life. He wants us to live in peace. Will you allow Him to restore your peace? What is the reward associated with being a peace maker – **YOU WILL BE CALLED CHILDREN OF GOD.**

Remember, the alternative titles for being a child of God are as follow:

- child of wrath
- child of the devil
- child of disobedience
- fool
- sinner
- enemy
- slave of sin
- unrighteous
- unbeliever
- alien
- stranger
- foreigner
- wicked
- lawless
- insubordinate
- unholy
- profane
- ignorant
- blasphemer.

As a child of God, you and I are granted access to all God's resources and wealth. Jesus was a peace-maker. In this passage, we are called to be peace-makers. When we receive God's life, we are granted the ability to maintain an environment that is conducive to growth. Jesus continues his sermon by turning to the theme of persecution.

"Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake.

Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you."

We now come to the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount. (10-12) What is going to happen when we take this message to the community? Some are going to receive it. Others are going to reject it. If they persecuted the author of the Sermon on the Mount, what do you think they will do to us? Jesus told his disciples, "You are going to be persecuted for doing the right thing." If you tell them that sin is a poor investment, and that it enslaves and robs the human race of happiness, it is possible that you will be rejected. We have been called to share the secrets of happiness! Jesus is now sending us to share the secret. Jesus states that our reward in heaven will be great if we accept the fact that our message will not always be understood or accepted. If we are not discouraged by rejection, we will reap great rewards.

Concluding Remarks

We have discussed SEVEN secrets to a happy life. Share them! Reach out and help others remove the obstacles that keep them from experiencing God's best. Tell them that God has good intentions! He desires that we be happy, have success, prosper, and know divine joy. Multiple times, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells His disciples: "You can be happy, prosper, have success and experience joy." This is God's message to us.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

You are the Salt of the Earth

(Three Responsibilities)

Scripture Reading: Matthew 5:13

The Sermon on the Mount is important because it summarizes the teachings of Jesus while on the earth. He was on a mountain. His disciples gathered. He revealed His heart. He spoke to them about the secrets of a happy life. Multiple times, Jesus used the word bless in order to emphasize His desire. The Christian life should be an adventure. We are not called to a cold, dead and dull religion. We are called into a living relationship with the manufacturer of the universe. Jesus sat with His disciples and said, “Men, there are seven attributes I want to work into your life. He did not send His disciples out empty-handed. He taught them, prepared them and then sent them out to conquer the world. Our calling is no different. God’s desire is to work in us so He can then work through us. Again, we have discussed seven attributes that will bring happiness, prosperity and success. One important note: God is the only one that can work these attributes into us.

What are we saying? God has a monopoly on eternal joy, peace and happiness. If you want these things, you must come to Him! After dealing with **receiving blessing** in verses 1-12, Jesus then moves on to **becoming a blessing** to others in verse 13. Jesus informs the disciples regarding their responsibility – You are Salt! In this study, I would like to focus on three uses of salt that help us to understand our responsibility as the “salt of the earth.”

1. Salt as Preservative
2. Salt used to Add flavor
3. Salt as Promoter of Growth

Jesus told His disciples: "You are the salt of the earth." When God takes control of our lives, He makes us “salt.” History reveals several things about the importance of salt. The Greeks purchased slaves using salt. The Romans paid their soldiers with salt. Contracts were sealed with salt. Salt was a very expensive commodity. When Jesus said, You are the salt... He was informing the disciples about their value. The focus of this passage is the purpose of salt. Jesus uses the metaphor of salt to identify the responsibility of the Christian. Jesus says to His disciples, "Your responsibility is to be salty."

Salt as a Preservative

In ancient times, salt served as an antiseptic. It was used to preserve meat. Many commentators make a connection between the preserving power of salt and the rotting condition of the culture of the time. The Roman culture was notorious for its idolatry, man-worship, immoral life-styles, rampant sin, decadence, and its love of pleasure. The Roman culture was rotting. The disciples had the responsibility of preserving the good in it. The church has been

given the power to preserve us from rotting. Stay away from the church for a while and you will see what I mean.

Dr. Francis Shaeffer, points out something interesting in His books on philosophy ... "any culture that rejects Christ eventually crumbles. Any culture or individual that excludes Christ eventually rots from the inside out." Jesus is the only one that can preserve and keep our life. Without Jesus, life is like a rotting piece of meat. The Christian is responsible for preserving his/her culture. HOW DO WE DO THIS? Spend time in God's presence, in God's Word and with God's people. Promote good music, good art, good literature, good entertainment, healthy environments and smile when you do it.

Salt as Flavor

There was a second use for salt. It was used as an ingredient that provides flavor for food. Most of us do not like bland food. We like to add spice to the food we consume. Life is like a plate of food. We should add flavor to life. Many have misunderstood us. The assumption is often made that allegiance to God equates the absence of joy. Nothing is further from the truth. The truth is that life without Christ has no flavor. Jesus is telling His disciples, when you step into any setting, you should be the life of the party. You should add flavor. Others should see your genuine joy. They should see in you a peace that surpasses all understanding. Unfortunately, many of us look like we just walked out of the funeral home. It seems like we just swallowed a sour lemon. We are not enjoying Christ. We may have religion, but not a relationship. Our life should be an adventure. We have the responsibility of adding flavor to any context in which we find ourselves.

How do we do this? Begin by showing up to the celebrations of life. Be present at celebrations such as birthdays, baby showers, marriages and other activities. People like to celebrate. Show up, smile and be yourself, be a Christian. Don't complain – Be the life, not the hag of the party. Be positive! I get excited when I hear someone say they went to a ball game or a family party. What a joy! Jesus went to a party in Cana. He did not lose His faith. He rejoiced with them that rejoiced!

Salt as Promoter of Growth

There was a third use for salt. Salt was used to promote growth. Salt, in small amounts, was used as a fertilizer. When a Christian touches something, it should grow. When a Christian is in right relationship, good things happen. What is Jesus saying? Without Me, there is no growth. There is no development. Christians are responsible for promoting growth in every field of knowledge. How do I do this? When we have an opportunity, we need to share our faith. Recommend a good book. Share our joy, our struggles and pain. Show others how God has intervened for us. Invite someone to join us to a Christian event. Ask someone to worship with us.

Jesus also provides His disciples with a warning. Don't be a saltless or tasteless Christian. Do not lose your flavor. How does a Christian lose his or her flavor? We stop seeking God's face. We stop meeting with God's people. We stop exposing ourselves to God's Word and are therefore unable to be a blessing to others.

Concluding Remarks

Jesus called His disciples the salt of the earth. Christians ought to have a positive effect on their world. We are to preserve the good in a culture. We should bring flavor to life. Everything we touch should flourish and grow. What is Jesus doing for us? He preserves us from rotting on the inside. He adds flavor to our life. He causes us to flourish. What is Jesus calling us to do? We have received blessing and are now called to share it with others.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

The Demon Possessed Man and the Legion

(Jesus Sets Him Free)

Scripture Reading: Luke 8:26-31

Recently, we celebrated the birthday of our nation. It was a celebration of freedom. We call it Independence Day because in 1776 we said no to tyranny. We said yes to the gift of freedom. The freedoms we enjoy were not cheap. Lives were lost and blood was shed. We enjoy the benefits of freedom because men and women made the ultimate sacrifice. As I speak to you, there are many who find themselves in harms' way in order to keep this nation free. I would remind you to pray for our soldiers. We honor those of you who have fought to make the blessings that we enjoy a possibility. Thank you for your sacrifice and courage. May God continue to strengthen and bless you. Our reading deals with freedom. We find a man living under the tyranny of Satan. We find a Savior wielding His power to rescue him. We discover a wonderful example of the kind of master-piece that God wants to create. As we review this story, I will focus on three important points.

1. The Human Condition
2. A Divine Solution
3. An Invitation

The Bible informs us that Jesus arrived at the region of the Gaderenes. (vs. 28) He had just demonstrated His power over nature. He had just silenced the winds. He had just calmed a storm. His disciples were in awe because of His demonstration of power. Can you imagine the disciples sitting in the boat, reflecting on the miracles they had just observed? There was more to come. The sun had set. It was dark. Suddenly, out of the black of night, the silence is broken. A man approaches Jesus.

- He is naked and disfigured.
- He is covered in blood.
- His body is full of scars and open wounds.
- The wounds are infected.

The Bible informs us that He fell before Jesus. Who is this man? The text provides a few clues. He is a slave to a horde of demons. He has come to Jesus because he is tired of living. The text reveals that he constantly cries and cuts himself with stones. He lives in the tombs among the dead. On various occasions, he was captured and chained, but to no avail. He would break the chains. People were frightened of him. Let's summarize his condition: He is a slave to a horde of demons, tired of living, suicidal, out of control, full of rage, rejected, friendless and

lonely. I do not know of anyone who lives in the tombs or is a slave to a horde of demons, but I believe this portion of scripture speaks to the human condition.

The Human Condition

There are people in this community who can relate to this man. They are tired of living. They feel rejected and are tired of being out of control. They do not have a sense of belonging. They are silent weepers. This man describes the condition of the human race as it stands outside of Christ. The Bible informs us that when we come into this world, we are dead. Without Christ, there is no peace, there is no rhyme or reason for human existence. Without him, there is no joy to be had. This story reveals what happens when we detach ourselves from Christ. Paul states that in union with Christ, all things are held together. Without Christ, everything falls apart. The story does not end here. Jesus walks into this man's life. When this man is in the darkest moment of his life, Jesus works a miracle. He grants him freedom. He breaks his chains. He gives him a new beginning. The man is therefore transformed.

The Divine Solution

The man came to Jesus because he had need of a savior. He could not change himself. He was powerless to transform his own life. He humbled himself and fell before Christ. Jesus worked a miracle. The Bible reports to us that this man was being afflicted by a legion (6,000) of demons. When he came before Jesus, the devils began to speak. The demons were terrified at the presence of Jesus. They begged Him. Visualize it - 6,000 demons bowed before Jesus. Jesus commanded them to leave. He transformed a slave into a master-piece. The Bible informs us that the man sat at the feet of Jesus. He was clothed. He was clean. He was in his right mind. He was completely restored. He found freedom in Christ. You might ask, "What does all this have to do with me? Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever! The miracle worker is present. What he did for this man, He can do for us. He is ready to restore order and will do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

The Invitation

What happened when the man received his miracle? He asked Jesus if He could travel with Him. What did Jesus tell him? Jesus said no. Jesus told him that He should stay and share the good news. Tell your neighbors about the great things God has done for you, Jesus said. Be a model of my handiwork. Tell men that I transform everything I touch! This story invites us to share our experience with others. This story invites us to surrender to the Christ that can transform.

Concluding Remarks

Nothing has changed. The Christ who rescued a man from a legion of 6,000 demons is present. He wants to work a miracle in our life. Notice that Jesus did not highlight the man's past. He gave him hope for the future. He focused on restoration. Jesus wants to bring order into our lives. He wants to restore us completely. He wants to create a master-piece. He wants to set us free so we can make a difference in the lives of others.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

The Parable of the Sower

(Four Types of Soil)

Scripture Reading: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

The Bible declares that the Christian life should be a life of abundance. Jesus told His disciples:

“I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.”

What is meant by abundance? Do we have any examples in human history of a man who lived life in abundance? Jesus is our model. He lived a life of abundance! He came to teach us how to live. When He was born, a choir of angels sang for Him. At the age of 12, the doctors of the law marveled at His wisdom. At the age of 30, the heavens opened and Father spoke to confirm His mission. The Spirit filled Him without measure. Angels ministered to Him in the wilderness.

During the last three years of His life, He raised the dead, cleansed the leper, gave sight to the blind, opened deaf ears, and made the lame to walk. Demons trembled in His presence. He controlled the wind and sea. He converted water into wine and fed the multitudes. We could give many other examples. How many of you would say that Jesus lived a life of abundance? I WANT YOU TO NOTICE SOMETHING VERY IMPORTANT. After Jesus completed his work, He looked over at the disciples and said: It’s your turn ...

“Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go unto my Father. (John 14:12) “

Jesus turned to His disciples and said, “It’s your turn!” We are called to be channels of the Life of Christ. Jesus wants to live His abundant life through us. This is living a life of abundance - to be a channel for Christ! Will you allow His power and blessing to flow through you?

I often hear people say, I’m a channel, but there is neither power nor blessing flowing! When I compare my life with the life of Jesus, there is great gulf of difference. Why is it that I cannot live the way Jesus lived? This is the question we want to address in this study. In the parable we have read, Jesus explains why we are often unfruitful or unproductive. The passage explains why adventure and abundance are often missing in the Christian life. I would like to deal with three points related to the parable.

1. Its Purpose
2. Its Meaning
3. Its Promise

Its Purpose

What is the purpose of a parable? The Bible informs us that Jesus was sitting on a boat by the Sea of Galilee. There was a great multitude present. They had come from many places. We are told that Jesus taught the crowds using parables. Why did He use parables? According to Matthew 13:11, Jesus used parable in order to accomplish two things:

- To reveal His secrets to some
- To hide His secrets from others

The theme of this parable is the heart. If our heart is ready to receive, Jesus will reveal His secrets. If our heart is not prepared, His secrets will be hidden from us. Paul writes that the devil blinds the heart/mind so that the sinner does not understand. Here we have an example of Jesus hiding secrets from the listener because their heart was not ready. After dealing with the purpose of a parable, Jesus shares its content.

It's Meaning: Four Types of Soil (Heart)

While Teresa and I visited Israel, we had the opportunity to stand where Jesus stood when he addressed his disciples. To this day, there are vast open fields where farmers sow their seed. While Jesus taught the multitude, there may have been sowers planting their seeds at a distance. Everyone could see them. Jesus probably pointed to the sowers and said, "Can you see the sower?" The seed is being sown in four types of soil:

FIRST TYPE OF SOIL: The seed is falling on the way side. The soil is hard. Do you know why the seed is not going to survive? The oxen are stepping on the seed. The birds are eating it.

SECOND TYPE OF SOIL: Now, notice the seed is being sown in a rocky place. Do you know what is going to happen to that seed? It's going to grow quickly, but when the sun comes out, it will dry up. Do you know why it is not going to survive? It has no root.

THIRD TYPE OF SOIL: Now, notice the seed being planted among the thorns. What is going to happen? The seed will grow! Do you know why it is not going to survive? The thorns are going to suffocate it.

FOURTH TYPE OF SOIL: Now notice, the seed falling on good ground. Do you know what is going to happen? The seed is going to grow and produce 30, 60 and 100 fold. Immediately after sharing the parable, Jesus walked away.

NOTICE: JESUS GAVE NO EXPLANATION to the multitude. The Bible informs us that after the parable was delivered, Jesus returned to the house. Everyone walked away confused including the disciples. It was only when the disciples approached Jesus for an explanation of the parable that they understood. (Mk. 4:10; Lk. 8:9) What is the point here? If our heart is not right, even if we listen to the message, we will not appreciate it or enjoy its blessing until Jesus reveals meaning. The entire multitude received the Word, only those who sought fellowship with the messenger understood its meaning. Jesus explained why people fail to live fruitful lives. Jesus explained that there were four types of people present in the crowd.

The first group (First Type of Soil) consisted of those with a hardened heart. They could not experience blessing because they did not want God. They refused to submit to God's Word. They heard the message, but did not profit from its content. The devil stole the seed from them. If we reject the fountain of joy, we should not expect happiness. Luke tells us that these people were lost. These are the people that will never experience abundant life.

The second group (Second Type of Soil) present in the crowd consisted of those who heard and received the word. Then come the trials, problems and storms of life. They welcomed the blessing of God, but were too weak to face the storm. They had no depth. If we dug into the soil of their heart, we would discover rocks that kept them from enjoying the blessing of God. As long as the rocks of hidden sin are present in our life, it will be difficult to enjoy God's best. These people may have had religion, but not a relationship with God. These were the people that were ready to be blessed by God, but not to suffer for Him. These are the people ready to serve as long as there was no inconvenience. These could not experience abundant life.

The third group (Third Type of Soil) consisted of those who heard and received the word, but remain unfruitful. There were signs of life, but no fruit. They were divided in purpose. They were too busy to seek God's face or meet with God's people. They were too busy to read and study God's word. They were the crowd that focused on the here and now. They lived for a house, a car, pleasure, or a multitude of other things. They lived for themselves. They may have attended a religious service, but their heart was somewhere else. This is the person who heard God's word, but remained unchanged by it. The writer to the Hebrews states, "They heard the word preached, but it did not profit them." Jesus said, the seed was suffocated by their pursuit of wealth and pleasure. This group cannot know a life of abundance.

The fourth group (Fourth Type of Soil) consists of those who were doing four things.

- They hear the Word
- They receive the Word
- They understand the Word
- They practice the Word

These are those who were productive and prospered. These are those who enjoyed God's best. These are those who became God's channel. They lived a life of abundance and adventure.

The Promise of the Parable

To which group do we belong? What can be done in order to make the heart good ground? - NOTHING! Jesus is not only the one who sows the seed, but is also the one who works the soil. I have often heard people tell me. Where is the blessing? Where is joy, peace and happiness in my life? Why is my life so dull? My response has always been the same. We must surrender to the one who works the soil? Only Jesus can chase away the birds that steal the seed. Only Jesus can give depth to our life and remove the stones that keep away the blessing. Only Jesus can remove the thorns that suffocate growth. What is the promise of the parable? Jesus, the sower, is ready to cultivate our heart and give us a life of abundance.

Concluding Remarks

We must ask God to do what we cannot do for yourself? The secret to a fruitful, productive and happy life is to surrender to the sower of the seed.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

The Kingdom of God

(Men as Sown Seed)

Matthew 13:24-30; 13:36-43

One of the central themes of the Bible is the kingdom of God. There are over 300 references to the word “kingdom.” In the Old Testament, the patriarchs, prophets, priests, and kings all spoke about the coming of God’s kingdom and rule. In the New Testament, Jesus, John the Baptist and the apostles also address the topic. What is the kingdom of God? A kingdom consists of two components: A king (Jesus) and His subjects. (The believer) What must I do to become a subject in the kingdom?

- Repent! (Release/Abandon your sin)
- Receive the King’s pardon
- Receive the King’s gifts of eternal life and the Holy Spirit
- Receive the King’s robe of righteousness

What does God expect from me if I am already a subject in His kingdom?

- Maintain a relationship with Him. He has promised the Kingdom to those that love Him. (James)
- Do His will! Because not all that say Lord, Lord will enter His kingdom, but those that do His Will. (Matthew)
- Seek fellowship with those ruled by Him because we are told to seek first His kingdom and all else will be added to us.
- Align yourself to His moral law – Jesus said seek first his righteousness ... and all else will be added to us

If you will do these things, God will reveal His secrets to you. In this study, I would like to focus on three points.

1. The Purpose for the use of the Parable
2. The Message of the Parable
3. The Promise of the Parable

The Purpose of a Parable

Jesus used a parable to speak to the multitude. There are two primary reasons for their use. If the heart is closed, Jesus will use parables to hide His truth. But, if the heart is open, He

will reveal secrets. The condition of our heart is going to determine whether God reveals or conceals His secrets. If our heart belongs to Him, He fills it. If your heart is closed, we will walk away empty. This is why Jesus said, "He that hath an ear, let him hear."

The Meaning of the Parable

Jesus explained the parable to His disciples. This is a story about two sowers who planted two types of seed. The first sower planted wheat in His field. While he rested, an enemy (a second sower) crept into the first sower's field and planted tares. (poisonous weeds) A few months later, when the crop had grown, the good man's servants noticed that there were tares growing with the wheat. The servants suggest that the tares be pulled up. The owner of the field suggests that they be allowed to grow together until the harvest.

What happened on the day of harvest? When the harvest came, the reapers gathered up the tares and burned them up. When the harvest came, the reapers also gathered the wheat into the barns. Notice that Jesus ends His explanation at this point.

Everyone probably walked away puzzled, including the disciples. It was later that Jesus expounded the meaning of the parable. Jesus knew who had an open heart. How many of you know that life often does not make sense until Christ becomes our teacher. Life remains a mystery. When Christ comes, he brings meaning to life. The Samaritan woman said: When Messiah comes, He will explain all things to us. This is precisely what Jesus did for His disciples.

Later, Jesus explained the parable by pointing out its details. God planted good seed. In this parable, the good seed refers to the children of His kingdom. Satan planted bad seed. In this parable, the bad seed refers to the children of Satan's kingdom. Now you have two kingdoms growing on the same field. What should the Christian do with the bad seed? Nothing! Leave it alone. The bad seed can only produce one thing – poison. God's angels will take care of the bad seed.

What is the point? You will have to put up with evil until judgment day. Don't expect perfection. Among the Christian, there will always be those who look like Christians, smell like Christians, talk like Christians, but are lost. They may have religion, but no relationship. They may hear, understand, but never surrender. They worship with their lips, but their heart is far from God. They can only do one thing – produce poison. (sin) God will allow them to remain until judgment day. Then the angels will take care of them.

The Promise of the Parable

God has promised a reward to both seeds. God is going to reward both the good and bad seed. He will mete out His rewards on judgment day. What has God promised the good seed? (the Christian) He has promised to gather them to Himself. He has promised that they will shine forth as the sun. The good seed will glorify God and enjoy His presence forever. He offers the Christian: joy unspeakable, a peace that surpasses all understanding, a life of abundance on the earth, and the glories of heaven.

What has God promised the bad seed? These are they who have rejected God's offer of salvation. The angels will gather them. They shall be judged because of their rejection and

disobedience to Christ. They will be cast into hell. There will be weeping. They will gnash their teeth. What kind of seed are we? All of us were born into the kingdom of Satan. We were born into sin! Our reward is condemnation and eternal death.

What is the mystery revealed in this parable? **Bad seed can become good seed.** A child of the devil can become a child of God. If you are bad seed, you can be translated into the kingdom of God. You can be rewarded with salvation: forgiveness and eternal life. How can I become a child of God's kingdom?

1. Repent (Acknowledge and abandon sin.),
2. Receive God's forgiveness
3. Enjoy God's gifts of gifts of Eternal Life and the Holy Spirit
4. Acknowledge that only Jesus can rescue you from the power of Satan and translate you into His kingdom.

Concluding Remarks

As Christians, we are the good seed that God has planted into this world. We are here to make a difference. Our task is to warn this community that a day of judgment is coming. The angels are going to cast the wicked into hell. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. In that place of torment, the fire is not quenched and the worm does not die. We have been assigned an awesome responsibility. We are to inform all those around us regarding God's desire to rescue the human race from judgement. We are called to alter the eternal destiny of the unrepentant. We must inform others that God has no desire that any should perish. God has the power to transform. God is offering the gift of forgiveness. Do you know anyone who needs to hear about the hope God is offering? Do you know anyone who needs to hear about the wonderful love of God?

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

The Kingdom of God

(A Grain of Mustard Seed – A Measure of Leaven)

Scripture Reading: Matthew 13:31-33

Jesus is sitting on a boat. The multitudes gather. Matthew points out that Jesus speaks in parables in order to reveal mysteries about the kingdom of God. Jesus wants to reveal secrets that have been hidden from the foundation of the world. What secrets does He reveal? They are secrets that deal with how God's Kingdom works. How many of you want to see God's kingdom grow? Are you planting the seed of God's word? In this study, we will review two prophetic parables. The passage indicates that the kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed (vs. 31) Jesus is the sower. The seed is good. The ground is good. The results are good. A mustard tree grows. (vs. 32) The birds of the air come and lodge in its branches and find rest. The birds find food and protection from the sun. What is the secret revealed in this prophetic parable? The church can expect external growth! The seed in this parable is being interpreted as the church! It began with one seed – Jesus. After his death and resurrection, there are 120 believers. Peter planted the seed (two sermons) and the church grew to over 8,000. The church members planted the seed and five years later, the church in Jerusalem grew to 50,000.

In 313 with the edict of Toleration there was 10 million Christians. By the year 1000, the church had grown to about 50 million. By the end of the 1700, there was 215 million Christians. By the year 1900, there was 500 million professing Christians. Today, there are approximately 2 billion Christians on the earth. Do not allow anyone to tell you that the church is dying. Do not allow anyone to tell you that the church is losing its impact and power. The church has been planted by God and it is growing! It all began with a tiny mustard seed. Today, the church of 2 billion strong offers the world: rest, protection, and nourishment. This prophetic parable speaks about the **outward growth of the church**.

Where is the church growing today? It is growing where the seed of God's Word is being sown! Sometimes, we are like the man who was disappointed because his field did not produce watermelons. The problem is that he never planted any seeds. How many of us want to see growth? Are we planting the seed? There is no problem with God's good seed. His word does not return void. The problem is that the sowers are sleeping. I am holding millions of peaches in my hand. You are asking, where? You have only one seed in the palm of your hand. If I plant it, it becomes a tree that will give you fruit for 30 years. There is power in this seed just like there is latent power in the seed of God's Word. The writer to the Hebrews tells us that God brought the worlds into being by His word. Do you believe God's word has power?

- Plant it at home.
- Plant it in your children.
- Plant it in your heart. It will change you forever!

The second prophetic parable informs us that the kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till the whole was leavened. The leaven permeates the entire lump of dough. What secret does this parable hold? This prophetic parable speaks about the **inward growth of the church**. The prophecy reveals that the church will experience not only outward, but also inward growth. The leaven in this parable has been interpreted as the permeating effect of God's power. The same power that raised Christ from the dead is working in us today. He that began a good work in us will complete it! God will transform us from the inside out. All we have to do is surrender!

Are we living up to the prophecy of Jesus? Are we growing inwardly? Are we flourishing? These two parables ought to make us optimist. They ought to encourage us because we have a bright future ahead of us. A few days ago, I had a couple of people come to my door. They told me they were going to share the good news about the kingdom. I was interested. I listened. They spoke about the wretched condition of the world. They stated that the world belonged to the devil and that there would be earthquakes and wars. They said there was no peace, joy or happiness to be had. They declared that crime was going to continue to increase and that men live without restraint. We are seeing things that have never been seen before, they said. I asked them, "where is the good news?" Their message was all bad news. They predicted disorder, chaos, confusion, and emptiness. They painted a dark picture of the world. The truth be told. They are only describing the kingdom of Satan.

Things are different in the kingdom of God! Our world belongs to God. In God's kingdom there is peace, joy and happiness. In God's kingdom, life has meaning. In God's kingdom, He is in control of all the details of life. He has a plan for us. It is the kingdom of Satan that is bankrupt, not the kingdom of God. God's kingdom is growing. We live from glory to glory. We are being renewed from day to day. We are experiencing joy unspeakable and are blessed with a peace that surpasses all understanding. We are being conformed to the image of Christ. We have nothing to fear.

If you want to know what the devil is doing in his kingdom, read the newspaper or talk to the people that came to my door. If you want to know what God is up to in His kingdom, read the Bible! The parables we have reviewed speak to us about VICTORY. We are on the winning team. Greater is He that is in us than he that is in the world. If God be for us, who can be against us? We are more than conquerors! We can do all things through Christ who gives us strength! Those living under the rule of Christ enjoy an open heaven.

Concluding Remarks

God is at work. He has given us His word so we can plant it in the hearts of men. – Are we planting? He has made us seeds so we can flourish where ever we are. – Are we flourishing? He has promised both outward and inward growth – Are we growing and developing? God has already done all He is going to do; now we must respond to His command to surrender. God wants His church to become a place where others can find rest, protection, and nourishment. If we are in union with Christ, we should expect blessing, growth and victory.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Jesus Calms the Storm

(His Power over Nature)

Scripture Reading: Mateo 8:23-27

How do we handle the storms that come into our life? There are many examples in the Bible of men and women who struggled when faced with a crisis. Pharaoh faces a serious problem – It was his storm. He complained and murmured against the will of God. He hardened his heart. We all know how the story ends. God turned his paradise into a desert. His rebellion led him to ruin. Job also faced trials. In contrast to Pharaoh, Job submitted to the will of God. He lost his possessions, his health, his family, but he remained faithful. Listen to the words of Job,

“Naked came I into this world, and naked will I leave. The Lord giveth, the Lord taketh away. Blessed be His name.”

Job understood the sovereignty of God. He understood God had a plan and purpose. Job’s story had a happy ending. God fully restored and blessed him beyond belief. Well, we know how Pharaoh and Job handled the problems they faced, but how do we face our fears? In this life no one escapes the storms! Jesus told his disciples. The rain will fall. The torrents will come. The winds will blow. They will beat against your house. No one is exempt. Trials will come to all! Today, we read a beautiful story that addresses our response to trials. In this study, I would like to focus on three points.

1. The Storm
2. The Lesson in the Storm
3. Divine Intervention

The Storm

Jesus and His disciples boarded a small boat. It was getting dark when they sailed across the Sea of Galilee. The disciples were confident. They had just seen Jesus cleanse a leper. They had witnessed the healing of the centurion’s son and watched Jesus restore Peter’s mother in law. They had just walked away from the multitudes where Jesus touched and healed thousands. Jesus had demonstrated his power over sickness. The disciples were probably thrilled after watching the Master in action? They were excited when they entered the boat. The last thing they expected was a storm! Verse 24 tells us that it happened “suddenly.” This is how the storms charge into our lives? They give no warning. There is no prior announcement. The trial that came to the disciples was “sudden.” A great storm was unleashed. The waves tossed the small boat back and forth and it began to sink. The night was cold. The waves were assaulting. The disciples were in terror. How did they respond? Some said: “Lord, Save us for we perish!” Others said: “Master! Don’t you care that we perish? We should not be too critical with their response. How do we respond when the storms come into our lives? We are no different. We

feel fear. We say: “Lord, Don’t you care for us?” We say: “Lord, why are you asleep? It is natural for us to become anxious. But, we forget that He is in the boat with us. The Lord does not leave us in the storm.

The Lesson of the Storm

Where was Jesus when the disciples were in the grip of fear? He was asleep. The storm did not awaken him. He did not panic. He was not shaken by the fear of death. He is simply at rest. Listen to what Jesus tells His disciples?

“Why do you fear; you of little faith? Where is your faith?”

Jesus spoke to them about faith. It appears the disciples lost something in the storm. They had lost sight of the fact that God cares. They had lost sight of the fact that God was aware of all the details of life. The storm was simply an object lesson about faith in God. Have you ever noticed that when our eyes are fixed on Jesus, we have faith. When we fix our eyes on the problem, it seems that faith disappears. In the storm faced by the disciples, Jesus takes the opportunity to teach a lesson. God is in control. God is not caught by surprise. God can be trusted. There is no need to fear. God only does His will. John Wesley once found himself in a similar experience. He was on a ship that was sinking in the middle of the ocean. Wesley writes that he heard people crying on the ship. There was mass confusion. In the midst of panic and fear, he was struck to hear a group of people singing. When he found them, he could see no trace of fear on their faces. When he asked them, “why are you so calm”, they answered: God is doing His will. Wesley points out:

“One group was focusing on the raging sea; the other was fixed on the God of the raging sea.”

The Bible informs us that “God works all things together for good to those that love Him.” The man of faith can declare: “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” The woman of faith can say, “If God be for us, who can stand against us? God uses the storms of life to reveal Himself. God allows storms to come so we can learn to trust. I think the message is clear: When the rain falls, the sea rages, the wind blows and the waves beat against your ship, remember, you are not alone! The Master of the Sea is present.

Divine Intervention

Jesus stood, rebuked the sea and told the wind to hush. Nature obeyed its creator! The men on the boat marveled! Listen to the words of the disciples:

“Who is this? He commands nature and it obeys Him!”

Jesus is the one that calms the storms in our lives. Too often, we forget that God wants to intervene. I read an article sometime back. The year was 1993. A young man was running from the law. He had eloped with his girlfriend. Family and friends were frantically looking for him. A few days prior to running away, the young man visited his doctor. The doctor discovered he had a serious case of cancer that required immediate attention. The police were looking for him to save his life, not to punish him. I wonder how many people have misunderstood God’s intentions. God wants to save us, restore us, renew us, revive us, and bless us. God wants to

rescue us from the storm. The disciples told Jesus, “Don’t you care that we are going to perish? They failed to see His love for them.

Concluding Remarks

Maybe today you are facing a trial. The winds are blowing. The sea is raging. Maybe you are afraid. Remember, he is present. Jesus is aware of all the details of your life. He can be trusted! He will unveil Himself in the storm. He is ready rescue you.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Jesus Heals a Man Born Blind

Scripture Reading: John 9:1-12

Two things ought to happen as we study God's word. We should gain a greater vision of Christ and we should become aware of our desperate need for a Savior. There is a message in every story we study. I hope we hear it. I hope we are moved to action by it. Have you noticed that it is much easier to talk about problems than it is to solve them? As I read this narrative, I was reminded of all the committees in which I have served. A group is selected to study a need. There is a lot of discussion. We try to get to the root of the problem so we can find a solution. We discuss theories, but fail to act. It is alright to problem-solve as LONG as our talking leads to walking. We see something similar in the story we have read today. The disciples want to talk about the root causes of a problem, but Jesus wants to take action. In this study, I will focus on three points:

1. The Human Condition
2. The Divine Solution
3. A Call to Action.

Jesus had just left the temple and met with the religious community. They were not happy with his sermon. In fact, they took up stones in order to kill him. Jesus walked through the crowd and left the temple. Now, I do not know about you, but if someone made an attempt to kill me, I would probably keep right on walking until I left Jerusalem. Jesus did not do this. The Bible reports that "as Jesus is passing by, He becomes aware of a need." He sees a man that moves him to compassion. Who was the man? This man's parents rejoiced when he came into the world. The midwife said, "It is a boy" and they were elated. Has anyone here ever had this experience? How did you feel? A happy occasion! This is how the parents in this story felt. But, the tears of joy become tears of sorrow when the parents discovered the baby was blind. Can you image? As a child, he spent a lot of time at home. He could hear other children play, but could not participate. He was probably isolated from others. As a teenager, he did not have many friends. He had no prospects of a girlfriend or wife. The story gets worse. His parents could not support him and he had to beg for charity. I cannot imagine the pain and humiliation?

The Human Condition

I see a portrait of the human condition. Our community is full of people who suffer in secret. People know well the pain of loneliness and rejection. They know what it means to be excluded. They weep in silence. Do you know anyone like this? They are not aware of the fact that God is reaching out to them. This is the man for whom Jesus felt compassion. Instead of running from a failed attempt on His life, Jesus focused on blessing a man in need! While Jesus observed the man, the disciples interrupted. They wanted to have a committee meeting. "Jesus, before you take action, can we ask you a question?"

“Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind? (2)

Jesus was focused on the man’s need. The disciples were looking for the root causes of sin. While Jesus was thinking about the man’s pain and suffering, the disciples were looking for a culprit. Jesus wanted to work a miracle, but the disciples want to speculate about the doctrine of sin and its consequences. Jesus wanted to act, the disciples want to talk. It is not enough to know that those around are suffering. We can sit here and discuss the human condition, but until we act, we are no different than these disciples. Jesus had to adjust their thinking. Listen to the correction.

“Neither hath this man sinned. Neither hath his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be made manifest in him. (3) I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work. (4) As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world. (5)”

Jesus points out that trials are an opportunity for God to manifest Himself.

The Divine Solution

Jesus wants His disciples to forget about who is responsible for this man’s condition.

“Stop focusing on the source of the pain. Stop focusing on the failure. Stop focusing on sin. We are running out of time – Do God’s work while there is time.”

What do we think about when we see a person struggling? What do we think when we see someone fail? Do we wonder why “God is judging?” Do we feel superior because “the rod of discipline” is being applied? It is a grave sin to rejoice when others fall. We do not have time to waste. Stop trying to figure out if the problem is God’s disciple, an attack of the devil or a trial sent by God. Jesus looked beyond the failure, the sin and focused on the sinner and his need. What is our focus? What do we see? Jesus did not emphasize the problem, He offered a solution.

A Call to Action

Jesus took action. What did He do? He spit on the ground, made clay and anointed the eyes of the blind man. (6) Jesus said to his disciples, men it’s time to stop talking and start walking. The master has not changed! He is the same yesterday, today and forever. If we come to him today, he will not highlight our sin, our failure, or our past. Two thousand years ago, Jesus stopped to work a miracle for a blind man. He is present to do the same for us. His hand is extended. He is aware of our pain. He is the solution. Jesus gave the man instructions.

“Go! Wash in the pool of Siloam. He went his way therefore, and washed, and came seeing.” (7)

Jesus offered a blind man a new life. All the man had to do was obey. The Bible reports that the neighbors were confused. Is not this he that sat and begged? (8) Some said, This is he. Others said, He is like him. The recipient of the miracle said: I am he. Curiosity opened a door. Tell us more, they asked. How were your eyes opened? The blind man gave his testimony. He told them,

“A man that is called Jesus made clay. He anointed mine eyes. He said Go to the pool of Siloam, and wash: I went. I washed. I received my sight.”

His neighbors wanted to know where to find Jesus. They asked, “Where is he?” He said, I know not. (12) The first people that will notice that God is at work in our life are the neighbors. What do our neighbors say about us? Do they see the difference? Are they asking about our miracle? We are called to testify regarding the power of God. Are the neighbors asking: “Where is Jesus?”

Concluding Remarks

We have focused on three points - the human condition, the divine solution and a call to action. Are you struggling? Maybe you are in need of a miracle. God is reaching out to you. He is not here to focus on your sin or failure. He wants to restore, renew and revive.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

The Parable of the Nobleman and the 3 Reports

(Occupy Until I Come)

Scripture Reading: Luke 19:12-13

Jesus spoke to a multitude standing outside the home of a man names Zaccheus. Passover was five days away and the people had great expectation. The multitudes thought that the kingdom of Israel was about to be restored. They thought Jesus was going to become an earthly king. They thought Rome was going to be conquered and the Jews would once again become a world power. The Jews were expecting world domination, but Jesus came the first time to accomplish heart domination. He did not come to set up a Jewish kingdom. He came to establish His rule in the hearts of men and women who desired a new beginning. You see Jesus must first do a work in us before He can change the world through us. This is what Jesus is doing today. He is working in us so He can work through us. What was the confusion outside the home of Zaccheus? People thought the end of the world was coming. It is no different today. There are many people running around asking, “When is Jesus coming? Are the signs fulfilled.” According to the parable we have read, we are not to focus on “when he returns.” We should be concerned about what to do until He returns. In this study, we will review a parable in which Jesus speaks to us about God’s expectation.

I will focus on three points:

1. Observe
2. Interpret
3. Apply

Observations

Jesus dispelled the confusion. The crowds misunderstood. They thought Jesus was saying the kingdom was about to be re-established. (11) How did Jesus respond? He used a parable. I call it the Parable of the Nobleman and the three reports.

“A certain nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom, and to return.” (12)

What did the nobleman do before He left? Firstly, He gave his ten servants each ten pounds. A pound was equivalent to about \$165 U.S. dollars. This was about 3 months’ wages. Secondly, He gave them a command. He said unto them, Occupy till I come. (13) The passage informs us that the nobleman’s citizens hate him. They sent a message after him, saying, “We will not have this man to reign over us.” (14) After he received a kingdom, he returned. What happened when the nobleman returned? He commanded his servants to be called unto him. He wanted to know how much every man had gained by trading. (15) The ten servants delivered their report. Those reports were divided into three categories.

Report #1: The first servant delivered his report:

“Lord, I made a profit of 1000%.” (16) What was his reward? “Well done, thou good servant: because thou hast been faithful in a very little, have thou authority over ten cities.” (17)

Report #2: The second servant delivered his report:

“Lord, I made a profit of 500%.” What is his reward? “Well done, Be thou also over five cities.”

Report #3: The third servant delivered his report:

“Lord, I didn’t make a profit. I hid your money in a napkin.” (20) I did not want to take any risks. I was afraid because you are an austere man. You take up that thou layedst not down, and reap that thou didst not sow. (21) He said, Lord, I know how you think! How was he reprov’d? “Out of your own mouth will I judge thee. You are a wicked servant. You knew all these things about me. Your knowledge did not move you to action. (22) Wherefore then gavest not thou my money into the bank, that at my coming I might have required mine own with usury? (23) Jesus tells him, “You used an excuse to remain inactive.” What is his reward? “Take from him the pound. Give his pound to him that hath ten pounds.” (24)

The crowd interrupted: (Lord, he hath ten pounds.) “That’s not fair!” Jesus informed them regarding His operating procedures!

“Unto every one which hath shall be given; From him that hath not, even that he hath shall be taken away from him.” (26) Jesus also announced the punishment against the rebels. But those mine enemies, which would not that I should reign over them, Bring hither, and slay them before me. (27)

The Parable Interpreted

How should we interpret this parable? A man left to receive a kingdom and promised to return. Jesus left to receive a kingdom. Jesus is going to return. The man left His servants two things:

Jesus left each servant money and a command to “do business” until he returned. What is Jesus saying to the crowd listening? I am about to leave to receive a kingdom. I am giving you the task to do business until I return. When I return, each one of you will have to give me a report. No excuses will be accepted. All those who oppose my rule will be destroyed. Jesus used the parable to explain an order of events

What does all this mean to us? Two thousand years ago, Jesus left to receive a kingdom. He was made Lord and Christ. He established His kingdom. He is expanding the borders of his Kingdom, but it will not be fully established until he returns. Until the full establishment of his rule, we have been assigned the task of occupying until He returns. According to this parable, he has left us a few thing: Gifts / Talents / Skills / Abilities / Money and a command to do business. When he returned, he will ask us for a report.

Applications

I think there are several things we must do. First, we must do an inventory of our gifts. What gifts have we been granted? Each person has received a tool or tools of service from God. Some may say, “I don’t have any gifts to use or wealth to give.” What have we received to invest? We have been saved, sanctified and filled with the Holy Spirit! We are inhabited by God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God has deposited his fullness into our life. He has given us an inheritance. We are recipients of the unsearchable riches of Christ. He has given us all spiritual blessings. Paul tells us that, “Christ has become poor that we might be rich.”

Secondly, we must begin to share and use our gift. These gifts must be used in the Father’s business. What is the Father’s business? It is to introduce Christ, disciple Christians and reform culture. We are called to be agents of change. We are called to be channels of blessing. We are called to transform what we touch. These gifts must be used in the service of God. Can you preach? – preach! Can you teach? – teach! Can you serve? – serve! Can you encourage? – encourage! Can you sing – sing! Can you worship using an instrument? – use your gift! Has God blessed you with resources, then give. Don’t wrap your gift in a napkin and say to Jesus, “I did not use it, because the pastor did not let me. I didn’t use it, because I did not feel like it. I did not know I had an assignment. Let me ask you a question. Is there anyone here that does not have a gift? I know a lot of people who do not use their gift, but have never met anyone without a gift.

What about rewards? The parable seems to indicate that there will be different levels of reward. Some will be kings over 10 cities. Some will be kings over 5 cities. Some will be kings over no cities. Some will be destroyed. Remember, what we do in time, will echo into eternity. How you spend your life in time will influence your rewards in heaven. We are not speaking about salvation – We are saved by grace. We are speaking about the rewards of the Christian. Jesus also makes reference to the ungodly that reject God’s rule – He will take care of them. What is your report going to look like when Jesus reads it? Will you tell Him you were afraid? Will you tell Him you did not want to take risks?

Concluding Remarks

We have discussed a parable about three reports. Our king has given us gifts / tools. Our king has commanded us to “do business.” Our king will require a report. How are we doing? Have we discovered our gifts? When we give our report, what will Jesus say? I hope we hear Him say, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Jesus Trains His Disciples

Scripture Reading: Matthew 10:1, 7, 8

Jesus trained His disciples to make a difference. What a privilege to be chosen by Christ. How many of you think God still calls people to serve Him? What kind of people does He call? Does He call perfect people? No, He calls people who are still under construction! He calls people willing to surrender! We have read a few verses that deal with the process of preparation that has to occur before we can become useful in God's service. In this study, I will deal with three things Jesus does in order to make us tools of transformation.

1. He Prepares Us
2. He Empowers Us
3. He Works through Us

He Prepares Us

How did Jesus prepare His disciples? When we look at the life of these men, we discover they had two important things in common.

1. They were witnesses of the power of Christ.
2. They repeatedly heard His message.

What did they witness? They saw Jesus convert water into wine. They were present when He gave sight to the blind, made the deaf hear, and the dumb to speak. They saw Him heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead and cast out devils. They were in the boat when Jesus calmed the storm. Once again, the disciples were witnesses of the power of Christ. What about us? Are we witnesses of His power? Paul informs us that the same power operating in Christ when He conquered death is at work in us right now! There is resurrection power at work in us! Again in his letter to the Corinthians, Paul informs us that we are being changed from glory to glory. That's the power of Christ at work in us. A thousand times a day, God is demonstrating His power. Are we experiencing that power?

The second thing evident in the life of the disciples is a constant exposure to the Word of God. They heard John's testimony. They heard Jesus speak to them about Nicodemus. They heard Jesus talk about the Samaritan woman. They heard his sermons in the synagogues of Nazareth and Capernaum. They heard the content of His Sermon on the Mount. They heard divine secrets when Jesus explained the parables. The disciples were constantly hearing the Word of God. What about us? Are we hearing God's Word? How does God prepare us to do divine work? He makes us witnesses of His power and speaks to us through His Word! You cannot give away what you have not experienced. Note the pattern.

He allowed the disciples to watch Him. He allowed them to hear Him. Jesus modeled for His disciples because He wanted them to do the works He did. There is no retirement for the

Christian. We are privileged to do divine work until we see God face to face. Jesus in essence says to His disciples: NOW, It's your turn! To this point, you have been observers. Today, you will become participants.

Why do we gather? Why do we listen to sermons, attend Sunday school, do book reviews and have fellowship? We are being prepared to do divine work. Jesus does not just send disciples out without any preparation. It is no different with us. He prepares us by making us witnesses of His power and then exposing us to His word. This is what he is doing in us!

He Empowers Us

After preparing his disciples, he then empowered them to act. Jesus gave them authority. Why do His disciples need authority? Listen to the task Jesus gave his disciples:

“Preach, heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils, freely ye have received, freely give.”

If we have received this assignment, do you think we might need some power to carry it out? Has the assignment changed? No, we still preach. We heal the sick spiritually, psychologically and even physically. We cleanse the leper when he/she receives the forgiveness of Christ. We raise the dead, when we introduce Christ. We cast out devils in the name of Jesus. The task has not changed! Jesus said, “

Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believes in me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go unto my Father. (John 14:12)

Again, Jesus declared,

“Verily I say unto you, If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you. (Matthew 17:20)

How many of you believe that the Christian has received power? If God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are living in me, there must be power present. If the Word of Christ indwells richly, there must be power. Too often, we think that Jesus gave power only to the early church. He is the same yesterday, today and forever. What Jesus did then, He wants to do today! God is calling us to exercise His power. Jesus said,

“You shall receive power after the Holy Spirit has come upon you.”

How many of us have received the Holy Spirit? Then, there must be power present in us. What does Jesus do after He gives power? He promises to do divine work through us.

He Works Through Us

As you go, Jesus said,

“Search out a worthy person.” Look for a seeker. (11)

Look for someone in need. Stop and spend time there. Greet them. (12) Let your peace remain there. Bless them. The disciples may have asked, “What do I do if they reject me?” If

they reject you, (14) let God take care of them. You must move on to another place. Who are the seekers in these verses? Where do I go? To whom do I speak? Notice the clues that Jesus gives:

1. Heal the sick – Look for the sick.
2. Cleanse the leper – Look for the leper.
3. Raise the Dead – look for the spiritually dead.
4. Cast out devils – Look for the oppressed.
5. Go and search out. Speak.

Allow God's power to flow. It's not enough to receive power; it has to flow through us. What is God's responsibility? He convicts those we touch with our life and word. He works the miracle when we pray.

Concluding Remarks

Jesus called his disciples. He prepares them, empowers them and then worked through them. **THIS IS WHAT HE WANTS TO DO THROUGH US!** There are many of us here who have been prepared and have received God's power. Is that power flowing through us? Do others see God in us? Jesus said to his disciples:

“Freely, you have received, freely give.”

God is seeking those who will witness His power, hear His word, and allow the blessing to flow through them. This week I had about twenty Christian young people come to the High School where I work. I was convicted when they asked if they could walk around the campus to pray. When I asked them, what are YOU expecting? They answered, “**We are expecting God to unleash his power!**” What about us? What are we expecting God to change in us, in our children, in our community? Will we allow the power of God to flow through our prayer? If we have faith the size of a mustard seed, nothing shall be impossible to us!

CHAPTER FORTY

Jesus: Take No Thought

(Paralyzing Affects and the Cure)

Scripture: Matthew 6:25-34

What is the number one killer in America? It is not drugs, or alcohol. It is not murder or wars. The number one killer in America is anxiety! We are told that anxiety is the primary cause in the majority of the diseases that kill. According to the Institute of Mental Health, over 40 million Americans are afflicted and permanently damaged by its effects. Some of the initial effects of anxiety are depression, sleeping disorders, eating disorders, drug and alcohol abuse. If you fail to deal with anxiety, then come ulcers, heart disease, high blood pressure, stomach problems, migraine headaches and the list goes on and on. Anxiety is a serious problem? Every year, we spend approximately 70 billion dollars in order to reduce it. Anxiety has become an obstacle in the life of many Christians. It robs us of joy. It reduces our productivity. It diminishes our quality of life and disables us. Anxiety is like an acid that eats from the inside out. How is anxiety defined? The Greek word means “pulled in many directions at once.” It is normal to have some anxiety, but not to be paralyzed by it. In the verses we have read today, Jesus addresses the issue. Jesus tells his disciples. If you are going to be effective in this life, you must deal with anxiety. In this study, we will focus on two major points.

1. The Causes of Anxiety
2. Ways to Escape its Paralyzing Effects

What are some of the causes of anxiety? Jesus informs his disciples that they should not be anxious about the basic needs of life. Life was difficult during the times of Christ. There was a lot of poverty. People were concerned about survival! There were no food stamps, AFDC, or social services. There were no government programs! What worries us? We worry about our future, our health, our children, and hurricanes. We worry about crime, drugs and a number of other things. Is it wrong to be concerned? No, it is wrong when we become paralyzed because of fear and worry. Jesus discusses several reasons for our anxiety.

Causes of Anxiety

Reason #1: We become anxious because we do not realize how important we are to God. Jesus said to his disciples: Do you see the birds flying about? (26) They do not plant crops or reap? They do not gather into barns? Do you know who feeds them? “Your Father feeds them.” Then comes the question: “Are ye not much better than they?”

What is Jesus saying? You are valuable to God! Here we see the first cause of Anxiety. We forget that we are important to God. We do not see our value before God. How many of you have a pet? I had a bird named JJ. I loved to hear him sing! I fed him every day and then I left for a few days. My bird died. I remember I wept because of my failure. God is not like that!

Jesus is saying to his disciples that God provides and cares for all the birds on the globe. Not one sparrow falls without His knowledge. God has never failed a single bird! Why do you think He is going to fail you? You are more important than all His birds combined. When you realize that God views you as important, you can begin to relax. Have you forgotten how important you are to God? God has a message for you:

“I am not going to abandon you.”

Reason #2 Look at verse 27, we find the second cause of anxiety. Jesus says to his disciples, “You are anxious because you feel like you are not in control.” Jesus asked the disciples a question. Which of you by being anxious can add 18 inches to your height? (27) Which of you can add time to your life-span? What is Jesus saying? We become anxious about things we cannot change or control. How many of you can change the weather or force someone to love you? How many of you can change the past? Have you ever tried to change someone’s mind or heart? That is God’s department! You see, we are often anxious because we cannot do what only God can do. We have got to let go. Stop trying to change others. Stop trying to mold others into the image you have in your head! Stop trying to control everything. God alone is absolute ruler. He alone controls all human and divine.

Reason #3 Jesus goes on to deal with the third cause of anxiety. In verse 28, we see that we become anxious because we forget that God is interested in the details of our life. Jesus said to his disciples, Look at the flowers of the field. Watch how they grow! They do not toil or spin. What is Jesus saying to His disciples? God goes to all the trouble of putting billions of flowers on the globe. Have you ever seen their beauty? Each one of them is different. Then Jesus says, Solomon did not even have one suit that equaled the beauty of one of God’s flower. (29) Jesus then proceeds to ask a question. If God so clothe the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you? O ye of little (30) Do you not know that “God is interested in all the little details of your life.” If God pays so much attention to flowers that are here today and gone tomorrow, don’t you think He is interested in your life? Have you seen how much detail and care God puts into just one flower? If God would beautify the field with flowers that only live for a day, don’t you think that he would do that for you? We fail to trust God for our needs. We say, God doesn’t care about my job. God doesn’t care about my business. That’s where we are wrong! Tell Him about the little things in your life. He wants to hear all about it.

Reason #4 Now we come to the last cause of our anxiety. Look at verses 31-32, Jesus tells His disciples: You are anxious, because you are trying to operate using the worldview of a nonbeliever. “Stop trying to be like the world.” Jesus says to the disciples: The world system focuses on the here and now. Their focus is on temporal needs. They have no security. They sink their confidence into money, power, prestige and position. They look for security in earthly things. Jesus told the disciples, "You are anxious because you try to follow their pattern." We try to follow the American dream. What we need to follow is the Christian dream. Stop being like the world! Stop thinking like the world! Jesus said to the disciples: “You have no excuse because you have a Father that is aware of all your needs.” We are not fatherless! We are not alone in the world! Ok, we have discussed a few sources of anxiety. How can we get rid of it? What can I do? How do I remove the obstacle of anxiety? (33)

Ways to Escape its Paralyzing Effects

Firstly, we are commanded to seek first the kingdom of God. What does that mean? It means to be ruled by God. Have you surrendered your life to Him? Who is in charge in your life? **Secondly**, we are commanded to seek the fellowship of God's people. Do you meet with God's people to hear Him? It is in the company of God's people that we will be reminded of God's good intentions toward us. **Thirdly**, we are commanded to seek His will. We are to seek and discover God's will for our lives. That will is found in the Bible. Then comes the conditional promise: If you do these three things, than "All the things you need will be added." The psalmist David expresses it a little different when he declares

"If you delight yourself in Him, He will give you the desires of your heart."

Sometimes, our needs are not met because we are not walking in obedience to Him. David was a man that sought God's kingdom. Listen to his testimony.

"I have been young, and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread. (Psalm 37:25)

Paul gives his testimony:

"But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:19)

The Bible is clear regarding the way to escape anxiety. Ensure you are in right relationship with God. Ensure you are in right relationship with God's people. Ensure you align yourself with God's Word.

Concluding Remarks

We have discussed four primary causes of anxiety in the life of the Christian.

Remember,

- You are important to God!
- Stop trying to control everything!
- God is interested in the details of your life! Be yourself! – Stop trying to be like others.

Jesus also teaches His disciples how to diminish anxiety. Jesus tells His disciples:

- Give God control of your life.
- Seek to fellowship with God's people.
- Seek to do God's will.

If you give God your anxiety, He will give you His joy. If you give Him your doubt, He will give you His faith. If you give Him your weakness, He will give you his strength. Trust Him!

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Lord, Speak to My Brother

(Thou Shalt Not Covet)

Scripture Reading: Luke 12:13-21

In this study, we will deal with the theme of coveteousness. The tenth commandment states the following,

“Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house; thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbor's.”

What does the word ‘coveteous’ mean? Webster defines it as “a thirst for more” or “an unrestrained desire to have more – right now.” Are we guilty of coveteousness? 2600 hundred years ago, the Greek slave, Aesop, wrote about a dog:

“It happened that a Dog had got a piece of meat and was carrying it home in his mouth to eat it in peace. Now on his way home he had to cross a plank lying across a running brook. As he crossed, he looked down and saw his own shadow reflected in the water beneath. Thinking it was another dog with another piece of meat, he made up his mind to have that also. So he made a snap at the shadow in the water, but as he opened his mouth the piece of meat fell out, dropped into the water and was never seen more.”

Aesop’s fable provides an example of coveteousness. We don’t have to go back 2600 years to define coveteousness, we have many examples of it in our time. A teacher asked a group of students,

“What would you do if you had 1 million dollars? The students frantically wrote for 30 minutes. One student got up, threw his piece of paper on the teachers desk and said. “Not enough teacher, I need another \$100,000!”

Many of the economic problems we face today are due to our thirst for more. This week, I read an article entitled, “Whoever dies with the most toys wins.” We are bombarded on every side with ideas of coveteousness and materialism. We have read a passage of scripture that deals with the same theme. In this study, I will focus on three points:

1. Review the Context of a Parable
2. Discuss the Problem of Coveteousness
3. Offer Antidotes against Coveteousness

The Context of a Parable

Jesus was speaking to a multitude when he was suddenly interrupted by a man in the crowd. He said, “Jesus, talk to my brother. Tell him to divide the inheritance with me.” He

wanted Jesus to do justice. Apparently, his father had died and the younger son was not happy with his share of the inheritance. He wanted more. (Note: It was not uncommon for someone to approach a rabbi to ask for help in legal matters.) The young man wanted Jesus to exert his influence on his brother! How did Jesus respond to his request? Jesus said,

“Man, who made me a judge or a divider over you?” (14)

The master refused to comment on the seeming issue of injustice. Jesus was aware regarding the motive of this man’s heart. The man’s request for justice was motivated by greed. Jesus did not waste any time with the young man’s smoke screen. He went to the root of the problem.

The Problem of Coveteousness

Jesus said to the man, listen to me! Your life is in danger of coveteousness. A man’s life does not consist in the abundance of the things which he possesses. (15) Jesus focused on the issue of coveteousness. He warned the man to “guard himself!” What problem is evident in this narrative? The man’s world view was twisted. His desire for more had caused him to think that possessions were the most important thing in life. The young man had defined himself by the things he possessed! What makes us so important! Is it the job? Is it the car we drive? Are we important because of our education or because we live in a big house? This is the way this man thought. He thought that if he had more things, this would make him happy. Jesus informed the man that there are more important things in life than possessions. Jesus elaborated and said, “let me tell you a story about a man who had it all.” Jesus uses a parable to communicate His heart regarding the matter. (16) Jesus said,

“The ground of a rich man produced plenty. The rich man thought: (17) What shall I do? (17) I have no room where to bestow my fruit. I know what to do:

- I will pull down my barns.
- I will build greater ones.
- I will store all my fruit and goods. (18)
- I will say to my soul: (19) Soul! You have much good laid up for many years.
- Soul! Take it easy. Eat, drink and be merry!”

The rich man in the parable had two very serious problems. First, he could not see beyond himself. Second, he could not see beyond the here and now! Who was this rich man in the parable?

- He was successful – Nothing wrong with that!
- He was diligent – Nothing wrong with that!
- He was law abiding – Nothing wrong with that either!

God interrupted the rich man's train of thought (20) "You fool!" **A fool is someone who rejects the knowledge and precepts of God as a basis for life.** God told him, "Tonight, your soul shall be required of thee. Whose shall those things be which you have provided?"

What is the lesson? (21) Listen to the words of Jesus.

"So is he that lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God."

Jesus summarized the problem in the parable. The man could not see beyond himself. His whole life revolved around his vision, his need, his pleasure, and his future. His focus was on the temporal. He was only thinking about the here and now. Jesus accuses him of laying up treasure for himself. The rich man made reference to himself 12 times. Some commentators write that there were approximately 250 million people living at that time. The rich man was thinking only about one of them – Himself. Sometimes, we become so engrossed in our own little world that we forget that there are other human beings on the planet. We make ourselves the center of the universe. Jesus came to serve. He laid down His life. He gave His best to rescue the human race from its condition.

The second thing Jesus points out in the parable is the fact that the man was not rich toward God. Christians are called to be rich toward God. **What does it mean to be rich toward God?** I will mention only a few examples. Paul exhorts us to be rich in good works, willing to meet needs – **to give.** (1 Timothy 6:18) In Titus 2:14, Paul encourages the Christian to **be zealous of good works!** (Titus 2:14) Jesus said, "Let your light shine ... **Let men see your good works!**" Again and again, we are told in the scripture to **serve as Christ served!** We are called into this world to carry out a mission, a plan and a purpose. We have been called to leave the world a better place than we found it. Jesus told his disciples to work for those things which last forever. God told Abraham, **I am going to bless you so you can become a blessing!**

Antidotes for Coveteousness

What are some antidotes for coveteousness? We must desire more than things! We must set our affection upon the things above! Only Christ can give us the jewel of satisfaction. When Christ is not the center of our life, rest disappears. Coveteousness is considered idolatry because only God is the source of joy, happiness and satisfaction. Men try to seek joy, happiness and satisfaction in temporal things. We must allow God to reach into our heart and refine our desires?

Concluding Remarks

The Bible informs us that the covetous man was a fool. He left God out of the picture. He forgot that he was only an administrator of his wealth. He forgot that God was the source of his blessing. He lived for the moment and failed to remember that he was going to have to give an account. What about us? How do we live? I want God to refine my desires. I want God to help me look beyond myself. I want God to make me a good administrator of His blessing. I want to be rich toward God. We take with us only what we invest for the cause of Christ.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Lazarus and the Rich Man

(God's Self-Revelation and Desire)

Scripture Reading: Luke 16:19-31

We have read a passage of scripture that actually provides us with a glimpse of life after death. Death has always been a great mystery. There are many books written about people who have come back from the beyond. PMH Atwater tell us that there are 12 million people who have had these experiences. For \$33.95, he will tell you all about it. If you Google "near death experiences," you will get 6.5 million hits. People claim to see bright lights, tunnels, smell flowers, and even see fields of grain waving in the wind.

Well, today, we are not going to talk about death experiences! We will deal with two men who died. The Bible records their experience. We are allowed to watch while Abraham and a rich man dialogue. We are allowed to listen in on the prayers of a man in hell. This is better than Atwells' book. In this study, I will focus on three points.

1. A Divine Revelation
2. The Human Condition
3. A Call to Action

A Divine Revelation

The passage reveals three things about God. **Firstly**, it reports that God is watching and is aware of all the details of human life. Verse 19 provides us with a summary of the rich man's life. The Bible states he was clothed in purple. (External garment) It then informs us about what he wore under his garments. (His underwear) We are told what kind of underwear he was wearing. (fine-linen) The passage informs us that this man fared sumptuously. He feasted every day. Remember that this is during a time in which the majority ate meat once a week. This man ate meat every single day. God knew all about his eating habits. The Bible paints a picture of a man who lives in the lap of luxury and is totally preoccupied with HIMSELF.

In verses 20-21, we are also given a summary of another character. We are told that Lazarus is a beggar. He is crippled. (the passage indicates that he is laid at the rich man's gate) He is full of sores or ulcers. He visits the rich man's gate in order feed on the crumbs that fall from his table. (21) We are also told about the dogs that lick the beggar's infected and bloody sores. God sees Lazarus, his condition, his motives, his sores and even the dogs. As we read about both men, these verses make it clear that God is watching! Today, God is watching you. He knows your secrets. He knows all about your pain, heart-aches and disappointments. Someone made me feel good the other day. They said, "I was thinking about you today." How many of you know that God thinks about you. The Psalmists states that God's thoughts concerning us are without number.

The **second** thing the passage reveals is God's love and desire. God demonstrated His love to Lazarus by rewarding Him with eternal bliss. God desires that all men be saved. He does not take pleasure in the death of the wicked. He wants all to come to the knowledge of the truth. Both men had the same opportunity to enjoy God's presence for all eternity. How many of you know that God is reaching out to us! He is demonstrating His love by giving us an opportunity.

The **third** thing this passage reveals about God is His judgment. The passage informs us that God has no problem pouring out His wrath upon those who reject His Word! Many people are confused about this aspect of His character. The Bible reports that the rich man died and was buried. We see him lift up his eyes from hell. We see him tormented by flames. We see him begging for a drop of water.

Look at the passage for yourself. While the rich man is in hell, he begins to pray. His first prayer is for himself. Have mercy on me, he said. Rescue me from the fires of hell. He wants to escape the flames, but it is too late. God does not answer prayer in hell. He then prays a second time. Since I cannot escape the torment, please send someone to talk to my family, he said. People in hell are probably praying for the salvation of the lost. There is no answered prayer in hell. Paul warn, "Escape the wrath of God while you can!" Don't fall into the hands of an angry God. He is a consuming fire. You see, God has no problem judging those who live contrary to His word.

The Human Condition

What does this passage reveal about us? I believe it reveals two things about us. Firstly, it shows how stubborn we are! God gives us His word. He provides us with instructions. We respond by making excuses. The rich man was making an excuse. He was indirectly saying to Abraham, "No one told me about this place. Send someone to tell my brothers!" Abraham, responds to him. "They have the Bible just like you did! If your brothers don't listen to the Bible, then they will have to join you."

God had made ample provision. I hear people say that if only God would work a miracle, people might believe. God has already worked multiple miracles. God has already spoken! Men have recorded His word. The presses have printed billions of Bibles since the invention of the Gutenberg press. We will have no excuse when we appear before the judgment seat of Christ.

There is a second thing this passage reveals about us. Men are willing to live without God and spend an eternity in hell. We live in a culture that focuses on the moment. It is a culture that embraces a pagan view of life. Eat, drink, be merry for tomorrow we die, they say. You only live once. Go for the gusto! What is the problem with this view of life? It assumes that God is not watching! It assumes that there is no judgment! It assumes that there is no hell! If we choose to die without God, we will have to face the consequences. How does the Bible describe hell? It is a place where the worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched. It is described as place of torment, weeping and gnashing of teeth. It is a shame that we defy God. He is not blind? Paul states, "do not deceive yourself, you cannot mock God!" Remember: What we do with Christ in this life will determine our eternal destiny. The rich man lived for the moment and lost his soul. What a poor investment.

A Call to Action

How are we to respond to this passage? I think there are several things God is asking of us. Firstly, we are commanded to repent. What does this mean? Stop living for the moment! Stop pretending that God is not watching. Stop pretending that there is no judgment and that you can ignore God without consequence. We are warned that whatever we sow, we will reap. Stop living for self! Start living for God! Remember, the rich man lived for the moment and inherited hell and the curse.

The second thing God is asking of us is to receive the gift of eternal life. If you have never surrendered your life to Christ, God wants to give you eternity! The Bible reveals that eternal life is a gift. It is not for sale. Have you received God's gift? It is yours for the taking. After receiving God's gift, we are called to share the gift of God with others. God forbid that our children will lift their eyes in hell and say, my parents never told me. Today, we are being warned to flee the wrath to come. There is nothing to think about. We will all appear before the judgment seat of Christ. God does not want our children to perish! God wants us to move beyond ourselves and begin to think about the eternal destiny of those we love.

Concluding Remarks

I believe God is speaking to us. If we have never surrendered our life to Christ, this is our opportunity to accept His gift of forgiveness and eternal life. If we have loved-ones who do not know Christ, pray for them. I am praying that God will convict my children.

- I am praying that God will reveal Himself to them and will conquer their hearts.
- I am praying that God would steal their peace and joy until they repent.
- I am praying that God will generate a storm to get their attention.
- I am praying that God will give them a hunger and thirst for Himself.
- I am praying that God will give them a passion for eternity.
- I am praying that God will instill new desires in them.
- I am praying that God will grant them a vision of Himself.

Pray for those you love before they walk out of time and step into eternity!

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

A Certain Lawyer

(How can I Inherit Eternal Life?)

Scripture Reading: Luke 10:25-37

My youngest son is at the age where he wants to know everything. I remember when he was a few months old. I would listen to him make all these strange sounds. I remember his first word. It was a historic moment for the family. Armando said “mama!” No, it did not make the front page of the newspaper, but it was wonderful. Well, now he is in questioning mode. Recently he was very frustrated with me because I told him that I did not know the answer to his question. He raised his voice and said, “Dad, stop lying. You know the answer. Tell me!” Now, I am becoming more aware of how little I know. Well, today’s story is about an important question raised by a scribe.

Jesus met with 70 disciples who had just returned with joy from a mission trip. They were amazed by the fact that demons had been subject to the name of Jesus. Jesus told them: “Do not rejoice over the power you exercise. Rejoice because your name is written in heaven.” This is the context of the passage we have just read. There was a scribe present while Jesus was doing all this. Instead of rejoicing, the scribe was thinking of how he might put Jesus to the test. He asked Jesus two questions. “What must I do in order to inherit eternal life.” And “Who is my neighbor?” In this study, I would like to focus on three points.

1. Two Questions
2. Three Philosophies of Live
3. A Call to Action

Important Question One

The first question the scribe asked is as follows:

“What must I do in order to inherit eternal life.”

Some have translated this phrase as follows: “What must I do in order to live a life of fullness? How can I live a life of adventure?” How does Jesus respond to this question? He uses the Socratic method. He responds to a question by asking a question. “What does the law say, asked Jesus. The scribe answered, “Love God and love your neighbor.” Jesus praises him for his response. The scribe answered his own question. Jesus said to him, “Do these things and you will experience fullness of life and inherit eternal life. In this portion of scripture, Jesus makes reference to the moral law or the ten commandments. The first four commandments teach us how to love God. (Exodus 20) The last six commandments tell us how to love our neighbor.

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS (Exodus 20)

HOW TO LOVE GOD (Vertical Relationship)

Command #1:

Thou shalt have no other gods before me.

Command #2:

Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, any likeness of anything that is in heaven above any likeness that is in the earth beneath any likeness that is in the water under the earth. Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them. Thou shalt not serve them: For I the LORD thy God am a jealous God visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me. I shew mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.

Command #3:

Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.

Command #4:

Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work: But the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates: For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day, and hallowed it.

HOW TO LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR (Horizontal Relationships)

Command #5:

Honor thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee.

Command #6: Thou shalt not kill.

Command #7: Thou shalt not commit adultery.

Command #8: Thou shalt not steal.

Command #9: Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour.

Command #10.

Thou shalt not covet Thy neighbor's house, Thy neighbor's wife, Thy neighbor's manservant, Thy neighbor's maidservant, Thy neighbor's ox, Thy neighbor's ass, Nor any thing that is thy neighbor's.

Jesus made it very simple. A fulfilled life includes two important components.

- A vertical relationship with God

- A horizontal relationship with others

How many of you know that if you do not have a vertical relationship with God, you will have no success with your horizontal relationships? Jesus is not telling this man that he can inherit eternal life by keeping the moral law. Jesus is informing him that life is all about relationships. The writer to the Hebrews informs us that Jesus is the one that holds all things together. Without Him nothing works. If someone asked: “How do I inherit eternal life? We would tell them that it all begins with a relationship with Jesus. (vertical) This is what Jesus is telling the scribe. If you want to live a full, complete life, if you want to see adventure, you must surrender to God first! Paul explained it this way:

“In union with Christ, everything falls into its proper place.”

It appears that the Scribe was satisfied with the answer provided by Jesus, but then proceeded to ask a second question.

“Who is my neighbor?”

Important Question Two

The next question focused on the second table of the moral law. It is in the last six commandments that we discover how we are to love our neighbor. The scribe may have thought that he had no problem with his love for God, but his love for his neighbors was lacking. If we do not know who our neighbors are, how are we going to demonstrate love for them? The scribe’s question may have been an excuse for his failure. Jesus answers the second question with a parable and introduces three groups of people who represent three distinct philosophies of life. What are the three philosophies of life?

1. What is yours is mine.
2. What is mine is mine.
3. What is mine is yours.

Three Philosophies of Life

Before discussing the three philosophies of life, let’s take a look at the parable. The Bible informs us that there was a certain man (probably a Jew) who took a journey from Jerusalem to Jericho. (30) He had to travel 17 miles to get there. It was a dangerous road. Herod had just fired about 40,000 workers. They were unemployed and many of them may have become bandits on this stretch of road. The road was called the path of blood. The parable we have read reveals the tragic experience of one traveler. He was approached and surrounded by bandits. They took his clothing, beat him repeatedly and leaving him for dead. He became a victim. He was helpless. The parable tells us that three individuals saw this victim while he laid wounded and dying. Each character in this story represents a differing world view. Let’s take a look at the first group of characters.

The **first view of life** is modeled by the bandits - **What is your is mine**. They had an entitlement mentality. They represent those who think the world owes them something. If the world does not give, they extract by force. Many in our society have the mentality of these

bandits. They do not labor to see results. They look for short cuts. They prefer that others work while they reap the benefits. When it comes to relationships, their primary interest is their own benefit or gain.

The **second view of life** is modeled by the religious -**What is mine is mine**. This group encountered the victim. The Bible informs us that one is a Levite and the other a priest. (31-32) They see the wounded man and move on without offering assistance. One commentator states that these two individuals move on because they saw the man had already been robbed. These religious men represent those who are only observers in life. They remain untouched by the pain of the world. Their entire focus is egocentric. Their world revolves around self. There is no room in their circle for anyone else. They hang out only with the righteous like themselves. Their circle excludes the human race.

Sometimes we are like this. We do not want to get involved! We see the suffering of others and say, "It's every man for himself." The religious in this parable want to serve God, but not men. They do not want to be inconvenience. It's easy to say, God bless you as long as it does not cost anything. We can never be a neighbor if our philosophy of life revolves around our comfort.

The **third view of life** is modeled by the Samaritan - **What is mine is yours**. The Bible records that a certain Samaritan also journeyed. (33) He saw the victim and was moved to compassion. He attended to his wounds. (34) He put the man on his own horse and took him to an inn. He cared for him. He gave of his time and money. This man did not tell anyone he loved God; he demonstrated his love by serving humanity. This is a real neighbor.

The scribe who asked Jesus to identify his neighbor was convicted. The scribe declared his love for God, but was confused about his neighbor. Jesus told him, Do not talk about loving God; demonstrate it by reaching out to your neighbor. Stop looking for a neighbor. **Be a neighbor!** We must allow others into our circle of friendship. The Samaritan had the right idea.

There is a poem that exemplifies the right attitude:

"They drew a circle and left me out.

Rebel, heretic, a thing to flout.

But love and I had the wit to win.

We drew another circle and took them in."

Concluding Remarks:

Jesus asked the crowd. "Who was a neighbor to the wounded man? (36) Jesus tells the scribe, go out and do likewise. Do not talk to me about mercy and how much you love God, demonstrate it through your love for the human race. Don't entangle yourself with dead doctrine, live it. Enlarge your circle so that it includes humanity. Jesus uses a parable to communicate a message to us. Stop asking, who is my neighbor? **Be a neighbor.**

There are many victims in our community. They are waiting for evidence of our love. They have suffered at the hands of the enemy. They are haunted by emptiness and live in a state of hopelessness. Remember, when we were victims. Jesus approached us as our good Samaritan. He rescued us. Jesus told the scribe – If you want to live a life of fullness, Love God and love your neighbor.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

Jairus – His Daughter is Raised

(The Power of Christ over Death)

Scripture Reading: Mark 5:21-24

As we review each story in the four accounts of the Gospel, we discover an omnipotent Christ. Paul calls Him “Kurios.” (LORD) That means “Absolute Ruler, Controller of all Human and Divine. This title is important because it reveals the power and authority of Christ. Who rules your world?

The secular humanist would say that fate rules. We know the truth - Jesus rules over all the affairs of men. Again and again as we review the life of Christ, we see demonstrations of His power. He heals the sick. The blind receive sight. The lame walk. The leper is cleansed. He even raises the dead. We serve an omnipotent Christ! He is ready to act on our behalf. He is ready to meet our need. In this study, we encounter yet another example of the love of Christ and His willingness to exercise His power on behalf of those in need. I would like to focus on three points.

1. A Problem
2. A Petition
3. A Divine Solution

A Problem

The story begins with a problem. A woman is crying in the bedroom. Her heart is broken. Her only daughter is dying and there is nothing she or Jarius can do to help their little girl. Mark reports that the 12 year old girl was agonizing. Luke informs us that her life was hanging in the balance. Jarius, her father, is devastated. Can you imagine the scene? Can you sense the despair? There is nothing they can do for their daughter. This causes Jarius to search. His problem caused him to look up! This story reveals something about the human condition.

The human race is agonizing and groaning. Without Christ we are like this twelve year old girl. We are powerless to rescue ourselves. Those around us cannot provide any help. The situation causes us to seek divine intervention so we look beyond ourselves for an answer.

This is what happened to Jairus. God, in His permissive will, allowed His daughter to suffer in order to get his attention. I wonder what God will have to do to get our attention! Every time we are met by a trial, we should look up immediately. What kind of things does God allow to bring us back to Himself? I have heard many stories of God’s work. These are few examples:

- God used hurricane Celia to bring me back.

- God used a group of gang members to bring me back.
- God used a mosquito to bring me back.
- God used a spider bite to bring me back.
- God used my visit to jail to bring me back.
- God used a car accident to bring me back.
- God used a divorce to bring me back.
- God used a death in the family to bring me back.
- God used the sickness of my child to bring me back.

These are just a few examples I have heard from different individuals. There is not a person sitting here today that is beyond God's reach. The story we have read informs us that Jairus was moved to focus on the more important things in life because of his trial.

The Petition

In verse 22, we are introduced to a petition. Jairus prostrates himself before Jesus, not to worship, but to present a petition. He states,

“My daughter is agonizing. Can you come, lay hands on her and heal her?”

How did Jesus respond to Jairus? He rose and followed him without saying a word. This is incredible! Jesus is surrounded by thousands who need Him, yet He leaves the crowd to help one man. Jesus is never too busy. He does not say, “I have company.” Today, if we come to him, he will not be indifferent to our need. He is waiting for us! Can you imagine the excitement Jairus felt. Jesus was on the way to meet his need.

The story gives us details about the journey to the home of Jairus. As Jesus traveled to help the dying daughter of Jairus, he was interrupted by a woman who also had a need. A woman had touched Jesus and received her miracle of healing. The crowds were impressed. Jesus did not allow the woman to leave without giving a testimony. It seems that everyone was excited about the miracle, except one man –Jairus. What was Jairus thinking? He was probably thinking about his daughter who was at the point of death. He was probably getting impatient with Jesus. The Bible reports that while Jesus is speaking to the crowd about the woman's miracle, Jairus received bad news from home. “Stop bothering the master, he was told. Your daughter is dead”.

How do you think Jairus felt? He was probably disappointed. He was probably in shock. He momentarily lost all hope. The tears probably began to flow. Jairus was put to the test. When Jesus heard the bad news, Jesus told Jairus,

“Don’t be afraid, only believe.”

Has your faith ever been put to the test? How often have we suffered and it seems that Jesus arrives too late. We think that God has lost control of our world. We may ask, is He really concerned for all the details of my life? We often doubt the love and care of God. We are arrogant. If we do not understand what is happening, we immediately accuse God of failure. I am glad the story does not end here.

A Divine Solution

Jarius had to make a decision. Who am I going to believe? Jesus arrived at the home of Jairus. He could hear crying and wailing. The funeral had begun. Then, Jesus asked a strange question.

"Why are you crying?"

The crowd was confused. Jesus walked into a funeral and asked why they were sad. He then confused them further when He said, “She is not dead, she is asleep.” The Bible reports that the people laughed and scorned him. Things get worse - Jesus tells Jarius to empty out the funeral home. Talk about testing faith! Jesus took three of His disciples and the parents and went in and commanded the girl to get up. This is wonderful. Jesus cancelled the funeral. I have heard of a wedding being cancelled. I have heard of cancelling a business meeting. Jesus cancelled a funeral and declared His power over death. Jesus turned mourning into dancing. He raised the little girl and again demonstrated His love and compassion.

Concluding Remarks

You may be asking, “What does all this have to do with me?” Some of you need a miracle. The miracle-worker is present. The Omnipotent Christ is here. You need a miracle for yourself. You need a miracle for someone else. Your husband, your wife, your children are facing trials and you are looking up. Remember, Jarius presented his petition. He came to the right person. Will you present your petition to the God that cares? He is waiting for you. “Don’t be afraid, only believe.” He will not turn you away. He is ready to work on your behalf.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

Jesus Feeds Five Thousand

(The Compassion of Jesus)

Scripture Reading: John 6:1-14

Why do we study the Narratives of Christ. He is our pattern and model. His life provides us with examples regarding how we are to live, love and serve. Each story we have studied reveals secrets. In the passages we have read, Jesus and His disciples are busy doing divine work. They are healing the sick, casting out demons, and teaching the multitudes. The disciples are caught up in the excitement of the moment. Jesus tells them “Get on the boat, you need to rest.” (Mark 6:30) Jesus is considerate! He is practical! He understands the importance of the work! He also knows it is necessary to rest. In this study, we find yet another demonstration of his wonderful compassion. The Bible reveals how Jesus performs a creative miracle in order to feed a multitude. I want to focus on three points.

1. A Human Need
2. A Realization
3. A Divine Solution

While Jesus rested with His disciples, multitudes gathered from 204 cities in Galilee. Why did they gather? They were spiritually hungry. Religion had not filled their emptiness. Many of them had physical needs and were seeking for a miracle! Some of them were being afflicted by the devil and wanted Jesus to break their chains of oppression. Others just wanted to be entertained. Jesus did not ignore the human need! As we review the story, we discover that Jesus was moved to compassion. He not only saw the human condition, but was also moved to intervene. The Bible reports that he began to teach and heal! Note that he met both their spiritual and physical needs. When Jesus looked at the multitudes before him, He saw sheep without a pastor.

The Human Need and Our Realization

Let me ask you a question! Are you aware of the human condition? Sometimes we do not know what is happening around us. The world is suffering. I recently performed a Google search. Did you know there are 4 major wars and 31 serious conflicts taking place around the world? Human being are dying:

- Sri Lankan Civil War – 80,000 - 100,000 dead
- Kivu Conflict – 5.4 million dead
- War in Afghanistan – 210,000 dead
- War in Darfur – 300,000 dead

- War in Iraq – 500,000 dead
- Somali Civil War - 350,000 – 1,000,000 dead
- Conflict in Peru – 70,000 dead

(This is only 7 conflicts)

There is the issue of starvation. Last year, 16 million children died of starvation? Every year 2.7 million people die of malaria. The World Health Organization informs us that in the last 45 years suicide has increased 60% worldwide. The YouthAIDS Institute informs us that 5700 people die of AIDS every day. We hear about economic collapse and the depletion of our energy resources. We hear that the population of the world has tripled and we are in a global water crisis. What about the problems caused by climate change?

Human beings are afraid. They are confused. They are insecure. Why am I sharing all these statistics? We will never move to take action until we become aware. The masses are like sheep without a shepherd. None can escape the curse of sin. What did Jesus do with the multitude? He helped the disciples to understand how to meet human needs. Let's see how he equipped them.

The Divine Solution

After making the disciples aware of the need, He then gave them an assignment. How did the disciples respond to the problem? Jesus asked Philip,

“Where can we buy bread for the multitude?”

Philip said, “We only have 200 denari and that is not enough.” Andrew offered a solution: “There is a boy with 5 pieces of bread and two fish – but that’s not enough. The other disciples came up with a great solution. “Lord, send them home to eat.” Their solution was to get rid of the problem by getting rid of the people. These are just a few examples of how we deal with problems we encounter? When faced with a problem, we often focus on the impossibility of the issue. We ignore the problem. We wait for someone else to solve the problem. We say the problem does not exist. Jesus insisted that the disciples solve the problem. The disciples complained. Lord, we do not have enough. Lord, our resources are limited.

NOTE: Jesus waited until they understood their limitation before working a miracle. This is very important. Before we can experience God’s unlimited power, we must first become aware of our human limitation. Before we can enjoy God’s infinite strength, we must acknowledge our human weakness. Before we can enjoy His fullness, we must be aware of our emptiness. God is waiting for us to come to an end of ourselves so He can ACT! The creative miracle does not come until we become aware of our limitation.

Bring the little that you have, said Jesus. Jesus made the multitudes sit in groups. He lifted His eyes to heaven and prayed,

“Blessed by our God, King of the Universe Who gives bread from the earth.”

He broke the little provided and gave it to the disciples. The disciples distributed to the multitude and they all ate. If we are going to minister to our communities, it is necessary to first realize our limitations and then remind ourselves that we know someone who can work the creative miracle necessary to meet the need. When we give Him the little we have, he multiples it. We need divine strength to meet human needs. Watchman Nee writes a book entitled, “Let us pray.” He makes a wonderful point.

“God is like a locomotive with all the power. Our prayer is like the railroad tracks. If we pray, God will ACT. Lay out some tracks in the direction of the need so God can move. Acknowledge your inability. Confess His ability to work the miracle.”

Concluding Remarks

There are people here today who have needs. Maybe you are tired – He wants to give you rest! Maybe you feel empty – He wants to fill you! Maybe you have a broken heart – He wants to mend it! The miracle worker is present! Jesus is here to heal, calm your storms, to rescue you from oppression, to break the chains that bind you. He is ready to work on your behalf.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

Lazarus is Raised from the Dead

(Jesus is Resurrection and Life)

Scripture Reading: John11:1-5

How many of you know that God desires that we experience joy unspeakable. He wants to fill our emptiness and quench our thirst. He wants to make our dreams a reality. He wants to give us all the desires of our heart. But how does God do all this? Jesus said to Martha, Mary and the Jews. I am Resurrection. I am Life. The story we have read reveals the heart of Christianity. In this study, I would like to focus on three points

1. A Problem
2. A Divine Solution
3. A Challenge.

A Problem

In the narrative under discussion, we are introduced to a small family in Bethany who is about to lose a loved one. The family consists of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Lazarus is sick! In fact, he is dying. Martha and Mary are concerned so they send a messenger to inform Jesus. After two days of searching, the messenger finds him. Jesus receives the message and remains in Jerusalem an extra two days. I have a question, why is it that Jesus did not drop everything like He did with Jarius. The journey to Bethany was only a one hour walk. We fail to understand that Jesus understood the big picture – He knew God was up to something. He understood Father had a plan! When he spoke to the messenger that came, Jesus told him: (4) This story will have a happy ending. God’s glory is going to be manifested. I am going to be revealed. What do you think the messenger did when he got this news from Jesus? He was elated. He couldn’t wait to get home to tell Mary and Martha. But when the messenger arrived, he discovered bad news. Lazarus was already dead. The messenger was probably confused! How many of you have ever been in a situation like this? You are right in the middle of a crisis! You are confused and afraid! It seems like your problem is impossible. You feel like you are running out of time. You feel like you are going to fold under the weight of your trial. You send a message to Jesus and instead of things getting better they seem to get worse. This is what happens in this story. Things got worse! Everyone in the story seems to be discouraged.

Let me summarize the problem: Lazarus is sick. Jesus doesn’t show up. Lazarus dies. Hope is lost. The problem does not end there. We are informed that everyone expresses their disappointment. When Jesus came near Bethany, Martha came out and said, “If you had been here, things would have been different.” When Mary arrived, she knelt, wept and said,

“If you had been here, Lazarus would not have died.”

The Jews saw Jesus and said,

“I wonder if Lazarus could have been saved from death?”

What was everybody really saying: “JESUS YOU FAILED!” Jesus you’re too late. Jesus where were you when we needed you? It seems like everyone had lost all hope.

How many of you know that there are people in this community who have lost all hope. They feel like God has abandoned them. They feel like nobody cares. They are insecure about their future.

The situation we have read about was charged with emotions. Jesus knew Lazarus was going to die. He knew everyone was going to lose hope. He knew people were going to misunderstand. He had to allow the suffering in order to communicate a life-changing truth. Why did the people lose hope? They thought death was the greatest problem ever faced by mankind. Think about it! What do you think? What is worse, the measles or death? What is worse, not being able to pay the light bill or death? In this life, is there any problem bigger than death? Jesus was doing something incredible. By conquering the biggest problem, in the human mind, He was declaring to be greater than any problem. Everyone was disappointed because in their mind death was bigger than Jesus. What does Jesus do? He raised Lazarus and demonstrates that death is not a problem to Him. The implications of this truth are profound. Jesus seems to be saying, “If I can solve your biggest problem, what do you think I can do with all the other little ones?”

The Solution

The solution is offered in the dialog between Jesus and Martha. As Jesus spoke to Martha, he told her that Lazarus would live. Martha said to Jesus:

“I know my brother will rise again in the day of resurrection.”

Jesus corrects her understanding by saying: Martha,

“I am resurrection.”

To Martha, resurrection was something that God was going to hand out at an appointed day. Jesus turned things around and said, Martha, Resurrection is not a thing, it is a person! The implications are profound. What is Jesus saying? Resurrection is a person – If you have me, you have resurrection. Salvation is a person named Jesus. If you have Jesus, you have salvation. If you do not have Jesus, you are lost. Power is a person named Jesus. If you have Jesus, you have power. Wisdom is a person named Jesus. If you have Jesus, you have wisdom. The Bible reports that Jesus is peace, joy, love, light, life, wisdom, sanctification and so much more. Jesus does not reach into his pocket to give us things. He gives HIMSELF to us and becomes all we will ever need.

The Challenge

Jesus raises Lazarus from the grave. He cried out,

“Lazarus, come forth!”

The Bible tells us that Lazarus walked out of the tomb. Everyone was amazed at the creative miracle performed by Jesus. Jesus conquered death. The power that we need to face the trials of life is present in the person of Christ. When we invite Jesus to come live in us, we become beneficiaries of a power greater than death. We become recipients of every attribute present in Christ. This story challenges us to surrender our lives to and discover the fullness of Christ. If our vision of Christ is small, everything else in our life will be small.

Last night, I shared a testimony with some men. I told them about taking my family to the Chinese restaurant. (Buffet Style) As we were leaving, Victoria said, "Dad, I am hungry." I could not believe my ears. The food was there, but she did not take advantage of the buffet. God's buffet has been set before us – Are we taking advantage of it? We are responsible for appropriating the vast riches made available.

Concluding Remarks

We thank God for the unsearchable riches of Christ. We thank Him for the fullness we are called to enjoy. I thank God for the all-inclusive gift of Christ. Maybe God is speaking to your heart. Maybe you are in the middle of a trial. Maybe you are confused. Maybe you have given up hope. The one who conquered death is present. He is here to meet you – Come! He is waiting.

OTHER BOOKS AND QUICK READS

BOOKS

The Narratives of Christ (Gospel)
Is God Speaking? (Minor Prophets)
God's Life-Changing Curriculum (An Agent of Change)
Worship (In the New Testament)

QUICK-READS

The Authority of the Believer
Transforming Power
Redeemed from the Curse (Entitled to the Blessing)
Emotional Intelligence (Models: A Brief Review)
Why He Came
The Kingdom (13 Parables)
Divine Transition
Divine Expectation
Unclaimed Wealth
Times of Refreshing
Unlocking God's Diary
The House of James
The Will of God (In James)
The Pure Gospel (Galatians)
Paul's Vision of God (Ephesians)
The Journey

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