

October 8 : Scriptures Malachi 1-4

SUMMARY

Congratulations! You've reached the end of the Hebrew/Older Covenant scriptures! I hope that as you've accomplished this remarkable feat, you've gained a much deeper understanding and appreciation for God's word. I hope you've put what you've read into practice and are walking closer to the Lord.

Let's move into the final minor prophet, Malachi. His message is simple. It teaches us how to relate to God and one another in our relationships and responsibilities. We'll view it through the lens of Yehovah's correcting words to His people who have gotten off track. Apparently, really off track. God's overarching word to Malachi is for His people to be faithful to God and one another, and failure is to invite God's discipline or judgment.

I get it. Over time and under the pressures of life and daily routines, our zeal for God wanes. It happens to the person in the pew, and it happens to God's leaders. Spiritual disciplines grow lax. Commitment goes soft. Boundaries dissolve. That's what Malachi is addressing. Do we live lives of a genuine passion for the Lord and His people, or is it something we numbly walk through week after week? For those who blindly go through the motions or deliberately sin by breaking the covenant with God or others, there is a warning of God's impending action. It can come upon the offenders suddenly. But for those who diligently seek the Lord and His word, striving to live it faithfully every day, there is God's approval and a record of their covenant fidelity. Which are you? It's time for a spiritual life check.

Malachi was likely written toward the end of the Nehemiah/Ezra era. The Temple had been rebuilt, and the regular worship service was operating. But excitement and motivation seem to have slowed since the days of Haggai's and Zechariah's prophetic cheerleading.

Malachi 1 begins with Yehovah addressing His priestly team. Before He gives the bad news, Yehovah speaks about His love for His people. Malachi anticipates his hearer's question, "How has He shown us His love?" By loving Jacob and hating Esau (1:2-3). Did God really hate Esau? Well, judging by Obadiah's indictment of Edom, they weren't exactly God's favorites for harming their brother-nation. But the God of love still loved the man Esau even though he wasn't faithful nor the covenant son. Jacob was the covenant son, and the family covenant promises traveled through his side of the family. To "love/hate" is a Hebrew idiom that means "preferring one over the other," not necessarily *literal* love or hate. In this case, God showed His love for His people by taking

Edom down in judgment. "They will be called a wicked country and the people the Lord has cursed forever" (1:4). Okay, that's some pretty intense stuff there. Maybe "hate" might find a thread in there. But the Jews get the point. God loves them by favoring them over the Edomites/Esau-ites.

Speaking of favoring His people, how have the priests of Yehovah's people responded to Him? Not so good. God calls them out for disrespecting Him in a terribly dishonoring way. A son would honor his father and a servant his master (1:6). Since Yehovah is so much more than a father or a master, why would his "sons and servants" treat Him so callously and disrespectfully? Doing so shows the Lord that His sons/servants (the priests) despise Him and hold His holy altar in contempt. Why? They don't bring God the best offering as He requires. They bring rotten, unacceptable offerings to His Altar, animals that are blind, lame, and sick. Really? Didn't they know the Torah forbids such blemished sacrifices? Of course, they did. It's all there on the Torah scroll in black and tan, "You are not to present any animal to the Lord that is blind, injured, maimed, or has a running sore, festering rash, or scabs; you may not put any of them on the altar as a food offering to the Lord" (Leviticus 22:22).

So, what gives? The priests had grown lax and fell into the "What's the difference?" mode with God and their sacred service to Him. It's kind of like a pastor that refuses to put in serious, challenging Bible study, pulls his sermon from the internet, and reads it to his congregation on Sunday, hoping to end the service so he can watch football. Yeah, that kind of disrespect and contempt for God and His high calling.

Yehovah calls them out rather bluntly. "Really? Try offering that swill to your Governor and see how He reacts! Why should I show you any favor for such insulting worship? Tell you what. Why don't you just shut down the whole operation for all it's worth?" Imagine a pastor saying that to his congregation on a Sunday morning. "You know, you're all just going through this by rote. Why don't you all go home right now and come back when you're serious about your relationship with the Lord." Man, that would get some attention, wouldn't it? It might shrink attendance and the offering, but you'd have a much better commitment and zeal in the ones who returned to the next worship service.

Oh, and this is even better (sarcastically written). Yehovah tells them He knows they think their service to Him is a nuisance and that they secretly (or maybe openly) scorn it. *Plus, they bring stolen animals for offerings!* That would be like a mob boss tithing off extortion money. Yehovah tells them the priest who has an acceptable offering but substitutes a blemished one to fulfill his obligation and conveniently get rid of a sick animal is a deceiver and cursed. Yeah, not good.

Chapter 2 is God's response and warning to the priests, and it's brutal! "If you don't change your ways, I'll curse you and cut off your blessings, which has already begun happening. If you keep it up, I'll drop the hammer on your descendants, spread their sacrificial animal's poop and guts on your faces (yes, that's what it says), and then kick you out because you haven't taken your job seriously or your responsibilities to heart" (2:1-3).

Yehovah was serious about His covenant with Levi when He selected Aaron and the rest of the Levites as His entourage and worship servants. Priestly service required commitment, reverence, solid Torah teaching, and a godly life, which the Levites generally followed. Malachi has a word for pastors, elders, and anyone who serves the Lord today. "True instruction was in his mouth, and nothing wrong was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and integrity and turned many from iniquity. *For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should desire instruction from his mouth, because he is the messenger of the Lord of Armies*" (2:6-7). That's a fine goal to shoot for, right?

But the Levites Malachi speaks to have failed, big time. Their teaching has caused people to stumble, and the priests have failed to live up to Levi's covenant. Therefore, Yehovah has already started to humiliate them (2:9).

And the prophetic hits just keep on coming. Now Yehovah addresses His peoples' sins and faults. 1) Marriage violations: Marrying pagan wives (2:11-12) and breaking their marriage covenants with their Israelite wives (2:14). The Israelites were expressly forbidden from marrying pagan women because they so easily led their husbands away from the One True God and toward horrible pagan gods (Deuteronomy 7:1-4). (God knows us so well, doesn't He?) God ordained godly marriages to create godly offspring (2:15). Yehovah's indictment is about unjust divorce, which is equivalent to blatant injustice, which our just and holy God hates.

The end of chapter 2 blends into chapter 3. I like my study Bible commentary's take on this. "The people's treachery against one another (2:10) was a form of injustice (failing to give someone his due), but they accused God of injustice for not coming to their aid and punishing people they considered evil (1: 2, 3: 15). God's ironic reply was to announce in 3:1-6 a coming messenger of "judgment" (3:5, the same Hebrew word as "justice") who would purge and purify God's people, including the priests" (Study Bible, HCSB). In other words, "You want justice? I'll give ya justice! A Messenger of Judgment."

This messenger is not God but associated with Him (3:1). This messenger will clear the way for another messenger, God's messenger of the covenant. Confusing? That's because

the 2nd messenger follows the “then” after the first messenger, “he (1st messenger) will clear the way before me (God). *Then the Lord you seek will suddenly come to his temple, the Messenger of the covenant you delight in.*” So, the 2nd messenger, the “messenger of the covenant,” will be God Himself. So, God will send a messenger to prepare the way for Him to show up, bringing a message about the covenant. Got it? Sound familiar?

This 2nd messenger’s job is to purify God’s priesthood so that the offerings and sacrificial service are pure and holy as God intended. This part addresses the priests’ sins in chapter 1. And not just the priests. Yehovah will judge and bear witness against the people who practice the sins of 3:5, “sorcerers and adulterers; against those who swear falsely; against those who oppress the hired worker, the widow, and the fatherless; and against those who deny justice to the resident alien.” These people don’t fear God, but they will.

What does Yehovah mean by, “Because I, the Lord, have not changed, you descendants of Jacob have not been destroyed” (3:6)? God replies to the charge that He’s not been faithful (2:17). Baloney! He’s been more than just and faithful because He’s honored His covenant with Jacob yet hasn’t destroyed them for their unfaithfulness.

Next, Yehovah moves to the peoples’ mandatory offering – the tithe. It’s simple. The people haven’t been setting a tenth of their income aside. Therefore, they’ve been experiencing an unidentified curse for doing so, likely a drought (3:9). The tithe was not only an offering to God, but part of the tithe was what God used to support His priests and the local poor. But God is tremendously gracious. He allows them to test Him. Normally, testing God is wrong because it’s usually a sign that you doubt God and His promises. It’s a different matter when Yehovah *invites* you to test Him. “Bring in the tithe and see if I won’t bless you abundantly and hold off the things that devour your crops!” Then their enemies will count them blessed when they see the land’s fruitfulness.

The final indictment is Yehovah calling His people out for complaining that it’s useless to serve Him. At this point, I would have expected God to *zotz* them all with a lightning bolt for their insolence. But Yehovah does something different. He ignores those who insult Him and turns to those who have remained faithful and reverentially committed to Him. “Yup. These good ones are mine,” the Lord says. “For those who say it’s useless to serve Me, they’ll realize how worthless their words were when I gather those who are Mine, My possession, on that Day.” To answer the complainers’ accusation, “Those who serve God are righteous, and those who don’t serve Him aren’t. So, if you find serving God tedious, maybe you need a check-up from the heart up.”

Understanding this is crucial because a time is coming when you want to be right with the Lord. "For the wicked, the coming day will consume them. But for you who fear my name," it will be a time of being healed, freedom, and joy (4:1-2)! No longer will righteous people endure the attacks of wicked people. So what shall we do? Remember Elijah and Moses. Elijah was the prophet of repentance (stay right with God), and Moses was the prophet who told the wicked world to leave God's people alone! Both men represent the parts of God's word that tell us how to live – the Torah and the Prophets.

Before the Day of the Lord comes, He will send "Elijah" to call His people to repent, to prepare themselves for the Day and the coming of the Lord. "Malachi 4:6, quoted in Luke 1:16-17, describes a time of reconciliation when "the disobedient" will accept the wisdom of "the righteous" and when fathers and their children will no longer live self-serving lives but will regard one another with compassion and respect" (HCSB).

God's word to us through Malachi? "Get back to heart-felt, give-your-best worship that truly honors God. Treat each other right. Revere God."

INSIGHT

The messenger angel Gabriel told John the Baptist's elderly dad that something was unique about his soon-to-be conceived son. "He will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and the disobedient to the understanding of the righteous, to make ready for the Lord a prepared people" (Luke 1:16-17). Recognizing John's ministry of leading people to repentance to prepare them for the Day of the Lord, Jesus said, "For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. And if you're willing to accept it, *he is the Elijah who is to come*. Let anyone who has ears listen" (Matthew 11:13-15).

Since John is God's messenger to prepare His way, Jesus is "the Messenger of the covenant you delight in" (Malachi 3:1). Jesus *is* the messenger of the covenant; the renewed old covenant called the New Covenant. We find purifying, healing, freedom, and joy through the New Covenant, and we can live in God's presence and are God's possession.

I wonder something. We know Jesus will come again, so will the Lord send a person or many persons who, under the power of the Holy Spirit, will preach repentance to the saved and unsaved to prepare for the Messenger of the Covenant's return? Just wondering.

And now, on to the New Covenant scriptures that start with the two messengers our Heavenly Father promised.

October 9 : Scriptures Matthew 1-3

SUMMARY

In today's reading, Matthew begins with Jesus' genealogy. If you've been following *Cruisin' Through the Bible*, you'll notice that genealogies are critical to the writers because they establish proper pedigree. Regarding human beings, a pedigree is a record of ancestry used to establish a person's relationship to a family line. Genealogies in the Hebrew scriptures are crucial to proving family lines for humanity (Adam to Noah to the ancient nations), the people of Israel (Abraham to the 12 tribes), elders, priests (especially the High Priest of Aaron's family line), and the kings of Israel and Judah. Genealogies were critical for tracing legitimate heirs to David's throne for political reasons. Because Yehovah promised David that he would always have a descendant as Israel's king (2 Samuel 7:16). Yehovah's promise to David is significant since the regathering and reunification of the 12 Tribes into one nation must have a Davidic king as their leader (Ezekiel 37:25).

Since Matthew writes specifically to Jews to convince them that Jesus is Israel's Messiah, Matthew does what any Jew would expect – establish Jesus' bona fides as David's descendant, qualifying Jesus as Israel's King Messiah, a genuine descendant of Abraham, "the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham" (1:1). To prove his point, Matthew follows Jesus' genealogy from Abraham (1:2) through David (1:6) down to Jesus (1:16). As my Study Bible reminds me, Jesus is the Jews' Messiah, their long-awaited Davidic king. Matthew also presents Jesus as the fulfillment of Abraham, the founder of a new creation, spiritual Israel, which will include Jews and Gentiles in God's kingdom. Jesus is the new Moses, Israel's most excellent Teacher, and prophet, who rightly interprets and applies Yehovah's Torah/Laws. Finally, Jesus is Immanuel, "God With Us" (born of the virgin Mary) and the Suffering Servant of whom Isaiah prophesied (Isaiah 7:14, 52:13-53:12). Yup, Matthew packs in a lot of stuff!

What's Matthew's purpose for writing a Gospel? Like the other Gospel writers, it's to record Jesus' life and teachings; only for Matthew, his Gospel is geared toward Jewish audiences. Why? Because Jesus was sent to His people, the Jews, first to announce the New Covenant, the final and only was to establish a saving relationship with God.

Matthew's over-arching theme is the coming King (Messiah) and His Kingdom. Yes, Jesus will reign as Israel's Messiah, but first, Jesus must create the condition through which all humanity can enter into God's kingdom (salvation through His atoning sacrifice).

I don't want to get too technical here, but scholars note that Matthew left out a few names along the list. Don't worry. That doesn't change Jesus' pedigree. Matthew used a common rabbinic technique to make a strong point. Jesus' genealogy is divided into three sections of 14 names. Go ahead; I'll wait while you count to make sure. Or you can just look at 1:17 if you're a trusting person. Got it? Moving on.

The Jewish Sages use a technique called Gematria, "Gematria is a numerological system by which Hebrew letters correspond to numbers" (myjewishlearning.com/article/gematria). Long story short, the number value of the Hebrew letters in the name "David" equals 14! Matthew's abridged genealogy, 14/14/14, screams, "David! David! David!" Get it? Right from the start, we get Matthew's intent.

The rest of chapter 1 is the account of Jesus' conception and birth. It's kind of hard to think of Jesus as a baby. Here are a few things that stand out to me. First, Joseph (Yoseph) was *engaged*, not married, to Mary (Miriam). This engagement, called betrothal, is as binding as marriage, without intimate contact, if you catch my drift. The consummation of the marriage happens on the wedding day. Therefore, an official divorce will occur if a betrothed woman becomes pregnant with a man who is not her fiancé. When Mary told him she was pregnant, Joseph had no idea what was happening. She likely told Joseph she was still a virgin and how the angel, Gabriel, had come to her and told her of an impending supernatural pregnancy (Luke 1:31-32). Right, Mary.

You can imagine Joseph's skepticism or confusion. It took an angel of the Lord, likely Gabriel again, to clue Joseph in and override his suspicions. However, people in their village could do the math, and I'm sure they put the numbers together. That meant Joseph and Mary had to be brave and resilient enough to let others' gossip (and scorn?) slide by. Knowing the score, Joseph avoids the divorce proceedings and marries Mary.

Second, names mean things, remember? Names in the Bible often reveal a person's God-given nature or mission. Jesus's name is *Yeshua* (*Y'shua*). It's from the Hebrew root word, *yasha*, meaning to save. It's in Jesus' nature to save people, and His mission is the same, to save His people (1:21).

Also, Matthew quotes a prophecy from Isaiah, "See, the virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they will name him Immanuel." Matthew gives us the translation, "God is with us" (Isaiah 7:14). Because Matthew provides us with the translation, it provides us with a clue that he's writing to non-Jewish people sometime after Jesus' life, perhaps c. 50 A.D. Immanuel's name reflects Jesus' divine nature and mission to reconnect God with His people.

The chapter ends with Joseph and Mary's marriage. Note that Matthew reinforces that there were no intimate relations between the two lest anyone get the idea Jesus' conception wasn't of the Holy Spirit.

Chapter 2 continues Jesus' birth and early years, much of which is familiar even to most non-Christians because of Christmas traditions. And *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. Here's the snapshot: Jesus is born in Bethlehem, and sometime later (within a two-year window), a group of Jewish sages (the Wise Guys) arrives in Jerusalem. They go to King Herod to ask where they might find Judea's new king (Wait! Weren't the Jewish sages talking to Judea's king, Herod? Yes, they were. Read on.). Of course, this disturbs Herod because he was a very ambitious king who wasn't about to surrender his throne to a descendant of David. So, slyly he finds out where Judea's king was to be born (in Bethlehem, King David's city) and sends the sages to find the very young heir to David's throne (1:7-8). The sages don't know it, but Herod uses them as spies. They're supposed to report back to Herod so he can "pay homage" to his competition, and by that, he means "dispatch the tyke."

The sages set off for Bethlehem, and the star leads them to the house where Joseph, Mary, and Jesus are living (1:11). Did you catch that? The *house* and not a cave or a building where animals were kept. Why is that? Because they were Jewish sages *from the east* (2:1). Do you remember the Jews' Babylonian exile in 586 B.C.? Some Jews returned, but some stayed and put down roots where the Babylonians resettled them. These Jewish communities became centers for Torah learning and scholarship. They studied God's Torah intensely, and there in Moses' writings was a prophecy about a future king from the tribe of Judah, "The scepter will not depart from Judah or the staff from between his feet until he whose right it is comes and the obedience of the peoples belongs to him" (Genesis 49:10) and one about a strange sign signaling this Judahite king's birth, "I see him, but not now; I perceive him, but not near. A star will come from Jacob, and a scepter will arise from Israel" (Numbers 24:17). Therefore, it's no surprise that when the sages saw a uniquely looking star arise in the west over the distant land of their ancestors, they sent a delegation to check out if it was Yehovah's signal of King David's heir's birth.

The star appeared at Jesus' birth, but it took a while for the sages to travel from the east to Jerusalem to Bethlehem. This time lag is why, later in the chapter, King Herod chose to kill all the male children in Bethlehem "all the boys in and around Bethlehem who were *two years old and under, in keeping with the time he had learned from the wise men*" (2:16, italics author). But we're getting ahead of ourselves.

The wise men pay homage (honor) to Israel's king (future Messiah) and return home without returning to King Herod because they were warned in a dream not to reveal Jesus' location. Once again, an angel visits Joseph and tells him to flee with his family to Egypt, beyond Herod's reach (2:13). Matthew quotes a prophecy from Hosea 11:1 to affirm Jesus' fulfillment of it.

Like all good tyrants, King Herod launches an assassination attempt against His competition but to no avail. Matthew quotes a strange prophecy from Jeremiah 31:15, which I'll discuss in the Insight below.

After Herod dies (4 B.C.), the busy angel again appears to Joseph and tells him the coast is clear, and he can return home. However, King Herod's son, Archelaus, was now ruling Judea where Bethlehem was (2:22), so Joseph gets directions in a dream to take his family north to the Galilee region, "Galilee of the Gentiles," to the town of Nazareth (2:23). You may have a question why King Herod died four years before Jesus was born according to today's calendar years. It's because after the B.C./A.D. years were set, historians reworked the date of Herod's death. So, Jesus was likely born c. 6-4 B.C. and was crucified c. A.D. 30. Therefore, Jesus was in His thirties when He died (gotquestions.org/how-old-was-Jesus-when-He-died.html).

Matthew jumps ahead about 31 years in chapter 3. This shift is the beginning of Jesus' ministry to His people, which centers in Galilee, in the northern part of the Roman province of Judea. The region is just north of the Samaritan region (Jew-Gentile mixed ethnicity from the Assyrian de-nationalization in 722 B.C.), with Jewish and Gentile villages scattered about the area.

Do you remember that Malachi prophesied the Lord would send a Messenger (a person like the prophet "Elijah" who had a ministry of repentance to Israel) and that this Messenger would precede the Messenger of the Covenant (Malachi 4:5, 3:1)? Well, here he is in chapter 3 – John the Baptist! What's his ministry? A call to repentance so the Jews will be ready to receive their Messiah (Israel's Davidic king) and God's new way of relating to Him (His Kingdom within the person). Why is John in the Judean wilderness, east of Jerusalem, in the Jordan River Valley? Because that's where God prophesied he would be. Matthew's quote from Isaiah is, "A voice of one *crying out in the wilderness*: Prepare the way for the Lord; make his paths straight!" (3:3). Isaiah puts it, "*Prepare the way of the Lord in the wilderness; make a straight highway for our God in the desert*" (Isaiah 40:3). Do you see the difference? Matthew says John is supposed to be in the wilderness shouting his call to repentance. Isaiah says the way of the Lord is in the wilderness, so that's where John should be if he's preparing "a straight highway," i.e., repentant hearts

prepared to receive Messiah. Both are correct. However, here's a pro tip. When you read a New Covenant writer's use of a Hebrew scripture quote, put them side-by-side, and you'll see some interesting insights as to *why* the NC writer used the passage and how they applied it.

John the Baptist is in the wilderness because the Jordan River runs through it. For baptism and cleansing, a Jewish person needs water that's 1) moving for ritual cleansing (a river qualifies as "living water") and 2) about 4-5' deep for total immersion (*baptizo* – Greek for "immerse") as required by the Torah.

John not only sounds like Elijah by calling God's people to repent, but he *looks* like Elijah with the camel hair outfit and the stylish leather belt (3:4; 2 Kings 1:8). You could say John was "cut from the same cloth" as Elijah (**ba-dump-bump** Thanks. I'll be here all week.). John's ministry was rocking! People traveled from all over to see John, accept his altar call, confess their sins, and repent publicly before God. (Jerusalem is about 16-18 miles away from the traditional site of John's baptism.)

Of course, the religious authorities, the Sadducees, and the Pharisees arrived to see whether John was legit because you don't want any unorthodox ministers getting out of hand or stirring up trouble. After all, Rome was in charge, and any messianic fervor could stir up further anti-Roman sentiment, and Judea would have an army marching into Jerusalem. Not good. John confronts the leaders head-on. Were they there to pursue God and the new thing He was doing, or would they refuse it because they believed the way to be in God's kingdom was by being a descendant of Abraham (3:9). What John is revealing is that this new way of entering and remaining in God's kingdom is a matter of the heart (faith and repentance), not birthright or ancestry. The Messenger of the covenant is coming. He is the Messenger of the *NEW* Covenant (Jeremiah 31), and this Messenger will immerse you in fire (cleansing from judgment) and the Holy Spirit (transformation and power to live righteously) to fulfill the New Covenant promise. This Messenger determines at the End who is in God's kingdom and who isn't (wheat and chaff, 3:12).

And the Messenger shows up! It's John's cousin, Yeshua/Jesus. John has been preparing for this his whole life, even earlier. Remember, he was filled with the Holy Spirit from the time he was in the womb. Jesus asks John to supervise His water immersion, and this shocks John. Why would Jesus need to be baptized? It's a baptism of repentance, and a "superior" supervises an "inferior's" baptism. There's no slam in that at all. John simply recognizes that Jesus has a higher spiritual status than him, "the one who is coming after me is more powerful than I. I am not worthy to remove his sandals" (3:11). Removing someone's sandals is a very demeaning, slave-equivalent task. Jesus sets John straight.

He needs to be baptized by John, not because Jesus needs it for repentance. He's the sinless Lamb of God. Jesus' baptism is how the Father will reveal Israel's Messiah to the people (3:15).

Sure enough, when Jesus immerses Himself under John's supervision, Jesus (and John, as we'll find out) gets an open vision of heaven, see the Holy Spirit descending on Him, and hears His Father's voice declare Jesus to be His Son. 1) This is a clear affirmation of the Trinity, the 3-fold nature of God, Three Persons of One Being. 2) The Father's declaration of "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased" links Psalm 2:7, where God proclaims David as His anointed king (Jesus is anointed with the Holy Spirit), "I will declare the Lord's decree. He said to me, *"You are my Son; today I have become your Father,"* and Isaiah 42:1, "This is my servant; I strengthen him, *this is my chosen one; I delight in him. I have put my Spirit on him; he will bring justice to the nations."*

The Father has just declared Jesus Israel's Messiah and God's Servant who will accomplish the Father's work, specifically, the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 52:13-53:12. See? I told you Matthew packs a lot of stuff in his Gospel, and we just scratched the surface.

INSIGHT

Why did a newborn King of the Jews threaten Herod so much? Because Herod was an Idumean. Idumeans were the descendants of the *EDOMITES*, whose ancestor was Esau, Jacob's brother. Remember how Jacob leveraged the birthright and blessing from Esau to himself? Esau was *really* ticked because he believed the right to "rule the family" belonged to him. As a result, a lot of hate between the two branches of the family flowed down the ancestral lines. The Edomites and the Judahites often warred against each other. King David conquered the Edomites and inflicted significant damage on them, which didn't help matters. When the Babylonians attacked Judah, the Edomites not only helped the Babylonians but also abused the people of Judah as they were led away into exile.

When the Roman empire took control of the Middle East, King Herod sucked up to the powers that be, and Rome made him the ruler of Judea in 37 B.C. King Herod ruled for 32 years. But as we read today, not only did a threat to his throne appear, but it was from that "other side" of the family, the Jews. King Herod's murderous attack on Bethlehem's little boys came from an ancient family feud and a likely satanic attack on God's plan to bring forth salvation (*Yeshua*) to the world.

October 10 : Scriptures Matthew 4-6

SUMMARY

Hey there! Welcome to today's reading. For many Bible readers, Jesus' temptation in the Judean wilderness is somewhat familiar – turn stones into bread, jump off the pinnacle of the Temple, bow down and worship Satan to gain control of all the kingdoms of the world. What we would like to know is, "Why?" Why was Jesus led by the Spirit (whom He'd just received) to go out into the Judean wilderness and fast for forty days and then be tempted? Good question. Glad you asked.

I'm so tempted to write volumes on Matthew's Gospel because I preached through the book for over 2 ½ years. But we're *Cruisin' Through the Bible here*, not *Camping in the Bible for Years*. That's for you to do after you're done with this schedule and commentary. But I'll touch on a few things that will make the Wilderness Temptation more understandable.

First, Jesus' temptation immediately follows His baptism, where the Holy Spirit descended upon Him, and Jesus' Father pronounced Jesus His Son (3:16-17). I noted that all these things are related and point to a single conclusion; Jesus is Israel's heir to David's throne. To be Israel's king requires the Spirit's "anointing" (empowering and guidance, see Saul, 1 Samuel 10:10) and a king-vassal king relationship with Yehovah. This king-to-king relationship is designated as a "father-son" connection. Jesus is not only His Father's son, i.e., conceived in the flesh by the Father, but Jesus is "His Father's Son," i.e., the Father's king for Israel-designate. With all this in mind, we see Jesus' temptation as a *test* of His Father's choice for Israel's Messiah.

Jesus fasts, denying His body's urges, to prepare Himself to face those urges and master them because His mission to save the world requires that He be sinless. Jesus proved Himself sinless by following His Father's will in every way up to death and beyond. To complete His Father's work, Jesus will have to maintain His unwavering commitment to His Father for the coming three years so as not to short-circuit or abort His Father's plan. Of course, one person would *love* to see Jesus fail, the being that holds sway over humanity via the Fall (Genesis 3), Satan, the Adversary. If Jesus succeeds in His salvation mission, Satan loses all, and Jesus qualifies as Israel's King, fulfilling His Father's word. In the wilderness of temptation, Satan has two goals. 1) Get Jesus to sin, and 2) move ahead of His Father's plan and assume Israel's throne prematurely. That's all. Well, there are a few more things, but we have limited time and space for them.

After Jesus fasts, He's famished (4:2). If you've ever fasted food, you know how tough it can be. Not only does your body legitimately need food and starts reacting (sometimes brutally), but you start craving food's tastes and textures. This intense hunger is Jesus' state when Satan shows up (3:3).

Matthew puts the three temptations in the order of "stones to bread, jump from the Temple, and bow down to worship Satan." The phrase, "If you are the Son of God," is the key. Again, Son of God = Israel's King, not ancestry, and Satan's temptation is better rendered, "Since you *are* the Son of God" (by Jesus' Father's declaration). Therefore, Satan challenges His Father's word to Jesus. That's precisely what the serpent/Satan did in Eden by slyly asking, "Did God say." That statement was Satan's hook to cast doubt on God's clear word to Adam and Eve. Yes, God did say, but Adam and Eve rebelled against the Lord's word for food, pleasure, and gain. The stones to bread temptation is Jesus' first. Would Jesus disqualify Himself to satisfy His legitimate bodily needs and desires illegitimately, against His Father's will?

If Jesus' wilderness temptation sounds a bit familiar, it should. This is the same temptation the nation of Israel faced in the Wilderness after their Exodus from Egypt. Will you disobey God to satisfy your human needs and desires (see *manna*, Exodus 16:4)? Will you follow Yehovah's will precisely and fulfill His plan to reach the world through them and be the vehicle through which God will bring humanity back to Himself?

So, let me restate Satan's temptation. "Since you *are* Israel's Messiah designate, anointed by your Father with authority and power, then satisfy your hunger by turning these stones to bread. They look mighty tasty, huh?" But Jesus replies with His Father's word that Satan is trying to get Him to violate. "Man must not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (4:4, Deuteronomy 8:3), meaning "I will trust My Father to supply all I need according to His will alone."

Satan next takes Jesus to the highest point of the Temple. The Tempter changes tactics. "Oh, you want to use your Father's word, huh? Well, throw yourself from the Temple and trust that your Father will fulfill His word and rescue you *since you are Israel's Messiah and your Father's will is to use you to complete His plan for humanity*" (all of which will be derailed if Jesus gives in and violates His Father's will). Jesus' answer is simple. He refuses to test His Father's will per Deuteronomy 6:16 (4:6). To "test God" means that we demand God to prove Himself before we will trust Him. God's trustworthiness is beyond question. Any demand He does so is to place oneself on par or above God. Again, this is Adam and Eve's and Israel's sin. If Jesus were to throw Himself off the Temple, this would impress a lot of Jews, and they would demand Jesus be their King and throw off

Roman rule. Or Jesus would die for His presumption. Satan's temptation is a shortcut to what Jesus will ultimately gain if He only follows His Father's path. Jesus refuses to take the shortcut and doesn't violate His Father's plan.

Finally, Satan takes Jesus to a very high place for the third temptation (hint: a high place is a place for worship, usually for idolatry since God's High Place is the Temple Mount and the high place of our hearts). Satan's offer is, "See all the world's people and their God-given dominion over the earth? I have that now because humanity submitted itself to me in Eden. I'll give it to You and let humanity be under Your dominion as your Father intends. All You have to do is worship/pay homage to me" (4:9). In other words, Satan offers Jesus everything that will come to Him if He obeys His Father's plan, which includes the horrors of the crucifixion and death only without the trouble.

Except for one little thing: Jesus' work is meant to destroy Satan's work, not reinforce it. Had Jesus succumbed to this temptation, *He* would have aborted His Father's will and plan, leaving the world in a lost and sinful status quo with Satan still in control. Satan would be "over" God Himself. This outcome is the worst. So, Jesus replies as He should, "Worship belongs to God alone, not to anything *He created, and that means you, Adversary!*" (4:10) Knowing he was beaten (for now), Satan leaves Jesus and the angels help Jesus recover from His fast.

Jesus' baptism and temptation are the threshold of Jesus' ministry that He must cross to begin calling Israel (the Jews) to repent and turn to the new way of God's kingdom He is about to reveal. When Jesus heard that His cousin, John, was arrested (4:12), He left the region of Judea for "safer" territory, the Galilee region up north. Jesus' time to be arrested wouldn't be for quite some time. Matthew sees Jesus' relocation as a fulfillment of prophecy from Isaiah 9:1-2. Why is that important? Because Isaiah 9's context is about Israel's future Messiah. Matthew is writing in prophetic shorthand. The fact that Jesus moved to the Galilee region adds further credibility that He is the Messiah. These verses follow Isaiah's Galilee prophecy about seeing "God's light" in the Galilee area, a light for Jews and Gentiles alike:

"For a child will be born for us, a son will be given to us, and the government will be on his shoulders. He will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. The dominion will be vast, and its prosperity will never end. He will reign on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish and sustain it with justice and righteousness from now on and forever. The zeal of the Lord of Armies will accomplish this" (Isaiah 9:6-7). Matthew asserts that Jesus is who Isaiah spoke of. Look for this contextual shorthand as you read the New Covenant scripture. It'll give you loads of understanding.

Jesus begins His ministry with His benchmark message, "Repent, because the kingdom of heaven has come near" (4:17). God's kingdom is coming. The king-in-waiting is announcing it, Messiah, the Messenger of the covenant (Malachi 3:1), now that the predecessor Messenger (John the Baptist) has completed his task of introducing Jesus to His people.

Jesus now begins selecting His team of disciples (4:18-22). Why? Like the rabbi He is, Jesus chooses His disciples to teach and train them in God's word and ways. Not just the previous Torah words and practices but the additional ones Jesus brings to clarify His Father's word apart from imperfect human interpretations and applications accumulated by His day (see Pharisees, scribes, Sadducees, et al.). Jesus presents God's word straight from God's mouth.

Jesus' ministry expands from the words of God's kingdom to the works of God's kingdom (miracles). Of course, this would get much attention (4:24), and the news about Jesus naturally spread. People heard of Jesus in the Galilee region of the north, the Decapolis (ten cities east of the Sea of Galilee), Jerusalem, Judea, and east of the Jordan River.

Now that Jesus has their attention with His power works, Matthew compiles a nifty section of Jesus' teachings that all deal with the same thing – how to live His Father's way correctly. The Jews learn it from the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings (the Older Testament, Hebrew scriptures – there was no "New Testament"). Matthew 5-7 is Jesus' great talk about how to live His Father's Law/Torah as He intended.

Chapter 5 begins with the Beatitudes. The Beatitudes can be understood as the "Be-Attitudes," how God wants His people to be and that they will be blessed (happy) if they are these ways:

- Poor in spirit (those who utterly depend on God for they have nothing. God's kingdom is for them).
- Mourn (those who sorrow for sin, especially the people of Israel, in light of their past exile. God will make them happy by forgiving them).
- Humble ("gentle" or "meek," those who willingly submit to God and wholeheartedly trust Him. This is the way humanity was supposed to be when God put us in charge of the world).
- Hunger and thirst for righteousness (those who fervently desire to live God's way. God will fulfill their desire by helping them do so).
- Merciful (those with a forgiving and compassionate attitude will get forgiveness and compassion from their Heavenly Father).

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- Pure in heart (those who are genuinely righteous, no faking it. God will reveal Himself to them through His word and eventually face to face).
 - Peacemakers (those who habitually “resolve conflicts, apologize, and make restitution when they’re wrong” [Study Bible]. Their attitude reflects a godly nature).
 - Persecuted (those who know their self-sacrifice will invite abuse from an ungodly world because they are living right, and by their actions, God shows the worldly people they stand condemned and need His forgiveness and restoration).

For most Gentiles reading Matthew 5:1-2, they would miss the benchmark, the cornerstone, that sets the theme for Jesus’ teaching. For Jewish eyes, the verse, “When he saw the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to teach them” would equate Jesus with Moses, who received God’s Torah on Mount Sinai and taught them about it. Some rabbis say Jesus’ action would be like Yehovah, who “sat down on the mountain, drew Israel near, and taught them His Torah.” Matthew points out that God again teaches His Torah, ensuring it’s understood and applied correctly according to Him and not faulty human teachings.

The picture also speaks of Jesus creating a “new” (renewed) Israel as God intended, one that will accept Gentiles in the future. Jesus’ disciples are the seed of this new “kingdom of God on earth” way.

Next, Jesus’ disciples are to be salt – actively working against the sin and corruption in their lives and the world around them, and light – revealing God to the world in a way the lost would understand, what God would look like if He were a person (5:13-16). We’re called to “live out loud,” not secret agent Jesus followers. Spread the salt, light the lamp, and let the chips fall where they may!

Now that Jesus has covered the attitudes and the baseline behaviors He expects from His followers, He launches into His Father’s Torah. Let me put this according to the idiom in the text. “Let no one think I came to misinterpret or misapply the Torah and the Prophets. Nope. Not in the least. I came to teach and apply it correctly, just as My Father intended. In fact, the Torah is so important that none of it will become null and void, not the letters or even the letter’s decorations, until My Father’s plan is accomplished. If anyone treats even the smallest command in the Torah lightly, they’ll be regarded lightly in heaven. But if anyone sets themselves to practice and teach God’s Torah faithfully, they’ll be highly regarded in heaven for their righteousness.”

“And speaking of righteousness, that’s not gained by the scrupulous observance of the Torah, as important as that is. Righteousness isn’t gained by the letter of the Torah, but demonstrated out of a righteous heart of love for God.” As Tim Hegg of Torah Resources

puts it, "One passes the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees not by neglecting the outward performance of the commands, *the mitzvoth*, but *by performing them as the fruit of a heart given over to true worship of God.*" This "keeping of God's commands" (starting with the Ten Basic Commands) comes from a heart that is right with God, showing whether one is indeed in Yeshua's Kingdom or not."

Speaking of starting with the Ten Commandments, that's what Jesus does with command #6 – murder (unauthorized taking of human life, 5:21-26). Jesus teaches that harming someone's life goes beyond just action and the result. The action starts as a thought and can emerge as verbal abuse, not just a physical attack. If we realize our hearts are wrong against another person, we must stop our worship (bringing a sacrifice) and reconcile with the person first. Our hearts can stain our worship. How many people's worships service on Sunday is nullified by hard-hearted, angry, and resentful attitudes and thoughts? How can we curse someone on the way to church services and expect the Lord to bless our time with Him? How can we act this way for six days and expect it to be different on Sunday? Let's work toward integrated holiness throughout the whole week. Speaking of angry thoughts and attitudes, could you be convicted of murder in God's court right now?

Command #7 – adultery (breaking the marriage covenant, 5:27-30). Jesus says the same thing regarding adultery. The sin of adultery begins with lust in the heart. Control the lust, and cheating will never occur. Could you be convicted of adultery in God's court right now? Since these sins are such terrible things, we need to take whatever measures to stop ourselves from committing them, even if the measure is extreme, like getting rid of TVs or installing potent internet blockers.

Breaking the marriage covenant, pt. 2 – divorce (5:31-32). Jesus tightens up the lax attitude and restrictions against divorce. Since God hates divorce (Malachi 2:14-16), divorce should not be treated lightly.

Always speaking truthfully (5:33-36). We are not to "hedge our bets" by giving ourselves an out when it comes to fulfilling our word. Do it or don't promise it, especially when it comes to making promises to God. This one is primarily about keeping our word to God, although it easily applies to other people.

No retaliation, but gracious cooperation (5:37-42). Instead, love your enemies (5:43-48). This application is the other half of "Love God, love your neighbor." We have the right to self-defense, but not retaliation. God's way is to realize persecution will come to God's people (see the last Beatitude), but Jesus' way to deal with it is by cooperating as much

as we can, and it doesn't violate God's commands. That leaves us a *wide* avenue of gracious responses.

Jesus continues His "How to live God's Torah the way He intends" teaching in chapter 6. When we give, we're not to do it to show off because that comes from pride. And we don't have to make a huge deal about doing it secretly, either. Just give your gift without a fuss. Our Heavenly Father knows what we do, and other people don't have to know (6:3-4).

When we pray, it's the same thing. Talk to God, and don't make a big production to impress people. The only one we need to connect with is our Father in heaven. Prayer is our conversation with Him. If you need a pattern, Jesus gives His disciples a nifty one (6:9-15):

- Worship.
- Pray for God's kingdom to manifest in your life by following His will. Now that you've put God first move on to your needs and requests.
- Daily provision of all sorts.
- "Help us forgive others as you forgive us. As an incentive, treat us as we treat others. (Ouch.)"
- Help us say no to the temptation to sin and protect us from our spiritual enemies. Amen.

Did you notice that Jesus' teaching slid from God's commands (chapter 5) to godly practices (chapter 6, giving/praying/fasting)? When we fast, we're to treat it as we would giving. Just do it without making a fuss to draw attention to your extraordinary spirituality (6:16-18).

And finally, a big one. How to handle the material things of life and the anxiety that comes when we think we're coming up short. First, keep your eyes on God and live for Him. That will set your heart on Him, not your stuff (6:19-21). Second, don't have such a grip on your stuff that you become stingy (a "bad eye" is an idiom for stinginess), refusing to look at the needs around you that you could help meet. Instead, have a good eye (be generous). This proves you control your material goods, and it doesn't control you. Third, realize how important this is. Our hearts determine who our master is – God or our desires, represented by us chasing the things of this world. We can't have two masters. Choose, and your actions will reflect upon which master toward whom you've pledged allegiance.

Me: "But Jesus, what if I come up short in finances or needs?" Jesus: "Don't worry. My Father takes care of His children. Do birds or flowers fret and rub their wings/petals in worry? No. Don't you worry. You mind My business (seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness), and I'll mind yours (all these things will be provided for you)" (6:25-34).

INSIGHT

Jesus always gets to the heart of the matter, doesn't He? The transformation He's looking for is not just outward but an inward work, and that's the nature of the New Covenant; inward change. When we're transformed inwardly, our outward actions will follow naturally.

October 11 : Scriptures Matthew 7-9

SUMMARY

One of the most misquoted verses in the Bible is right here in chapter 7. This verse is usually used as a club against any Christian who *dares* to address bad behavior or outright sin. "Hey, hey, hey! You have no right to judge me. It says it right there in your Bible – 'Don't judge.'" Isn't it fun when people who are clueless about the Bible try to use it to lecture us who have read *and studied* it? If you're one of those who have misused Matthew 7:1, it's time to learn what Jesus taught for real-sies.

The phrase means, "Be careful *how* you judge. Because the way you judge others, God will judge you." That leaves judgment open as an option, but it puts quite a bit of responsibility on it. It doesn't mean not to judge because Jesus later talks about tossing what's sacred to dogs and pearls to swine (7:6). Wouldn't that mean we're supposed to judge if a person is that kind of person? You get my point.

This section is about judging people correctly. It appropriately follows the previous two chapters about how to live God's commands and practice our righteousness the right way, Jesus' way. We must be careful how we assess someone else's efforts at "living God's way." And here's where the speck/log illustration comes in. If someone has a speck in their eye (they're doing something wrong regarding how they think God wants them to live), ensure you're not doing the same thing, only bigger. When we go on the righteousness "in-speck-tion" tour, let's make sure we see them and their situation clearly to help and not harm them.

However, some don't give a gosh darn about how they're living. Dogs and hogs are non-kosher, unclean animals. These people are unprepared or unwilling to receive your advice and don't want to hear anything you have to say. You can give them an accurate assessment of the situation (a judgment) and offer your help (pull the speck out of their eye), but they'll turn on you, stomp on your advice, and rip you good. Good judgment includes knowing your audience and when/how to help them. Even though you discern something correctly, some people are able or willing to listen. In some cases, it's best to leave them alone.

Another misused scripture is what follows – the ask, seek, knock verses. Yes, it's about prayer, but it has to stay in its context to let it say what it says. It's about seeking help for the resistant person. If the person with the speck in their eye refuses to listen, then your only recourse is to pray and let God help them, which He is more than able to do. Trust Him because He's the God who gives good things to His children when they ask.

And to end this section, Jesus wraps it up with a reference to 7:2 – judge and correct others the way you would want to be judged and corrected, even if you're one of those pig-headed people who don't want someone's correction.

In 7:13-29, Jesus gives us His kingdom talk. For Jesus' disciples, the only way into His Father's kingdom is via trustfully doing His Father's will (7:21). Now, lest you think I'm advocating that the way into our Father's kingdom is by doing good works, that's not the truth. Jesus tells us the *preliminary* work we do to enter God's kingdom, "This is the work of God – that you believe in the one he has sent" (John 6:26). That's the starting point. We can't do anything else regarding living Father's way (Matthew 5-7) until we first come to Him in faith. *After that*, the natural proof of our genuine saving faith is our works about which Jesus just taught.

So, as Jesus' disciples seek to enter the kingdom (because it hasn't arrived yet at this point in the Gospel account), they need to be careful who they listen to because others are speaking about how to enter it as well. These would be people that say a person is in God's kingdom by birth (a descendant of Abraham as John the Baptist rebuked the Pharisees, scribes, and Sadducees, Matthew 3:9) or any other path. Jesus says their actions reveal the validity of their way. While we can't judge *precisely* where a prophet/teacher/person is coming from, we can generally judge if their teaching is correct by the "fruit of their lives," evidence of a life and character that lines up with God's will (7:21). See? Judging.

In fact, our Heavenly Father's will is so important that it is the *sole* determining factor for entering God's kingdom. "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven." Again, the first requirement of the Father's will is to look to Jesus only as our salvation, to "believe in the one he has sent." Since Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6), that settles it. You can say, "Jesus is Lord," but your actions must confirm your word. Otherwise, your declaration is suspect, and the judge who *really* knows where you're at will make the final call.

Here's an interesting verse, "Lord, didn't we prophesy in your name, drive out demons in your name, and do many miracles in your name?" (7:22). Why does Jesus disqualify that? 1) Because being in the kingdom isn't determined by what we do, our relationship with Jesus determines it, "Then I will announce to them, 'I never knew you...'" (7:23). 2) "But Jesus, didn't we do this stuff in your name?" **buzzer** Those works that Jesus' used as illustrations don't qualify because those aren't Torah commands. But how can a person drive out demons if they don't have a relationship with Jesus? Because Jesus' name still

carries authority and power. It's kind of like making a citizen's arrest. You're not a cop, but the perp might obey by virtue of the law you claim (authority) and the gun you're holding (power). But again, unless you call on Jesus' authority and power to save you (i.e., in Jesus' name), you won't be in God's kingdom, no matter how many genuinely good things you do. How do we know? Because of the part I left out in 7:23, "Then I will announce to them, 'I never knew you. Depart from me, you lawbreakers (Torah-breakers, those who aren't doing Father's will)!'"

So, what should Jesus' disciples do, those who are listening to His teachings? Practice them, live them! When you do, disciple, you'll experience stability when circumstances get rough. If you don't, when things get turbulent, you're going to crash, and it won't be pretty.

As a topper to Jesus' TED Talk (*Torah for Education and Discipleship*, Matthew 5-7), the crowd's reaction is great. "When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, *because he was teaching them like one who had authority, and not like their scribes*" (7:28-29). Oh, wow! What a statement! On the one hand, it seems like a slam against the Torah teachers. But it's true because the Torah-teaching person is the Author and Living Torah Himself! Boom!

For the rest of our chapters (8-9), Matthew records Jesus' miracles. See? Teaching followed by the fruit of good works demonstrating the commands and power of God's kingdom.

Cleansing the man with the skin disease (8: 1-4). For background, review *tzara'at*, *skin diseases* in Leviticus 13-14. You'll find the process detailing how a skin diseased person is cleansed there. What's unique about this account is 1) *Jesus touched the man!* This act would have made Jesus ritually unclean. On one level, it shows the people that this rabbi would be willing to be made ritually unclean out of compassion for the sick man. But that's not what's going on here. 2) when Jesus touched the man, "immediately his leprosy was cleansed," showing that this was a miracle-working rabbi. If He can cleanse a diseased man, he can't be rendered ritually unclean! Therefore, Jesus is like no other person.

Let me put it another way. Once a person is cleansed of skin disease, they undergo a cleansing ritual (Leviticus 14). Part of the ritual involves the healed person being sprinkled with specially prepared "fresh" or "living" water, water that has been gathered from a body of water that has an inflow and outflow (a stream or spring-fed lake with a creek). Living water can *never* become unclean because it's always moving, carrying the

impurity away. Therefore, Living Water became a picture of the Holy Spirit who cleanses and carries away a person's sin and impurity. When Jesus healed the man, He did it by the power of the Spirit, cleansing Him entirely. Because Jesus upheld the Torah, He commanded the man to follow the Torah's regulations about cleansing. *Jesus the King has authority over spiritual contamination.*

Next, Jesus heals a Centurion's servant from paralysis (8:5-13). But what's unique about this is Jesus doesn't even have to be in the broken person's vicinity, and he can heal at a distance via His God-given authority. *Jesus' kingly authority is unlimited.* Even more striking about this account is that it's a Gentile who seeks out a Jewish rabbi for help. Usually, the Romans would lord it over the Jews whose land they occupied. This Centurion has developed relationships with the Jewish community in Capernaum on the north side of the Sea of Galilee. And with Jesus' words, we see that the scope of God's kingdom is not limited to the Jewish people. They are His first concern, but our Father's plan is to rescue as many people as possible and restore humanity to its original relationship with Him.

Then Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law and others who heard of Jesus and came for help (8:14-17). By this, *Jesus demonstrates the King's authority over all realms, physical and spiritual.* Matthew sees this as a fulfillment of Isaiah 53, the Suffering Servant (Isaiah 53:4) whose sacrificial work opens the way for healing. Why? Because Jesus' sacrifice opened the door to God's kingdom and where the King is, so is His power to heal.

But there's a cost to following Jesus. The disciple isn't allowed to set the terms for his service. The Rabbi does (8:18-22). Following Jesus requires a sacrificial commitment to make Him the disciple's priority, even over family obligations if needed. In other words, *Jesus the King has authority over those who call themselves His disciples.*

For the last two miraculous accounts, we see Jesus control the weather and demonic beings proving *Jesus the King's authority over nature and spiritual beings.* Did you notice the "herd of pigs" reference? Jesus had crossed from the north shore of the Sea of Galilee (primarily Jewish people) to the east shore. This region had a significant Gentile presence. Unless a Jewish person was particularly compromised, they wouldn't raise pigs, so this herd likely belonged to a Gentile. What we also discover is demons don't like to be disembodied. Human or animal, demons desire physical bodies to be their home. But the demons' plan didn't work out. The demonized pigs went crazy and stampeded down the slope and into the Sea, where they perished, and the demons were forced to go elsewhere. Where that was will be explained in later Gospels. To me, the saddest part of this account is that the people didn't want this remarkable rabbi, Jesus, to stay around because He

threatened their income. Perhaps they had a few demons in them that caused them to be afraid, and they wanted Jesus to git.

Jesus continues His *tour de force* Miracle Tour in chapter 9. A paralyzed man is brought to Jesus, and He does something unusual. He forgives the man's sins at first rather than healing him (9:2). So, instead of getting into a discussion about how sin relates to bad situations, I want to draw your attention to the spiritual leaders' (the scribes') response, "He's blaspheming!" (9:3). How is Jesus *speaking injuriously* of God (the definition of *blaspheme*)? Because He's making Himself out to be God since everybody knows only God can forgive sins. At this point, we realize Jesus set up this situation to reveal something. It's easier to proclaim someone's sins forgiven than heal them because there's no outward proof. Here's Jesus' point. "If I can heal this guy's hopeless paralysis, then I really can forgive sin, and I have God's authority to forgive sin."

Furthermore, Jesus refers to himself as the Son of Man (a reference to Daniel 7). By healing the paralytic, Jesus proves He *is* the Son of Man, God's official Representative and Judge who will arrive to establish the Ancient of Days' kingdom on earth. *Jesus the King has the authority to forgive sins.*

We then see Jesus visit Matthew, the former tax collector, turned disciple, and future Gospel writer. Tax collectors were not looked upon kindly by their fellow Jews and were regarded as traitors because they worked for the Romans to collect revenue. In short, Matthew worked for the Man, the Jews' oppressors. Some of the scorn was justly deserved. Some Jewish tax collectors abused their position for financial gain, making money off their compatriots' pain.

And yet, Jesus, Israel's coming King, sought out Matthew to be His disciple. Jesus simply called for Matthew to follow Him, and Matthew obediently responded. Matthew hosts a "Dinner with Sinners" event for His new master shortly afterward. So, what's the deal with the Pharisees and their seeming disdain for "sinners and tax collectors?" Both Jesus and the Pharisees are concerned with sinners, those who are Jews but in a backslidden condition, i.e., those who aren't whole-hearted in their devotion to God. Jesus chose to embrace the sinners and traitors while the Pharisees would, in effect, stand back and call the people to clean up first (spiritually), and then they could have fellowship. The Pharisees saw Jesus' contact with the "sinners" as a compromise. "Rabbi, we appreciate your efforts to be seeker-sensitive and inviting, but why don't you set the example *for* them, Jesus, rather than eat *with* them? Set the bar Jesus, don't join them in it."

What are Jesus' responses? Point #1: "It is not those who are well who need a doctor, but those who are sick" (9:12). A doctor brings healing to the sick. No doctor would demand you get better before you make an appointment, and people would die waiting. People seek a doctor when they're sick, and if they can't go to the doctor, doctors can go to them, even if it isn't the clean environment of a doctor's office.

Point #2: Jesus quotes Hosea 6:6, "I desire mercy and not sacrifice." Hosea's message to Israel is God's plea to repent and return to Him with all their hearts, yet God laments their refusal. This response reveals Jesus' motivation for doing what He did, for God is the same, yesterday, today, and forever. Jesus went to the sick because He wanted them to get well rather than be concerned about proper religious observance. Therefore, the Pharisees should adjust their expectation of a "religious observance to jump-start recommitment" to "reaching out to the backslider first, then encourage a better walk with God," as Jesus modeled.

The question about fasting is complex, but I'll try to simplify it. Fasting, in this case, was based on Pharisee-taught practices of when and how to fast.

1) The old cloth = the Pharisees' teaching. The new patch = Jesus' teaching. The Pharisees want Jesus to adjust His teaching to work with theirs, but Jesus says His teachings and theirs are as incompatible as new patches on old cloth. We know Jesus' teaching comes from God Himself. The Pharisees' teaching is the best they can do as human beings. God's pure teaching captures God's intent. The Pharisees' teaching? Not so much.

2) New wine = Jesus' teachings. Wineskins = the people. Jesus' teachings work best with people who have been "newly made" by God. An old wineskin = a sinner. If a person tries to follow Jesus' ways without being transformed by God first, they'll eventually break down because they have neither the new nature nor the Spirit's power to help them flex/adapt to Jesus' teachings. That's why trying to be a Christian by living via church do's and don'ts doesn't work and ultimately causes many problems. Therefore, *Jesus the King embraces sinners.*

Next, Jesus heals a dead girl and a woman who can't stop bleeding from her menstrual cycle (9:18-26). Are these two different situations? Not really. Spilled blood is a sign of death. There's the connection. The woman with the continual bleeding is in a state of "living death," rendering herself and anyone she touches ritually unclean. If her neighbors want to attend synagogue, go to the Temple, or just stay ritually clean, they can't touch her or anything she's touched. You can imagine the isolation, avoidance, and perhaps shame the woman experienced. But she had a bold plan. She would go to the

miracle-working rabbi and try something. Malachi 4:2 says, "But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings." By Jesus' day, there was the belief that when Messiah, God's representative, appeared, a person could touch the sides of his prayer shawl (called the *qanaf*, "wings") where the fringes were and be healed. So the woman exposes herself to potential humiliation by approaching Jesus from behind and touching His prayer shawl. Jesus turns to her and proclaims her well as she's suddenly healed. What's remarkable is *that no one knew what happened except Jesus and the woman!* The woman's "death" had been lifted from her. Likewise, Jesus lifts death from the little girl. *Jesus the King has authority over death.*

Jesus heals the blind (9:27-31). The blind men call Jesus the "Son of David," referring to Jesus as the potential Messiah. Jesus' healing power is building the people's expectations and faith. Of course, the men can't keep their mouths shut after being healed. Even more significant, Jesus releases a man from a demon that has prevented him from speaking. This deliverance makes me smile because the last event and this one has "the word spreading" as people are freed from their afflictions by their Messiah's power. And yet, not everyone is convinced. A group of Pharisees is skeptical, even to the point of attributing Jesus' power to that of demonic power, which is ridiculous. How can Jesus do good using demonic power when by their power, demons do evil things like making people mute? Either Jesus is wrong, or the group of Pharisees is. Hmmm, I wonder which?

And now we have reached a climax. Jesus' reputation is spreading, along with His message. "God's kingdom is manifesting in a new way; the likes of which Israel hasn't seen since the ancient days through the prophets' times. Who could this new prophet be? Is He the Messiah we've been waiting for?" Jesus' work has grown beyond what one man can facilitate. He needs more workers to go out into the harvest to collect God's "ripening grain," those ready to embrace Father's new work. It's time for the disciples to put their training into practice.

INSIGHT

"For I didn't come to call the righteous, but sinners." These less-than-observant people, who don't measure up to our righteous standard, shouldn't need to clean themselves up before we fellowship with them. If pursuing them means breaking man-made religious barriers or sensibilities to reach them, we should. And that can be done without breaking biblical commands. We can reach out to sinners wherever we find them without becoming one. We shouldn't expect them to clean up our way. Not everyone has the same shower routine! Christians grow in different ways and at different speeds. Another way to put it is, "Not everyone wakes up at the same time in the morning."

October 12 : Scriptures Matthew 10-11

SUMMARY

So, what do we have in Matthew 10-11? Jesus can transfer His authority and power to His disciples to use on His behalf, and He chooses His inner circle of disciples, 11 chosen men, and the one who will betray Him.

Jesus sends His inner circle out on a short-term mission, first to their fellow Jews. The Jewish people were God's starting point for His plan of redemption and restoration (see Abraham, Genesis 12). Jesus tells His representative to proclaim the presence of God's kingdom and back up their words with Jesus' power. God's kingdom is wherever the Father's reign is embraced, and works of power confirm that. Because Jesus was the embodiment of His Father's will, He embodied the kingdom of God. Imagine that. Jesus was God's kingdom wrapped up in one person in those days. Actually, that's the way we were initially designed – to be God's subjects overseeing His world. That was lost, but in Jesus, it started making a return, beginning in one man. When Jesus' work is complete, it will spread to many people. Eventually, the whole earth will be filled with God's subjects and come entirely under the Father's reign through Messiah Jesus on Israel's throne. (But let's not get ahead of ourselves.)

The disciples' mission is to announce the coming kingdom of God. There's a change coming in how God's kingdom will manifest itself according to the New Covenant. Furthermore, Jesus' disciples aren't to use their mission for personal enrichment. "Speak. Let God confirm your words with His power for your listeners' benefit. Trust your Father to provide for you through people who are receptive to the announcement. Turn away from those who reject it. Jesus won't force people into the kingdom (10:14).

Now comes the warning. Jesus' disciples shouldn't think this is going to be smooth sailing. The reality is the world's people are under a different kingdom, under the influence of God's Adversary. What the disciples will experience is a clash of the two kingdoms at the human level. The disciples (and all of Jesus' representatives in the future) will be persecuted because they are the King's ambassadors. They need to be innocent and wise in their mission, not to give anyone a reason to persecute them. Some of the persecution will be severe, but even in that, there's an opportunity to speak out on Jesus' behalf. Don't stop sharing God's call to switch allegiances to His kingdom (10:18-20). They are to speak boldly because God will speak through them through His Holy Spirit.

Jesus' instructions are super encouraging, and I've seen the Holy Spirit speaking through a person unaware of what was happening. I know a pastor who denies the gifts of the

Holy Spirit are for today. And yet, during a sermon on using what the Lord has given as spiritual gifts and talents (generally and non-charismatically speaking), he used an illustration that the Holy Spirit inspired. The pastor's encouragement contained a word of knowledge and wisdom and was a prophetic forth-telling word. *He had no idea until a lady in the congregation talked to him after the service confirming all the details the pastor used.* If you're worried the Holy Spirit will let you down when He's needed, don't be!

Okay, so back to Jesus' disciple deployment time. Yes, persecution could be to the point of death (many Christians in heaven today can attest to that), but the disciples should hang in there. Jesus is following behind them. He will be persecuted in the worst way (as we know), and His disciples should expect the same. They're not greater than their Master. A disciple's goal is to become just like their rabbi, and they'll get treated the same as the world treats their teacher/trainer (10:24-25). "Have more fear of God (reverence) than fear of people (emotion). Stay on task and don't worry because your Heavenly Father is watching over you, caring for you" (10:28-31).

Jesus tells them to be fearless in acknowledging their relationship with Him. Jesus warns them that denying Him would cause Jesus to deny them before the Father. Even the closest relationships will be difficult because when they (we) find themselves (ourselves) attacked by their (our) families regarding Jesus, they'll be (we'll be) prone to fold under pressure. Jesus reveals three things they'll have to be willing to surrender in their service to Him: their families, selves, and their lives (10:35-39).

But it's not all doom and gloom. For those who welcome Jesus' representative, those people welcome Jesus and His Father, and they can expect a heavenly reward for doing so (10:40-42). So, are you, dear reader, open to receiving God's people, especially those who serve Him in ministries like missionaries, apostles, prophets, pastors, teachers, evangelists, elders, and deacons? Aw, heck, let's include anyone who is in God's kingdom.

So, off go the disciples. The camera stays trained on Jesus as we come to an interesting interchange. The word comes to John the Baptist, who is languishing in prison because of Herod Antipas, about his cousin, Jesus, whom he identified as Israel's long-awaited Messiah per the Father's word. However, John's arrest and imprisonment have caused him to have doubts. Yes, Jesus is performing wonderful kingdom of God works, but where is God's kingdom on earth? Where is Israel's king who would drive out the Romans and bring Israel to her highest glory after the manner of her greatest king, David? John sends his disciples to find out if he was right or wrong about Jesus. Is Jesus the one

(11:3), or is there another person who is coming? Was John the Messenger to precede the Messenger of the covenant, or was Jesus the Messenger instead of John?

Jesus' answer is to the point. He affirms that He is indeed Israel's Messiah by pointing to His supernatural works as His credentials, even though no political change has happened. John shouldn't take offense or be concerned he missed his assignment (11:5-6). All is on track.

After affirming Himself to John's disciples, Jesus affirms John and his ministry as the Messiah's herald, the Messenger God promised (3:10; Malachi 3:1). Not only that, Jesus affirms two more things about John the Baptist.

1) He is the "breaker," the person who "opens the gate of the sheepfold, whereby the sheep excitedly jostle each other to get out of the confines they were in to follow their Good Shepherd to wonderful pastures (11:12; Micah 2:12-13; John 10:2-6).

2) John the Baptist is God's promised "Elijah" who is to come to prepare God's people for their Messiah by calling and leading them to repentance (11:13-14; Malachi 4:5-6). John was the greatest of all the prophets because his ministry introduced the One who would inaugurate the new way into God's kingdom – faith in Jesus's atoning work for sin, open to all Jews and Gentiles – the New Covenant!

But sadly, Jesus' generation looked at John's and Jesus' ministry and refused. They were like "spoiled children who didn't get their way" (Study Bible). John preached "Repent," but many didn't repent. Jesus preached about the kingdom, but many refused to receive it. However, such refusal carries a fatal price – God's condemnation which would fall on the townspeople who rejected the manifestation of God's kingdom in their very midst – Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum (Jesus' initial headquarters) (11:16-24).

But switching metaphors from children to "adults" who are set in their knowledge are skeptical of other adults, there were those who took Jesus at His word, like trusting children. Those who know-it-all often miss what God is doing because it's outside their accepted frame of reference. But for those who are humble, willing to trust God, learn, and adapt, they receive what our Father offers, and He opens their understanding to it (11:25-27).

Jesus' words in 11:28-30, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. *Take up my yoke* and learn from me, because I am lowly and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. *For my yoke is easy and my burden is light,*" are often

misunderstood by today's western Christians. Jesus isn't talking about life's burdens in general. He's referring to those who miss Him (the "wise and intelligent," the spiritual leadership) and those whose eyes His Father opens ("infants," any person who is receptive to Jesus). The key is the word, "yoke." To a Jew in Jesus' day, this speaks volumes.

God's Torah is a body of instructions, guidelines, and laws to help His people live as He wants them to according to the standard of Who He is and what He wills. The Torah acts as a yoke on people, similar to how a yoke works on an animal. The owner's yoke helps the owner to guide his animal straight. Over centuries, the Jewish sages and teachers added many interpretations and applications (*halacha*, laws; from the Hebrew word *halak*, to walk) to help the Jewish people live God's way. As we often see throughout the Gospels, Jesus' teachings conflict with these man-made laws when they violate God's intent for His Torah. Who should know better than the One who gave Moses His Torah than Jesus?

What Jesus says is simple. "I know trying to follow God's way of life has been tough on you because of how men interpret and apply it. Learn how to live My Father's way from Me because I'm not doing it for pride's sake or trying to find favor or anything else. When you follow the way I teach you to live, you'll find rest even while you live a godly life. Why? Because the way I interpret and apply My Father's instructions is easier for you, thus not making it a burden."

We now know that under the New Covenant, the Torah goes from the outside of a person to the inside of them. After that, living God's way becomes a matter of "I want to" under the Holy Spirit's guidance and motivation rather than "I have to."

INSIGHT

When Jesus commissioned His disciples to go out and preach the Kingdom accompanied by His power, this was only the beginning. Jesus gave His disciples a Great Commission after He rose from the dead, just before He ascended to heaven. Check this out, "*All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you*" (Matthew 28:18-20). The essence of this command is the same – go in my authority and power and lead people from all nations into God's kingdom through Me. Teach them how to live in the Kingdom. The kingdom announced with power. That's the way we're to do it!

October 13 : Scriptures Matthew 12-13

SUMMARY

You may recall when I wrote that chapter numbers sometimes get in the way and break up a flow of thought or a theme among verses. This is one of those examples. According to Matthew's authorship, Jesus just finished telling the people that His way of interpreting and applying the Torah is easier than the man-made laws and traditions of the elders (11:28-30). If we ignore the chapter number (12), Matthew could insert, "For example, at that time Jesus passed through the grain fields on the Sabbath..." because this chapter shows the clash of the kingdoms regarding the Pharisees' traditions and the King's laws by which the King's subjects shall live. The laws in question are about proper Sabbath observance.

Why is Sabbath observance a big deal? Because it's a big deal to the Lord. As the Torah says, "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy" (Exodus 20:8-11), and there's a punishment for observing the Sabbath wrongly or breaking specific Sabbath rules, "Observe the Sabbath, for it is holy to you. Whoever profanes it must be put to death. If anyone does work on it, that person must be cut off from his people" (Exodus 31:14). The prohibition is mostly about not working (a person's employment or what they need to do daily) on the Sabbath. If you have the right attitude, it's indeed a blessing from the Lord.

Imagine! God commands you to prepare for the Sabbath, take a break, sleep, rest, and "enjoy Me and the day!" Gee, what a burden.

Well, it became one because those in authority wanted to spell out precisely what it meant to *observe* the Sabbath and *honor* it by not working. Other laws were created over the centuries since Moses to "help" people with the yoke of the Sabbath Torah command. These man-made laws and traditions are called "fences." The principle is if you don't jump the fences (i.e., observe the created laws and traditions), you most certainly won't violate the Torah. It makes sense until it doesn't.

By Jesus' day, there were so many man-made laws and traditions it became burdensome for people to know and follow them. There were even conflicts between the various Jewish sects (Sadducee vs. Pharisee) and rabbis regarding which fences were valid. Very confusing and frustrating!

This is what we see in chapter 12. Jesus and His disciples are walking through a grain field. The guys are hungry, so they pick some heads of grain, rub them together with their

hands to remove the chaff, and eat the raw kernel. Mmmm, wonderful! But it wasn't so wonderful to the Pharisees who observed the disciple's "Sabbath infraction."

The Torah allowed people to glean in a stranger's field (Leviticus 23:22). However, the guys weren't gleaning, they were eating, and that involved picking and preparing the heads of grain for consumption. Naughty, naughty! That's something the Pharisees ruled as work. Yes, it was work – *to a farmer*. The so-called work the disciples were doing was the work of sustaining life by satisfying their hunger and feeding their bodies, not harvesting a field. The Pharisees' accusation against another rabbi's disciples wasn't valid because Jesus rightly judged the issue. It wasn't about doing work but sustaining life. According to rabbinic rulings over millennia, *it's acceptable to violate a Torah law to preserve life*, and that's the 1,000-year precedent Jesus points to (12:3-5).

Something far greater than the Tabernacle (David's place of Sabbath transgression) and the Temple (the priests') is present. Yes, the Lord of the Sabbath is present, and He has every right to declare what's legal or not on the Sabbath – without question – but the thing "greater than buildings" are bodies and the lives within those bodies. Jesus then calls out the fault in the Pharisees' reasoning. God is more concerned about mercy than a person sacrificing themselves for a religious observance, especially if it's based on a man-made fence (12:6). The God Who gave His people the Sabbath and its basic guidelines would sooner see His Sabbath violated than hurt human life. The basis of the Pharisees' accusation is flawed. So sayeth the Son of Man (The Almighty's official representative) who is Lord of the Sabbath.

We come to another example of the same issue. Is it right to violate the Sabbath, performing medical work, for the sake of mercy? If you answered, "Yes!" pat yourself on the back. Jesus uses the occasion of a synagogue visit to drive home His point about the Torah and mercy in the service of life. "Is it lawful (okay with the Torah) to heal on the Sabbath?" (12:10). Of course, it is! Even the silent Pharisees know they would show mercy to an animal in distress on the Sabbath. How much more to a distressed person (12:12)? Therefore, having made His point, Jesus heals the man.

But the Pharisees didn't like this newcomer rabbi negating their laws and traditions, undercutting their teaching, and humiliating them publicly, even if He did produce a miracle. These Pharisee observers are more concerned about their "turf" than seeing God at work in a remarkable way. Those who considered themselves Torah observant now consider breaking the Torah (murder) to get rid of their competition (12:14). Warped thinking, huh?

Jesus is no dummy. Knowing their intent, He wisely makes Himself scarce. But the crowds follow Him, and Jesus mercifully heals those who earnestly seek Him. Matthew sees this as fulfilling the Suffering Servant prophecy from Isaiah 53 (12:18-21). Jesus is the Suffering Servant as He is His Father's delight and chosen one. The Holy Spirit empowers Him. Jesus is righteous and doesn't make a scene to draw people to Himself. Jesus is merciful and tender with the most bruised people and will be the one to whom all the nations will look.

Speaking of the Pharisees hating competition, Matthew shows Jesus casting out a demon, prompting the crowd to ask if Jesus is their Messiah. Again, the Pharisees denounce Jesus by making a terrible accusation amongst themselves, "He's not driving out demons by God's power, but by Satan's power." Knowing their thoughts (you can't keep a secret from God!), Jesus calls them out. Their accusation is ridiculous because any kingdom that fights against itself (Satan and his minion demons, for example) will fall. Infighting weakens any group (12:25-26). "Jesus argued that Satan is too smart to undermine his own kingdom" (study Bible). So therefore, Jesus is doing God's work because there are only two camps in the spiritual realm.

Furthermore, the Pharisees' accusation goes against their own disciples, who are also driving out demons (12:27). Jesus calls out the Pharisees for opposing Him (12:30), and by opposing Him, they also oppose the Holy Spirit, Who bears witness to Jesus' legitimacy by God's power. Resisting the Holy Spirit is a dangerous thing to do because repeated resistance to the Holy Spirit is to reject what God is doing. "Their attempt to dismiss Jesus' supernatural power would not be forgiven because it expressed a resolute, permanent rejection of Jesus" (Study Bible). Names mean things, remember? To reject Jesus (*salvation*) is to reject the Father's salvation which they need to keep from being lost forever.

Jesus continues His rebuke against the Pharisees who had rejected His anti-demon ministry at that time. They claim to be good, but their words (the fruit of their lips) betray their actual status. By speaking against Jesus, who is good, they reveal they are evil, "for the mouth speaks from the overflow of the heart" (12:34). Whatever we have stored up inside, that's what we'll bring out to the world.

I need to make a point here that I'll repeat later on. *Not all Sadducees, Pharisees, and scribes opposed Jesus; some genuinely sought God's kingdom and accepted Jesus' new way.* Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea were two such disciples, and some Pharisees are seen as part of the New Covenant community in the book of Acts. Understand this. *The New Covenant community began as a Torah-observant sect of Jews who had accepted Jesus as*

Israel's Messiah, who had risen from the dead. Therefore, Sadducees, scribes, and Pharisees could be part of the Way and still hold to their Torah-only (Sadducees) or Torah+ (Pharisees, scribes) viewpoints after accepting Jesus in faith. We must be careful that we don't paint all of them as villains, which has often been the case following the Early Church days.

We now come to an account about a group of scribes and Pharisees who see Jesus as a legitimate Messiah candidate and want to check out His credentials which is why they ask Jesus for a sign. But there's something about *why* they asked it to make Jesus refuse to do so. Didn't Satan ask Jesus for a sign to confirm that He was Israel's Messiah? Can you hear Satan's voice behind the group's request? It appears their request comes from their unfaithfulness to Yehovah as part of an evil and adulterous generation. Jesus will give them a sign, alright – the sign of Jonah. Jesus' death and resurrection are all they'll get to confirm Jesus' credentials (12:39-40). But then Jesus pushes back on them. If Nineveh repented, they'd better do so as well because a prophet greater than Jonah is standing right in front of them. Since God promised Nineveh's downfall if they didn't repent, the message remains the same for those asking Jesus to prove His *bona fides*. And if a Gentile queen traveled a long way to seek Solomon's wisdom, the scribes and Pharisees would do well to seek the wisdom incorporated standing in front of them!

So, what's with Jesus' lesson about a demon leaving, "sweeping the house clean," and multiple demons returning? It's about the generation of Jesus' day. On a personal level, Jesus teaches that once a demon is driven out and a person is cleansed of its presence, if the person opens the door again, the person's condition will be worse than before. More demons will enter along with the original one. On a generational level, Jesus has come to "cleanse Israel's house," which will happen. But after He leaves, if they don't follow His way, their generation will get even worse than before Jesus came. History shows the nation didn't follow Jesus, and 40 years after His ascension, the Roman army arrived while Judea/Jerusalem was in turmoil during the 1st Jewish revolt and destroyed the city.

Jesus' teaching at the end of chapter 12 is about prioritizing our relationship with Jesus, even above our most cherished relationships – family relationships. Jesus leaves no room for putting anything or anyone before Him in our lives (12:48-50). This prioritizing doesn't mean Jesus doesn't want us to love our families. He wants us to put Him first in our lives at all times.

After seeing the responses to Jesus' early ministry (11:1-12:50), we get a section on Jesus' parables that use stories and illustrations to teach spiritual truths. Here's an important thing to remember about parables; they have one central point. Many Bible teachers and

pastors try to spiritualize every single element in a parable. True, there can be many applications, but there's one point Jesus is making. Also, two parables might have similar elements (birds in the Parable of the Sower and the Parable of the Mustard Seed), but those elements don't always represent the same thing.

Something else to note about these parables is that they're about God's kingdom. Remember Matthew's Kingdom of God emphasis?

Jesus' first parable is the Parable of the Sower (13:1-23). The elements are a sower, his seed, and the nature of the ground upon which the seed is sown. Jesus tells the parable, then explains why He teaches in parables. It's based on His Father's command to Isaiah (Isaiah 6:9-10). Understanding Jesus' parables show who is open to God and who isn't, just as it was in Isaiah when God told the prophet that rebellious Israel wouldn't understand his message. Jesus' disciples, and others who understand, are blessed because they're witnessing and taking part in God's most significant move in human history as it happens. However, many will remain clueless.

The point of the Parable of the Sower is this. Your receptivity to Jesus and His word determines how genuinely you follow Jesus. The seed on the hard path is an unbeliever. The seed on the rocky ground is someone who claims to be a disciple but folds under pressure or persecution. The seed among thorns is a disciple who fails to thrive because they're more concerned with "the worries of life and the seduction of wealth" than staying faithful to Jesus. Only those who put Jesus first will live lives that richly prove their devotion to the Lord through an abundance of godly actions. See? This parable relates to the end of the previous chapter! Those who truly follow their King have lives that prove it.

The Parable of the Wheat and Weeds is about the King and His world, not true and false disciples (13:24-30, 36-43). The whole world belongs to the King. God's enemy, Satan, seeds the world with evil people. While the Jews expected the Messiah to arrive and immediately separate the wicked from the righteous, it was not for that time when Jesus first appeared. As the kingdom of God grows, so does Satan's kingdom. It will only be at the Grand Harvest (the Day of the Lord) when *all* humanity will be harvested and separated into their respective kingdoms for storage or destruction.

The Parables of the Mustard Seed and Yeast are about how God's kingdom grows. As a mustard seed starts really small, it is the same regarding God's kingdom, which will also start small with one person, Jesus, and will become extensively large with many people

becoming part of it. As yeast begins with a small amount (the 12 disciples), so it is with God's kingdom that will spread through the entire world's population (13:31-33).

Jesus' use of parables is also explained as a fulfillment of prophecy (Psalm 78:2). Through Jesus' parables, hidden things about God's kingdom are revealed, unknown from the beginning of the world.

The Parables of the Hidden Treasure and the Priceless Pearl teach the same point that God's kingdom is so valuable that wise people are willing to give anything so they can have it (13:44-46).

The Parable of the Net is about the final judgment regarding acceptance into God's kingdom (13:47-50). This parable is like an addendum to the Wheat and Weeds parable. Ultimately, as humanity transitions into God's eternal kingdom, all people will be drawn to judgment. The wicked and the righteous will be separated; one group to eternal punishment and the other into the joy of the kingdom.

Jesus then asks His disciples if they understood what He had been teaching with explanations. They got it! They are being taught God's law (the old, as in established) in light of the new revelations Jesus is giving them. Therefore, they're actually better educated and trained than the established Torah teachers who don't have Jesus' teachings (and even reject them).

Speaking of rejection, Jesus goes to his hometown and begins to teach. We would think that with Jesus' reputation spreading all over the Galilee region, His Nazareth friends and neighbors would be proud of their hometown hero, the boy who made good. Not so! They can't see past Jesus' humble beginnings and take offense over His ability to teach and work so powerfully. The peoples' offense to Jesus "gittin' all high and mighty is because Jesus had been a blue-collar worker (Greek – *tekton*, stone mason or carpenter). They refused to believe who He revealed Himself to be. Therefore, "he did not do many miracles there because of their unbelief" (13:58).

For the record, the James and Judas mentioned here as Jesus' brothers (half-brothers, actually) later went on to serve as the messianic community's chief rabbi and epistle author (James, Acts 15) and epistle author (Jude).

INSIGHT

"And they were offended by him. Jesus said to them, 'A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and in his household.' And he did not do many miracles there

because of their unbelief." Why is that? Many of Jesus' works were accomplished because people received Him and His message. As we saw with the Parable of the Soils, receptivity makes a big difference regarding results and how God's power works in our lives. Such is the case with those in Nazareth.

Faith, doubt, and unbelief. If we combine the Parable of the Soils, we see that Faith receives (good soil). Doubt is unsure if it will receive (thorny, rocky soil). Unbelief refuses to receive (hard path). Faith trusts God and comes from hearing and receiving God's word. Faith knows that everything *must* submit to God and will because God has commanded it to submit (healing, rescue from demons, power over nature, etc.). Doubt is that we're unsure if something will submit to God, either because it's stronger than God or God doesn't do it (like confronting a cancer diagnosis). Unbelief just flat out refuses to believe that something will submit to God, especially oneself.

Do you have a situation you're facing and want to overcome doubt or unbelief? Embrace God's word. Soak in it (meditate/think). The Holy Spirit will take our Father's word and light it up in you to tell you what His will is for whatever you face. Once you've received what you think is God's input, 1) bounce it off mature and faithful Spirit-filled Christians for counsel and confirmation. 2) God's word will spark an "I know that I know that I know" certainty that will stick with you until you receive what God's will has granted you. However, we can also drum up that kind of feeling. We know for sure if we've heard correctly when what we seek God about truly comes to pass. That's the *ultimate* confirmation of our faith.

October 14 : Scriptures Matthew 14-16

SUMMARY

Why is it that some of the most righteous people in the world suffer at the hands of some of the wickedest people? The answer to that is unknown to us but not overlooked by God.

Matthew 14 opens with the sad account of John the Baptist's demise at the hands of Herod Antipas. John was in prison because Antipas didn't like John calling him out for bedding and wedding his brother, Philip's, wife (Herodias). Antipas was a tetrarch (a governor of the fourth part of a province) who was one step below an ethnarch (the governor of a province or people) who was one step below a king. When King Herod the Great died, his rule over the region of Judea was divided into four parts and given to his sons Herod Archelaus, Herod Antipas, Philip the Tetrarch, and Salome I (Herod the Great's sister). Herod Antipas ruled over Galilee (northern Judea) and Perea (a region on the east bank of the Jordan River, east of Jerusalem). This eastern area was John the Baptist's stomping grounds and baptismal site.

It's sometimes risky to speak truth to power, but John didn't care. As a prophet, his job was to speak God's truth, so he did. Antipas had him arrested (I'm guessing at his wife's instigation) and imprisoned. And yet, Antipas refused to execute John because the people regarded the prophet highly, which the Herodian family wasn't. At his birthday party, Antipas is enthralled by Herodias' daughter's dance recital and foolishly promises the young woman anything she wants. This foolish offer is Herodias' chance. Since Antipas made the declaration publicly, it would be a humiliation for him to rescind an official oath. Really? Would he rather keep a foolish oath than be manipulated into executing one of Israel's greatest prophets? Yup. That's the caliber of "leadership and morality" Judea dealt with under the Herodian family. It seems the only thing evil likes more than doing evil is silencing the people who call them out for doing evil.

Jesus hears of His cousin's death and travels to a distant location (a lonely place near Bethsaida on the north side of the Galilee Sea) to make sure He's out of a murderous king's reach. When the people of Galilee learn the miracle-working rabbi is coming across the sea, they stream to meet Jesus for healing and deliverance (14:13). Jesus' compassion is as limitless as His power, and He helps the multitude.

However, as evening approaches, the disciples' compassion rises. Where will the multitude find something to eat? Their problem is time, distance, and supply (14:15-17). I love how Jesus tells them to feed the people as if He didn't know they didn't have the resources to provide for so many. Why would Jesus give such an impossible command?

Didn't He know that there weren't enough shekels in the group's money bag to do this or enough food for sale close by, even if they did have the funds? Why did Jesus ask the impossible? *Because He was planning something.* Do you really think Jesus doesn't know our limitations? Of course, He does! Here's a lesson: *When Yeshua asks the impossible of us, don't panic. Rest assured, He's planning something great!*

But the disciples' response is telling, "But we only have five loaves and two fish here" (14:17). Oh, silly disciples. Didn't they know they were dealing with the God who provided manna daily to over a million people in the wilderness for 40 years (Exodus 13:35)? And how about when God caused Elisha to do the same "feeding of a multitude" miracle about 800 years before the disciple's day (2 Kings 4:42-44)? What about the God who is "the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Hebrews 13:8)?

Jesus asks His disciples for what they have. Once He has the bread and fish, they multiply *in His hands*, as the Greek text reads. The Greek reads that Jesus continued breaking the bread and handing out fish to the disciples until everyone was satisfied with some left over. Here's another lesson: *Jesus doesn't ask us for what we don't have. He asks us for what we do have. Some problems can only be solved by God, and that's okay with Him. Let go of whatever you have and give it to God. It's fun to see what God does with what little we have.*

After Jesus feeds the multitude, He tells the disciples to get into a boat and go to the other side. They probably thought Jesus would take the long way around the Sea and catch up with them by the following day. Nope. After spending time talking with His Father and while a storm rises on the Sea of Galilee, Jesus decides to take a shortcut *across the water* (14:25). The disciples believe they see a ghost because no human being can cross water without a boat. Well, except for Jesus. That He can do. Impetuous Peter figures, "Hey, if Jesus can do it, so can I if He tells me I can," which Jesus does.

Now there have been *many* sermons preached about Peter's faith and how it was firm when his eyes were on Jesus and shaky when he took His eyes off Jesus and looked at his circumstances. Faith says God can override our situation, so "I can walk on water." Doubt says God *could* override it *but might not*, so "The water seems soft and shifty. I'm not sure about this." Unbelief tells us God *can't* make the water support me (or make me lighter than water), so "There's no way I'm going to make it." But even though Peter's trust begins to sink along with his body, Jesus helps Peter. You have to give Peter credit, though. At least he, among all the disciples, tried. Let's not be too hard on him. When was the last time Jesus asked you to do something as impossible? How did you fare?

But I see this story through a different lens. The Jews were looking for a Messiah, and they were also looking for a long-promised specific Prophet patterned after Moses. At the end of Moses' life, he knew the people would want someone to take his place as God's representative. Joshua was that guy. But before he died, Moses told them, under the inspiration of the Spirit, "Yehovah your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him" (Deuteronomy 18:15). Why is this important? Because the Jews of Jesus' day were keeping an eye out for a Prophet *who could multiply bread (manna) and who would have mastery over water (crossing the Red Sea)*. So tell me, what did Jesus do in a few short hours that day? Multiply bread and walk on water. Matthew is recording this account as proof that Jesus *is* the "prophet like unto Moses" the Lord promised. Didn't Jesus teach the people God's Torah like Moses did (Matthew 5-7; Exodus 20)? Case closed.

After the exciting events of the night, Jesus and crew reach the southeast shore and are met by many people begging to touch the edge of Jesus' robe. Aha! Remember the woman with the continual flow of blood? Word has gotten out that Jesus has "healing in His wings," thus bolstering their belief that Jesus is the Messiah (14:36).

Now we come back to the "fences around the Torah" issue. These fences are man-made laws and traditions that fit together to act as a "yoke" that was too heavy for many people to bear, and it made living for God obligatory labor, not a life of loving obedience. The incident and accusation that starts chapter 15 are over a tradition the sages created based on the Torah command that priests are to wash for ritual purity before serving in the Tabernacle (Exodus 40:30-31) and that washing is also required to remove ritual impurity from people, for example, those with a bodily discharge, etc. (Leviticus 15:11) because ritual contamination CAN be transferred. So, by extension, eating with ritually unclean hands defiles food, which then defiles the person eating the "defiled" food. Do you understand their reasoning?

But there is no Torah law about people washing their hands before they eat. This episode comes down to: "Whose law is higher – Jesus' or man's?" Jesus fires back at the accusers, pointing out that the Pharisees have no trouble violating the Torah for their own purposes (15:3-6). By using this quote from Isaiah, Jesus also applies Isaiah's accusation that the Pharisees' willful violations for their purposes prove how far they've strayed from God (15:7-9). After claiming the moral high ground for legal rulings, Jesus declares the truth and the Torah. Evil thoughts, attitudes, and actions defile people, not eating with unwashed hands. In this way, Jesus fulfills the Torah with its needed freedoms and restrictions without man-contrived add-on laws and traditions.

Jesus' healing of the Gentile woman's child is so touching! Jesus now travels from Galilee to the region of Tyre and Sidon, Gentile territory that has some Jewish influence. The Jewish woman asks Jesus to help her daughter, who is being demonized. What would a Jew think about a Gentile asking for help from a Jewish Messiah? "Tough. Go find your own messiah-healer." In fact, that's what the woman expects, but she tries anyway. She uses a distinctly Jewish title for Jesus, "Lord, Son of David" (15:22). Frankly, as a non-Jew, she didn't have the standing to use that title. However, she did it out of respect or perhaps to curry favor with a miracle-working rabbi and messiah wannabe. The disciples give the expected reaction, "Send her away, Jesus. She's making a fuss and ruining our religious gathering."

But Jesus doesn't ignore her. He tells her that His focus is on the people of Israel proper, and she isn't one of them (referring back to her use of the messianic title). That doesn't deter the woman. She humbles herself and acknowledges that Jesus is right. She isn't Jewish nor an Israelite descendant. But she declares Jesus is her lord, a person more significant than her (15:25). Jesus presses her further, "It isn't right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs" (15:26). Wow! Yes, many Jews regarded the Gentiles as dogs, i.e., "unclean" before God, and not acceptable to approach Him since so many Gentiles practiced idolatry. And yes, some Jews despised Gentiles as "mangy curs," especially after all the persecution the Jews had endured at Gentile hands over the centuries. But is Jesus really using an epithet against her? No!

The word for "dog" here is critical to understand their interchange. It's not the Greek *kuon* – scavenging hounds that roam in packs looking for prey. It's *kunarium* – a beloved little pet dog under the table waiting for morsels. Jesus isn't degrading her. He's revealing something. She's not Jewish, so she's not one of "the children" and can't make her claim for God's blessing based on that. So, she then claims Jesus as her Lord. As Lord, Jesus is the Master of God's whole house, all humanity. Jews and Gentiles are in His house and under His authority, but there's still a difference, and it's not about value or exclusion. *It's about order.*

At dinnertime, who gets fed first, children or pets? The children. Does this mean the puppies don't get fed at all? No. But the order is children first, pets second. But puppies will gladly accept anything dropped while the kids enjoy their meal! Jesus has been offering God's banquet to *His* people first. His mission was to reach *His* family, *His* nation first. Gentiles will get fed later *after* Jesus has opened the way for them to sit and sup through the Cross and Resurrection! There is no distinction as to the blessing Jews and Gentiles receive from God, for God promised Abraham, "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:3). For the King's banquet to come to the nations, it

must first come to and through Abraham's descendants, the whole house of Israel! *So Jesus' reply isn't about value. It's about order.*

The woman understands precisely what Jesus said and replies that it is true. Dogs, crumbs – yes. But at this point of desperate trust, she was willing to settle for whatever He would give her, even if it was “out of order,” and threw herself on His mercy. “Even if you're here only for Your people, I'll take whatever You'll give me, no matter how small.” *Desperate trust moves God's heart and pleases Him.* Hebrews 11:6 says, “But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.” And reward her, Jesus does! His pushback was meant to draw her out to honestly pursue Him, to reveal herself as the Gentile for who she was, and for Jesus to show He's for all His Father's children.

Chapter 15 wraps up with more healings and another mass feeding. Again, Matthew records Jesus' works to shore up Jesus' credentials to the Jews reading his Gospel.

Chapter 16 opens with a bang! Some Pharisees and Sadducees confront Jesus again, asking for His Messianic/Prophet credentials because Jesus has been doing high-level miracles (16:1). Why do they want a “sign”? Because if Jesus performs a sign and teaches the Torah wrong (in their view), then He's a false prophet according to the Torah, *and they can kill Him.* If Jesus doesn't perform a sign and teaches the Torah right, then He's just a teacher, not the “prophet like unto me” that Moses commanded them to listen to and obey. The text has the sense of “Show us a sign *right now* to prove You are who You say you are!” They were in-His-face testing Jesus. Can you hear the serpent's hiss again (“Since you are the Son of God, then...”, Matthew 4:3)?

Jesus replies that they are part of an evil and adulterous generation, meaning “ripe with unbelief and turned away from (cheating on) God.” Sure, He'll give them a sign, and just one. Like before, Jesus refers to Jonah's experience in the whale as a foreshadowing of what He will do by dying and rising on the third day, a Jonah-type experience. But there's something more this time.

Jonah was a sign in another way. To Nineveh, Jonah himself was a sign, a man sent from God to warn his target audience, Nineveh, about God's approaching judgment. Jonah's message was to repent! God's judgment was lifted when the Ninevites truly repented! So, in Matthew 12, the sign of Jonah is about Jesus' death and resurrection. But in this 2nd reference, the sign of Jonah *points to Jesus Himself, the man sent from God to call God's people to repent, turn to God, and be saved from God's judgment on sin called death.* Tell me, what were Jesus' first words when He launched His ministry? “Repent because the kingdom

of heaven has come near!" Jesus showing up and preaching repentance makes Him the sign of Jonah, not just His death and resurrection. When we combine the two Jonah statements from Matthew 12 and 16, we get that *the sign of Jonah is God sending Jesus to that evil and adulterous generation so that they should repent and turn back toward God. The proof that Jesus was the sign of Jonah will be His death and resurrection within three days.* Thus, having given them their requested sign, Jesus turns and leaves.

Back in the boat, Jesus and the disciples cross the Sea. During the trip, the disciples fret about not having any bread for a snack. Jesus uses that situation and the recent run-in with the Pharisees and Sadducees as a teaching opportunity. "Watch out and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (16:6). Of course, the disciples-in-training miss what Jesus is saying. Again, please don't be so hard on them. How often have you missed what Jesus taught you because you were young in faith and Bible knowledge?

What is Jesus' point? "You're worried about bread. Hello! What did you just see with the multitude yesterday? Bread is not a problem, nor is it the point. The 'yeast' thing I'm talking about is the Pharisee's and Sadducee's *teaching!* Their teaching leads to hypocrisy (Luke equates their teaching to hypocrisy, Luke 12:1), and like yeast, it grows and spreads to everyone. Bad stuff!"

After that, Jesus and His disciples travel to Caesarea Philippi, a Roman city at the base of Mount Hermon, in the northeast corner of today's Israel. "Caesarea Philippi was so named by Herod Philip, whose father, Herod the Great, had built a temple there. Philip took a special interest in the village and enlarged it, attaching his name to that of Caesar." (For more information – gotquestions.org/Caesarea-Philippi.html)

This place was well-known for its terrible idolatry. "To the pagan mind, the cave at Caesarea Philippi created a gate to the underworld, where fertility gods lived during the winter. They committed detestable acts to worship these false gods... When Jesus brought his disciples to the area, they must have been shocked. Caesarea Philippi was like a red-light district in their world, and devout Jews would have avoided any contact with the despicable acts committed there. It was a city of people eagerly knocking on the doors of hell" (thattheworldmayknow.com/gates-of-hell-article).

Next to the "Gates of Hell," Jesus asks them a foundational question. "But you," He asked them, "who do you say that I am?" (16:16). *This is the big question* that the Jewish leaders refused to answer. This question from Jesus Peter now faces. This question is the one that each of us faces. *The answer to this question defines God's kingdom, decides destinies, and guides lives.* Peter replies, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God!" The late Robert

Lindsey of the Jerusalem School of Synoptic Gospel Research says it could be worded, "You are the Divine Messiah," "You are God's Messiah," or "You are the God-Messiah."

By *all* interpretations, Peter's declaration would jar the sensitivities of any 1st c. Jew, making them wince. Think about this. No one up to this point in the biblical record has used such exact and unmistakable terms about Jesus, and Peter goes ahead and drops the "M"-bomb!

This incident isn't Jesus' messianic coming out party. He's been doing that all along, and the Transfiguration in the next chapter is *THE* divine declaration of all declarations. At this critical point, as Jesus is turning toward Jerusalem, Peter fully and willingly acknowledges the truth about Jesus – who He is, his career, his purpose, and his mission... something the Pharisees and Sadducees of the previous run-in wouldn't do because of their errant teaching and hypocrisy.

Jesus' reaction to Peter is basically, "Well, how about that!" (16:17). Peter declares Jesus is God's Divine Messiah, and Jesus accepts it! Jesus then pronounces a blessing over Peter for saying it! Why did Jesus bless Peter? It was typical of a rabbi to pronounce a blessing on a student who gave the correct answer. Jesus' following words mean this, "Peter, your declaration about My being the God-Messiah will become the foundation for the new movement of God's kingdom that will spread through our people to the world. This movement will have the power to conquer God's spiritual enemy and rescue people from the enemy's grip. And when it comes to grey areas of the Torah, Peter, you will have the authority to make official rulings for this budding movement (called "using the keys of the kingdom")."

No, this isn't papal authority nor about the start of the Roman Catholic Church. To be truthful, the Christian Church should bend the knee to the Early Messianic Jewish Synagogue in Jerusalem, but that's another story.

From this point on, Jesus turns His face toward Jerusalem. The time is fast approaching when Jesus has to switch from teaching and training to atoning for sin. Completing this work will require that Jesus keep His will submitted to His Father even when facing pain and death (16:21). Anything or anyone that stands in the way of this is not of God but God's enemy (16:23). As it is with the Master, so shall it be with His disciples. They, too, need to follow Jesus' example. Even though all but one of the disciples were martyred, all of Jesus' immediate and distant disciples are called to surrender their wills to their Master, even to the point of regarding themselves as dead to their will (16:24). But take heart, the reward is great for those who do.

INSIGHT

Jesus did many impossible things in today's reading. Impossible situations need impossible solutions. But don't fear the impossible. "He replied, 'What is impossible with man is possible with God.'" (Luke 18:27). Impossible situations are God's way of revealing Himself to us. Don't fear, have faith, and be bold!