

07 THE SON HAS COME

COMMENTARY


the **GOSPELPROJECT**.

ADULTS



SPRING | 2026

A SON WAS BORN FOR YOU

**“A CHILD WILL BE BORN FOR US, A SON WILL BE GIVEN TO US.”
(ISAIAH 9:6)**

A Son will be given—a gift, a present. Isaiah lived in days shadowed by gloom, but God granted a flicker of hope, a ray of light. A Son would be given, a descendant of King David would come, an eternal kingdom would be established—one marked by justice and righteousness.

Yet God’s people were shrouded in gloom for their lack of justice and righteousness. Their idolatry, their sin, brought God’s judgment and exile to the nations. They were meant to be a light to the nations; instead, they were nearly snuffed out. Still, a flicker of hope, a ray of light—a Child would be born. Through many dark days and years of God’s silence, the flicker remained until the Son at last was given.

“She will give birth to a son, and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). God presents His gift, the Son. And this Son answers the question, He solves the problem of their gloom: He will save His people from their sins. Their lack of justice and righteousness will be made up in His fullness. Their idolatry and sin will be done away with in His sacrifice. The flicker rages; the ray bursts forth; the Light has come to His people—and more.

“But the angel said to them, ‘Don’t be afraid, for look, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people: Today in the city of David a Savior was born for you, who is the Messiah, the Lord’” (Luke 2:10-11).

The present, the gift, is for all the people. The Savior from sins is for all the people; the Messiah-King is for all the people. Repent of your sin and believe in Jesus, who died for sins and rose from the dead that you may have life. “See, now is the acceptable time; now is the day of salvation!” (2 Corinthians 6:2).

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THE EDITOR

When Covid came and shut down societies, the world changed in many drastic ways. Society learned to work remotely, online ordering dramatically increased, worship services were livestreamed, and even taking communion was revolutionized.

And if we thought 2020 was a year that changed the world, how much more was the year Jesus came onto the scene? Though only a few knew at the time, Jesus entered the world fulfilling prophecies of old, and He came ushering in a new kingdom—one of peace, forgiveness, and salvation to those who believed.

The Messiah, the Anointed One, God Himself in human flesh, had come, not to set up a throne here on earth but to set Himself on the throne of our hearts. Humbly He was born and grew in wisdom. He was baptized, tempted, and began His ministry in a way like no other.

He brought forth a new kingdom, talked about a new birth, and commanded a new way of living. And when He called, people followed. And early on, He spoke of His crucifixion, but no one understood at the time. He was on a mission with the purpose of saving humanity through His own sacrifice.

Jesus, thus, is our everything. He is our Savior and Lord. And through Him, we are gifted life evermore. Without Jesus, we are in darkness. But because of Jesus, we are forever in the light. Because of God's love for us, He sent Jesus. And the world and our lives are forever changed.

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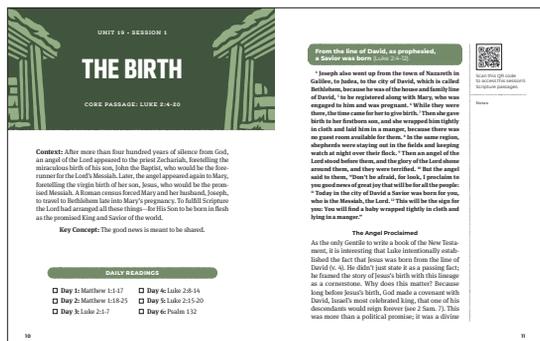
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HOW TO USE THE COMMENTARY

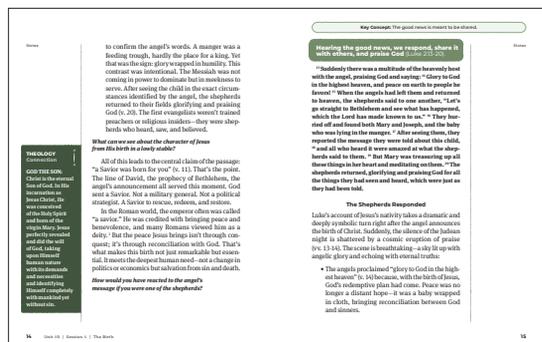
The Commentary is a vital tool in your personal and group experience with The Gospel Project for Adults. Here are different ways on how to make the most of your time with it:

1) AS A SUPPLEMENT TO THE LEADER GUIDE



You can use the Commentary to supplement your learning and personal preparation. The context, key concept, and daily readings as well as the Scripture breakdowns and discussion questions in the Commentary will be the same as in the Personal Study Guide and the Leader Guide. But the bulk of the content is unique, so read through the Commentary to gain additional insight for your group's questions and discussions during the Group Experience.

2) AS A PERSONAL STUDY GUIDE



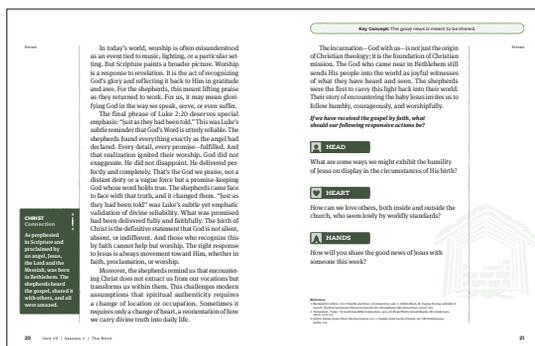
The Leader Guide takes you through the same Personal Preparation your group members will follow in their Personal Study Guide so you can experience that with them during the week. And then the Leader Guide provides you with step-by-step instructions for the weekly Group Experience, including the learning activity and application questions.

Your leader and your group may want to use the Commentary as a personal study guide for a more in-depth study of the Scripture passages in the sessions provided. Your group may be more knowledgeable and seasoned and may want to delve deeper into the nuances of Scripture as you explore how Scripture points to Christ throughout the Bible.

Leaders may also choose to use the Commentary as a personal study guide for their group because it is easier to read with a larger font than the Personal Study Guide.

If used in this way, the Commentary is designed to be used before the group time and then during the group time. Read through the session to be prepared for your group time. The context, key concept, and daily readings will give you the background and focus you need to study. The various headings and subheadings give you the bullet points that connect to the key concept. Answer the questions provided to prepare beforehand to discuss during the group time together. The Head, Heart, and Hands questions help you apply what you have learned. Use the margins for whatever notes you might need to jot down.

3) AS A LEADER GUIDE



the Commentary as a leader guide. For the best learning experience, having the Leader Guide along with the Commentary will be beneficial as the Leader Guide has a guided path to lead the group time, a group activity to foster discussion and group interaction, and further details about the Head, Heart, and Hands application section.

But if you choose not to use the Leader Guide, you can use the Commentary as a leader guide by following the pages in order with your group, highlighting important ideas and concepts along with the headings and subheadings to add further insight to the key concept. Ask your group what was interesting to them, and use the questions provided to further your group discussion. And as you wrap up with the Head, Heart, and Hands questions, allow the group to discuss how to apply what they've learned. End with prayer requests and praises that you can jot down in the margins.

If your group chooses to use the Commentary as their personal study guide, then you as the leader can also use

THE GOSPEL PROJECT

UNIT 19

THE ARRIVAL



MATTHEW; LUKE



MEMORY VERSES

“But the angel said to them, ‘Don’t be afraid, for look, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people: Today in the city of David a Savior was born for you, who is the Messiah, the Lord.’”

–Luke 2:10-11



THE BIRTH

CORE PASSAGE: LUKE 2:4-20

Context: After more than four hundred years of silence from God, an angel of the Lord appeared to the priest Zechariah, foretelling the miraculous birth of his son, John the Baptist, who would be the forerunner for the Lord's Messiah. Later, the angel appeared again to Mary, foretelling the virgin birth of her son, Jesus, who would be the promised Messiah. A Roman census forced Mary and her husband, Joseph, to travel to Bethlehem late into Mary's pregnancy. To fulfill Scripture the Lord had arranged all these things—for His Son to be born in flesh as the promised King and Savior of the world.

Key Concept: The good news is meant to be shared.

DAILY READINGS

- Day 1:** Matthew 1:1-17
- Day 2:** Matthew 1:18-25
- Day 3:** Luke 2:1-7
- Day 4:** Luke 2:8-14
- Day 5:** Luke 2:15-20
- Day 6:** Psalm 132

**From the line of David, as prophesied,
a Savior was born (Luke 2:4-12).**

⁴ Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family line of David, ⁵ to be registered along with Mary, who was engaged to him and was pregnant. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for her to give birth. ⁷ Then she gave birth to her firstborn son, and she wrapped him tightly in cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them. ⁸ In the same region, shepherds were staying out in the fields and keeping watch at night over their flock. ⁹ Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, “Don’t be afraid, for look, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people: ¹¹ Today in the city of David a Savior was born for you, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be the sign for you: You will find a baby wrapped tightly in cloth and lying in a manger.”

The Angel Proclaimed

As the only Gentile to write a book of the New Testament, it is interesting that Luke intentionally established the fact that Jesus was born from the line of David (v. 4). He didn’t just state it as a passing fact; he framed the story of Jesus’s birth with this lineage as a cornerstone. Why does this matter? Because long before Jesus’s birth, God made a covenant with David, Israel’s most celebrated king, that one of his descendants would reign forever (see 2 Sam. 7). This was more than a political promise; it was a divine



Scan this QR code to access this session's Scripture passages.

Notes

PLACE Study**BETHLEHEM:**

Known as the city of David, Bethlehem, or “house of bread,” was David’s ancestral home. The prophet Micah prophesied that the Messiah would come from Bethlehem (Mic. 5:2), a prophecy the priests and scribes in Jerusalem were well familiar with (Matt. 2:4-6). It is fitting that Jesus, “the bread of life” (John 6:35,48), would be born in “the house of bread.”

commitment. God told David: “I will raise up after you your descendant, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever” (2 Sam. 7:12-13). This prophecy of God had a fulfillment that was both “now” (David’s son Solomon built the temple) and “not yet” (a future son of David would be a king forever).

The Jews of Jesus’s day were waiting for that descendant—the Messiah who would fulfill this eternal promise. But not just any descendant would do. The Messiah had to be born in the right family and in the right town. The prophet Micah had declared centuries earlier: “Bethlehem Ephrathah, you are small among the clans of Judah; one will come from you to be ruler over Israel for me. His origin is from antiquity, from ancient times” (Mic. 5:2). Bethlehem, the “city of David,” was no coincidence in the Christmas narrative; the prophecy of the Messiah was being fulfilled down to the village where He would be born.

Luke connected the bridge from David to Jesus through Joseph, Mary’s husband (Luke 2:4). While Jesus was born of a virgin and Mary was a descendant of David as well (Luke 3:23-38), Joseph was His legal, though non-biological, father. Through his marriage to Mary, Joseph’s lineage placed Jesus legally within David’s line. This mattered in Jewish law and confirmed that Jesus wasn’t just any child—He was the long-awaited King.

Bethlehem also was significant for what it represented. It was a small town, hardly a center of power or influence. Yet God’s choice of Bethlehem over Jerusalem or Rome signaled something critical: God values faithfulness and humility over fame and status. This

becomes a pattern when we read about how Jesus’s birth was announced.

If a king were born, the natural expectation would be that royalty, priests, or the ruling elite would hear about it first. But that’s not how God works. Shepherds were not highly regarded in the first century. They often were poor, marginalized, and considered ceremonially unclean. Yet it was to shepherds—not priests in the temple or leaders in the palace—that the angel came bearing the good news (Luke 2:8-9). This wasn’t random; it was theological. God was making a statement: This Savior would be for everyone, especially the overlooked.

The angel’s message was clear and direct and worthy of careful analysis:

- “Good news of great joy” (v. 10): The Greek word for “good news” is *euangelion*, the same root from which we get “evangelism” and “evangelical.” The angel was saying: “God’s rescue plan is now underway, and it brings joy to those who hear it.”
- “For all the people” (v. 10): Not just Israel, not just the righteous (of which there are none), but for everyone. From shepherds in fields to scribes in the temple, the Savior is for all.
- “A Savior . . . who is the Messiah, the Lord” (v. 11): These three titles are packed with meaning. “Savior” connects Jesus to God’s deliverance throughout Israel’s history. “Messiah” identifies Him as the Anointed One, chosen by God to be king. “Lord” signals His divinity—He is God in flesh.
- “You will find a baby wrapped tightly in cloth and lying in a manger” (v. 12): This was the sign

WORD Study

GOOD NEWS: The angel who appeared to the shepherds proclaimed good news to them. In other words, he “evangelized,” a verb form of the Greek word for “gospel,” or “good news.” The gospel is something to be announced and shared with others. The content of the angel’s gospel was focused on the truth about Jesus, and so too must ours be for all the people of the world: In fulfillment of Scripture, the Messiah-King, who is the Lord, has come to save sinners.

THEOLOGY Connection

GOD THE SON: Christ is the eternal Son of God. In His incarnation as Jesus Christ, He was conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. Jesus perfectly revealed and did the will of God, taking upon Himself human nature with its demands and necessities and identifying Himself completely with mankind yet without sin.

to confirm the angel's words. A manger was a feeding trough, hardly the place for a king. Yet that was the sign: glory wrapped in humility. This contrast was intentional. The Messiah was not coming in power to dominate but in meekness to serve. After seeing the child in the exact circumstances identified by the angel, the shepherds returned to their fields glorifying and praising God (v. 20). The first evangelists weren't trained preachers or religious insiders—they were shepherds who heard, saw, and believed.

What can we see about the character of Jesus from His birth in a lowly stable?

All of this leads to the central claim of the passage: “a Savior was born for you” (v. 11). That's the point. The line of David, the prophecy of Bethlehem, the angel's announcement all served this moment. God sent a Savior. Not a military general. Not a political strategist. A Savior to rescue, redeem, and restore.

In the Roman world, the emperor often was called “a savior.” He was credited with bringing peace and benevolence, and many Romans viewed him as a deity.¹ But the peace Jesus brings isn't through conquest; it's through reconciliation with God. That's what makes this birth not just remarkable but essential. It meets the deepest human need—not a change in politics or economics but salvation from sin and death.

How would you have reacted to the angel's message if you were one of the shepherds?

Hearing the good news, we respond, share it with others, and praise God (Luke 2:13-20).

¹³ Suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel, praising God and saying: ¹⁴ Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to people he favors! ¹⁵ When the angels had left them and returned to heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go straight to Bethlehem and see what has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶ They hurried off and found both Mary and Joseph, and the baby who was lying in the manger. ¹⁷ After seeing them, they reported the message they were told about this child, ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. ¹⁹ But Mary was treasuring up all these things in her heart and meditating on them. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had seen and heard, which were just as they had been told.

The Shepherds Responded

Luke’s account of Jesus’s nativity takes a dramatic and deeply symbolic turn right after the angel announces the birth of Christ. Suddenly, the silence of the Judean night is shattered by a cosmic eruption of praise (vv. 13-14). The scene is breathtaking—a sky lit up with angelic glory and echoing with eternal truths:

- The angels proclaimed “glory to God in the highest heaven” (v. 14) because, with the birth of Jesus, God’s redemptive plan had come. Peace was no longer a distant hope—it was a baby wrapped in cloth, bringing reconciliation between God and sinners.

Voices from THE CHURCH

“As the adopted son and heir of Julius Caesar, who had been declared divine by the Roman senate, Augustus claimed to be the son of a god. He was worshipped and hailed as the bringer of peace to the empire. But while Augustus was being flattered, the true Son of God and bringer of peace was being born in poverty in a simple peasant home that was not his own.”²

–Takatemjen

- The angels sang not of human achievement but of divine mercy. “Peace on earth to people he favors” wasn’t a reward for the righteous but a gift for the undeserving. This heavenly announcement is the gospel in chorus form: glory to God, peace for all who believe.

What makes this moment even more profound is who got to witness it. The heavenly choir burst onto the stage of a field in the middle of the night in front of a group of men—shepherds—who lived on the fringe of society. Yet God chose them. This choice revealed the heart of God. He bypassed the self-important and the socially polished to reach the humble and the hungry. His glory isn’t reserved for those with status; it’s given to those who are ready to respond, and the shepherds did exactly that.

Their reaction to this overwhelming scene wasn’t paralysis, skepticism, or analysis. They didn’t get stuck trying to process every detail. They didn’t spend time questioning their qualifications. They didn’t wait to see if someone else would go first. Their response was immediate and decisive (v. 15). They recognized this event as a direct word from God, and they moved to obey immediately.

This kind of response is rare because we’ve become so used to filtering God’s voice through layers of distraction, comfort, or doubt. The shepherds didn’t say, “We’ll go after the next shift,” or, “Let’s see how we feel tomorrow.” They went immediately with the urgency of conviction. When the truth of Jesus grips the heart, it creates movement. Something shifts internally that demands external action. The shepherds weren’t merely inspired—they were compelled.

Even more striking is that their obedience was based solely on what they heard. They trusted the message from God. They didn't wait for visual proof to validate the angel's words. They acted in faith, believing the word of the Lord was enough. In doing so, they modeled the very essence of biblical faith: believing without seeing, trusting God simply because He has spoken.

God has always blessed this kind of faith (Heb. 11:1-2). Abraham left his homeland not knowing where he was going (v. 8). Moses stood before Pharaoh armed with only a promise (vv. 24-28). The shepherds joined this legacy of faithful obedience. They believed, and then they went.

In their faith we also see something freeing: you don't have to have all the answers to obey God. The shepherds weren't theologians. They probably weren't temple regulars. But they were attentive and responsive. This is the kind of posture that makes space for transformation. So let us lead with obedience, even before we have a full understanding of all that follows.

What are different possible responses from those who hear the gospel?

Mary Pondered, and the Shepherds Praised

After encountering the baby Jesus in the manger, the shepherds did not linger in passive wonder or keep their discovery to themselves. They immediately transitioned from seekers to heralds. Once they saw Mary, Joseph, and the baby, the shepherds "reported the message they were told about this child" (Luke 2:17). The Greek word translated as "reported" carries the connotation of narrating or recounting a matter fully,

often with a sense of bearing witness. Their report went beyond casual conversation. What they experienced compelled them to become communicators of divine truth.

Culturally, shepherds were held in low esteem, social outcasts whose work kept them away from the religious and communal centers of life. Their testimony in legal contexts often was considered unreliable.³ And yet, God chose them as the first public witnesses of the Messiah's birth.

Luke 2:18 says: "All who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them." This reaction was one of astonishment, not merely because of the content of the message but because of who was delivering it. These men were not offering speculation or interpretation; they were bearing direct witness to what was revealed to them by divine messengers and confirmed by their own eyes.

It's also significant to consider the theological weight of their message. They were saying the Savior, the Messiah, the Lord had come (cf. Luke 2:11). This was the convergence of centuries of prophecy, hope, and expectation. And it was being proclaimed first by men who, just hours earlier, had been tending flocks under the stars.

There is a deliberate inversion here—an echo of the very nature of Christ Himself. The One who came in humility was first proclaimed by the humble. God's upside-down kingdom was already in motion even at the birth of Christ. The shepherds' witness foreshadows a major theme in Luke's Gospel, that the gospel spreads through unexpected voices: fishermen, tax collectors, women, Gentiles, the demon-possessed, and here, shepherds.

This pattern persists throughout the New Testament. The most enthusiastic and authentic witnesses of Jesus were not those who knew the most but those who had experienced the most grace. The gospel moves person to person not by polished presentation but by sincere testimony. The shepherds had seen the Christ, and they could not remain silent.

In the noise of animals, strangers, and confusion, Mary quietly contemplated each word and wondered. She meditated on grace incarnate with her mind and heart. In a world of hurry and headlines, Mary revealed what it means to ponder the gospel personally, letting God's promises sink in deep and stay.

After spreading the news, the shepherds returned to their ordinary lives, but they returned transformed. The shepherds responded to the fulfilled promise of God with worship. They went back to the fields, but everything was different. They were now worshipers. The Greek verbs for "glorifying" and "praising" suggest ongoing action (v. 20). This wasn't a one-time shout of joy; it was a sustained attitude of exaltation. They glorified God, attributing to Him the highest honor and reverence because they had seen with their own eyes that His promises are true.

True worship is not confined to sacred spaces or special events. It spills into the ordinary. The shepherds didn't remain in Bethlehem to bask in spiritual euphoria. They returned to the fields—to the same lowly occupation they had before—as people who had encountered the divine. Their environment hadn't changed, but they had. And that's the essence of genuine Christian worship: it travels. It transforms ordinary spaces into sanctuaries because the heart is filled with praise.

**CHRIST
Connection**

As prophesied in Scripture and proclaimed by an angel, Jesus, the Lord and the Messiah, was born in Bethlehem. The shepherds heard the gospel, shared it with others, and all were amazed.

In today's world, worship is often misunderstood as an event tied to music, lighting, or a particular setting. But Scripture paints a broader picture. Worship is a response to revelation. It is the act of recognizing God's glory and reflecting it back to Him in gratitude and awe. For the shepherds, this meant lifting praise as they returned to work. For us, it may mean glorifying God in the way we speak, serve, or even suffer.

The final phrase of Luke 2:20 deserves special emphasis: "just as they had been told." This was Luke's subtle reminder that God's Word is utterly reliable. The shepherds found everything exactly as the angel had declared. Every detail, every promise—fulfilled. And that realization ignited their worship. God did not exaggerate. He did not disappoint. He delivered perfectly and completely. That's the God we praise, not a distant deity or a vague force but a promise-keeping God whose word holds true. The shepherds came face to face with that truth, and it changed them. "Just as they had been told" was Luke's subtle yet emphatic validation of divine reliability. What was promised had been delivered fully and faithfully. The birth of Christ is the definitive statement that God is not silent, absent, or indifferent. And those who recognize this by faith cannot help but worship. The right response to Jesus is always movement toward Him, whether in faith, proclamation, or worship.

Moreover, the shepherds remind us that encountering Christ does not extract us from our vocations but transforms us within them. This challenges modern assumptions that spiritual authenticity requires a change of location or occupation. Sometimes it requires only a change of heart, a reorientation of how we carry divine truth into daily life.

The incarnation—God with us—is not just the origin of Christian theology; it is the foundation of Christian mission. The God who came near in Bethlehem still sends His people into the world as joyful witnesses of what they have heard and seen. The shepherds were the first to carry this light back into their world. Their story of encountering the baby Jesus invites us to follow humbly, courageously, and worshipfully.

If we have received the gospel by faith, what should our following responsive actions be?

 **HEAD**

What are some ways we might exhibit the humility of Jesus on display in the circumstances of His birth?

 **HEART**

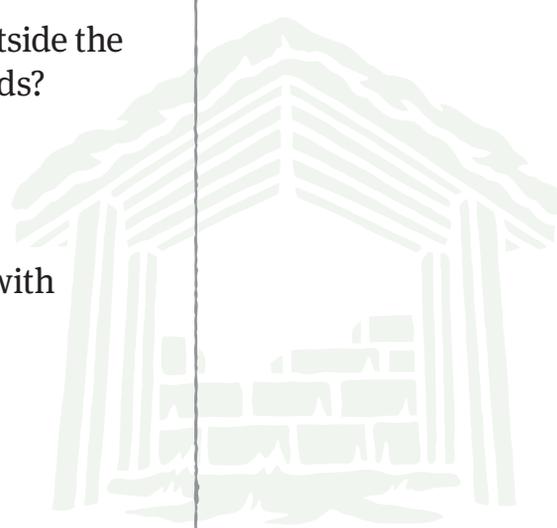
How can we love others, both inside and outside the church, who seem lowly by worldly standards?

 **HANDS**

How will you share the good news of Jesus with someone this week?

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2. Takatemen, "Luke," in *South Asia Bible Commentary*, gen. ed. Brian Wintle (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 1334-35.
3. John G. Butler, *Jesus Christ: His Incarnation*, vol. 1, Studies of the Savior (Clinton, IA: LBC Publications, 2000), 193.



THE DEDICATION

CORE PASSAGE: LUKE 2:25-38

Context: According to Mosaic law, every firstborn son was to be consecrated to the Lord and redeemed with a sacrifice (Ex. 13:1-2,11-15), and every woman was to present a sacrifice in the temple a certain number of days after childbirth (Lev. 12:1-8). So Joseph and Mary brought the infant Jesus to the temple, so that even as a baby, He fulfilled every requirement of the law. At the temple, two faithful, elderly people had been waiting for the Messiah, and now they would wait no more.

Key Concept: Jesus is the only hope of salvation for the whole world.

DAILY READINGS

- Day 1:** Luke 2:21-24
- Day 2:** Luke 2:25-32
- Day 3:** Luke 2:33-35
- Day 4:** Luke 2:36-38
- Day 5:** Luke 2:39-40
- Day 6:** Psalm 27

Jesus came to bring salvation to Jews and Gentiles, but at a cost (Luke 2:25-35).

²⁵ There was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon. This man was righteous and devout, looking forward to Israel’s consolation, and the Holy Spirit was on him. ²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he saw the Lord’s Messiah. ²⁷ Guided by the Spirit, he entered the temple. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to perform for him what was customary under the law, ²⁸ Simeon took him up in his arms, praised God, and said, ²⁹ “Now, Master, you can dismiss your servant in peace, as you promised. ³⁰ For my eyes have seen your salvation. ³¹ You have prepared it in the presence of all peoples— ³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles and glory to your people Israel.” ³³ His father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. ³⁴ Then Simeon blessed them and told his mother Mary, “Indeed, this child is destined to cause the fall and rise of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be opposed— ³⁵ and a sword will pierce your own soul—that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.”

Simeon Encountered the Incarnate One

Luke’s narrative of Jesus’s early life is not ornamental. Each scene is purposeful, with each person mentioned being a witness to God in the flesh. In Luke 2:25-35, the aged Simeon emerged to deliver one of the most profound affirmations in all of Scripture—that the infant Jesus was the long-awaited salvation not only of Israel but of all nations. Here we find the first public human proclamation that Jesus is the light for the Gentiles and the glory of God’s people Israel. But the light



Scan this QR code to access this session's Scripture passages.

Notes

WORD Study

DEVOUT: Used only in the books of Luke and Acts, this Greek term referred to someone who was careful about following the religious duties of the Jews. This word was later used to describe the Jews who would believe at Pentecost (Acts 2:5), the believers who buried Stephen (8:2), and Ananias, who overcame his fear to obey the Lord and to visit Saul, the persecutor of the church (22:12).

Jesus brought would not be the triumphant blaze of political revolution. It would be the refining light of redemptive suffering. The Christ child Simeon held would bring salvation, but at a cost.

Luke introduced Simeon as a righteous and devout man, someone whose life was marked by fidelity to God and fervent hope in His promises. Simeon was “looking forward to Israel’s consolation, and the Holy Spirit was on him” (v. 25). The phrase “Israel’s consolation” is a direct reference to the messianic hope rooted in Isaiah’s vision of comfort for God’s people (see Isa. 40:1-5). Simeon was a watchman waiting, an old man clinging to the promises of God.

What are you faithfully and prayerfully waiting for God to accomplish in this season of your life?

Luke carefully noted the Holy Spirit’s activity in this encounter. Three times he mentioned the Spirit—the Spirit was upon Simeon (Luke 2:25), revealed to him that he would see the Lord’s Messiah (v. 26), and guided him to the temple at the right time (v. 27). This is divine orchestration, not coincidence. The same Spirit who overshadowed Mary (1:35) and filled John the Baptist in the womb (1:15) now led Simeon to the temple to bear witness to the Savior of the world.

Mary and Joseph presented Jesus at the temple in obedience to Mosaic law, specifically the commands in Exodus 13 and Leviticus 12. Their actions reflected a humble submission to God’s Word, but there was more happening than faithful parenting. Luke showed that Jesus, though only a child, was on the path of perfect righteousness. From His infancy, Jesus fulfilled every requirement of God’s covenant. This quiet dedication and sacrifice for purification at the temple was part

of the symphony of Jesus's obedience that would crescendo at the cross.

Furthermore, Jesus, presented at the temple by law-abiding parents, is Himself the true Temple—God with us. Even at this stage of life, He was doing what we could never do—fulfilling all righteousness so that we, by grace through faith, might be counted righteous in Him.

Simeon Held the Source of Salvation

Simeon's exclamation at the sight of Jesus was a poetic and theological masterpiece, simultaneously both personal and cosmic:

Now, Master, you can dismiss your servant in peace, as you promised. For my eyes have seen your salvation. You have prepared it in the presence of all peoples—a light for revelation to the Gentiles and glory to your people Israel. (Luke 2:29-32)

These words declared deep theology. Simeon saw salvation incarnate. The long-promised deliverance from God was not abstract; it was embodied. In this child, God unveiled His rescue for all humanity: "You have prepared it in the presence of all peoples—a light for revelation to the Gentiles" (vv. 31-32). This was radical. In a Jewish context deeply conditioned to expect a national Messiah, Simeon's words shattered tribal boundaries. The Messiah was not merely for Israel. He was for the Gentiles, the outsiders, the nations who have long walked in darkness.

Simeon drew upon the Servant Songs of Isaiah for his proclamation, especially Isaiah 49:6: "It is not

THEOLOGY Connection

SALVATION:

Salvation involves the redemption of the whole man and is offered freely to all who accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, who by His own blood obtained eternal redemption for the believer. In its broadest sense, salvation includes regeneration, justification, sanctification, and glorification. There is no salvation apart from personal faith in Jesus Christ as Lord.

enough for you to be my servant raising up the tribes of Jacob and restoring the protected ones of Israel. I will also make you a light for the nations, to be my salvation to the ends of the earth.” Jesus is the Servant in whom this vision is realized. He is the light, both illuminating and exposing. The phrase “revelation to the Gentiles” (Luke 2:32) meant more than inclusion; it also meant confrontation. The Light would uncover idolatry, false hope, and spiritual blindness. He would call the nations to repent and believe.

But Simeon did not stop with global hope. He also declared Jesus to be the “glory of your people Israel” (v. 32). Israel’s glory was never meant to be in her kings, armies, or achievements but in her relationship with God—“I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people” (Lev. 26:12). Jesus embodies that promise. He is the goal of Israel’s covenant story. In Him, the promises of God find their “Yes” and “Amen” (2 Cor. 1:20).

Unfortunately, not everyone would embrace that revelation. Simeon turned to Mary, and his tone shifted from triumph to tension. “Indeed, this child is destined to cause the fall and rise of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be opposed” (Luke 2:34). The Light that revealed God’s glory would also divide. Jesus would be the litmus test of true faith. Some would rise by faith: Zacchaeus, the thief on the cross, the Gentile centurion. Others would fall: religious leaders, self-assured legalists, indifferent crowds. Jesus would not be universally celebrated. He would be rejected, opposed, and ultimately crucified.

The arrival of God’s salvation in Jesus did not immediately dissolve darkness—it pierced it and confronted it. The same Light that saves also judges. Jesus

said: “This is the judgment: The light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil” (John 3:19).

Simeon’s prophecy set a tone that ran throughout Luke’s Gospel and culminated at the cross. The glory of Israel would not be in national resurgence but in sacrificial redemption. Jesus was not coming to reign from a throne in Jerusalem, yet, but from a cross outside its walls. He is the Servant who must suffer.

Simeon’s final words addressed Mary directly: “A sword will pierce your own soul—that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed” (Luke 2:35). Mary, who had been called “favored” and “blessed,” was now told that the joy of bearing the Christ would be laced with anguish. Mary would witness the rejection, humiliation, and crucifixion of her Son. She would stand near the cross and hear the crowd mock Him. She would feel in her own mother’s heart the full weight of humanity’s hostility toward the Child she nursed. Simeon offered no false comfort. The path of salvation was one of sorrow.

How have you experienced suffering as a part of God’s call on your life?

And yet, this sorrow was revelatory “that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed” (v. 35). Jesus’s suffering would become a spotlight exposing human religiosity, pride, and rebellion. The cross would not only atone, it would unveil. What people do with Jesus will ultimately disclose what rules their hearts. His suffering becomes the great revealer.

What Simeon recognized—and what Luke wanted us to see—was that Jesus’s mission cannot be confined to categories of triumph or power. He is the Messiah,

yes, but not in the way many expected. He is the light, but a searing, purifying light. He is salvation, but through the path of suffering. He is the glory, but veiled in humility. Jesus is both the Servant and the Redeemer. He came not to dominate but to deliver, not to demand but to serve. This is the scandal of Christian hope—that Jesus saved the world not by seizing power but by laying it down; not by crushing enemies but by bearing their guilt. Jesus would serve to the end, and in doing so, He would redeem.

Jesus is the light, the only hope of salvation for the entire world. There is no alternate plan, no secondary Messiah, no cultural workaround. The Gentiles, representing all nations outside the covenant community, are not left to grope in darkness. The Light has come, not to accommodate but to transform. He calls all people everywhere to repent, to believe, and to follow.

This is not religious pluralism but divine particularity. Salvation has a name—Jesus. The infant in Simeon’s arms was not a symbol but the hope of the world—the Redeemer sent to suffer, serve, and save.

Serving God means recognizing Jesus as God’s promised redeemer (Luke 2:36-38).

³⁶ There was also a prophetess, Anna, a daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was well along in years, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, ³⁷ and was a widow for eighty-four years. She did not leave the temple, serving God night and day with fasting and prayers. ³⁸ At that very moment, she came up and began to thank God and to speak about him to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

Anna Served with Devotion

In the few compact verses of Luke 2:36-38, we meet Anna, a prophetess who became a critical witness to God's redemptive plan. Though her appearance in the narrative is brief, her role was profound. Anna was a living testimony that serving God faithfully leads to clear recognition of His redemptive work. God reveals His promises not according to cultural status or human qualifications but according to faithfulness. Her voice, lifted in praise and proclamation, affirmed that Jesus was the redemption of Jerusalem. She recognized Him for who He truly is—the Redeemer.

Luke introduced Anna with a blend of reverence and historical background. Anna was identified not just by her lineage but by her spiritual office—she was a prophetess (v. 36), connecting her to figures like Miriam, Deborah, and Huldah. Yet in a cultural context where women often were marginalized, and widows doubly so, Anna's recognition as a prophetess is striking. Luke did not shy away from elevating women in his Gospel; in fact, he consistently highlighted their faith, their participation, and their theological insight. Anna's voice mattered, not in spite of her gender or age but precisely because the Spirit speaks through the overlooked.

Luke also included her ancestry—"of the tribe of Asher" (v. 36), a northern tribe associated with the ten "lost" tribes of Israel. This reminds readers that God's work in Christ extends not only to the politically dominant tribe of Judah but to all Israel, and beyond. Jesus gathers what has been scattered. Anna, a remnant of what might have seemed a forgotten tribe, stood in the temple as a witness to Israel's long-awaited hope.

Voices from CHURCH HISTORY

“One immediate fruit of patience is peace: A sweet tranquility of mind, a serenity of spirit that can never be found except where patience reigns. And this peace often rises into joy. Even in the midst of various temptations, those who are enabled in patience to possess their souls can witness not only quietness of spirit but triumph and exultation.”¹

–John Wesley
(1703–1791)

Anna’s biography was marked by loss, widowed after only seven years of marriage (v. 36), and yet, her story is dominated by sacred devotion. For eighty-four years, she remained in the temple, “serving God night and day with fasting and prayers” (v. 37). Anna embodied what it means to wait well.

Anna’s worship was not passive. The Greek term translated “serving” is the same word used for priestly service. Anna devoted her life to serving the Lord. Her entire life was a living sacrifice, and her devotion was both vertical (directed to God) and horizontal (benefiting the people of God). Anna’s persistent prayer and fasting were not acts of religious performance but expressions of hope. Like Simeon, Anna was among the faithful remnant who clung to the promises of God in quiet faith. In a time of Roman occupation, spiritual complacency, and messianic confusion, Anna was a faithful intercessor.

How have you seen those older than you serve the Lord with devotion?

Anna Proclaimed with Fervor

The moment arrived for her hope’s fulfillment, and Anna responded with stunning clarity. Luke wrote: “At that very moment, she came up and began to thank God and to speak about him to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem” (v. 38). Again, this was not accidental timing but providence. Anna walked into the scene surrounding Mary, Joseph, Jesus, and Simeon by the invisible guidance of the Spirit. The same Spirit who orchestrated Simeon’s arrival brought Anna into this moment of divine revelation.

Her response was immediate. She did not need convincing. She saw the infant and knew Jesus was the One for whom she had waited, fasted, and prayed. She thanked God—literally, she gave “praise” or “confession” to God. Her heart overflowed in doxology.

But she did not stop there. Her worship became proclamation. Anna became yet another evangelist after the birth of Christ to speak publicly of Him with others. Her message was not vague or poetic; it was specific—Jesus is the One who will bring redemption.

The Greek word translated “redemption” is pregnant with theological significance (v. 38). It refers to the act of being set free by the payment of a ransom. It evokes the exodus, where God redeemed Israel from slavery. It echoes Levitical law, where kinsmen-redeemers would pay the price to rescue family members from poverty, debt, or captivity. Anna was not speaking in generalities; she saw in Jesus the embodiment of God’s plan to buy back His people from spiritual exile.

Importantly, Anna tied this redemption to Jerusalem. Jerusalem was the religious heart of the people of Israel, the place of the temple and sacrifices. During Anna’s day, Jerusalem was a paradox: spiritually central yet compromised. Herod’s temple gleamed, but the spiritual vitality of the people had waned. Anna’s proclamation was not just about national restoration; it was about spiritual renewal. Jesus would redeem not just a city but what that city represented: covenant, presence, worship, and belonging.

Anna’s praise situated Jesus within the full arc of redemptive history. Jesus was not a political liberator or inspirational teacher. He was the One to offer Himself as the ransom for many (Mark 10:45). Her words anticipated the cross, even if she could not yet see

it fully. Anna proclaimed what she knew: God once again had acted faithfully, and His plan to redeem His people was embodied in this Child.

It is worth pausing to consider the profound irony and beauty of Anna's role. In a world where women's testimony often was devalued, where widows were vulnerable, and where age typically marginalized one's influence, God chose Anna as a herald of divine truth. As Mary had testified, God exalts the lowly and fills the hungry with good things (cf. Luke 1:52-53). Anna's gender did not disqualify her; it positioned her. Her widowhood did not diminish her voice; it refined it. Her age did not silence her; it amplified her. Anna became a living embodiment of the truth Paul would later write: "God has chosen what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen what is weak in the world to shame the strong" (1 Cor. 1:27).

Anna's biblical story concluded without drama. She faded from the narrative as quickly as she entered it, but her legacy was indelible. She stood as a model for living a life of faithful anticipation, spiritual clarity, and fearless witness. Service to God is not about titles, stage lights, or visibility. It is about consistency. Night and day. Fasting and prayer in preparation for God to act.

Recognizing Jesus as the Redeemer is not the result of clever argumentation or academic pursuit but of Spirit-formed discernment. The temple was full of priests, scholars, and pilgrims, but only a few saw who this Child really was. Simeon and Anna were aligned with the purposes of God. Their story also reminds us that everyone who recognizes the Redeemer is called to speak. In those moments, the gospel ripples outward.

GOSPEL Connection

At the temple, even as an infant, Jesus was recognized as the Messiah, the One who would fulfill God's promise of salvation.

Key Concept: Jesus is the only hope of salvation for the whole world.

Why do worship and proclamation (evangelism) go together?

Notes



HEAD

What are some things we can do to help us patiently wait on the Lord?



HEART

How does the gift of Jesus for our salvation address the distractions and discouragement in your heart?

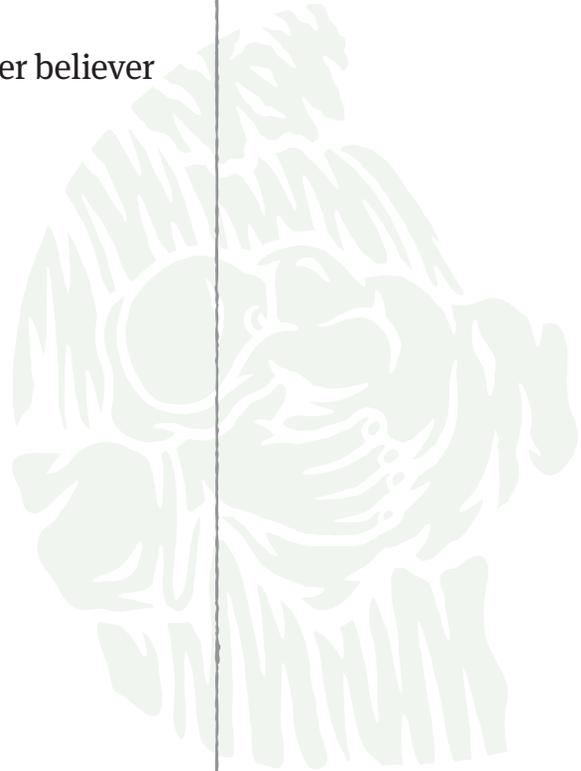


HANDS

How will you encourage an older or younger believer in their faith this week?

References

1. John Wesley, "On Patience" in *The Essential Works of John Wesley*, ed. Alice Russie (Uhrichville, OH: Barbour Publishing, Inc., 2011), 389.



THE VISIT



CORE PASSAGE: MATTHEW 2:1-12

Context: Mary and Joseph experienced much in the years surrounding Jesus's birth. An angel gave each of them a message concerning God's Son being conceived by the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:26-38; Matt. 1:18-25). A Roman census sent them traveling to Bethlehem, where Jesus was born and visited by shepherds. And at the temple in Jerusalem, they were amazed at Simeon's and Anna's reactions to their infant Son (Luke 2:25-38). Some time later, still in Bethlehem, they received yet more visitors—this time wise men from a pagan land looking for the promised King.

Key Concept: Jesus is the true King and worthy to be worshiped.

DAILY READINGS

- Day 1:** Matthew 2:1-6
- Day 2:** Matthew 2:7-12
- Day 3:** Matthew 2:13-15
- Day 4:** Matthew 2:16-18
- Day 5:** Matthew 2:19-23
- Day 6:** Psalm 47

Jesus came from humble means to be our humble King (Matthew 2:1-6).

¹ After Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of King Herod, wise men from the east arrived in Jerusalem, ² saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star at its rising and have come to worship him.” ³ When King Herod heard this, he was deeply disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ So he assembled all the chief priests and scribes of the people and asked them where the Messiah would be born. ⁵ “In Bethlehem of Judea,” they told him, “because this is what was written by the prophet: ⁶ And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah: Because out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.”

Two Kings in Opposition

The Gospel of Matthew opens not with fireworks but with a genealogy (Matt. 1:1-17)—firmly rooting Jesus in God’s divine promises to Israel. Yet when we arrive at Matthew 2:1-6, the veil of ordinary surroundings is still intact. There was no throne, no crown, no royal parade for the newborn Messiah. Still, in these verses, Matthew made a seismic claim: the true King was born—not merely a ruler of Israel but the long-promised King who was worthy of worship.

This King of kings came in obscurity, humility, and vulnerability. Yet His arrival was no less authoritative, no less royal. His birth carried divine weight, disoriented worldly power, and fulfilled ancient prophecy. Jesus came into humble circumstances to be our humble King—a truth that demands a response. Knowing Jesus as King will either stir worship or



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Notes

FIGURE Study

HEROD THE GREAT: Ruthless and paranoid, Herod the Great was appointed king of Judea by Rome, and he ruled from 37–4 BC. He killed anyone who was a threat to him, including his own sons and heirs. He also was known for his architectural feats, including the Antonia Tower, his fortress at Masada, and the renovations of the temple that took 46 years to complete (John 2:20).

provoke resistance. But regardless of the reaction to God incarnate, the true King had come indeed.

Matthew quickly set the stage of his Gospel with two kings—one already established and one just born (vv. 1-2). Herod the Great sat on the throne in Jerusalem, a ruler known for architectural splendor, political cunning, and paranoia-fueled cruelty. He refurbished the temple with grandeur but also murdered members of his own family to preserve his power. He was Rome’s man in Judea—an Idumean crowned “king” by political appointment, not divine anointing, and he certainly could make no claim to the Davidic line.

Jesus, on the other hand, was born under modest conditions in a small Judean town. At His birth, He had no political power, no army, no wealth. Though He came to earth as God incarnate, He was born to a poor family in a borrowed space, wrapped in cloth, and laid in a manger. Yet He is King in the truest, fullest sense, not by human appointment or societal recognition but because God has declared Him so. His kingship does not depend on earthly trappings but on heavenly authority. Herod reigned in visible might; Jesus presently reigns in concealed majesty.

This is the kind of king Jesus is—humble, hidden, and holy. His humility exposed the false power of human kings and threatened worldly authorities. In particular, news of His birth disturbed paranoid Herod. Herod recognized, perhaps more clearly than others, that true kingship had entered the world, and his authority was in danger.

The appearance of the magi, or wise men, introduced Herod to the threat to his rule. The magi were Gentiles, outsiders to the covenant people of Israel, yet they sought the King of the Jews (vv. 1-2). They

came from the east—likely Persia or Babylon—regions historically hostile or foreign to Israel’s God. And yet, somehow they discerned what those in Israel missed: a King was born, and He was worthy of worship. The term for “wise men” or “magi” denoted scholars of astronomy, philosophy, and possibly spiritual mysteries. Their interest in worshiping the Messiah fulfilled Isaiah’s prophecy that “nations will come to your light, and kings to your shining brightness” (Isa. 60:3). These magi were firstfruits of that promise. They did not come to debate nor to inspect but to worship.

The wise men’s question went right to the heart of the matter: “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?” (Matt. 2:2). The certainty of their question indicated divine revelation; they had good reason to make their incredibly expensive and time-consuming trip. The star they had seen at its rising was not a random astronomical event; it was a supernatural sign, a cosmic witness to a cosmic King. The reach of Jesus’s kingship was already extending beyond the borders of Israel. The covenant promise to Abraham—that “all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen. 12:3)—was unfolding. And the magi’s response sets an example for all who encounter Christ rightly: recognition, reverence, and worship.

Herod’s reaction, however, was immediate, negative, and intense. The Greek word for “disturbed” implies inner turmoil, agitation, even dread (Matt. 2:3). The birth of Jesus was not “good news” to Herod; it was a threat. He understood what was at stake. If a true King had been born—one whose authority came from God—then Herod’s rule was illegitimate and over.

But Herod was not alone in his disturbance. “All Jerusalem with him” shared his anxiety (v. 3). This is



Bonus Content

Scan this QR code to learn more about Jerusalem and King Herod at the time of the wise men’s arrival.

THEOLOGY Connection

CHRIST AS KING:

God has always been King over His creation, whether in heaven or on earth. Yet some of His creatures in both realms have rebelled against Him, leaving destruction in their wake. To restore His broken world, God promised a King who would deliver His people and restore all of creation. The promise of a coming King finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ and looks forward to its perfection when Jesus returns for His bride, the church.

a fascinating and unsettling line. One might expect that the news of a promised king would be met with joy, especially in the capital city. But Jerusalem, weary from upheaval and complicit in its own spiritual decay, was not ready. The news of the Messiah's birth disturbed them because it was disruptive. Jesus did not arrive to affirm human agendas but to upend them.

Here we encounter the heart of one of Matthew's themes in his Gospel: Jesus's kingship compels a response. He cannot be ignored. His kingship exposes loyalties, unmasking idols, and forces a choice. The same news that led magi to worship left a king and a city trembling.

How might people today be disturbed by the news of Jesus and His gospel?

Identifying the True King

Unnerved by the wise men's claims, Herod consulted the experts about where the Messiah would be born (vv. 4-5). Herod called together the priests and scribes, those steeped in the Scriptures, and they responded directly: "In Bethlehem," as was foretold in Micah 5:2. Micah prophesied during political upheaval and spiritual decline in Israel and Judah around the time of Israel's exile in 722 BC. Though judgment loomed, Micah offered hope: a future ruler would come from Bethlehem. This ruler would not be ordinary. His origin was said to be "from antiquity" (Mic. 5:2), pointing beyond human lineage to the divine. God promised that greatness would come from smallness and salvation would rise from obscurity.

When the events of Matthew 2 unfolded, the prophecy of Micah took on flesh. The magi arrived in

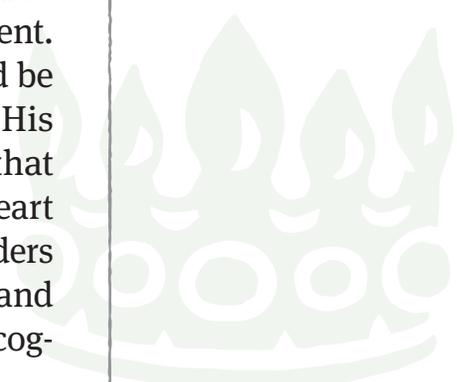
Jerusalem seeking the King of the Jews, and Herod, along with all Jerusalem, was deeply disturbed. The religious leaders correctly identified Bethlehem as the Messiah's birthplace, but they made no effort to go and see for themselves whether the Messiah had come. They knew the Scriptures but missed the Savior.

The religious leaders' biblical knowledge had been correct, but their hearts remained cold. Those who lived closest to the truth responded with apathy, while Gentile outsiders came with determination to worship. The chief priests and scribes should have been the first to seek out the Christ, but they stayed home. In the irony of redemptive history, foreign seekers bowed in faith while the covenant people remained indifferent.

Micah had proclaimed that the Messiah would be both humble in His appearance and eternal in His nature. Jesus fulfilled both. Matthew revealed that proximity to religious truth does not guarantee a heart responsive to grace. The apathy of the religious leaders reminds us that it is possible to be well-informed and yet spiritually unmoved. True faith doesn't just recognize a prophecy, it runs to worship the King.

Here we find the danger of detached religiosity—when Scripture becomes information rather than invitation. The priests and scribes knew the right words, but the wise men, who weren't even part of the religious community of Israel, were the ones who responded in faith. Lasting faith comes not to those who presume to understand Jesus but to those who seek Him.

In a time when Israel's leaders did not follow God's commands, Micah prophesied about Bethlehem: "Out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel" (Mic. 5:2; cf. Matt. 2:6). The word "shepherd" is critical. The Messiah would not exploit, manipulate, or



dominate. He would guide, guard, and give His life for the sheep. The prophecy linked regal authority with pastoral tenderness. He would not be like Herod. He would not rule through fear but through sacrifice. In Ezekiel 34:11-16, God promised He would be the One who would seek the lost sheep, bind up the wounded, and bring back the strays of His flock. In Matthew's Gospel, God does this in Christ. The Messiah was not a symbolic figure, for He came from a real place, from a real lineage, and would accomplish real redemption.

The location of Bethlehem mattered not for its prominence but for its humility and ancestry. That God would choose Bethlehem over Jerusalem was no accident. His ways are not ours. His kingdom would be ushered in not with coronations but with relative obscurity. The Shepherd-King, the God-man, would arise from humble roots and lead with humility.

Jesus fulfilled gospel prophecy not only by being born in Bethlehem but by embodying the heart of God revealed through prophecy: justice with mercy, sovereignty with service, majesty with meekness. He is the Ruler who shepherds, the King who lays down His life.

Why do you think God sent the Savior into the world as a humble king?

The result of knowing Jesus is joyful worship (Matthew 2:7-12).

⁷ Then Herod secretly summoned the wise men and asked them the exact time the star appeared. ⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. When you find him, report back to me so that I too can go and worship him." ⁹ After hearing the

king, they went on their way. And there it was—the star they had seen at its rising. It led them until it came and stopped above the place where the child was.¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overwhelmed with joy.¹¹ Entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and falling to their knees, they worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.¹² And being warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their own country by another route.

Herod's Treachery

In these verses, the focus shifted subtly from cosmic signs and prophetic fulfillment to personal response. If the first part of the passage revealed the contrast between earthly power and heavenly authority, this section pressed a deeper truth: Those who truly recognize Jesus cannot remain neutral; they rejoice and they worship.

The movement of the wise men from Jerusalem to Bethlehem was not only geographical but theological. They left the place of anxiety and political scheming and went into the presence of divine joy. What they found in Bethlehem was not a spectacle but a child, and before this child, they bowed in worship and presented gifts fit for a king. Their journey ended in worship. So too should ours.

Compared to the wise men's actions, Herod's outward words masked an inward threat. He spoke the language of reverence—"so that I too can go and worship him" (v. 8)—but his intentions were murderous. We know from the verses that follow that Herod's heart was bent not on worship but on eliminating a threat (see vv. 13-18).

Herod was the anti-worshiper. His response to Jesus's kingship was fear disguised as piety and deception disguised as devotion. Here we see a sobering reality: not all who speak of worship are worshipers. Proximity to Jesus does not guarantee reverence. Herod's palace was closer to Bethlehem than the magi's homeland, but his heart was farther away.

What things in life compete for our attention, devotion, and worship, distracting us from true worship of Jesus?

This contrast sharpens Matthew's central claim: Jesus is the true King, and He is worthy of worship. Herod's reaction was not unique to his historical moment. The same Christ who draws some to adoration will provoke others to rebellion. But the response of the magi provides the model we should follow. As the narrative moves from deception to discovery, we are ushered into the theology of joy.

Verses 9-10 are saturated with spiritual significance. The star, which appeared at the beginning of the wise men's journey, now reappeared and guided them to the exact place where Jesus was.

The connection between Balaam's oracle in Numbers 24 and the star the men sought in Matthew 2 is not a direct fulfillment, but it is theologically weighty. Balaam, a reluctant and corrupt prophet, was compelled by God to speak blessings on Israel rather than curses. In one blessing, Balaam foretold a ruler who would arise from Jacob—a "star" and "scepter" evoking kingship. While Numbers 24:17 likely found initial fulfillment in the rise of David and Israel's national victories, Matthew echoed that imagery. The literal star that guided the wise men to Jesus was a signpost

pointing to a greater King than Balaam could have ever imagined.

This celestial sign evokes gospel-rich themes: a promised King came from Jacob's line, God spoke through unexpected voices, and the nations were drawn by worship. The heavens declare God's glory, not just in creation but in incarnation (Ps. 19:1; Rom. 1:20). In this sense, the star in Matthew 2 functioned as an allusion to Balaam's words, fulfilled in part in Christ. God foretold the day when the nations would stream to Bethlehem, not for battle but to bow before the Child who is both the Star and the Scepter.

Verse 10 highlights the wise men's reaction to finding Jesus: "They were overwhelmed with joy." The Greek here is intense and layered; literally, "they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy." They rejoiced because God had brought them to Jesus. This is the joy of recognition, the realization that all their seeking, all their waiting, all their wandering had culminated in arrival. The King had been found, and He was worthy.

True knowledge of Jesus is inseparable from joy. In Matthew 13:44, Jesus described the kingdom of heaven as a treasure hidden in a field: "Then in his joy he goes and sells everything he has and buys that field." Joy leads to surrender. Joy leads to worship.

The Wise Men's Worship

All of Matthew's deliberate pacing—geographical travel, prophetic citation, and political tension—led to the quiet, intimate scene of 2:11. The wise men entered a modest home, saw a young child with His mother, and they fell to the ground in worship.

The paradox is weighty. Men of status, wealth, and learning had journeyed thousands of miles to bow

CHRIST Connection

The wise men from a foreign country recognized Jesus as the King of the Jews, as creation aligned to reveal His birthplace. And when they found Him, they rightfully worshiped Him.

Voices from CHURCH HISTORY

“Wherever the Bible is read the conduct of these wise men is known, and told as a memorial to them. Let us walk in the steps of their faith. Let us not be ashamed to believe in Jesus and confess him, though all around us remain indifferent and unbelieving. Have we not a thousand times more evidence than the wise men had, to make us believe that Jesus is the Christ? Beyond doubt we have. Yet where is our faith?”¹

–J. C. Ryle
(1816–1900)

before a Child. They did not need royal trappings to perceive royal majesty. In the ancient world, kneeling was the posture reserved for homage to kings or divine beings. These men were not giving polite respect—they were offering worship. Matthew used the Greek verb *proskuneō* to define their response of worship, the same word used throughout the New Testament for worship offered to God. They recognized this Child was more than human. He was divine.

The wise men then opened their treasures:

- Gold, a gift for royalty, affirmed Jesus’s kingship.
- Frankincense, used in temple worship, affirmed His divinity.
- Myrrh, used for burial, foreshadowed His suffering and death.

Here we glimpse the fullness of who Jesus is: King, God, and Savior. Whether the magi understood the prophetic weight of these gifts is unclear. True worship bows in humility and gives sacrificially. It sees Jesus for who He is and responds accordingly. Worship is not an add-on to belief. It is the natural outpouring of beholding glory.

Verse 12 might seem like a narrative footnote, but it holds spiritual insight. The magi, having encountered Jesus and worshiped Him, were redirected by God through a dream. They did not return to Herod. This change of route was literal but can be symbolic. When you have truly encountered Jesus, you do not walk the same path. Worship changes direction and reorients allegiances. The magi were now marked men, not by the world’s standards but by a divine encounter.

How do we respond when we meet the true King? Do we, like Herod, resist and protect our own little

kingdoms? Or do we, like the magi, rejoice, kneel, and give Him our treasures? True worship begins not in the mouth but in the heart. It moves us to joy, it humbles our pride, it loosens our grip on what we have, and it redirects our steps. The magi sought the King. They found the Child. But in Him, they recognized glory, and they worshiped.

What are some ways you give Jesus the worship He truly deserves?

 **HEAD**

How can recognizing the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies in the life of Jesus bolster your faith?

 **HEART**

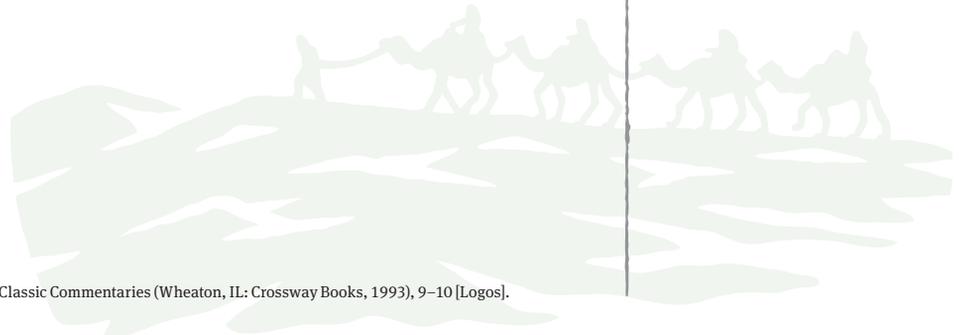
What do you need to confess or release to worship Jesus with all you have?

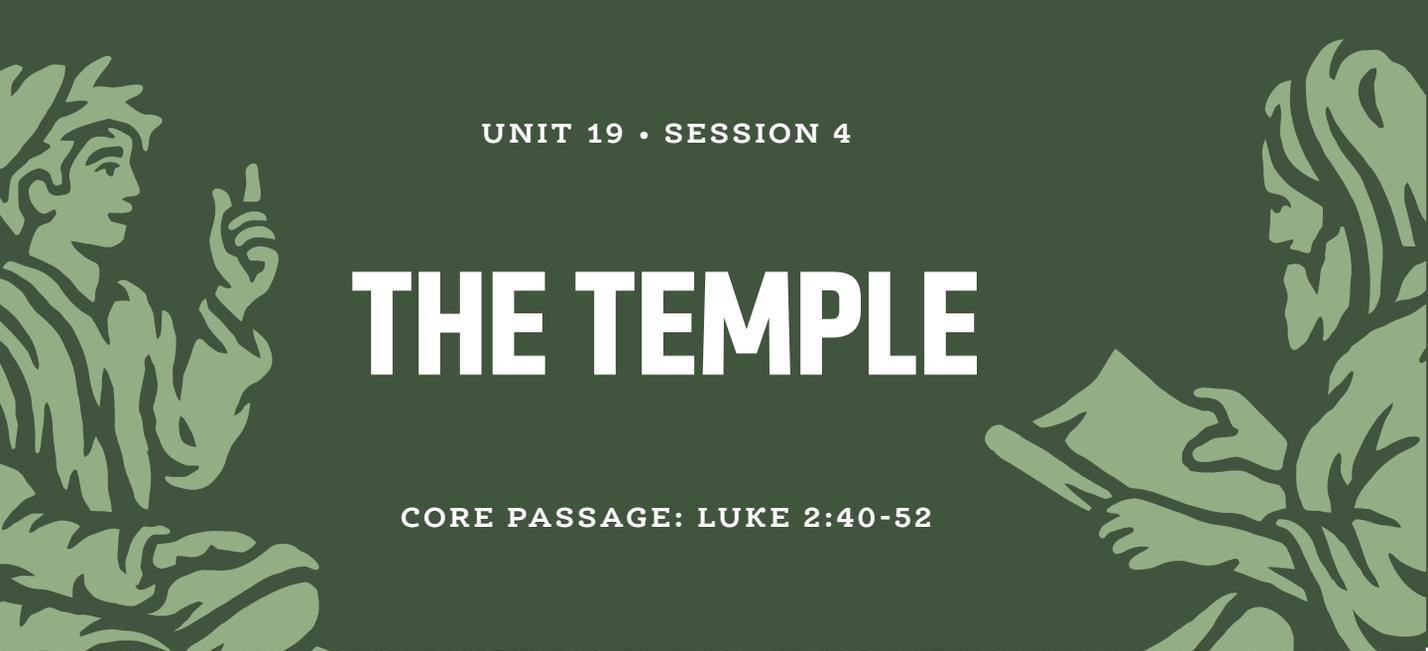
 **HANDS**

What is something you will give God today as an act of worship for the gift of His Son, our King?

References

1. J. C. Ryle, *Matthew*, Crossway Classic Commentaries (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1993), 9–10 [Logos].





THE TEMPLE

CORE PASSAGE: LUKE 2:40-52

Context: The first few weeks of Jesus's life evidenced that He was not an ordinary child like the rest of us. Through announcements from angels, words spoken by strangers, and prophecies made over Jesus, He was identified as the Savior the world had been waiting for. That same Savior would grow in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man, always keeping His focus on His mission from the Father.

Key Concept: Jesus, who is fully human and fully God, is the source of wisdom and knowledge.

DAILY READINGS

- Day 1:** Luke 2:40-42
- Day 2:** Luke 2:43-45
- Day 3:** Luke 2:46-47
- Day 4:** Luke 2:48-50
- Day 5:** Luke 2:51-52
- Day 6:** Psalm 122

Jesus grew up like all other humans yet displayed an understanding of the Word of God (Luke 2:40-47).

⁴⁰ The boy grew up and became strong, filled with wisdom, and God’s grace was on him. ⁴¹ Every year his parents traveled to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival. ⁴² When he was twelve years old, they went up according to the custom of the festival. ⁴³ After those days were over, as they were returning, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. ⁴⁴ Assuming he was in the traveling party, they went a day’s journey. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. ⁴⁵ When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. ⁴⁶ After three days, they found him in the temple sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁷ And all those who heard him were astounded at his understanding and his answers.

Jesus Grew in His Humanity

In the only canonical, inspired glimpse we are given of Jesus’s boyhood, Luke 2:40-47 opens a singular window into the mystery of the Incarnation. Here, nestled within a family pilgrimage to Jerusalem, we find a quiet yet staggering affirmation: the eternal Word made flesh was growing—not only in physical stature but in wisdom (vv. 40,52). We find Jesus immersed in Scripture, engaged in conversation, and astonishing those around Him, yet He was also obedient, still under the care of His earthly parents and surrounded by the rhythms of covenant life.

This is a profound moment where Jesus’s full humanity and full divinity were both on display—



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Notes

THEOLOGY Connection

JESUS'S

HUMANITY: In addition to being fully divine, the Bible also affirms that Jesus is fully human. Not only does the Old Testament affirm that the Promised One (Messiah) would be a man (Isa. 7:14; 9:6; Mic. 5:3), but the New Testament also affirms that Jesus's earthly life bore all the marks of being a human. He experienced the circumstances common to living as a human being, such as hunger (Matt. 4:2), thirst (John 19:28), weariness (Matt. 8:24), sorrow (John 11:35), and pain (the crucifixion).

undiminished, unconflicted. Luke did not tell us of boyhood miracles or divine interventions. But he did record this: Jesus “grew up and became strong, filled with wisdom, and God’s grace was on him” (v. 40).

The verses in this passage do not merely affirm the wonder of who Jesus is; they shape how we understand wisdom itself. They remind us that true wisdom is not reserved for the aged or the elite. It is centered in the person of Jesus, who even as a boy revealed the character of the Father and reoriented people’s understanding of the Word of God.

The language in verse 40 is remarkably ordinary: Jesus grew, He became strong, He matured. There was no halo above His head, no supernatural shortcut to adulthood. The Son of God grew the way all children grow: in stages, through time, within the boundaries of physical development. His physical humanity was not theoretical.

And yet, within that normal growth, there was something extraordinary. Jesus was filled with wisdom. Wisdom is not simply high intelligence or early maturity. In Jesus’s case, it was divine wisdom that would later cause crowds to marvel, disciples to follow, and leaders to tremble. It was wisdom that came not from learning or tradition but from perfect communion with the Father.

Importantly, Luke linked this wisdom to the grace of God. Jesus did not grow in wisdom in a vacuum; the favor of God was active in and upon Him. This is a reminder that wisdom is not the fruit of mere study; it is the result of grace-formed perception. Jesus did not learn about God as others do. He learned first-hand the ways of human obedience as the God-man (Heb. 5:8). The Boy was shaped by the Spirit of the

very God He had always known and been in perfect fellowship with.

At the same time, this verse humbles us. If Jesus, the perfect Son of God, grew in wisdom, how much more must we? Spiritual understanding is not automatic, and wisdom is not instant. Even the incarnate Son grew in this regard to some degree. Our desire to grow in wisdom and grace must be paired with submission to the same rhythms that formed Jesus: obedience, learning, and intimacy with the Father.

Luke was clear that Mary and Joseph were faithful Jews (Luke 2:41), and this is crucial to understanding what follows. They were not passive caretakers; they were covenant keepers. The law commanded that adult males attend the three great festivals in Jerusalem each year, with Passover being chief among them (Ex. 23:14-17; Deut. 16:16). For families that lived far from the city, this often meant an annual pilgrimage, and Mary's presence here suggests that this journey was a family affair rooted in devotion. Mary and Joseph made the long trip to Jerusalem not because it was convenient but because it was right. Their obedience formed the backdrop for Jesus's own spiritual hunger. Jesus was not raised in spiritual vagueness but in a home where God's ways were honored. Mary and Joseph's fidelity nurtured Jesus's formation.

In a passage and book centered on Jesus, Luke still honored Jesus's earthly parents. They did what faithful parents should do—place their family in proximity to the Word, the worship, and the community of God. Their example reminds us that spiritual maturity is often cultivated long before it is visible. Jesus's wisdom was extraordinary, but it did not arise in a vacuum. He grew in a household saturated in reverence for God.

What are some benefits for children who have believing and faithful parents and mentors?

Jesus Grew in Wisdom

Jesus was twelve years old, on the threshold of adulthood in Jewish custom (Luke 2:42). At thirteen, a boy would formally become “a son of the covenant,” obligated to keep the law for himself.¹ So while Jesus was still a child, this moment came on the cusp of maturity.

After the festival, the family caravan departed for home in Nazareth, but Jesus remained in Jerusalem (v. 43). He wasn’t acting in rebellion or disobedience but in hunger. His desire to stay was not rooted in independence but in attentiveness. He lingered where the Word was discussed, where God’s presence dwelled. Yet in doing so, He caused distress for His parents.

This is not a story about negligence but about growing complexity. Jesus’s full humanity included full submission to His parents, as we will see, but He also had divine priorities as God’s Son. Mary and Joseph, though faithful, did not yet understand fully what was unfolding in their Son. The Incarnation held a holy tension: The Son of God was also the Son of Mary, and He would honor both relationships without sinning.

Mary and Joseph’s subsequent search for their Son was frantic and anxious (vv. 44-46,48). They had lost not just a child but the Child. And yet, within that tension, God was orchestrating a revelation, not only for them but for us. Jesus was exactly where He was meant to be. The Word who was in the beginning with God—the Word through whom all things were made—was now a boy sitting in the temple courts, engaging with human teachers about the Word of God (v. 46).

Jesus was not preaching or teaching here. He was listening and asking. He was entering the conversation of faith not as a divine monologue but as a fully human participant. Yet in doing so, He astonished His hearers (v. 47). His understanding was not shallow. His questions were not ordinary. He did not merely recite Scripture, He perceived its depths. His knowledge was illuminated. The teachers were amazed, not simply because a twelve-year-old was engaging them but because this twelve-year-old was engaging them at a level that suggested more than precocious brilliance.

Jesus was not showing off in pride. He was showing us the nature of wisdom itself. True wisdom is not disconnected from Scripture—it is anchored in it. True wisdom is not aggressive; it listens, asks, and discerns. And most importantly, true wisdom does not bypass God’s Word but dwells within it. Here, the Source of wisdom sat humbly in the posture of a learner. The eternal Son modeled for us the way of wisdom: listening, questioning, and engaging, not in skepticism but in pursuit of truth.

In these few verses, Luke portrayed Jesus not as a mystical figure detached from real life, nor as a divine being merely masquerading in flesh, but as the true God-man. Fully human, Jesus grew, learned, and listened. Fully divine, He revealed wisdom, stirred wonder, and embodied grace. And in doing so, Jesus redefined our understanding of wisdom. Wisdom is not status, intellect, or achievement. Wisdom is a person, and that person is Christ (1 Cor. 1:24).

What we see in the temple here is not just a moment from Jesus’s adolescence but a glimpse into the nature of the gospel itself. The One whose authoritative teaching would silence Pharisees began His ministry with

WORD Study

WISDOM: The Bible says that the Lord is the source of knowledge and understanding (Prov. 2:6; 3:19; 9:10). In Proverbs, wisdom is personified as a woman calling out to humanity to turn away from sinful foolishness (1:20-33). Jesus, the eternal Word of God (John 1:1), took on human flesh and grew in wisdom (Luke 2:40,52), and even as a boy, He amazed the teachers with His wisdom (v. 47). Paul described Jesus as the power and wisdom of God for us (1 Cor. 1:21-31).

questions. The King began as a boy in the temple hungry for God's Word, astonishing the wise.

What might keep you from growing in your understanding of the Scriptures?

Jesus acknowledged God as His Father (Luke 2:48-52).

⁴⁸ When his parents saw him, they were astonished, and his mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you."⁴⁹ "Why were you searching for me?" he asked them. "Didn't you know that it was necessary for me to be in my Father's house?"⁵⁰ But they did not understand what he said to them.⁵¹ Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was obedient to them. His mother kept all these things in her heart.⁵² And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and with people.

Jesus Was Obedient to God and His Earthly Parents

After three days of anxious searching, Mary and Joseph found their twelve-year-old Son not lost but precisely where He intended to be—sitting in the temple, immersed in the things of God (v. 46). What followed was a theological flashpoint, the first recorded words of Jesus and a window into the mystery of His dual identity as the Son of Man and the Son of the Most High.

Jesus made a monumental declaration: "Didn't you know that it was necessary for me to be in my Father's house?" (v. 49). Jesus located His identity not in biology or tradition but in divine relationship. His primary

allegiance was to His Father in heaven, and His life would be shaped entirely by that reality.

Yet astonishingly, the boy Jesus returned with His parents (v. 51). He submitted to them. He continued to grow. Jesus did not use His divine identity to escape responsibility; He embodied it by maturing into perfect obedience. Luke concluded the chapter with a line that pulses with significance: “Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and with people” (v. 52). The One who is fully God is also fully human, and He was becoming what He already is: the perfect Son of God.

Mary and Joseph, like any parents, were deeply distressed (v. 48). Mary’s words were not a gentle question; they were a cry of emotional distress. She was not scolding a disobedient child; she was reaching out to her beloved Son she could not yet fully understand. Luke said that they were astonished because of where and how they found Him. Mary’s question revealed the mystery of who Jesus is. “Why have you treated us like this?” (v. 48) expressed the aching of a heart that sensed something deeper was happening, something beyond her comprehension. She added, “Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you” (v. 48). Joseph, after all, had been raising Jesus as his own. Yet even this mention of Joseph as “father” would be gently but theologically reframed by Jesus in what followed. Mary spoke as any mother would, but Jesus responded as the eternal Son.

What follows are the first recorded words of Jesus in the Gospels, and they carried immense weight. “Didn’t you know . . . ?” (v. 49) pointed not to forgetfulness on the parents’ part but to a deeper truth. Jesus was gently reminding them: He is God the Son.

The phrase “it was necessary” (Greek *dei*) is critical (v. 49). In Luke’s Gospel, the Greek verb *dei* signals divine necessity, a feature repeated throughout Jesus’s life: He must be about His Father’s business (v. 49); He must suffer (9:22); and He must be crucified and raised (24:7).² Everything Jesus would do fell under the direction of divine purpose. Even here, at twelve years old, He was aware of His mission.

And where was He found? In His Father’s house (2:49). Jesus was referring to the temple, the place where God’s presence dwelled with His people, where sacrifices were offered, where Scripture was studied. He was compelled to be there. There was no reluctance, no wandering. Jesus longed to be in the center of God’s purposes.

This longing was not juvenile fascination or youthful zeal. It was the deep yearning of the Son to be with His Father. Already we see the contours of Jesus’s identity. He would not be defined by social expectation or biological ties alone. His life would be shaped by the will of His Father, and this would cost Him everything.

In what ways are you acknowledging God as your heavenly Father and your highest authority?

Jesus Honored His Earthly Parents

Mary and Joseph did not understand what had compelled Jesus to stay behind (v. 50), and that too is part of the story. Divine revelation often comes wrapped in mystery. Jesus was clear, but He was not yet fully comprehended. This theme echoes throughout Luke’s Gospel: Jesus spoke truth, but even His closest companions struggled to grasp it.

What follows is astonishing in its simplicity: “He went down with them . . . and was obedient to them” (v. 51). The Son of God submitted to human parents. The Creator obeyed His creatures. The One who just spoke of His divine mission honored the authority of His earthly home. There was no rebellion, no superiority complex. After astounding the teachers in the temple, Jesus willingly submitted to Mary and Joseph, returning with them to Nazareth. This wasn’t merely family harmony, it was covenantal faithfulness. Jesus, even in His youth, fulfilled the law in every respect, including the command to “honor your father and your mother” (Ex. 20:12).

This moment reminds us that Jesus didn’t just die for sinners—He lived in perfect righteousness for them too. His obedience wasn’t limited to the cross; it began in the cradle and carried through the quiet years of home life. In honoring Mary and Joseph, Jesus fulfilled what every child has failed to keep: the fifth commandment. In doing so, Jesus secured a righteousness for all who fall short of the law’s demands. He honored His earthly parents so that we could be adopted by His heavenly Father, not as lawbreakers but as beloved children clothed in the righteousness of Jesus’s obedience.

What does Jesus’s obedience to both His heavenly Father and His earthly parents reveal about His character?

Luke added a final note: “His mother kept all these things in her heart” (Luke 2:51). Mary still did not fully grasp what had happened and been said, but she treasured it. She did not dismiss the mystery; she held it close. This posture—holding mystery with reverence—

Voices from CHURCH HISTORY

“The Lord of all submitted himself to the government of his supposed father and under him his mother . . . In fulfilling filial and economic duties in their house for the space of thirty years, what does he teach except obedience to superiors? He teaches especially that children should honor father and mother, no matter how poor, for this subjection is a virtue, not a weakness.”³

—John Boys
(1571–1625)

GOSPEL Connection

Jesus, the divine Son of God, honored and obeyed His earthly parents completely in fulfillment of the law of God so that He could be the perfect sacrifice for our sins in our place.

is a model for all who follow Jesus. Not all is immediately clear, but faith clings, reflects, and remembers.

After Jesus's return to Nazareth, we are told nothing else of His teenage or young adult years beyond that "Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and with people" (v. 52). This alone is staggering. His divinity did not cancel out His humanity. He learned. He aged. He developed. The One through whom all things were made became like us in every way, yet without sin (Heb. 4:15).

Luke 2:52, like verse 40 before it, affirms the true humanity of Christ in all its fullness. Jesus was not playacting. He truly lived a human life. He did not descend with instant mastery—He grew in wisdom. He did not float above others—He gained favor with them. He did not walk in a divine light with a halo—He walked a path of perfect yet broadening alignment with the Father's will.

Luke 2:48-52 is more than a biographical sketch. In these verses, we encounter the true humanity of Jesus: the Boy obeyed, grew, and submitted. But we also glimpse His divinity: the Son longed for His Father, spoke with authority, and knew who He is and what He was here to do.

Jesus's acknowledgment of God as His Father was not a momentary insight; it was the axis around which His entire life would turn. Every decision, every teaching, every act of mercy flowed from this identity. Jesus is the beloved Son of God, and in Him we see the fullness of wisdom and knowledge, not as abstract principles but as embodied obedience.

This passage invites us to do more than merely admire Jesus. It calls us to follow Him in the same kind of growth He experienced and cultivated: to seek the

Father's presence, to walk in growing wisdom, and to live lives of obedient devotion. Jesus did not come only to be known; He came to show us the way to live as sons and daughters of the Father. And He did so not from a throne but from a position of humility. Not in spectacle but in hiddenness. Not by dominating others but by submitting to them as was fitting. The Son was found in His Father's house, and from that house, He would one day rise and go to the cross so that we too could be called sons and daughters of God.

 **HEAD**

What are some ways you can honor God and your parents in this stage of your life?

 **HEART**

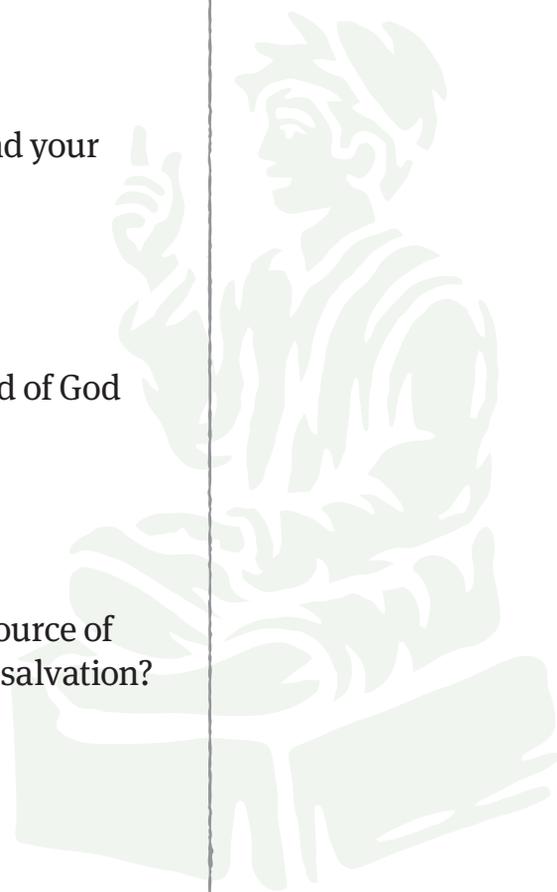
In what ways do you need to grow as a child of God and a disciple of Jesus?

 **HANDS**

How will you help others see Jesus as the source of wisdom and knowledge, especially for our salvation?

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THE GOSPEL PROJECT

UNIT 20 THE PREPARATION



MATTHEW; LUKE; JOHN



MEMORY VERSES

“The devil said to him, ‘I will give you their splendor and all this authority, because it has been given over to me, and I can give it to anyone I want. If you, then, will worship me, all will be yours.’ And Jesus answered him, ‘It is written: Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’”

—Luke 4:6-8



JOHN PREPARED THE WAY

CORE PASSAGE: MATTHEW 3:1-12

Context: Following the close of the Old Testament's inspiration and revelation, God was silent for over four hundred years. Then the angel Gabriel appeared to an old priest in Jerusalem and a young girl in Nazareth, informing them that God had not forgotten His promises. Decades later, John the Baptist, the surprise son of the priest, went into the wilderness to call people to repentance to prepare the way for the Messiah, the miraculous son of the young girl.

Key Concept: Following Jesus requires confession, repentance, and yielding to the work of the Holy Spirit.

DAILY READINGS

- Day 1:** Mark 1:1-8
- Day 2:** Luke 3:1-14
- Day 3:** Luke 3:15-20
- Day 4:** Matthew 3:1-6
- Day 5:** Matthew 3:7-12
- Day 6:** Psalm 139

Confession, repentance, and baptism are part of a believer's journey (Matthew 3:1-6).

¹ In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea ² and saying, “Repent, because the kingdom of heaven has come near!” ³ For he is the one spoken of through the prophet Isaiah, who said: A voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way for the Lord; make his paths straight! ⁴ Now John had a camel-hair garment with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵ Then people from Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the vicinity of the Jordan were going out to him, ⁶ and they were baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins.

God Speaks in the Wilderness

God often does His greatest work in barren or forgotten places. After the amazing events of Matthew 2, with Joseph’s dream, Jesus’s birth, the surprising visit by the wise men, and the family’s flight to and return from Egypt, you might expect the next scene to take place in the temple or a synagogue. But it doesn’t. It starts in the wilderness—a harsh, dry, uninhabited landscape far from the political and religious power center of Israel.

You might be wondering why this narrative begins in the wilderness. Because the wilderness reveals what the “city” hides. It is in the barren places of life that we come face to face with our need. The crowds came to hear John because the desert speaks more clearly than the palace. When all our busyness fades into the background, we can encounter God. The noise of religion and self-sufficiency fade in the wilderness, and we then find ourselves raw before Almighty God.



Scan this QR code to access this session's Scripture passages.

Notes

GOSPEL Connection

John was the prophesied messenger calling out in the wilderness, preparing hearts to repent and believe in the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

In biblical theology, the wilderness was not just a geographical location; it was the place where God chiseled and shaped His people. In the wilderness, God strips away pretense, confronts idols, and calls people into a deeper dependence on Him.

The wilderness in Scripture carries a double meaning. It was a place of danger and desolation, what the book of Deuteronomy calls “the great and terrible wilderness” filled with “poisonous snakes and scorpions, a thirsty land where there was no water” (Deut. 8:15). In it, people were exposed, vulnerable, and spiritually confronted. Yet the wilderness also was a place of profound hope, where God spoke tenderly to His people (Hos. 2:14), where He fed them with manna in spite of their grumbling (see Ex. 16), gave them water from the rock in spite of their complaining (see Ex. 17; Num. 20), and formed them into a covenant people. The wilderness was both a place of breaking and of becoming.

So when we read that John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching, Matthew wasn’t merely informing us of coordinates on a map; he was clueing us in that God was doing something new (Matt. 3:1).

Like the prophets of old, the message of John was one of repentance (v. 2). The word *repentance* means more than just feeling bad about something. It’s a total reorientation, turning around in mind, heart, and direction. It’s doing a U-turn. John’s call to “repent” wasn’t a motivational speech but a call upon the people to change everything. The nearness of God’s kingdom demanded this kind of response.

Why should repentance be a response to hearing the news of God’s kingdom coming near?

Why was repentance necessary for John’s message? Because the kingdom of God isn’t something that we add on to our already comfortable lives. Think of it like a fixer-upper show. We like to think that our lives are mostly filled with charm and only need to be freshened up a bit—new paint, opening up a wall or two. But John was declaring that the people needed a complete renovation, as if a renovator stated, “This thing has mold behind the walls, termites in the studs, and the foundation is cracked.” As much as we might like to, we can’t just “paint over” our rebellious hearts.

In 3:3, Matthew quoted Isaiah 40:3 to ground John the Baptist’s identity from the Old Testament—this man preaching in the wilderness was the fulfillment of a prophecy given seven hundred years earlier. In its original context, Isaiah 40:3 was part of Isaiah’s message of hope to exiled Israel (shockingly delivered about one hundred and fifty years prior to the Babylonian exile). Isaiah envisioned a day when God would return and dwell with His people, traveling like a king on a newly cleared highway (40:3-5). Matthew tells us that the ultimate fulfillment of these ancient words was found in John’s message—preparing the way for God’s kingdom coming through the work of Jesus.

Confession Brings the Hidden to Light

If you were to pick someone to introduce you to other people, what characteristics would you look for in that person? If you were a religious leader in Jesus’s day, you’d likely want someone from the temple with a priestly lineage. But that’s not who God picked to launch Jesus’s ministry. The Lord had chosen a wild man who lived in the wilderness with a camel-hair garment, a leather belt, and a diet of bugs and honey

(Matt. 3:4). While John might be strange looking to us (and maybe even to his contemporaries), his appearance was really more like a prophecy fulfilled.

This wasn't a costume for John—it was a sign. Matthew was deliberately tying John to Elijah, the Old Testament prophet who confronted the idolatry in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Second Kings 1:8 describes Elijah as “a hairy man with a leather belt around his waist.” Over four hundred years before the time of Jesus, the prophet Malachi had foretold that one like Elijah would come in the future: “Look, I am going to send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers” (Mal. 4:5-6). Jesus confirmed that John the Baptist was the fulfillment of this Elijah prophecy (Matt. 17:10-13).

Even John's diet fit the image. Much ink has been spilled trying to define exactly what kind of locusts or honey John was eating—bugs, tree sap, date nectar, or maybe just symbolism? Most likely the point was to let us know that John was surviving on the nutrients that God provided him from the land. John's diet was raw, untamed, and unmistakably wild—just like God's prophet. John the Baptist embodied the wilderness.

The most surprising thing about this passage, though, isn't John's wardrobe or diet; it's the crowds (3:5). People were flocking to see this prophet in the wilderness. And they didn't just stand on the sidelines and watch him rant. No, they confessed their sins and were baptized by him in the Jordan River (v. 6).

Today, people still flock to the Jordan River to be baptized. For many it's a spectacle, a mere photo op. But that wasn't the case for John's original audience.

John's hearers were broken by their sin and confessing in a spirit of repentance. They were agreeing with God about their sin, not downplaying it or explaining it away. They were owning it. And this act of confession was deeply tied to John's baptism. This wasn't a Christian baptism—not yet. It was more like a symbolic cleansing that marked someone as ready and waiting for the coming kingdom. Christian baptism is different in that it is tied to the triune God and draws upon the imagery of Jesus's death, burial, and resurrection.

What is shocking about John's baptism is that it was closer to a ritual a Gentile would go through to identify with and join the people of Israel. This was John saying: "Your bloodline won't save you. Your rituals won't cleanse you."¹ And the people responded, not everyone, but many, and their confession was the visible evidence of a heart turning to God.

Confession is still the doorway to true repentance. It's not something you do just once; it's part of your everyday walk with the Lord. The first of Martin Luther's ninety-five theses that he nailed to the door of the local chapel made this very point. He wrote: "Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, when He said [repent], willed that the whole life of believers should be repentance."² Confession is what happens when we finally stop hiding and acknowledge who we are before God.

This act of baptism at the Jordan River foreshadowed a greater washing to come—the baptism Jesus would bring, not with water alone but with the Holy Spirit (v. 11). Still, the story of baptism starts here, with John calling people to repentance.

What is the relationship between repentance and confession of sins?

**Voices from
CHURCH HISTORY**

"The force of that verb, repent, is no mere hat tip to the holiness of God with a mere acknowledgment of one's sin. The call here is to radical conversion—to turn from sin and intoxication with this world and direct one's soul and heart to the things of God."³

—R. C. Sproul
(1939–2017)

Those who trust in Jesus will be given the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:7-12).

⁷ When he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, “Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸ Therefore produce fruit consistent with repentance. ⁹ And don’t presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that God is able to raise up children for Abraham from these stones. ¹⁰ The ax is already at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that doesn’t produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. ¹¹ I baptize you with water for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is more powerful than I. I am not worthy to remove his sandals. He himself will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹² His winnowing shovel is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn. But the chaff he will burn with fire that never goes out.”

True Repentance Bears Visible Fruit

Imagine a revival has broken out at your church. People are confessing sin, repenting, and dedicating their lives to God. It’s an exciting time. During one particular service, influential leaders within your community come to the worship service and come forward asking to be baptized. Wouldn’t you be excited? Think of what it could mean if the movers and shakers within your community turned to God in repentance.

This is similar, to a point, to what happened in Matthew 3:7 when the Pharisees and Sadducees came out to the wilderness for John’s baptismal services. These were the religious leaders within the community. But we shouldn’t think of them like faithful local

pastors in town. They were more like a blend of power brokers, the religious establishment, and cultural gatekeepers. Think mayor, judge, influential church board member, and elite donor all rolled into one. They were the ones with status, wealth, authority, and a strong interest in maintaining the religious status quo.

This is what makes John's response to them so interesting. Rather than celebrating their presence, he called them a "brood of vipers" (v. 7). Rather than rolling out the red carpet, John rebuked them, in essence saying, "Who told you snakes to repent?"

When a brush fire sweeps through a field, snakes don't stay still. They slither away for survival. That's what John saw in the attendance of these religious leaders—an attempt to survive, not spiritually but socially. They weren't interested in actual repentance. They were reacting to the mass movement of the crowds to John's message because it threatened their status. Rather than challenging him head-on, they tried to co-opt his ministry. Their appearance at the river wasn't for repentance but an attempt to preserve their influence, and John saw through it.

John's rebuke of the Pharisees and Sadducees cut straight to the heart. God isn't satisfied with appearances; He wants real heart change. "Produce fruit consistent with repentance" is what the Lord demands (v. 8). This means that the fruit should match the root. Think of it like someone who tries to convince himself that he is eating healthy because he ordered a salad, but the salad has deep-fried chicken piled on it, croutons, a mound of shredded cheese, and enough ranch dressing to choke a horse. That's just the same old eating patterns in a new format.

Biblical CONCEPT**REPENTANCE:**

Repentance is a key biblical concept and an important practice in the Christian life. The term refers to the act of turning away from one's sin in order to embrace new life that is found in God's gift of salvation offered through Christ's sacrificial death on our behalf. Though not tied explicitly to an emotional response, true repentance results from sincere, godly sorrow over one's sin and is evidenced by a growing desire to walk with the Lord in faith and obedience.

We do the same thing today when we try to manage sin instead of obliterating it. Or we engage in half-surrenders. When we feel the nudge of conviction, we respond by adjusting appearances instead of addressing the heart. But if the repentance is real, it's going to change our direction. It may start inward, but it never stays hidden. When the root is healthy, healthy fruit will follow.

John followed up his rebuke with a warning not to rely on religious lineage. He said: "Don't presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that God is able to raise up children for Abraham from these stones" (v. 9). In other words, you don't inherit salvation through ancestry; your bloodline won't save you. The almighty Creator God could raise up a people for Himself out of rocks if He wanted to.

So, we aren't born into the family of God. We become part of the family by grace, by responding to God's initiative. This would have been a hard word for the Pharisees and Sadducees to hear. Their whole system was built on religious status and performance. But John's message was clear: If you really repent, it will show. You'll start acting more like the righteousness of God. But if there's no evidence, then there's no real repentance.

Imagine an ornate wedding cake you sometimes see at receptions. The frosting is perfect. The decorations are flawless. But when the couple goes to cut it, they cut the only edible portion—because the rest of the "cake" is actually fake. It looks stunning, but it was never meant to be eaten. It's all show, no substance.

This is what false repentance looks like. It might appear impressive from a distance, even believable

to the crowd, but once you “cut into it,” the thing is hollow. Real repentance is able to produce good fruit because it’s connected to the life of God.

John issued another warning to the Pharisees and Sadducees in verse 10: “The ax is already at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that doesn’t produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” He didn’t say the ax would come in on a delivery truck next Thursday. Nor did he say he had the ax but it was in the shop getting sharpened. No, it’s already at the root of the trees, and the One holding the ax is the divine Judge of all the earth. This means that judgment isn’t a long way off—it’s present, here and now.

The time for pretending is over. The time for fruitless religion has long since passed. Of course, there never was a time for such deceptions, but now the kingdom of God was breaking into our world. The King has arrived, and we won’t be prepared to receive Him if we keep up with our sinful obsession with outward appearances and reject authentic spiritual change.

John’s message was clear. Lineage, titles, and influence won’t matter if you aren’t ready for the King. The same is true with us. God can see through the mirage—He sees our hearts, and the fruit of our lives tells the true story of what’s going on inside.

Why is it important that we do not minimize the severity of sin and God’s response to it?

John Pointed to Jesus

An opening act has a job to do—set the stage for the main event. The opening act can’t stay on stage, play too loud, or draw too much attention. You can’t be faithful in your gig by pretending you are the main event.

THEOLOGY Connection

BAPTISM:

Christian baptism is the immersion of a believer in water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is an act of obedience symbolizing the believer's faith in a crucified, buried, and risen Savior, the believer's death to sin, the burial of the old life, and the resurrection to walk in newness of life in Christ Jesus. It is a testimony to his faith in the final resurrection of the dead. Being a church ordinance, it is prerequisite to the privileges of church membership and to the Lord's Supper.

John the Baptist understood his role. He understood that all of this was to point to the One who was much greater than he. Because of this, John didn't cling to his platform; he faithfully handed it off. In doing so, he gave us a model of what it means to truly prepare the way for Jesus.

When John said of Jesus that he was “not worthy to remove his sandals” (v. 11), he wasn't engaging in false modesty. In John's day, removing someone's sandals was reserved for slaves.⁴ With respect to Jesus, John placed himself even lower than that, saying he was not even worthy to untie the sandals of Jesus.

John's ministry was powerful, being appointed by God, but it also was preparatory. He baptized with water and called people to turn from their sin. Jesus, however, would baptize with “the Holy Spirit and fire” (v. 11). John could only call people to change. But Jesus gives the Spirit, who actually gives us the power to change. Like gold refined in fire, those who belong to Jesus will be cleansed from the inside out.

John exemplified what real ministry looks like. His job wasn't to impress other people but to prepare them to receive Jesus. We may not be prophets in the desert, but every follower of Jesus is called to point people to Him. Our lives, our words, our work, our everything is meant to lift eyes toward Jesus and not ourselves. If people walk away impressed with us, then we've missed our calling.

In verse 12, John pictured the Messiah standing on the threshing floor with a winnowing shovel in hand. He will be gathering “his wheat” and burning “the chaff.” How do we know which one we are? John's ministry is a clue. Are we given to a life of confession, repentance, and clinging to Jesus? Or do we resist Jesus

and cling to appearances, performance, and self-protection? The good news of the gospel is that the King who comes to judge is also the Lamb who died to save.

What “fruit” would you expect to see from a believer in Jesus because of the Holy Spirit’s presence?

 **HEAD**

What are some obstacles that may keep people from repenting of their sin?

 **HEART**

How will you pray for the Lord to change your affections so that you love Christ more than your sin?

 **HANDS**

What steps will you take to repent of and combat sin in your life?

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JESUS WAS BAPTIZED

CORE PASSAGE: MATTHEW 3:13-17

Context: Jesus’s baptism in the Jordan River followed on the heels of John the Baptist’s announcement concerning the arrival of the long-awaited Messiah. John’s ministry was the fulfillment of various Old Testament prophecies concerning a “forerunner,” one who was to come before the Messiah announcing His arrival and calling God’s people to repent from their sins.

Key Concept: Jesus, the Second Person of the divine Trinity, set an example for us in humility.

DAILY READINGS

- Day 1:** Mark 1:9-11
- Day 2:** Luke 3:21-38
- Day 3:** Matthew 3:13-17
- Day 4:** John 1:1-18
- Day 5:** John 1:19-34
- Day 6:** Psalm 146

Jesus set an example for us in baptism (Matthew 3:13-15).

¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴ But John tried to stop him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and yet you come to me?” ¹⁵ Jesus answered him, “Allow it for now, because this is the way for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then John allowed him to be baptized.

Jesus Walked Among Sinners

If you’ve ever waited in line with a kid (or as a kid) to get an autograph from a professional baseball player, you know the drill. Stand there with a pen and a hat, a glove, or a ball, and if you’re lucky, the star grabs your item, gives a few polite words, scribbles his name, and then hands the item back to you.

Royce Lewis, a third baseman for the Minnesota Twins, has flipped the script on this. When a kid hands him an object, he obliges with a signature, but then he asks the kid for an autograph. He hands them his hat and has them sign their name. It seems backwards. Why would this superstar need signatures from kids? Maybe it’s not about what he receives but what he’s giving to them by asking them to sign his hat.¹

This is similar to what happened in Matthew 3 when Jesus arrived at the Jordan River for John to baptize Him. John’s whole ministry was to point to Jesus. Furthermore, John’s baptism was designed for those turning from sin to publicly acknowledge their guilt and need for cleansing. Jesus, of course, didn’t need that. He is the only perfectly sinless person in history who didn’t “need” John’s baptism.



Scan this QR code to access this session's Scripture passages.

Notes

There was an intentionality here to Jesus's action that makes this even more staggering. Matthew emphasized Jesus's deliberate movement: He came to John, a lesser prophet, to be baptized by him, a posture that publicly placed Him among the penitent. Jesus was fully aware of what this baptism signified and what His baptism would communicate.

John responded as we might expect. John tried to stop Him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and yet you come to me?" (v. 14).

What reasons might John have had to stop Jesus from being baptized by him?

John asked the question that we're all thinking. Why would the sinless Son of God come to John for a baptism of repentance? Shouldn't it be the other way around? Shouldn't this be the moment when John passed the torch to Jesus and let *Him* do the baptizing?

It's important to see that something vital was happening here and also to understand what was not happening. This moment was not about Jesus repenting or needing to repent. Jesus has never sinned and never will sin. Rather, Jesus was identifying. His presence in the water signaled His solidarity with sinners. Jesus needed to be fully God and fully human to be able to save humanity. Being the Second Person of the Trinity, He humbled Himself to dwell among us and to identify Himself with sinful humanity, yet He was without sin.

Even though He had no sin, Jesus stepped into the very place where sin was acknowledged. His descent into the water prefigured His descent into the grave. Just as He would be crucified between criminals, so now He was baptized among those seeking cleansing. Jesus was doing in this baptism what He

did throughout His life and ministry—redeeming our world from within it.

For first-century readers, this action also would have communicated something socially. In an honor/shame culture, stepping into a role beneath one's status was offensive. This was partially why John was uneasy. The greater submitting to the lesser went against the fabric of their society. This wasn't how you'd expect the King to begin His public ministry. But in doing so, Jesus revealed the nature of His kingdom—humility is the real posture of greatness.

This also has implications for discipleship. If the sinless Son of God was willing to humble Himself to identify with others, then we cannot cling to pride. Jesus modeled a path of surrender and submission. He didn't begin His ministry by taking a throne but by taking His place among the lowly. He was showing us where real strength is found.

Jesus's Baptism Validated John's Ministry

John the Baptist did more than baptize; he also pointed. His baptism was always about something much greater. It was in preparation of the One who would baptize with the Holy Spirit. As people flocked to the Jordan River for John's baptism, they also were soaking in the message that the kingdom of God was at hand.

When Jesus, who is the Messiah bringing with Him the kingdom of God, stepped into the waters of the Jordan River, it was a validation of John's ministry and his claims. Though the people in attendance on that day likely didn't understand the significance, this would be a significant validation point for both John and Jesus.

GOSPEL Connection

Jesus needed to be fully God and fully human to be able to save humanity. As the Second Person of the one triune God, He humbled Himself to dwell among us and to identify Himself with sinful humanity, yet He was without sin.

Jesus’s baptism was an endorsement of John’s ministry. It was a public confirmation that both His mission and John’s message came from God. Jesus’s baptism was a fulfillment of John’s message, that the kingdom of God is at hand. This moment affirmed John’s role as the promised forerunner of God’s Messiah.

Though John hesitated, recognizing the spiritual disparity between himself and the promised Messiah, Jesus insisted that this act was necessary. Jesus wasn’t rebuking John here; instead, He was giving him comfort. What they were about to do was part of God’s plan. By participating in this baptism, Jesus put divine approval on John’s ministry, validating that John was the chosen herald preparing the way of the Lord (see Isa. 40:3; Mal. 3:1). This baptism, however, also validated Jesus, not from a merely human perspective but as one more way in which Jesus received the Father’s stamp of approval.

When John hesitated to baptize Jesus, Jesus told him, “Allow it for now, because this is the way for us to fulfill all righteousness” (Matt. 3:15). The word “righteousness” helps us understand the entire passage. “Righteousness” in Matthew’s Gospel isn’t about legalism or outward morality. It’s really about doing what aligns with God’s will. To fulfill all righteousness was to say “yes” to everything that God requires. For Jesus, that would mean identifying with the very people He came to save. Many see a connection to Isaiah 53 here, where the righteous Suffering Servant of God would be “counted among the rebels” (Isa. 53:12). Jesus wasn’t standing over and above Israel—He was with them to be like them in order to suffer for them.

Matthew’s use of “fulfill” in verse 15 was less like checking off a to-do list and more like bringing God’s

redemptive plan to completion. We tend to think of fulfilling God's righteousness as "do this, avoid that, and you're good with God." That's how the Pharisees saw it. But Matthew's Gospel treats this concept differently. In Matthew, it's more relationally based instead of rules based.

When Jesus said His baptism would be fitting to "fulfill all righteousness," He didn't mean there was a rule that the Messiah had to be baptized. Rather, He was saying something more like, "This is what faithfulness to the Father looks like in this moment." He was stepping into the role of the Servant of the Lord—He was embodying perfect righteousness. The phrase "Allow it for now" suggests that something was happening that fit this particular moment in redemptive history. John rightly recognized Jesus's superiority, and Jesus wasn't setting aside that truth ultimately. But He was choosing the time in which that should be revealed. His glory would come, but not yet.

Our culture seeks validation through achievement. Jesus, however, shows us that true validation comes through obedience to the Father's will, even if that means taking a lower place or associating with the "wrong crowd."

Jesus didn't need this baptism, but we did. And that's why He did it. This act of baptism not only validated Him as the Suffering Servant, but it also showed that John the Baptist was correct. The Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world was on the scene (John 1:29).

What should we learn and emulate from Jesus's example in being baptized by John?



Bonus Content

Scan this QR code to dig deeper into the harmony of the Gospel accounts of Jesus's baptism and temptation.

Jesus's baptism displays the triune God (Matthew 3:16-17).

¹⁶ When Jesus was baptized, he went up immediately from the water. The heavens suddenly opened for him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming down on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased.”

The Spirit Affirmed the Son

It's difficult to fully understand the significance of this moment. We could use an illustration like a baseball coach placing the ball in the hand of his closer in the ninth inning saying, “We trust you to win this game for us.” But what Jesus was being anointed for—commissioned for—was far greater than a baseball game.

We also may think of this as being the moment when John passed the baton to Jesus. But that doesn't quite fit either because the affirmation didn't come from John but from the Holy Spirit. While John could point and say, “This is the One,” he couldn't fittingly commission Jesus. That required the Holy Spirit.

Matthew stated that Jesus “went up immediately from the water” (v. 16). This wasn't just to give a time-stamp, like telling us that this all happened quickly. Rather, it was to show the purpose and intentionality of the event and to connect what happened next with Jesus's humble obedience to the Father's will.

At this, “the heavens suddenly opened for him” (v. 16). In Scripture, the heavens being “opened” signals divine activity. We see this language in Ezekiel 1:1; Isaiah 64:1; and Acts 7:56, among other places. Each time, God broke through the barrier between heaven and earth to speak, act, or reveal His presence.

The heavens being opened also was significant for this moment in redemptive history. For centuries, prophetic silence had hung over Israel like a closed sky. With the ministry of John, there seemed to be a slight opening, but with the baptism of Jesus, it burst open. Many had believed the Spirit departed when the last prophets spoke. They feared the heavens had been sealed. But now they were once again opened, and the silence was over.²

Furthermore, the text says that the heavens opened “for” Him. The skies opened for the sake of Him. This was the unveiling of Jesus’s identity and mission. Before Jesus would perform a single miracle, teach a parable, or call a disciple, He was affirmed by heaven. Identity always comes before activity, or at least it should. Love goes before labor.

Out of the opened heavens, a dove descended, or rather, the Holy Spirit descended like a dove. The Spirit, of course, is not a dove. Yet the Spirit came down in a way that was visible, gentle, and unmistakable. The imagery here is deeply symbolic.

- In creation, the Spirit hovered over the waters of chaos (Gen. 1:2). Here again, in the chaotic waters of baptism, the Spirit hovered, but this time over Jesus, the One through whom the new creation will come.
- In the narrative of Noah’s ark, a dove signaled the end of God’s judgment and the beginning of peace with humanity (Gen. 8:8-12). Jesus is the true ark who would bring the world through judgment and into reconciliation with God.
- In Leviticus 12:8, doves were the sacrificial option for those who couldn’t afford a lamb. The descent

PERSON Study

THE HOLY SPIRIT: The Third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit of God, has always existed in perfect unity with God the Father and God the Son. The Holy Spirit hovered over the face of the waters in creation (Gen. 1:2) and overshadowed Mary to conceive within her Jesus Christ (Luke 1:35). The Spirit reveals God’s will (John 14:26), convicts us of our sin (John 16:8), empowers believers (Luke 24:49), and serves as the seal of our salvation (Eph. 1:13; 4:30).

of the Spirit like a dove may have hinted at Jesus's availability to be a sacrifice for all people, regardless of social status.

- In Song of Songs and elsewhere, the dove symbolized purity, peace, and loveliness. These are all fitting images for the One in whom the Father delights.

Matthew said that “he saw” this happening (Matt. 3:16), though it is unclear whether Matthew meant John or Jesus. John the Baptist did see the Spirit descend and rest upon Jesus (John 1:32-34), but Matthew seems to draw attention to Jesus's own experience. The Spirit descended for Jesus and to Jesus. This was an intimate moment of assurance and empowerment. The Spirit said to the Son, “I’m with You.”

It's also important to notice that the Spirit rested on Jesus. The Spirit didn't just descend and then leave; He remained. The language echoes Isaiah 11:2: “The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him.” That prophecy described the coming King who would be endowed with wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge and the fear of the Lord. The same Spirit who anointed kings for their mission was now resting permanently on Jesus. In the Old Testament, the Spirit would come and go. Saul, Samson, and others experienced the Spirit's temporary empowerment. But here, the Spirit remained. This abiding presence marked the coming of the new age of God's kingdom on earth.

This event is significant for a few reasons. One, the Spirit affirmed Jesus's identity. Jesus hadn't done anything yet, but He was already beloved and empowered. Second, the heavens are still open. God hasn't gone silent. He has spoken to us through Jesus (Heb. 1:2),

and the heavens are open because of Him. Lastly, we should remember that this same Spirit rests upon us as believers in Christ. Acts 2 declares that the Spirit poured out on Jesus is now poured out on His people.

Why is it significant that all three Persons of the Trinity were active at Jesus's baptism?

The Father Declared His Delight

We all like to hear, "I'm pleased with you," but these words usually come after a performance. It would be weird and probably viewed as insulting just to clap at someone for existing. We tend to tie our performance to God's delight, as if we need to perform rightly in order for God to be pleased with us.

This wasn't the case for Jesus. At His baptism by John, Jesus hadn't yet performed a miracle. For all we know, He hadn't preached a sermon. No demons had been cast out, and there had been no confrontation with the religious elite. And yet, the Father said clearly, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased" (Matt. 3:17).

The phrase "a voice from heaven" echoes a long-standing Jewish tradition about an echo of God's voice that would sometimes be heard when prophecy had ceased.³ While many Jews believed that the age of the prophets had ended, this moment wasn't an echo or a whisper. This was a full-throated declaration that the Father delights in His Son.

Just as Jesus publicly identified with us in baptism, so the Father publicly identified with Him as the Son. Part of the Father's pleasure in Jesus is His humble identification with us sinners. The Son accurately represents the heart of the Father.

Voices from THE CHURCH

"Given all the different preconceptions people have about 'God,' it simply will not do for us to speak abstractly about some general 'God.' And where would doing so leave us? If we content ourselves with being mere monotheists, and speak of God only in terms so vague they could apply to Allah as much as the Trinity, then we will never enjoy or share what is so fundamentally and delightfully different about Christianity."⁴

–Michael Reeves

THEOLOGY Connection

GOD IS ONE IN THREE PERSONS:

While the Bible affirms that God is one (Mark 12:29; 1 Cor. 8:4-6), it also affirms that God exists as three Persons—Father, Son, and Spirit. Each Person of the Trinity is fully divine—the Father is God (John 6:27), the Son is God (Phil. 2), the Spirit is God (Acts 5:3-4)—and each Person is distinct from the others (Matt. 11:27; John 10:30; 14:16). This perfect unity within the three Persons of the Trinity is a first-order doctrine.

When God said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased,” He merged two Old Testament texts: Psalm 2:7 and Isaiah 42:1. Psalm 2:7 says, “You are my Son; today I have become your Father.” This was a coronation psalm used for kings in David’s line. It expressed divine endorsement of a ruling king (cf. 2 Sam. 7:12-16). But the kings of Israel all fell short. God revealed Jesus as a king, but He would not fail and would reign forever in righteousness.

The second echo is from Isaiah 42:1, which reads: “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.” This is the first of the Servant Songs in Isaiah, which culminate in Isaiah 53, where the Servant bears the sins of many. By merging these, God revealed both the royal dignity of Jesus and His sacrificial mission.

Jesus is both the King and the Suffering Servant. The Father’s delight in Him is rooted in relationship and in the eternal unity of the Trinity. The Father also delights in Jesus’s obedience. Jesus is everything Adam failed to be. He is everything that Israel failed to be. He is the Son who delights the Father, and He will continue to delight the Father. Jesus will walk in perfect trust, humility, and submission to the Father.

This moment is also a revelation of divine love. The Father loves the Son. He is pleased with Him. This is not functional delight. No, this is relational joy. The Son is the object of the Father’s eternal affection.

It’s important that we don’t read this as a moment when Jesus became the Son or when He earned the Father’s approval. Ancient heresies fall into this error. As Matthew 3:17 shows, the Trinity is not a concept Christians invented—it’s a reality that God revealed. At

the baptism of Jesus, we see this truth displayed: The Father spoke, the Spirit descended, the Son obeyed.

If you are in Christ by faith, then you share in the Father's voice over Jesus: "This is my beloved child, in whom I am well-pleased." Jesus's perfect record of obedience has become yours. Jesus didn't work for the Father's approval; He worked from it, and so do we.

What does it mean to be well-pleasing to God?

 **HEAD**

How is each Person of the Trinity significant and active in your life?

 **HEART**

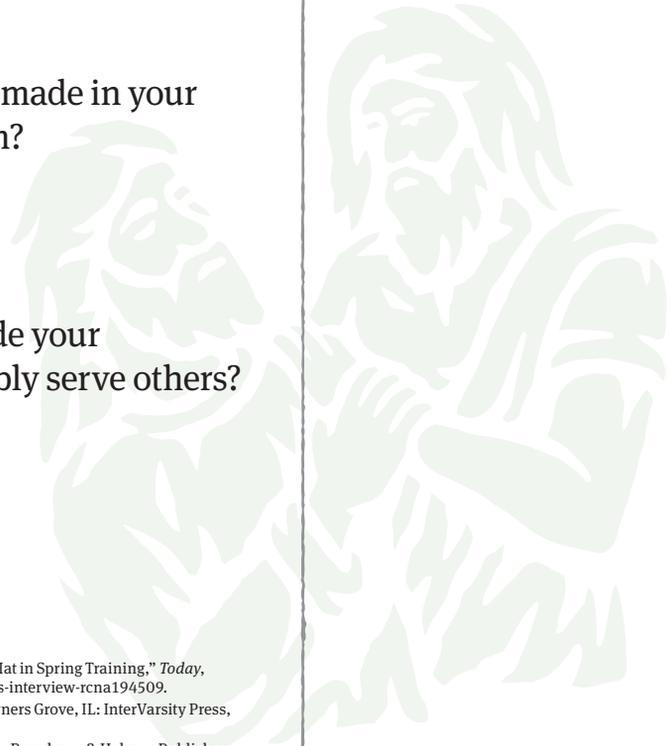
What significant changes has Christ made in your life as you continue to walk with Him?

 **HANDS**

What are some ways you will set aside your privileges to obey the Lord and humbly serve others?

References

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JESUS WAS TEMPTED

CORE PASSAGE: LUKE 4:1-13

Context: Following the glorious affirmation of the Father for the Son at Jesus's baptism, Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit into the desert, where He fasted for forty days and was eventually tempted by Satan. Jesus's responses to three specific temptations demonstrated both His commitment to God's will and His readiness for the ministry task before Him.

Key Concept: Like Jesus, we can turn to Scripture to help us resist temptation.

DAILY READINGS

- Day 1:** Mark 1:12-13
- Day 2:** Matthew 4:1-4
- Day 3:** Matthew 4:5-11
- Day 4:** Luke 4:1-4
- Day 5:** Luke 4:5-13
- Day 6:** Psalm 141

We are easily tempted when our needs are unmet, but we can resist (Luke 4:1-4).

¹ Then Jesus left the Jordan, full of the Holy Spirit, and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness ² for forty days to be tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and when they were over, he was hungry. ³ The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.” ⁴ But Jesus answered him, “It is written: Man must not live on bread alone.”

Jesus Identifies with Our Struggles

Have you ever had a wonderfully encouraging moment that was then followed up by one of the worst times of your life? Have you ever felt like you were on a spiritual mountaintop only to find yourself in the valley of deep and dark temptation shortly afterward? Jesus has.

You might expect that Jesus’s baptism would have launched Him immediately into bold ministry. That’s what we might do—strike while the iron’s hot, right? But instead, the same Spirit who descended upon Jesus like a dove now led Him into the wilderness. Mark used an even stronger word than the other Gospel writers. It’s a word that was often used for casting out demons. The Spirit “drove” Jesus into the wilderness (Mark 1:12). This is the word you would use to describe a bouncer tossing someone out the back door. Jesus went from the heights of the Father’s affirmation to the depths of physical need and spiritual testing.

The Spirit drove Jesus into a place of testing. That Jesus was going into the wilderness, the same place John came from to baptize people, was not incidental. This was a symbolic action. In the wilderness, Israel



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Notes

had failed to keep God’s covenant and to trust God to lead them into the promised land. Jesus entered this space to face what they couldn’t overcome. Jesus went into the wilderness because, in essence, this is where we are. This is where the enemy prowls. As such, this was where Jesus had to go, not only to win a victory but to identify with us in our weakness.

We shouldn’t rush past Luke 4:2: “he was hungry.” When Jesus faced the tempter, He didn’t do it from a place of physical strength. His humanity was at a weak point. We’re often told we shouldn’t make big decisions when we are hungry, angry, lonely, or tired because then we are vulnerable to bad choices. But Jesus wasn’t going to defeat the enemy by sidestepping the frailty of human experience. He embraced it. And it was in this spot where the devil struck.

In verse 3, the devil said to hungry Jesus, “If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.” Here the devil employed a familiar tactic. He questioned God’s provision and distorted God’s Word. He tempted Jesus to meet His needs on His own terms. When the devil said, “If you are the Son of God,” this was not a denial as much as a dare. He was not trying to cause doubt that Jesus is God’s Son. Rather, he was trying to bait Jesus into using His power as the Son of God for His own benefit instead of trusting God’s reasons for leading Him into the wilderness. Satan was urging Jesus to take what He wanted instead of relying on God.

This is an echo of Eden. Adam and Eve, unlike Jesus here, were surrounded by abundance. But the enemy’s question—“Did God really say . . . ?” (Gen. 3:1)—sowed doubt about God’s goodness. The wilderness also echoed with this scheme. In Numbers 11, the people

longed for the food of Egypt. They were hungry and ultimately dissatisfied with God’s provision of manna. They didn’t really care how they got their food, just that they got what they wanted. The devil was attempting to get Jesus to take that same posture.

Jesus, however, standing in their place and ours, didn’t take the bait. He quoted Deuteronomy 8:3: “Man does not live on bread alone,” leaving the rest of the quote (“but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD”) implied but not stated. In this verse’s original context, Moses explained why God allowed Israel to hunger in the wilderness—to teach them to trust and depend on God, who had promised to protect and provide for them. But they failed that test, and we often do too. We want security, but we don’t always desire sonship. Relief is often more important to us than relationship. But not for Jesus.

Jesus wasn’t just modeling for us though; He was also achieving something for us. Jesus refused to use His divine power for Himself. Though He would later feed thousands with just a few loaves and fish, He refused to feed Himself here. He identified with the starving, the tempted, the human. He showed Himself to be the kind of Son who trusts instead of grabs for power. He’s the Suffering Servant and not a proud tyrant.

Jesus refused this temptation not only for Himself but for us. Jesus was tempted as we are, yet He resisted the devil’s temptations and remained without sin. Thus, He was the blameless sacrifice needed to atone for our sins.

The author of Hebrews said: “We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in every way

as we are, yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15). Jesus understands what it is like to be in those moments when caving to temptation, seeking our way instead of God’s way, would be easier. But Jesus also understood the supreme value of waiting on the Lord for provision, saying, “I will not fill this cup from any other hand.”

This is incredibly good news for those of us walking through the wilderness. Let’s be honest: We’ve all had moments when we’d rather take matters into our own hands instead of waiting on God. We’ve all taken shortcuts. We’ve all reached for the stone and tried to turn it into bread on our own terms. But Jesus didn’t. And by faith in Him, His victory becomes ours.

You aren’t alone in your hunger. You’re not alone in your own wilderness. When the enemy whispers, “If you’re really God’s child . . .,” you can point to Jesus. Our Savior heard that same lie. He stared down that same temptation. And He answered with trust.

This also means that if you’re walking through a season of testing, it’s not a sign of God’s absence. This may be the very place where God is shaping your heart for something greater. This testing was the Spirit leading Jesus, not abandoning Him. The same is true for you as well. Jesus doesn’t promise to rescue you from the wilderness. He meets you in it. He’s already overcome the wilderness.

Why do you think God’s plan for our redemption included Jesus facing temptation?

Jesus Helps Us Resist Temptation

There are many strategies out there for resisting temptation, ranging from helpful to actively harmful. Jesus gave a sure-fire strategy—reliance on God’s Word.

We see behind the enemy’s strategy in this passage. Seldom does the devil show up offering grotesque evil. He more often whispers half-truths in vulnerable moments, such as “You shouldn’t have to wait,” “You shouldn’t be lonely,” and “If God really cared, wouldn’t He have provided by now?” Like Jesus, we are most easily tempted when our needs are unmet. The heart of temptation is always the same: take control, stop trusting, make your own way. The devil’s bait for Jesus was attractive, partially because it was so subtle. One can easily see a certain sensibility in his words. He appeals to our creaturely needs.

Jesus, however, responded with a clear and confident rebuke: “It is written: Man must not live on bread alone” (Luke 4:4). This was not just a clever retort; it’s a deeply theological declaration rooted in Deuteronomy 8:3. Jesus resisted temptation by anchoring Himself in Scripture. He didn’t argue with the devil or try to match wits. Scripture was Jesus’s immovable anchor. No other argument matters if it contradicts Scripture. Jesus saw through the devil’s ploy; He knew the devil’s suggestion wasn’t about mere food. It was about dependence on the Father. Jesus, in full humanity, resisted the devil’s temptation with the Word of God, just as we can.

This helps us see something important: Temptation isn’t resisted by sheer willpower but by trust in God’s Word. We fight temptation by refusing to act apart from the Father’s voice. This also helps us see that resistance is possible with God’s help. We aren’t helpless against temptation. We aren’t doomed to fall.

In His humanity, Jesus wasn’t exempt from temptation. In fact, because He didn’t cave, as we so often do, He felt the full weight of the temptation. Jesus’s

THEOLOGY
Connection

TEMPTATION AND SIN: Temptation is not the equivalent of sin. Temptation can refer to natural and good desires that are twisted and directed toward pleasing of self rather than giving glory to God. Jesus was tempted like we are (Matt. 4), and yet, He never sinned but faithfully resisted temptation and followed the will of His Father. Knowing our weakness, we are to be on guard against temptation that may lead us to sin (Matt. 26:41), and we pray for God to deliver us from evil (Matt. 6:13).

experience of temptation wasn't less than ours but probably greater than any other person has ever faced after forty days of fasting. Jesus resisted because He trusted the Father more deeply than we do.

If we don't understand the nature of temptation, this can be confusing. Temptation in and of itself is not sin. Temptation can refer to natural, good desires selfishly twisted instead of used to glorify God. Jesus was tempted as we are and yet never sinned but faithfully resisted temptation to follow the will of His Father. Knowing our weakness, we are to be on guard against temptation that may lead us to sin (Matt. 26:41), and we pray for God to deliver us from evil (Matt. 6:13).

We may also misunderstand Jesus's example if we think that Jesus was teaching us that all we need to do is quote a few Bible verses to resist temptation. Jesus wasn't using the Bible like a formula. He was not just reciting truth—He was resting in it, resting in the character of His Father. The story the Bible tells is that even if bread isn't present, God is. Jesus wasn't using the Bible like a magic spell. He was trusting its message and ultimately the God who spoke it.

We too can resist temptation, not by pretending we are stronger than we are, nor by suppressing our hunger and denying our humanity. We resist temptation by clinging to God's promises and trusting in His story—by rooting ourselves in Scripture, not just memorizing it but allowing it to shape our hearts, train our desires, and point us to the Father. When temptation whispers, "Take control," we answer with trust: "Man must not live on bread alone" (Luke 4:4).

How does Jesus's response challenge your view of where true sustenance comes from?

Trusting God and relying on His Word can help us resist temptation (Luke 4:5-13).

⁵ So he took him up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. ⁶ The devil said to him, “I will give you their splendor and all this authority, because it has been given over to me, and I can give it to anyone I want. ⁷ If you, then, will worship me, all will be yours.” ⁸ And Jesus answered him, “It is written: Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.” ⁹ So he took him to Jerusalem, had him stand on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here. ¹⁰ For it is written: He will give his angels orders concerning you, to protect you, ¹¹ and they will support you with their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.” ¹² And Jesus answered him, “It is said: Do not test the Lord your God.” ¹³ After the devil had finished every temptation, he departed from him for a time.

Jesus Resisted Glory Apart from the Father

The devil shifted tactics from subtle to not so subtle. In the next temptation, according to Luke, he took Jesus to a high vantage point to show Him all the world’s kingdoms. The devil stated: “I will give you their splendor and all this authority, because it has been given over to me, and I can give it to anyone I want. If you, then, will worship me, all will be yours” (vv. 6-7).

Isn’t this why Jesus came? All of the things that were promised to the Son of God in Psalm 2, the enemy promised to give to Jesus—without Him having to suffer on the cross. The devil was offering something that is rightfully Jesus’s but on the wrong terms. And isn’t that often the heart of temptation—to chase

Biblical BACKGROUND

Gospel writers were free according to the rules of the genre to rearrange stories to emphasize different details in their Gospels. Matthew and Luke recorded Jesus’s temptation in a different order. Matthew may have emphasized evil’s final demand—worship of Satan—whereas Luke emphasized Jerusalem as the final place where Jesus would overcome Satan, not only at His temptation but at the cross.

something good by bypassing the Father. The devil wasn't trying to convince Jesus to become a villain. He was trying to give Him the crown without the cross.

Jesus saw the lie behind the offer. Though Satan claimed to hold authority over the kingdoms, his power was limited. Ironically, the devil could only delegate to Jesus what had already been delegated to him. As one commentator stated:

The issue is how he would achieve this. Would it be through the shortcut the devil offered or by submitting to God's will, which involved suffering and death? The devil offered Jesus a cross-less path of messiahship, and Luke assumed that the devil had in fact the authority to offer the world's kingdoms to Jesus.¹

Yet Jesus wasn't fooled by this "bargain." He would receive all authority in heaven and on earth, but not from the enemy's hands—only from the hands of the Father and in the Father's timing (Matt. 28:18).

Jesus's response was again drawn from the book of Deuteronomy: "It is written: Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only" (Luke 4:8). This verse comes from Deuteronomy 6:13, a section of Scripture immediately following the Shema—Israel's daily confession that "the LORD is one" (Deut. 6:4). Jesus would have recited this truth on a daily basis. It was ingrained in Him that only God is to be worshiped.

Did Satan really think this would work? Could he really tempt someone who recited the Shema on a daily basis into worshiping someone other than God? Well, it worked before. This moment echoes Israel's repeated failures. Again and again the Israelites chose alliances with foreign powers—Egypt, Assyria, even Babylon.

Voices from CHURCH HISTORY

*"The Bible in the memory is better than the Bible in the bookcase."*²

—Charles Spurgeon
(1834–1892)

Even in Jesus's day, the empire of Rome offered peace and prosperity, but it was conditional. You had to be loyal to Rome and devoted to Caesar to be protected by Rome. The Israelites, and later some of the Jews, found themselves willing to trade faithfulness and worship of the Lord for a sense of peace, prosperity, and security. But Jesus didn't. He stood where Israel fell.

In Jesus's day, the devil was essentially offering the Son of God Caesar's throne. But Jesus was bringing a different kind of kingdom. He would rule, but first He came as the Suffering Servant. Jesus would defeat the devil, sin, and death not by seizing the crown but by laying down His own life.

Jesus revealed the character of the true Son. Adam grasped, Jesus yielded. Israel bartered, Jesus worshiped God alone. Satan offered a kingdom without a cross. But Jesus knew that it would only be through the cross that humanity is saved.

Jesus's mission wasn't merely to rule from a throne and fix all the world's symptoms. He came to conquer all that is wrong with the world at its root. That meant breaking the power of sin and death. The only path to that kind of glory was to run in obedience to the Father on a path marked with sacrifice, ultimately leading to a bloody cross. Jesus didn't take the devil's shortcut because it wouldn't accomplish what He came to do.

While our temptation will be a little different than what Jesus faced here, we can still identify, or rather, this shows that Jesus can identify with us. We too can be tempted to take good and rightful things on our own terms. We might pursue something good (like intimacy) but on our terms (without marriage). As Jesus was, we're offered shortcuts, paths that seem to lead to life but end up bypassing the Father. Any

kingdom gained apart from God’s timing and in God’s way will crumble. Jesus shows us that the way of worship, of waiting over grasping, is the way to go.

What are some ways we are tempted to take shortcuts to avoid suffering in our mission to take the gospel of Jesus to the world?

Jesus Refused to Test the Father’s Love

In the third temptation, the devil used Scripture to test Jesus. Satan recited Psalm 91:11-12, but he put a sinister twist on this verse. Instead of allowing this promise to be a comfort, the devil made it something that needed to be proved. He said Jesus could expect God to protect Him, thus demanding a miracle as proof of the Father’s love for the world to see.

Jesus refused, again quoting Scripture: “It is said: Do not test the Lord your God” (Luke 4:12). This time Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 6:16, which referenced Israel’s failure at Massah when they quarreled with God and demanded proof of His care (Ex. 17:7). Though Israel failed their test, Jesus would not because He trusted the Father’s love even without a visible rescue.

Notice that this temptation took place in Jerusalem, the very place where Jesus would later be taunted to come down from the cross to prove that He is the Son of God (Luke 23:35-37). This moment on the temple’s pinnacle would be revisited on the hill of crucifixion.

Both Jesus and the devil quoted Scripture. But only Jesus was in alignment with the heart of God. The devil quoted a promise while ignoring the context of obedience. Jesus quoted a command that reflects deeper trust. It is important to take Scripture in its context and to derive meaning from the author’s original intent.

GOSPEL Connection

Jesus was tempted as we are, yet He resisted the devil’s temptations and remained without sin. Thus, He was the blameless sacrifice needed to atone for our sins.

Key Concept: Like Jesus, we can turn to Scripture to help us resist temptation.

“After the devil had finished every temptation, he departed from him for a time” (4:13). We’ll see the work of the devil once again at Gethsemane. Would Jesus submit to the Father even if rescue wasn’t God’s plan? Would He trust the Father even in suffering? Yes! Jesus trusted the Father. And if we’re in Christ, we will ultimately trust our Father too.

What Scriptures have helped you avoid temptation and sin in your life?

 **HEAD**

How can we find passages of Scripture that will be helpful in our battle against temptation and sin?

 **HEART**

How does Satan make us doubt God’s goodness and faithfulness in our lives?

 **HANDS**

What action steps will you take to avoid or resist temptation in your everyday life?

Notes

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JESUS CALLED FOLLOWERS

CORE PASSAGE: JOHN 1:35-37,40-51

Context: John’s Gospel begins with a description of Jesus as the *Logos*, the eternal “Word” of God, a signifier of Jesus’s divinity and a bold statement concerning the Son’s co-existence with the Father prior to creation (vv. 1-5). John also summarized John the Baptist’s ministry, who pointed to Jesus’s messianic identity and mission. Jesus is the Word who became flesh (v. 14) and “the Lamb of God” who died to take away the sins of the world (vv. 29-34). Some of John’s disciples took his words to heart and followed Jesus (vv. 35-51).

Key Concept: Following Jesus means acknowledging Him as Savior, God, and King.

DAILY READINGS

- Day 1:** John 1:35-42
- Day 2:** John 1:43-51
- Day 3:** Mark 1:14-20
- Day 4:** Matthew 4:12-22
- Day 5:** Luke 5:1-11
- Day 6:** Psalm 24

Jesus, the Lamb of God and the Messiah, is worthy to be followed (John 1:35-37,40-44).

³⁵ The next day, John was standing with two of his disciples. ³⁶ When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, “Look, the Lamb of God!” ³⁷ The two disciples heard him say this and followed Jesus. . . . ⁴⁰ Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, was one of the two who heard John and followed him. ⁴¹ He first found his own brother Simon and told him, “We have found the Messiah” (which is translated “the Christ”), ⁴² and he brought Simon to Jesus. When Jesus saw him, he said, “You are Simon, son of John. You will be called Cephas” (which is translated “Peter”). ⁴³ The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. He found Philip and told him, “Follow me.” ⁴⁴ Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the hometown of Andrew and Peter.

True Disciples Follow

It’s one thing to hear a story. It’s quite another to be standing face to face with the protagonist of that story. In John 1, John the Baptist had been telling people about the Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world (v. 29). On this particular day, as Jesus was walking by, John pointed Him out to two of his own disciples.

It’s pretty amazing what came from this moment: two men walking quietly after Jesus. Not running. Not preaching. Not being healed. Just following behind Him. That doesn’t sound like much, and yet, this was the groundbreaking moment when Jesus first had followers.

This moment wouldn’t have happened, however, without John the Baptist pointing to Jesus and saying, “Look, the Lamb of God!” (v. 36), a phrase repeated



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Notes

WORD Study

DISCIPLE: In Matthew 28:18-20, Jesus commands His disciples to go and “make disciples” of Him and to baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Disciple is a word that means student, pupil, or follower, one who follows the instruction or teaching of another. Among other things, being a disciple of Jesus means worshiping Jesus above all else and seeking to be obedient to His instruction given to us in God’s Word.

from John 1:29. That repetition is worth noting because this becomes the turning point. John wasn’t just identifying Jesus with a theological title; He was relinquishing his own influence.

It took some serious humility to say: “Stop following me. This is the Man you need to follow.” But John wouldn’t have been faithful to his mission if he didn’t relinquish these disciples to Jesus’s care. There’s a lesson in this for us as well. Sometimes the Master calls the people we disciple to move from us and toward another mentor.

The phrase that John used for Jesus, “the Lamb of God,” is significant. For modern readers, it may sound poetic or sentimental or maybe like a death metal band. But in the first-century Jewish context, it would have been deeply evocative and maybe a little unsettling. To call someone a “lamb” was to evoke the sacrificial system, particularly the Passover lamb, whose blood was shed to spare the people of God.

Jesus is the Lamb of God, the Messiah, the Son of God, and the King of Israel. Jesus wasn’t just a religious teacher or the Man with all the answers, though that is certainly true. But Jesus was identified by John as the One who would die for others. These disciples of John perceived the significance of Jesus. Once you see Jesus for who He truly is, you cannot stay where you were. That’s why these disciples left John to follow Jesus.

You’d expect a little more drama here, but what we get is more like awkward pauses and unanswered questions. Verse 37 puts it simply: “The two disciples heard him say this and followed Jesus.” There was no dialogue, no plan, just movement toward Jesus. This transition reads like one of those moments when you’re very self-aware and awkwardly wondering, “Where

do I put my hands?” This was just two guys, unsure of what they were supposed to say, quietly following someone they thought might change everything.

Then Jesus turned around and spoke: “What are you looking for?” (v. 38). These are the first recorded words of Jesus in John’s Gospel. He was not asking what they believed or even what they heard. He asked what they wanted, a thread that runs through the heart of the Gospel of John. This is a question that pierces through religious performance and hits us straight in the gut. To follow Jesus is to cross a line from speculation to encounter. It is to be captured, not just curious. Jesus wanted to know why they were there.

The disciples responded with their own question: “Rabbi . . . where are you staying?” (v. 38). In Jesus’s day, such a question was searching for politeness and hospitality.¹ And Jesus replied with a gentle invitation: “Come and you’ll see” (v. 39). So they did, and the rest is history.

The phrase “Come and see” will pop up again in this chapter, and it’s really the essence of discipleship in John’s Gospel. Following Jesus isn’t a formula. It’s an invitation to dwell, to remain, to behold. It’s an invitation to see Jesus. Even at the beginning of Jesus’s earthly ministry, we see the theme of “abiding” emerge. This is spiritual attentiveness. This is wanting to be with Jesus, to be a disciple with the Master.

The slowness and earthiness of this scene is informative because this is really how discipleship takes place. Discipleship not about pressuring people into a moment or forcing a decision, though calling for a response to the gospel and God’s Word is vital. Rather, discipleship is about drawing people to a Person. These first followers of Jesus didn’t sign a pledge or even

attend a class. They simply saw the Lamb, followed after Him, and spent time in His presence. That's the heart of discipleship.

How does the title “the Lamb of God” point to Jesus’s purpose?

True Disciples Share with Others

What is your first instinct when you see something amazing? If you're like most people, you have a compulsion to tell others about what you've found. Whether it's a great bargain you found online or a wonderful book, we like to share our joys with others. That's what happened with Jesus's first followers.

Andrew's response to Jesus was immediate and missional. As soon as he had spent some time with Jesus, he went to tell his brother Simon. Without rehearsed apologetics, gospel presentations, or theological training, Andrew's testimony was simple: “We have found the Messiah” (v. 41). The call to follow Jesus almost instantly became a call to go and tell. We were made to share.

It was no small thing that Andrew called Jesus “the Messiah,” or “the Christ” (v. 41). This was not a generic title nor somebody's last name. The title Messiah identified Jesus with centuries of Jewish longing. Andrew was telling Simon that the One they'd been waiting for had finally arrived. And He was not some distant king—He was approachable, even hospitable.

When Andrew brought Simon to Jesus, something amazing happened. Jesus looked at Simon and immediately redefined him: “You are Simon, son of John. You will be called Cephas” (v. 42). Think about the audacity of this scenario, declaring a name change for

someone you just met. And on top of that, “Cephas” (“Peter”) was not a common name. This would have been like meeting someone and then saying, “You’re Lampshade from now on.”

Jesus wasn’t just giving Simon a new nickname. In that culture, naming was significant. A name carried with it a destiny. Jesus didn’t just see Simon as he was at that moment; He saw Simon for who would become and defined that reality with a new name. This also shows us that Jesus was the One setting the pace. He was the One taking the initiative and giving identity to His followers. Simon’s identity didn’t come from his performance but from God’s sovereign purpose.

The renaming of Simon established a pattern in John’s Gospel, in which discipleship is often characterized by personal transformation. The momentum of this scene is flipped here. Curious men were following Jesus, yes, but ultimately Jesus is the One seeing, calling, and remaking others. Peter wasn’t just renamed here—he was redirected.

Philip, likewise, wasn’t just found, he also was sent (v. 43). In verse 44, we’re told that Philip was from the same town as Andrew and Peter. And in verse 45, he went to find Nathanael. The pattern continued—found people find people. Philip even used the same language as Andrew—“We have found.” This showed his confidence in Jesus’s identity and messiahship.

Amazingly, John’s Gospel began with the eternal Word becoming flesh, and only a few verses in, things have become very earthly. Jesus was meeting with fishermen, inviting them, calling them by name. “The Word” of that beautiful prologue (John 1:1-18) was now having small-town conversations. The Lamb of God had entered the world redirect the wayward sheep.

THEOLOGY Connection

CALLING: The calling of God to salvation happens in two ways: externally through the proclamation of the gospel and internally through the Holy Spirit working in the heart of the person who hears. Both of these callings are essential, and both work together to bring someone to faith in Christ (2 Tim. 1:8-10).

This moment with Andrew, Peter, and Philip is a little slice of what Jesus would keep doing throughout His ministry—calling individuals, reshaping their identity, and sending them into the world. The “follow me” of verse 43 was a summons. It was certainly relational, but it commanded consideration. It was a gracious invitation that demanded a response.

What are some ways you are following Jesus, the Lamb of God who has called you through the proclamation of His gospel?

Jesus, the Son of God and the King of Israel, will reveal many things to His people (John 1:45-51).

⁴⁵ Philip found Nathanael and told him, “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the law (and so did the prophets): Jesus the son of Joseph, from Nazareth.”
⁴⁶ “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Nathanael asked him. “Come and see,” Philip answered. ⁴⁷ Then Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said about him, “Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.” ⁴⁸ “How do you know me?” Nathanael asked. “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you,” Jesus answered. ⁴⁹ “Rabbi,” Nathanael replied, “You are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel!” ⁵⁰ Jesus responded to him, “Do you believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than this.” ⁵¹ Then he said, “Truly I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”

Jesus Welcomes True Seekers

In John 1:10-11, we read: “He was in the world, and the world was created through him, and yet the world did not recognize him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.” In Philip’s invitation to Nathanael, we see our first “hiccup” on the mission. Rather than being receptive to Philip’s invite, Nathanael was skeptical that “anything good” could “come out of Nazareth” (v. 46). He scoffed at the idea.

This wasn’t a complicated theological objection, more like a raised eyebrow at Jesus’s zip code. And yet, Jesus met this man’s raw honesty with authenticity. He seemed to admire the frankness of the question. This encounter shows us a Savior who sees us as we are—with doubts, prejudices, and hang-ups.

Philip’s testimony to Nathanael had weight behind it. He implied that all of God’s revelation to this point had led to this: “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the law (and so did the prophets)” (v. 45). Philip, understanding that the law and the prophets had promised a Messiah was coming, believed he had found the Messiah and so told his friend.² But all Nathanael could hear was “Nazareth.” Nazareth wasn’t a place from which messianic hope should come. To Nathanael, Jesus was disqualified before He even stepped into the conversation.

Philip didn’t argue with his friend. He just invited Nathanael to “come and see” for himself (v. 46), the same invitation Jesus offered to Philip earlier in the passage (v. 39). This is the simplest apologetic we have. Philip didn’t defend Jesus, he just introduced Him. Philip let Jesus speak for Himself. Philip knew that if his friend met Jesus, he would see for himself.

CHURCH Connection

Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. He is also the Messiah, the Son of God, the King of Israel. He calls people to follow Him, and believers, likewise, should call on others to come and see Jesus.

Voices from THE CHURCH

“After John the Baptist believed that Jesus was the Son of God, he passed it on, and two of his disciples believed and followed Jesus. . . . Within two days, Jesus had five disciples. . . . People need to hear the Good News that the Prince of Peace, the Saviour of humanity, has arrived! If you have modern technology—use it to spread the word. But even if you do not, you have a mouth to share what you believe with others. That’s all you need.”⁴

—Africa Study Bible

This pattern is something we see throughout John’s Gospel—faith grows through seeing Jesus, spending time with Him, listening to Him, and watching Him work. The same is true today.

When Nathanael approached, Jesus greeted him with unexpected praise. Jesus referred to Nathanael as “an Israelite in whom there is no deceit” (v. 47). This wasn’t flattery. Jesus recognized a passion for truth in the heart of Nathanael. This tells us that Jesus values honest doubt over religious pretense. He sees the heart under the skepticism.

Being God in the flesh, Jesus knew Nathanael even before Philip knew him. Before Philip had spoken a word to his friend, Jesus said He saw Nathanael under the fig tree (v. 48). The fig tree reference has a variety of interpretations. It might refer to the literal spot where Nathanael had been praying and thinking. Or it might symbolize spiritual reflection, since Jewish rabbis tended to teach beneath a vine, olive, or fig tree.³ Either way, Jesus knew Nathanael’s heart. He saw Nathanael before anyone else did. He knew where he was and who he was.

There’s a deep comfort in this. Jesus knows us fully, and He doesn’t turn away. He sees our biases, our skepticism, our raw questions. He knows all about our doubts. And He calls us anyway. This moment with Nathanael is not unlike the experience in John 4 of the Samaritan woman who also encountered Jesus’s supernatural knowledge. In both cases, Jesus’s insight wasn’t used to shame but to invite.

There is a lesson here for us in how we think about evangelism. There is no need to manipulate or pressure people into belief. Jesus can handle honest seekers and even the dishonest ones. He honors our

questions. He is able to see the heart. Our task is like Philip's—just get others as close to Jesus as possible so they can “come and see.”

***How can we help others “come and see”
Jesus for who He is and what He has done
to save sinners?***

Jesus Reveals Heaven's Glory to His Followers

It didn't take long with Jesus for Nathanael to move from skepticism to a stunning confession: “You are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel!” (v. 49). This early in John's Gospel, lofty titles like “Son of God” and “King of Israel” were already being given to Jesus. These titles were loaded with Old Testament hope and messianic longing. And yet, as Jesus's response made clear, Nathanael had only seen a glimpse of who Jesus really is.

Nathanael's words recalled royal and divine titles drawn from Scripture. “Son of God” reaches back to Psalm 2:7 and 2 Samuel 7:14, where the king—especially the coming Messiah—would be called God's Son. “King of Israel” had obvious political overtones tied to the hope of liberation from Roman oppression. But Jesus was so much more than this.

Though Jesus didn't deny these titles, He prodded Nathanael's understanding of them. In verse 50, Jesus said, “You will see greater things than this.” Jesus would expand Nathanael's already lofty expectations throughout the Gospel of John. From Cana (2:11) to the raising of Lazarus (11:43-44) to His own resurrection (20:27-29), Jesus revealed more and more of His identity to those who followed Him. John's Gospel invites us on that same journey.

Notes

In verse 51, Jesus alluded to Genesis 28, in which Jacob, fleeing Esau, fell asleep and dreamed of a stairway or a ladder stretching to heaven with angels ascending and descending upon it. There the Lord made covenant promises to Jacob, so Jacob named the place Bethel, which means “house of God.” Jacob declared, “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it” (Gen. 28:16).

Jesus’s words alluded to Jacob’s dream, but rather than angels ascending and descending on a stairway, Jesus said they are now ascending and descending “on the Son of Man” (John 1:51). Jesus was telling Nathanael that He is the new and living stairway. He is the meeting place between heaven and earth. In Him, God dwells with humanity. Jesus is the way to heaven.

It’s important to note who received this promise that Jesus gave. Jesus’s first “You will see” regarding “greater things” was directed to Nathanael himself (v. 50). Nathanael was an honest seeker who dared to become one of Jesus’s followers. But the second “you will see” about Jesus’s identity was directed to all His followers (v. 51). The greater revelation of Jesus is for all those who follow, not just those who stand on the sideline and observe.

Note that the phrase “Son of Man” was Jesus’s favorite self-designation, drawing from Daniel 7:13-14, where one like a son of man received authority, glory, and an everlasting kingdom. By using this title here, Jesus affirmed both His humanity and His divinity. He is fully man and also the exalted figure who comes on the clouds of heaven.

Jesus wasn’t a mere rabbi calling people to follow. Jesus is God in flesh calling people to lay down their lives and follow Him. Jesus’s promise of revelation

to His followers is the beginning of a journey, not its end. In fact, John’s entire Gospel is structured around this idea: “Come and see” becomes “Believe and live.” The more we walk with Jesus, the more we see. Greater things await in this Gospel: miracles, signs, teachings, the cross, the empty tomb, the risen Christ. Will you “come and see”?

How have you seen skepticism give way to faith in yourself or in others?

 **HEAD**

How can we know more about Jesus and His Word to help our own discipleship and evangelism?

 **HEART**

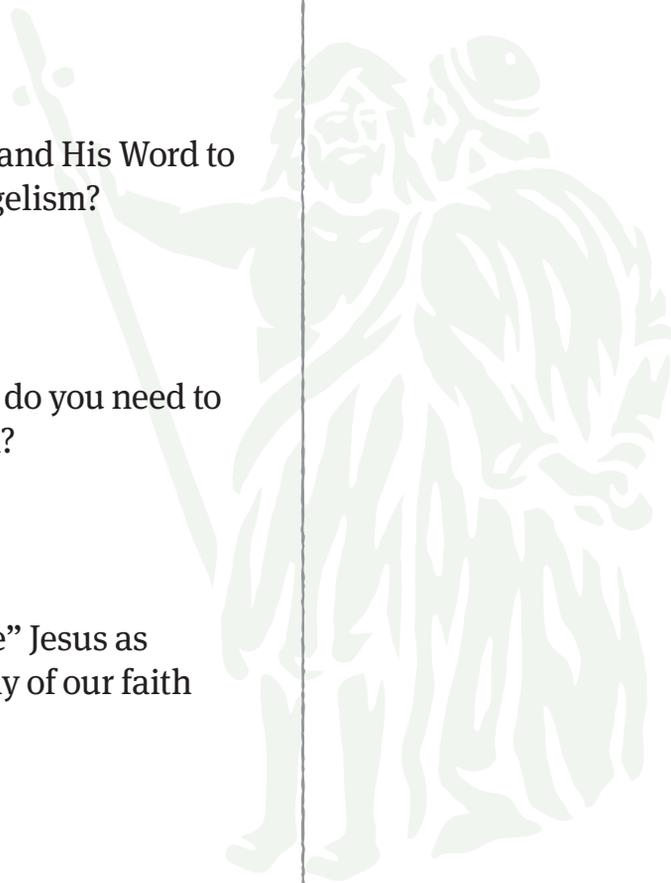
What questions regarding your faith do you need to pray about and seek faithful counsel?

 **HANDS**

Who will you invite to “come and see” Jesus as the Messiah and Savior who is worthy of our faith and following?

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THE GOSPEL PROJECT

UNIT 21

THE MINISTRY



JOHN



MEMORY VERSES

“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness,
so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that
everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.
For God loved the world in this way: He gave his one
and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him
will not perish but have eternal life.”

—John 3:14-16





UNIT 21 • SESSION 1

WATER TO WINE

CORE PASSAGE: JOHN 2:1-11

Context: The prologue to John's Gospel declared Jesus to be God (1:1), the One through whom all things were created (1:3), and the revelation of the Father's glory (1:14). Then John recounted John the Baptist's witness (1:19-34) and Jesus's calling of His first disciples (1:35-51). Turning water into wine was Jesus's first miraculous sign recounted in John's Gospel. The site of this first miracle, Cana, was a town in the region of Galilee near Jesus's hometown of Nazareth. This episode marked the beginning of Jesus's public ministry.

Key Concept: Jesus's power over creation reveals His divine glory and our only hope for salvation.

DAILY READINGS

- Day 1:** John 2:1-2
- Day 2:** John 2:3-5
- Day 3:** John 2:6-8
- Day 4:** John 2:9-10
- Day 5:** John 2:11-12
- Day 6:** Psalm 104

Jesus, being the Savior, came ultimately to lay His life down for our sins (John 2:1-5).

¹ On the third day a wedding took place in Cana of Galilee. Jesus’s mother was there, ² and Jesus and his disciples were invited to the wedding as well. ³ When the wine ran out, Jesus’s mother told him, “They don’t have any wine.” ⁴ “What has this concern of yours to do with me, woman?” Jesus asked. “My hour has not yet come.” ⁵ “Do whatever he tells you,” his mother told the servants.

Jesus Was Mindful of His Messianic Mission

In the Gospel of John, indeed in all of Scripture, a story is not just a story and an event is not just an event—the experience represents something far greater than what is taking place in time and space. The narrative of Jesus’s miracle at the wedding in Cana records a real historical event. Its historical reality is immensely significant, yet the meaning of the event spans well beyond its historical relevance.

Furthermore, the language John used shows that what was happening was more than meets the eye. This makes a lot of sense when one considers that Jesus never did anything arbitrarily. Everything Christ did (and does) has a purpose. Thus, in recounting Christ’s first miracle at the Cana wedding feast, the words and details John used matter deeply.

Jesus and His disciples attended a wedding in Cana, about four to eight miles from Jesus’s boyhood home. Cana was a small town with perhaps a couple hundred residents. The village was not known as a major point of interest in the ancient world. The mention of Jesus’s being there on “the third day” (v. 1) seems intentional



Scan this QR code to access this session's Scripture passages.

Notes

GOSPEL
Connection

Jesus is the Creator God and can perform miracles to reveal His glory. His greatest miracle is seen in His resurrection, conquering death and sin for our salvation.

to set the reader's mind on the future resurrection of Christ, but it gestures to even more. In Genesis 1:11-13, one reads that on the third day of creation, fruit bearing trees yielded their produce at God's command. Here, on Jesus's third day in Galilee, the divine Word, who was with God and who was God in the beginning (John 1:1-3), would produce the fruit of the vine in a miraculous way, a way that pointed toward His work of creating new life by His shed blood.

Both Jesus and His mother were invited to the wedding. This probably was a wedding of a close friend or relative. Jesus likely knew the bride or the groom, but since Mary was so concerned about the wine shortage, an issue for the groom's attention (see 2:9-10), context favors a relationship with the groom.

Wedding feasts could last up to a week, maybe two, in ancient Israel. Presents often were exchanged and food and wine were in abundance. Generally, a certain person was in charge of the food and wine. It seems likely that Jesus's mother, Mary, was either in charge of the wine or was close to the one who was. Either way, running short of wine would cause a major embarrassment to the groom and his family. In the ancient Middle Eastern world, people were particular about hospitality. Hospitality was seen as a sacred duty. An embarrassment like this could have been a negative social mark against the family.

In her stress over the social situation, Mary approached her Son for help. John simply recorded that Mary told Jesus, "They don't have any wine" (v. 3). Though on the surface, the statement seems factual and benign, the context indicates Mary was requesting something of Jesus. Keep in mind that though Mary knew her Son was sent by God, Jesus had yet to

perform any miracles. Why would Mary go to Jesus? What was she expecting Him to do? Given Jesus's reply, one can safely assume she was asking for some kind of supernatural intervention. The Gospel reader is never told how Mary knew Jesus could or would perform such an act. Even if Mary knew Jesus is the Messiah, such a miracle as this, on the surface, seems inconsequential to His messianic mission.

Why might we struggle to believe Jesus cares about our everyday lives?

To our Western ears, Jesus's response to His mother sounds disrespectful, but that need not be the case. He asked: "What has this concern of yours to do with me, woman? . . . My hour has not yet come" (v. 4). Literally, Jesus replied: "Woman, what to me and to you? My hour has not yet come." Though the reply may be direct, culturally speaking, it was not one of dishonor or snideness. First, some have suggested "woman" was a title of honor for His mother. Second, the evangelist never gives Mary's name. Indeed, she only appears at the beginning and the end of the Gospel of John (19:25-27). Anytime she is referenced, she is referred to as "woman" or a derivative of "the mother of Jesus" (2:12; 6:42).

In the second part of His reply, Jesus seems to be asking Mary what this situation had to do with His redemptive work. There is some debate regarding Jesus's statement "My hour has not yet come." Some see the statement as a reference to His crucifixion. All other times Jesus referred to His "hour" in John's Gospel, He was specifically referring to the crucifixion (4:23; 5:25; 7:30; 8:20; 12:23,27; 13:1; 16:32; 17:1). Others suggest that on this specific occasion Jesus

**Voices from
CHURCH HISTORY**

“Whenever the Lord keeps us in suspense and delays his help, it does not mean that he is inactive, but rather that he regulates his works so that he acts only at the right time.”²

–John Calvin
(1509–1564)

was referring to the revelation of His messianic ministry. Either way, the phrase is clearly referring to His redemptive work.

The incarnational work of Christ was not an undertaking intended simply to attend wedding parties. Jesus had a mission. His earthly ministry was saturated with purpose and intentionality from beginning to end. No time was wasted. No act was frivolous. No miracle was performed apathetically. In recounting the first miracle of Christ, John began by infusing the story with clear hints of the overall purpose of Jesus’s ministry. It is hard for one to read this account and not see it covered with salvific meaning and intention.

How does Jesus’s care for our temporal needs remind us of His ultimate provision for our spiritual needs on the cross?

Obedience Brings About the Miraculous

Jesus’s reply in verse 4 seems to our ears to be one of denial, but Mary understood it differently. In verse 5, she told the servants of the wedding, “Do whatever he tells you.” This directive from the mother of Christ is one we all should heed. Her simple command encompasses the mission of all followers of Christ—do as He says! Obedience is a fundamental requirement of all believers. For those who trust in Christ, obedience is essential. More to the point, for all who follow Christ, obedience is a natural outflow of the grace received through faith in Him.

Having run out of wine, things at the wedding feast were not going as planned. To fix the looming debacle, the servants simply needed to obey Jesus. Obedience is letting Jesus be in charge. When Jesus

is in charge, things go according to plan—His plan. Colin G. Kruse wrote:

It has often been remarked that Jesus' mother only ever gave one instruction that has been preserved for us: that people should do whatever Jesus tells them to do. It seems that, as she knew she could turn to her Son in time of need, she also knew to leave things to him once she had made the need known.¹

As stated above, Mary's command to the servants is one we would do well to follow today. In what may seem a dysfunctional or chaotic situation, obedience to Christ is always the best course. Often in times of distress, we feel justified in acting contrary to the will of God. Such an errant thought goes something like this: *God will understand my disobedience because things are hard right now.* Yet it is in those times of despair and hardship that following Christ is most needed. If the wedding party were unable to supply the guests with ample wine, the result would have been shame and embarrassment—minor perhaps, in the grand scheme, but significant in the mind-set of all experiencing such difficulty. If the servants failed to do as Jesus instructed, disaster awaited. But their humble obedience to Jesus's commands led to a wonderful display of His power and abundance.

Obedience is not simply an act performed out of obligation and duty. Life is better when we live according to the commands of God. That is not to say life will be easy but that those living an obedient life are the ones who will experience the abundant life. One cannot experience the abundance God offers without the obedience He commands.

Jesus, being God, is all-powerful and can perform miracles (John 2:6-11).

⁶ Now six stone water jars had been set there for Jewish purification. Each contained twenty or thirty gallons. ⁷ “Fill the jars with water,” Jesus told them. So they filled them to the brim. ⁸ Then he said to them, “Now draw some out and take it to the headwaiter.” And they did. ⁹ When the headwaiter tasted the water (after it had become wine), he did not know where it came from—though the servants who had drawn the water knew. He called the groom ¹⁰ and told him, “Everyone sets out the fine wine first, then, after people are drunk, the inferior. But you have kept the fine wine until now.” ¹¹ Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee. He revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him.

The Old Is Gone

Verse 6 notes that there were six stone water jars present for purification purposes. As D. A. Carson pointed out, the water jars were made from stone because stone was more advantageous ceremonially. Earthenware more easily cracks or breaks, causing a host of purification problems (for example, unclean material entering the water meant for purification).³ Scholars can only speculate on the reason for the presence of the stone jars. Perhaps the jars were near for ritual washing or perhaps unused by feast goes altogether. John did not explain why the jars were present. Given the time at which the evangelist wrote, it is assumed the original readers knew their purpose and use.

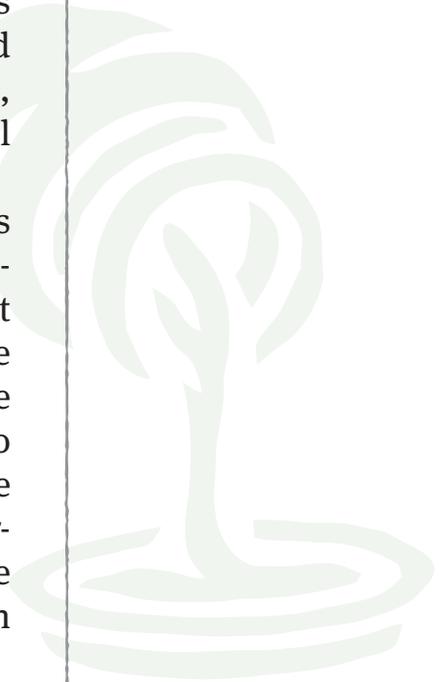
Purification rituals would have been for cleansing one’s hands and feet. At this time, the common footwear was sandals: just a piece of fabric under the

foot held in place by a strap. Purification rituals were meant to prepare one to be in the presence of God. On this side of the cross, we know that fellowship with God is not a matter of being physically clean. The Old Testament ritual was to signify and illustrate the spiritual impurity of the individual in the eyes of God. To the Jewish mind, one could not approach God unclean.

In the narrative, the jars of water may also be emblematic of the old way of the Law of Moses. Jesus came to fulfill the old covenant by His work and shed blood on the cross. The fact that there were six jars instead of the perfect number of seven symbolized that the current covenantal system was incomplete, whereas the new redemptive covenant in Christ will offer a perfection not realized in the old.

In either case, the spiritual significance of the jars is clear: whether historically or symbolically, humanity needs cleansing. We need purification from that which has tainted and enslaved our hearts—the curse of sin. The miraculous transformation of water to wine illustrates what the blood of Christ does for all who repent and believe in Him. Water is unable to cleanse us of the stain of sin. Sin's impact is too deep. Its alterations to our soul and being are too profound. There is no human solution to this problem. Only God can solve this human dilemma.

The old covenant, while good for its purposes, represented the futility of human effort to ensure our own salvation. The damage done by sin is too great to be washed away by ourselves. The only solution for our salvation is the wonderful grace of God. Therefore, in His mercy, Christ established a new covenant, one forged with His blood through grace. Humankind cannot achieve this cleansing through human means.



One can only be saved by the unmerited grace offered to us by the love and mercy of God. Apart from God's grace, we are all guilty and judged. Apart from Jesus's sacrifice, we have no hope. Apart from the Spirit's renewal, we all stand condemned.

So in service to this message, Jesus instructed the servants to fill the jars with water (v. 7). And in observance of His command, the servants filled the jars to the brim. The six jars would have equaled something like 120-180 gallons. After the miracle, that would have been far more wine than was needed for a wedding feast. Such abundance reminds us that the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus's perfect blood is sufficient to cleanse the sins of the whole world. God's superabundance of grace is sufficient to forgive all, yet only those who come to Christ in repentance and faith will be saved.

Why is it sometimes hard to believe Jesus can do the supernatural?

The New Is Better

After filling the jars, Jesus told the servants, "Now draw some out and take it to the headwaiter" (v. 8). The "headwaiter," or the master of the feast, was in charge of distributing food and drink at the wedding. He also may have been something of a taste tester. Proper protocol required that he consent to the circulation of new wine.

When the headwaiter tasted the transformed water into wine, he had no idea of its source. The servants knew, of course, but indicated nothing to the master of the feast. The servants, Jesus's mother, the disciples, and Jesus Himself were the only ones who knew of this

work at the time. Today, billions have heard of Jesus's miracle at Cana. Kruse writes: "The evangelist's primary purpose in telling this story was to show how Jesus began to reveal his glory and that this led people to believe in him."⁴

Some have claimed that it was common practice to water down the wine at weddings; however, that was not the case here. The rich flavor of the wine Jesus provided overwhelmed the head steward. His immediate reaction was to call for the groom. Again, the groom and his family would have been responsible for the food and drink. If there were any complaints or compliments of the feast, the groom and his family were sure to hear them.

The joy of the headwaiter at tasting the new wine illustrates the joy of those who have been transformed by the precious blood of Christ. Just as Jesus can transform water into wine, so can He transform our sinful, broken hearts into sacred temples for His reign and use. The headwaiter's exclamation is powerful: "Everyone sets out the fine wine first, then, after people are drunk, the inferior. But you have kept the fine wine until now" (v. 10). Jesus's miraculously created wine was superior to any previously provided.

Through narrating this event, John was proclaiming that the new covenant Jesus would establish with His blood is superior to the old law. The law isn't bad—it was ordained and given by God—but Jesus's meritorious work on the cross did what the law could never do. As Carson stated: "John's point is simply that the wine Jesus provides is unqualifiedly superior, as must everything be that is tied to the new, messianic age Jesus is introducing."⁵ For all who follow Christ, Jesus's covenant is better. He did the work for us.

THEOLOGY
Connection

MIRACLES: A miracle is an event in which God makes an exception to the natural order or supersedes natural laws for the purpose of demonstrating His glory and/or validating His message. Miracles are recorded throughout Scripture; signs and wonders were often evident when a prophet or an apostle was speaking God's message to the people. Because we believe God to be all-powerful and personally involved in this world, we believe He can and does perform miracles.

Voices from CHURCH HISTORY

“Seeing is not believing. . . . Every event which might claim to be a miracle is, in the last resort, something presented to our senses, something seen, heard, touched, smelled, or tasted. And our senses are not infallible. If anything extraordinary seems to have happened, we can always say that we have been the victims of an illusion. If we hold a philosophy which excludes the supernatural, this is what we always shall say.”⁷

–C. S. Lewis
(1898–1963)

He accomplished what we could not. He completed what He started before the foundation of the world was established (Eph. 1:3-6).

Another theological highlight also must be noted. Jesus, being God, has power over nature. The miracle at Cana shows Jesus’s ability to supersede or suspend the natural order of things. The naturalists of the world have a hard time with this idea. To a naturalist, the idea that God could manipulate or alter something within the natural order is unconscionable. As C. S. Lewis wrote:

What the naturalist believes is that the ultimate fact, the thing you can’t go behind, is a vast process in space and time which is going on of its own accord. Inside that total system every [natural event] . . . happens because some other [natural] event has happened.⁶

Contrary to the naturalist’s assumptions, Jesus demonstrated His power over creation. Conversely, humanity has always sought to use nature for our own purposes. This isn’t a bad thing necessarily; we were given dominion over the earth by God (Gen. 1:27-30), but we are limited in our ability to fulfill this command by our frailty and sin. Jesus, on the other hand, is not limited. He is the perfect, divine, incarnate Son of God. Through His divine power, Jesus changed water into wine instantaneously. He has power over every aspect of reality, be it spiritual or physical.

All of Christianity hopes and rests in this supernatural ability. Our faith rests in the fact that Jesus not only can transform water into wine but also our desperate souls and broken lives into beautiful reflections of His perfect image.

In John 20:31, John revealed the ultimate purpose for recording this sign in his Gospel. These signs, or miracles, were markers of Jesus's divine glory, visible evidence that the presence of God was among humankind. His transformation of water into wine indicates that He will not only renew the souls of all who believe but that He will also resurrect our bodies from the dead.

When have you witnessed God's supernatural work, and how did you respond?



HEAD

What might it look like to believe and acknowledge Jesus's work in our lives?



HEART

What are some reasons you might resist taking your concerns to Jesus in prayer?



HANDS

Who in need will you contact with encouragement this week?

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7. Lewis, 303.

WORSHIP TO ZEAL

CORE PASSAGE: JOHN 2:13-22

Context: Jesus performed many more miracles than were recorded in the Gospels (John 20:30-31), though Jesus's earthly ministry was more than a series of miraculous signs. Jesus demonstrated He is the Son of God in other ways too, including His driving out the vendors from the temple. John recorded an earlier temple cleansing than the one recorded by the other Gospel writers that took place during the week prior to His crucifixion. In this earlier incident, everyone who witnessed the event recognized that Jesus asserted authority like no other teacher of the law.

Key Concept: Jesus has the authority to purify all things because it all belongs to Him.

DAILY READINGS

- Day 1:** John 2:13-15
- Day 2:** John 2:16-17
- Day 3:** John 2:18-21
- Day 4:** John 2:21-22
- Day 5:** John 2:23-25
- Day 6:** Psalm 69

Jesus is zealous about holiness and purity
(John 2:13-17).

¹³ The Jewish Passover was near, and so Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ In the temple he found people selling oxen, sheep, and doves, and he also found the money changers sitting there. ¹⁵ After making a whip out of cords, he drove everyone out of the temple with their sheep and oxen. He also poured out the money changers' coins and overturned the tables. ¹⁶ He told those who were selling doves, "Get these things out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a marketplace!" ¹⁷ And his disciples remembered that it is written: Zeal for your house will consume me.

Jesus Went to Jerusalem for Passover

There is some debate regarding the number of temple cleansings mentioned in the Bible. Matthew, Mark, and Luke recorded the temple cleansing (Matt. 21:10-13; Mark 11:15-17; Luke 19:45-46), but they placed the event right after Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem during the week leading up to His crucifixion. John recorded the event at the beginning of Jesus's ministry. There are generally three accepted opinions on this. First, some New Testament scholars believe John did not list his events chronologically but thematically. A second view is that Jesus may have cleansed the temple more than once, but John mentioned the earlier cleansing to establish Jesus's authority at the start of His ministry. The third and least likely option is that the synoptic Gospels did not place the temple cleansing in any kind of chronological order. Regardless, the temple cleansing pointed to Jesus's authority and redemptive work on the cross.



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Notes

After the miracle at Cana, Jesus went with His mother, brothers, and disciples to Capernaum (John 2:12), a seaside town about sixteen miles from Cana. This was the base of operations for most of Jesus's ministry (Matt. 4:12-17). John recorded that Jesus and His disciples stayed there for a few days.

John then records that Jesus went to Jerusalem for Passover (2:13). The Passover feast always takes place on the fourteenth day of the Jewish month of Nisan, which has a different calendar date each year (always around March or April). Every Jewish male who lived nearby was required to travel to Jerusalem for Passover. Living in Galilee, Jesus and His disciples were able to celebrate Passover in Jerusalem frequently.

John wrote that "Jesus went up to Jerusalem" (v. 13). We might read this as a reference to heading north, but this was a reference to elevation. Jerusalem was built on a mountain, so anyone who visited had to "go up." Thus, the Gospel writers commonly describe any travel to Jerusalem as "going up."

John did not indicate how long Jesus was in Jerusalem, but the focus instantly moved to Jesus's arrival at the temple. There Jesus "found people selling oxen, sheep, and doves, and he also found the money changers sitting there" (v. 14). The temple grounds were constructed into various courts. The outer court was known as the Court of the Gentiles, separated from the Court of Women and the Court of Israel by the Soreg. The Soreg was a lattice barricade bearing signs that stated: "No foreigner is to enter within the forecourt and the balustrade around the sanctuary. Whoever is caught will have himself to blame for his subsequent death."¹ Any Gentile who desired to worship at the temple did so in the Court of the Gentiles.

Money changers and merchants would have set up their businesses in this outer court meant for Gentiles to worship.

Jesus was greatly troubled by what He saw. John described that Jesus made “a whip out of cords” and drove all the people and animals out of the temple; He also “poured out the money changers’ coins and overturned the tables” (v. 15). In His anger, He told the merchants: “Get these things out of here! Stop turning my Father’s house into a marketplace!” (v. 16). Ultimately, Jesus’s aggression was directed toward the merchants and money changers set up on the temple grounds. It is not clear, though, whether Jesus used the whip on the animals, humans, or both. Either way, we cannot ignore that He had a similar whip used against Him at His crucifixion (19:1).

Every registered male over the age of nineteen had to pay a temple tax according to Exodus 30:14. The price was half a shekel, but even during the Roman occupation, the tax could not be paid with Roman currency. So the money changers exchanged the money for a fee. Additionally, every family had to offer a sacrifice at Passover. The traditional sacrifice was a goat or a lamb, but the poor could sacrifice a pigeon or a dove. Families that didn’t want to travel with animals could purchase animals for sacrifice at the temple. So the merchants and money changers were providing a needed service. What, then, sparked such passion in our Lord? What was being done that was so reprehensible? If it wasn’t the function of selling and exchanging that caused the strong rebuke, what was it?

GOSPEL
Connection

In purifying the temple, Jesus revealed His authority as well as pointed to His future death and resurrection.

Jesus Rebuked Detractors

One popular understanding of this passage is that Jesus was angered by the massive price-gouging taking place. According to this view, merchants and money changers were abusing the religious requirements by overcharging for the currency exchange and animal purchases. So, the businesses were taking advantage of a religious obligation to make a handsome profit. Jesus's anger was not directed toward selling and exchanging per se; rather, He was indignant that individuals would leverage the religious system for significant financial gain.

This understanding of Jesus's rebuke, however, is by no means the only interpretation. D. A. Carson explains:

There is no evidence that the animal merchants and money-changers or the priestly authorities who allowed them to use the outer court were corrupt companions in graft. Jesus' complaint is not that they are guilty of sharp business practices and should therefore reform their ethical life, but that they should not be in the temple area at all.²

According to this view, Jesus's rebuke had nothing to do with greed. The temple was supposed to be a place of worship, but the financial activities in the Court of the Gentiles were a distraction from its purpose: prayer. Kruse emphasized: "Jesus' anger . . . was aroused because the one place where people from other nations could pray had been turned into a noisy market."³

The temple was not being used according to its intended design. It was supposed to be a place of prayer and worship for all nations. Instead, the money changers and merchants were engaged in business activities within the temple complex that would deter and distract from worship for the Gentiles, whereas the Jews had a quiet place in the inner courts. Money and convenience had become more important than a peaceful place of worship for all. Therefore, Jesus's zeal for the temple led Him to call for reform. He was not going to stand for the distraction or the disparity.

In Mark's recounting of the cleansing after His triumphal entry, Jesus said: "Is it not written, My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations?" (Mark 11:17). Clearly, it would be difficult to pray amid exchanging of money and livestock for the Gentiles. These activities were a distraction from the temple's main function—worship for all.

Distractions are something worshipers face even today. We live in an age when we have a plethora of sources vying for our attention and focus. We are drowning in an abundance of soul-killing entertainment that occupies our time and attention. Jesus was outraged at such distractions because He knew the importance of worship. Worship isn't an optional feature tagged onto the Christian life. Worship is our primary purpose. Any distraction from worship encumbers our ultimate purpose.

What practices help you worship God in a reverent manner?

Voices from CHURCH HISTORY

“Christian churches and chapels, no doubt, are very unlike the Jewish temple. . . . But they are places where God’s word is read, and where Christ is specially present. The man who professes to worship in them should surely behave with reverence and respect. The man who brings his worldly matters with him when he professes to worship, is doing that which is evidently most offensive to Christ.”⁴

–J. C. Ryle
(1816–1900)

Jesus's disciples might have been shocked by His actions. But Jesus's heart for all worshipers, including Gentiles, knew no bounds. Sometimes a divine defibrillator is needed to shock our spiritual hearts into beating again. Jesus's actions sparked the disciples to remember Psalm 69:9: "Zeal for your house has consumed me." John didn't specifically say when the disciples remembered this verse in correlation with the temple cleansing (John 2:17), though it was possibly after Jesus's resurrection (cf. v. 22). Jesus's zeal for God's house of worship to be one for all nations was remembered long after the event took place.

How has Jesus's zeal for worshipers from all nations caused you to adjust your life?

Jesus's death and resurrection would prove His authority (John 2:18-22).

¹⁸ So the Jews replied to him, "What sign will you show us for doing these things?" ¹⁹ Jesus answered, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it up in three days." ²⁰ Therefore the Jews said, "This temple took forty-six years to build, and will you raise it up in three days?" ²¹ But he was speaking about the temple of his body. ²² So when he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the statement Jesus had made.

The Jews Questioned Jesus's Authority

The Jewish leaders wanted an explanation for Jesus's behavior. They demanded, "What sign will you show us for doing these things?" (v. 18). The appeal for a sign was a request for authority. They wanted to know who

gave Jesus the authority to do such things, perhaps curious of His intentions as a messianic figure.

In the Old Testament, the prophet Malachi proclaimed that the Messiah would purify the temple:

“See, I am going to send my messenger, and he will clear the way before me. Then the Lord you seek will suddenly come to his temple, the Messenger of the covenant you delight in—see, he is coming,” says the LORD of Armies. But who can endure the day of his coming? And who will be able to stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner’s fire and like launderer’s bleach. He will be like a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver. Then they will present offerings to the LORD in righteousness. And the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will please the LORD as in days of old and years gone by. (Mal. 3:1-4)

Jesus’s actions may have brought to mind Malachi’s condemnation of the religious leaders’ false worship, so the Jews wanted to know what gave Jesus the right to judge their practices. Jesus took it upon Himself to disregard their position and regulate the temple activities, and they wanted a miraculous sign as proof of His authority for doing so.

Yet Jesus did not satisfy the inquisitors with an immediate sign. He said, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it up in three days” (John 2:19). The Jews probably thought He was crazy, because they said, “This temple took forty-six years to build, and will you raise it up in three days?” (v. 20). In 20–19 BC, Herod the Great began expanding and renovating the temple that had been built by Zerubbabel and the returning



Bonus Content

Scan this QR code to learn more about Christ’s zeal for the Lord’s house and how it pointed to His messiahship.

THEOLOGY Connection

RESURRECTION:

Both the Old and New Testaments teach that one day believers will experience a resurrection of the body from the dead (Isa. 26:19; Ezek. 37:12-14; John 11). The promise of the resurrection is found in the resurrection of Christ from the dead, and it will take place at the future return of Christ. (cont.)

exiles. The refurbishing was a very long process and was going on even in Jesus's day. The restoration was completed around AD 63. The Jewish historian Josephus claimed that the temple appeared to be a "mountain of snow" when visitors approached Jerusalem from a distance because some parts were not gilt but "exceedingly white."⁵ Indeed, the temple was beautiful, a magnificent structure to behold. To the Jews' shame, however, something greater was in Jerusalem, yet they did not realize it. They were so focused on the oyster that they completely ignored the pearl.

The Jews misunderstood Jesus's statement. His statement also was twisted and used against Him at His trial before His crucifixion. False witnesses claimed, "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple made with human hands, and in three days I will build another not made by hands'" (Mark 14:58). But of course, that wasn't what Jesus said. He said, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it up in three days" (John 2:19). Jesus was claiming metaphorically that He would raise the "temple" again after it had been destroyed. All of this was lost on Jesus's hearers, but when He was resurrected, His disciples remembered His words (v. 22).

What has helped you surrender to Jesus's authority in your life?

Jesus Foretold His Resurrection

Jesus's antagonists were focused on that moment, wanting a sign of His authority, but Jesus pointed to His greatest sign: His death and resurrection. After Jesus rose again, all who would experience God's presence must draw near to Him through the Son (Heb. 7:19).

This idea wasn't foreign to the Jews; it was actually integrated into the temple's very meaning and function. In the Jewish mind, the temple represented a unique presence of the Lord, a connection between heaven and earth. Just like Christians, the Jews believed that God is omnipresent. There were, however, certain places where God revealed His presence in a special way. The temple was such a place, emphasizing the holiness and imminence of God. In 2 Chronicles 7, at the completion of Solomon's temple, "the glory of the LORD" fell upon the temple (2 Chron. 7:3). Before the temple was destroyed during the Babylonian conquest in 586 BC, the prophet Ezekiel had seen a vision of God's presence leaving the temple (Ezek. 11:22-25). The people of Judah believed God would not abandon the temple (Jer. 7:3-11), and when the Babylonians destroyed it, the people felt the devastating loss of God's imminent presence in their midst.

When the second temple was built by Zerubbabel, it was a mark of God's grace upon His people (see Zech. 4:6-9). Given that the temple was so sacred to the Jewish people, any talk of destroying it was sacrilegious. Yet the temple foreshadowed something far greater than brick and mortar. As significant as the temple was, the One to whom the temple pointed was now walking the earth. Heaven had come to earth, but those focused on earthly things missed Him.

Of course, it cannot be overlooked that Jesus's words in John 2:19 influenced the description Paul used when he spoke of the church as the body of Christ. In fact, our bodies are called the temple of the Lord (1 Cor. 6:19). Just as the Spirit of God guided the construction and furnishing of the tabernacle of the Lord (Ex. 31:1-11), the Holy Spirit gathers Christians

THEOLOGY Connection

(cont.) Because Christ was the firstfruits of the resurrection, Christians can be assured that their resurrection will be similar in nature, both bodily and glorious (Phil. 3:20-21; Rom. 8:22-23). The hope of the future resurrection gives Christians confidence that death has been defeated in the death and resurrection of Christ.

Voices from CHURCH HISTORY

“To be conformed to Jesus, we must first begin to think as Jesus did. We need the ‘mind of Christ.’ We need to value the things He values and despise the things He despises. We need to have the same priorities He has. We need to consider weighty the things that He considers weighty. That cannot happen without a mastery of His Word.”⁶

–R. C. Sproul
(1939–2017)

into “a holy temple” fit for God’s presence and glory. Paul described the church as a structure with Jesus as the cornerstone and the apostles and prophets as the foundation (Eph. 2:19-22).

Not just a building, the church is a people in whom the Spirit of God reveals Himself in a unique and special way. All regenerate believers have immediate access to the presence of God. He lives within them. This access to God, though given freely, did not come cheap. When Jesus died upon the cross, offering His life as the ultimate atoning sacrifice for our sins, the curtain that marked off the Holy of Holies in the temple was torn in two from top to bottom (Matt. 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45)—Jesus’s death broke down the dividing wall separating sinful humanity from God. All who repent of their sins and trust in Jesus Christ have access to God. The Great High Priest offered His life as a once-and-for-all sacrifice. The true Holy of Holies offered Himself as our sacrifice, so now all who call upon the Lord Jesus can know God personally.

When Jesus challenged the Jews to destroy the “temple,” He pointed toward a day when a specific building would no longer be necessary to connect to God. Now, Jesus and His church is the temple of God. Though church buildings are important, they are not places of divine dwelling because God now dwells in His people. As significant as buildings may be, the Spirit of God does not dwell in places made by human hands, but He resides in the hearts of the people He has called to Himself, those who have been regenerated and justified by faith in Jesus.

How did you become convinced that Jesus truly rose from the dead?

Key Concept: Jesus has the authority to purify all things because it all belongs to Him.



HEAD

In what areas of life are you most prone to drift from God's standards of holiness?



HEART

What hinders you from confessing to Jesus the areas in which you have drifted and asking Him to restore you?



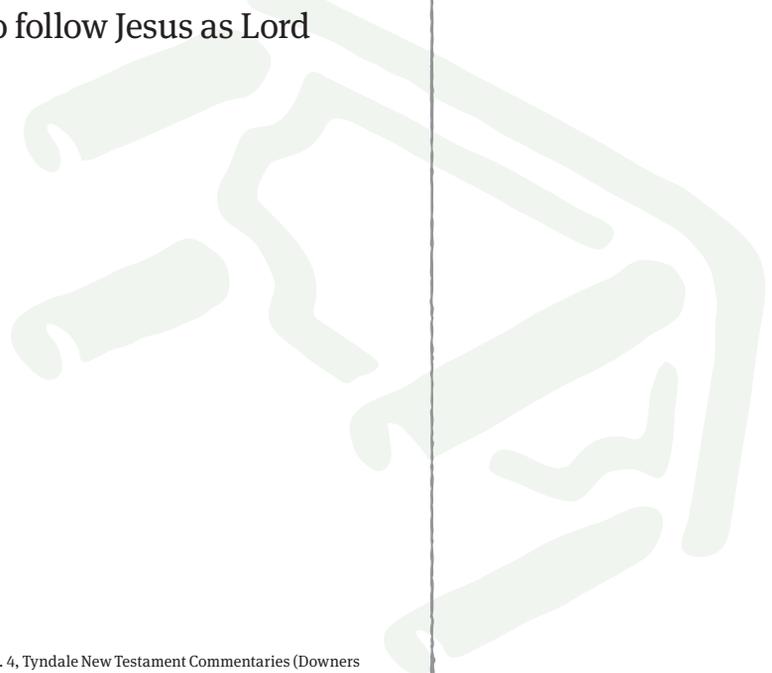
HANDS

How will you initiate a conversation this week with someone about their need to follow Jesus as Lord and Savior?

Notes

References

1. Colin G. Kruse, *John: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 4, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 100.
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BIRTH TO REBIRTH



CORE PASSAGE: JOHN 3:5-8,14-21

Context: Early in Jesus’s public ministry, large crowds followed Him. Yet their faith was inadequate. They were interested in Jesus—particularly in the miracles He performed—but not committed to Him. Because of their shallow faith, Jesus did not “entrust himself” to them (John 2:24). Jesus’s conversation with a man named Nicodemus in John 3 explains what true, saving faith in Jesus truly entails.

Key Concept: Salvation requires being born again by the Holy Spirit and believing in Jesus Christ.

DAILY READINGS

- Day 1:** John 3:1-2
- Day 2:** John 3:3-8
- Day 3:** John 3:9-13
- Day 4:** John 3:14-17
- Day 5:** John 3:18-21
- Day 6:** Psalm 18

We are born again through the work of the Holy Spirit (John 3:5-8).

⁵ Jesus answered, “Truly I tell you, unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh, and whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not be amazed that I told you that you must be born again. ⁸ The wind blows where it pleases, and you hear its sound, but you don’t know where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

You Must Be Born Again

Few Bible passages are as well-known and widely cherished as John 3. Here, Jesus conversed with Nicodemus, a Pharisee and Jewish leader, under cloak of night. The Pharisees were the most popular and probably the most traditional of the Jewish sects. Nicodemus was not only a Pharisee, but he was also part of the Sanhedrin, the ruling religious body that handled internal Jewish affairs.

Nicodemus approached Jesus after dark presumably because he did not want his fellow Jews to see him talking to Jesus. Given that John did not arbitrarily detail an event, it is also possible that verse 2 illustrated the spiritual darkness in Nicodemus’s heart at this time. From verse 2, we see that Nicodemus acknowledged Jesus was from God but did not recognize Jesus as the Messiah.

In conversation with Jesus, Nicodemus stated, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could perform these signs you do unless God were with him” (v. 2). To call Jesus “Rabbi” was a clear mark of respect by Nicodemus,



Scan this QR code to access this session's Scripture passages.

Notes

FIGURE Study

NICODEMUS: Nicodemus was “a man from the Pharisees” and “a ruler of the Jews” (John 3:1). The latter title indicated he was a member of the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin. When Jesus was slandered by the Sanhedrin in John 7, Nicodemus defended His right to a hearing before being judged (7:50-51). Nicodemus’s only other appearance in Scripture occurs in John 19:39-42, when he helped Joseph of Arimathea prepare Jesus’s body for burial.

but to claim Jesus was “from God” was an allusion to a prophetic office. Furthermore, Nicodemus used the first person plural pronoun “we,” meaning others within the Pharisee sect believed Jesus to be a prophet. Even the religious leaders could not ignore Jesus. As a miracle-worker, Jesus had grabbed the attention of those believed to be the vanguards of sound doctrine and teaching. It appears, based upon Nicodemus’s statement, the Jewish leaders weren’t quite sure what to do with Jesus.

In verse 3, Jesus made a statement that bewildered Nicodemus, “Truly I tell you, unless someone is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Understandably, Nicodemus was confused by Jesus’s statement: human beings can only be born once. Jesus seemed to be requiring what would be physically impossible for salvation. Jesus clarified, “Truly I tell you, unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (v. 5).

What did Jesus mean when He said one must be “born of water and the Spirit”? There are two general evangelical interpretations of “born of water.” The first is that one must be born of a human woman. According to this interpretation, being “born of water” is an analogy of natural human birth. Granted, Scripture does not refer to natural childbirth in this way in any other passage, but the metaphor gains strength as Jesus emphasized, “Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh, and whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit” (v. 6).

You Must Be Born of the Spirit

The second common understanding is that “born of water” could be a double metaphor. “Born of water” could be simply another way of saying “born of the

Spirit.” Jesus wasn’t claiming believers must physically be born again but that believers should spiritually be regenerated. Jesus seems to be referencing a passage in the book of Ezekiel:

I will . . . sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean. . . . I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will remove your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will place my Spirit within you and cause you to follow my statutes and carefully observe my ordinances. (Ezek. 36:25-27)

Jesus indicated that the Holy Spirit must renew and regenerate us in order for us to be born again. Regeneration is the process of being made into “a new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17). It is defined as “transformation of a person’s spiritual condition from death to life through the work of the Holy Spirit,”¹ a divine act that spiritually brings a whole new life for those who were spiritually dead and in darkness.

Being born again of the Spirit is necessary for entering the kingdom of God. Jesus further resolved this understanding by then saying that which is “born of the flesh is flesh” and that “born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:6). Human flesh is frail and weak, and it will one day die. The Spirit of God is everlasting, and those who are born of the Spirit will have eternal life.

What types of spiritual fruit should be visible if a person has been born again by the Holy Spirit?

Jesus continued on to emphasize the means by which we are “born again.” This rebirth is not done via human effort or human action. It is solely an act of

THEOLOGY Connection

REGENERATION: Regeneration takes place at the beginning of the Christian life and is the miraculous transformation, or the new birth, that takes place within an individual through the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit (John 3:3-8; Titus 3:5). It is the divine side of conversion (a person turning to Christ in repentance and faith), being the work of God within a person’s life that causes him or her to be born again, a work that human effort is unable to produce.

God. God is the One who regenerates. God is the One who spiritually cleanses us anew.

Playing off the Greek word for “spirit,” which can also be translated “wind” or “breath,” Jesus implied that regeneration is mysterious, especially because it cannot be observed with physical eyes (v. 8). We cannot see the new heart formed within us. We cannot see our soul renewed. It is as invisible as the wind and more so. Being born again by the Spirit is imperceptible by empirical senses yet magnificently real nonetheless. In an age of materialism, this might sound strange to secular ears. The renewal isn’t physical, though one can argue it has a physical impact. Yet it is as real as anything we see, taste, touch, hear, or smell. We remain the same person, but we are different. We are numerically the same, but we are qualitatively changed.

How can you help others who don’t understand what it means to receive new spiritual life?

We are given eternal life through believing in Jesus Christ (John 3:14-21).

¹⁴ “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶ For God loved the world in this way: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸ Anyone who believes in him is not condemned, but anyone who does not believe is already condemned, because he has not believed in the name

of the one and only Son of God.¹⁹ This is the judgment: The light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil.²⁰ For everyone who does evil hates the light and avoids it, so that his deeds may not be exposed.²¹ But anyone who lives by the truth comes to the light, so that his works may be shown to be accomplished by God.”

You Must Look to Christ

In Numbers 21:4-9, the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness, discontent and complaining against Moses and God. Displeased, God sent “poisonous snakes” to plague the people (v. 6). Many were bitten and died. The people then repented of their sin and pleaded with Moses to intercede with the Lord to “take the snakes away” (v. 7). In response, the Lord instructed Moses to make a snake image and to set it on a pole. Whoever was bitten and looked to the bronze serpent lived (vv. 8-9).

Jesus used this Old Testament account to describe the power of His own death and resurrection. Just as Moses lifted up the bronze serpent in the wilderness, so “the Son of Man must be lifted up” (v. 14). It is unlikely Nicodemus understood this as a reference to the cross, but believers on this side of Calvary see the clear prophetic teaching. Just as the snake-plagued Israelites looked upon the bronze serpent and were healed, so too all who look to Jesus’s death and resurrection in faith—“everyone who believes in him”—are saved for eternal life (v. 15).

As an expansion of verse 15, Jesus continued with what is probably the most well-known verse in all of Scripture: “For God loved the world in this way: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who

Voices from CHURCH HISTORY

“As gold among the metals, so is faith among the graces . . . Indeed, in heaven, love will be the chief grace; but, while we are here militant, love must give place to faith; love takes possession of glory, but faith gives a title to it. Love is the crowning grace in heaven, but faith is the conquering grace upon earth.”²

—Thomas Watson
(c. 1620–1686)

believes in him will not perish but have eternal life” (v. 16). God displayed His love for humanity in a real and evident way: He gave His only begotten Son. The phrase translated “one and only” is just one word in Greek. It is translated in various ways: “only,” “only begotten,” and “one and only.” No one has a relationship to God the Father like God the Son. As the Second Person of the Trinity, Jesus is united to the will of the Father in perfect harmony and in complete obedience. When humans “beget” others, their progeny come into existence. Not so with Jesus. He did not become the Son at the incarnation. Jesus has eternally been the only begotten Son of the Father.

God did not simply tell us that He loves us, He showed it. God’s love was so profound, so intense, so deep that He offered His eternally begotten Son as a sacrifice for us. Furthermore, Jesus displayed His love by being obedient to the Father and humbly dying for our sins. God is the primary instigator and agent in human salvation. Jesus condescended to humanity because He knew we could never get to Him on our own. God sent His only Son to atone for “everyone who believes in him” (vv. 15-16).

The word “everyone” here shows that salvation is not limited to a single nation, race, tongue, or tribe. Whoever believes in Jesus will be saved. There is no restriction set by birth or station. Jesus’s offer of salvation is to any and all who believe.

Notice Jesus did not simply say one must believe that He died. Jesus commanded us to believe “in him” for salvation (v. 16). There is a fundamental distinction between believing facts about Jesus’s death and resurrection and believing in Christ. Granted, belief in Jesus includes beliefs about Jesus, but it is not so limited in

scope. Belief in Christ is faith that personally trusts in Christ’s actions, His work on sinners’ behalf, His promises to take away our sin, and His plan to redeem and restore. This can be further highlighted by noting the Greek word translated “believes” is an active participle, which means true belief is an active belief.

And what is the result of this active belief? All who believe in Christ will have “eternal life” (v. 16). Believing in the Son—that is, believing in what Jesus did and why He did it in addition to surrendering to the truth of who He is—results in salvation. The redemptive mission Jesus was commissioned by the Father to accomplish was primarily to “save the world” (v. 17). Jesus’s earthly ministry with His incarnation was not to judge the world; such judgment will happen at His second coming (2 Tim. 4:1). The incarnate Son’s redemptive work was His death and resurrection, without which humankind cannot be saved.

How would you explain what it means to believe in Jesus?

Look to Christ or Remain Condemned

Jesus was explicit when He said that anyone who believes in Him is not condemned, or judged for our sin (John 3:18). Salvation only comes by believing in Jesus. There is no other way (John 14:6; Acts 4:12). But what happens if someone does not believe in Christ? According to Jesus, “anyone who does not believe is already condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the one and only Son of God” (John 3:18). All people who reject Jesus as Messiah will not inherit eternal life. Yet Jesus didn’t state they will be condemned but that they are already condemned:

GOSPEL Connection

Because of His love, God sent His Son, Jesus, to sacrifice His life for us so that we might be born again and have eternal life.

Already in need of a Saviour before God's Son comes on his saving mission, this person compounds his or her guilt by not believing in the name of that Son. . . . There is no need to await the final day of judgment (though it will come, 5:26–29): the person who disbelieves in the Father's one and only Son stands condemned already, and God's wrath remains on him (3:36).³

To properly understand this, we must first understand original sin and its impact on our lives.

Original sin is the sinful nature we inherited from our first ancestors, Adam and Eve. It is defined as “the universal defect in human nature caused by the fall, entailing the loss of original righteousness and the distortion of the image of God.”⁴ When Adam and Eve sinned, they were judged by God, and as a consequence of being their descendants, all humanity is born in a state of condemnation facing future judgment. The good news is that in His divine foreknowledge, God had already prepared Jesus's redemptive work to provide a means of salvation (1 Pet. 1:18-21). When we trust in Jesus's sacrifice, His blood cleanses us from all unrighteousness and places us in a state of grace, reconciling us to God (1 John 1:7,9). Believers are not only no longer under judgment, we are imputed with Jesus's perfect righteousness (2 Cor. 5:21).

Jesus continued this thought in John 3:19 when He stated: “This is the judgment: The light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil.” The context of this passage indicates that “the judgment” is a present reality. It is something humankind is enduring now.

Though light and darkness are used in various ways in the Gospel of John, here “light” refers to Jesus. Jesus was rejected by many of the people who witnessed His miracles and listened to His teachings because people loved the darkness more than Christ. That is the impact of original sin. Our sin nature hinders our ability to follow God as we should.

In this passage, Jesus reiterated what John narrated in John 2:25: “he did not need anyone to testify about man; for he himself knew what was in man.” Fully God and fully man, Jesus understood that the sin within humanity leads to actions. In 3:20, Jesus affirmed that he “who does evil” does so because he “hates the light.” The idea of hate is an internal reality that, as Jesus described, manifests itself in external actions. This was a stark declaration made by our Lord: Those who do evil do so because they hate Christ (the light). Those who sin do so out of a love for evil. Jesus stated the converse of this in His teaching in John 14:15: “If you love me, you will keep my commands.” The line is drawn in the sand. Love for the Lord results in obedience; hate of the Lord results in disobedience.

In contemporary teachings, evangelicals rightly declare that God loves the sinner but hates the sin. The question being discussed between Jesus and Nicodemus, however, isn’t whether God loves the rebellious sinner. The question is does the rebellious sinner love God? Given that humankind is limited in knowing the hearts of others or even our own hearts, we must be careful to judge only actions, not people’s hearts. Furthermore, we know we all sin. Drawing on the full context of the passage, however, Jesus distinguished between those who love Him and those who love evil by pointing to those who believe in Him and those

Voices from THE CHURCH

“You can’t do anything to enter God’s kingdom. You can’t keep enough rules. You can’t give enough money. You can’t attend enough services. You can’t memorize enough verses. You didn’t do anything to be born physically, and you can’t do anything to be born spiritually. The only way you can be born again is for the Spirit of God to do it all.”⁵
–Matt Carter and Josh Wredberg

who do not. In other words, belief in Christ is the key distinction between those who love the light and those who love evil.

Jesus continued to reveal the inner life of sinful humanity. He said in John 3:20 that those who avoid the light do so that their “deeds may not be exposed.” Living in darkness allows us to continue living in our sin. Those in darkness are somewhat comfortable in their sin. Sin is generally pleasurable and enjoyable at first. Living in darkness is our way of being able to continue in that which we find enjoyable. But it is the nature of sin to do us harm. Sin hurts us. It is self-destructive. It enslaves (John 8:34). Sometimes we speak of sin like it is no big deal. We excuse our actions with phrases like “Everyone does it,” “It is only a minor thing,” or “I’m not hurting anyone.” The apostle Paul warned against those who would use the freedom offered in Christ as an excuse to practice licentiousness (Rom. 3:8). Sin is a distortion of God’s original purpose and intent for our lives.

The context of this passage, however, doesn’t seem to indicate Jesus is speaking primarily of exposing sin before others. The context hints that the sin within us draws us away from Christ because we do not want to confess that which we love more than Him. Yet our actions are a confession unto themselves. Evil actions are not a confession of repentance but of rebellion.

A confession of repentance has drastically different results, as Jesus explained in John 3:21. Those who live by “the truth” come “to the light, so that his works may be shown to be accomplished by God” (v. 21). The change that regeneration by the Holy Spirit brings about makes a difference in the way we live. It produces the fruit of the Spirit that are clear markers

of what has been done within us (see Gal. 5:22-23). Though believers are not perfect in this life, regeneration shines through as a marker of what God has done. The works that result from our rebirth are done so that God's name may be glorified.

How should our view of the condemnation facing nonbelievers affect our willingness to share the gospel with others?



HEAD

How would you explain what it means to believe in Jesus and receive eternal life to someone like Nicodemus?



HEART

How does your life give evidence that you've been transformed by the Holy Spirit?



HANDS

With whom will you talk about a life-changing relationship with Jesus?

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HEAVEN TO EARTH

CORE PASSAGE: JOHN 3:25-36

Context: Jesus began to attract a crowd after His first miracle and driving out the money changers in the temple. Not long after meeting with Nicodemus, Jesus and His disciples went out to preach the message of the kingdom. Jesus and John the Baptist found themselves baptizing in the same vicinity with crowds flocking to each. John the Baptist's disciples questioned Jesus's rise in prominence, and John took that moment to explain that true joy comes from glorifying Jesus, the Son of God.

Key Concept: Belief involves acknowledging the supremacy of Jesus.

DAILY READINGS

- Day 1:** John 3:22-24
- Day 2:** John 3:25-26
- Day 3:** John 3:27-30
- Day 4:** John 3:31-34
- Day 5:** John 3:35-36
- Day 6:** Psalm 45

Belief in Christ involves humbling ourselves before Him (John 3:25-30).

²⁵ Then a dispute arose between John’s disciples and a Jew about purification. ²⁶ So they came to John and told him, “Rabbi, the one you testified about, and who was with you across the Jordan, is baptizing—and everyone is going to him.” ²⁷ John responded, “No one can receive anything unless it has been given to him from heaven. ²⁸ You yourselves can testify that I said, ‘I am not the Messiah, but I’ve been sent ahead of him.’ ²⁹ He who has the bride is the groom. But the groom’s friend, who stands by and listens for him, rejoices greatly at the groom’s voice. So this joy of mine is complete. ³⁰ He must increase, but I must decrease.”

John Acknowledged Jesus Is the Messiah

After Jesus’s meeting with Nicodemus, He and His disciples went into the Judean wilderness (3:22). Water was plentiful in the area near Salim and Aenon along the Jordan River (v. 23). Salim and Aenon were roughly 40 to 45 miles north of Jerusalem. John the Baptist frequently baptized there, but John indicated that Jesus’s disciples also were baptizing in the area (v. 22; 4:2).

Scripture confirms that both John the Baptist and Jesus often would teach and then retreat into the wilderness (Matt. 3:1; 4:1). Thomas Brisco noted that the “Jews believed the wilderness was a place of preparation for the expected messianic era.”¹ The wilderness also offered protection from religious and Roman authorities, so anyone in disfavor with the religious powers could teach freely in the wilderness without fear of persecution.



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Notes

While in the wilderness of Aenon and Salim, a debate arose between the disciples of John the Baptist and “a Jew” (v. 25). We do not know who this Jew was, but he likely was someone confused about Jesus’s and John’s ministries. The Gospel writer only explained that the dispute was over “purification.” Given the context of the passage, it is possible the debate was over whose baptism was more spiritually advantageous. Jewish cleansing rituals were not uncommon at this time. The primary distinction between John’s and Jesus’s practice and other Jewish practices is that Jesus’s and John’s disciples were baptizing others. In traditional Jewish washing of that time, washing for purification was self-administered.

John’s disciples were so concerned about the discussion at hand, they appealed to their rabbi for clarification. His disciples said, “The one you testified about, and who was with you across the Jordan, is baptizing—and everyone is going to him” (v. 26). Recall John’s words about Jesus in John 1:29-34. He declared Jesus is “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (1:29). He continued by proclaiming that Jesus was higher than him and that his mission was to point people to Jesus (vv. 30-31). When detailing the events of Jesus’s baptism, John the Baptist said:

I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and he rested on him. I didn’t know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water told me, “The one you see the Spirit descending and resting on—he is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.” I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God. (vv. 32-34)

In saying, “the one you testified about” (3:26), John’s disciples were referring to John’s declaration that Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God, in John 1:34. Despite John’s declaration, his disciples were still uneasy about Jesus’s work. The principal issue John’s disciples had with Jesus was that “everyone is going to him” (3:26). In John 4:2, the Gospel writer clarified that Jesus wasn’t specifically doing the baptizing; rather, He was overseeing as His disciples baptized. Still, Jesus’s following was growing, and it seemed to John the Baptist’s followers that John’s ministry was diminishing.

It doesn’t take a lot of imagination to picture the fear and pride that easily could have grabbed John’s heart. His numbers were declining; his influence was waning. His disciples wanted to protect his popularity and his reputation on his behalf. John’s response, however, was one of humility and wisdom. He began by directing them to the providence of God in all things: “No one can receive anything unless it has been given to him from heaven” (3:27). John the Baptist understood that his ministry was a calling from God. Whatever influence or popularity he had was something God had given him, and if God wanted to take it away, He could. John’s ministry wasn’t to platform a man-made agenda or to make a name for himself. His mission in life was to point others to the Messiah.

John continued, “You yourselves can testify that I said, ‘I am not the Messiah, but I’ve been sent ahead of him’” (v. 28). John was sent to “make straight the way” for the Messiah (John 1:23; cf. Luke 1:17). Though a great servant of God, John the Baptist was just that, a servant.

GOSPEL
Connection

Jesus is the Messiah and God the Son, coming from above to give eternal life to those who believe in Him, so He is worthy to be put first in our lives.

Voices from THE CHURCH

“The voice of the Bridegroom, the voice of the Shepherd, has replaced the voice crying in the wilderness. . . . And in a few months, the sword of Herod will absolutely silence John’s voice (cf. verse 24). And John’s response to this—to this diminishing, this decreasing? This great joy of mine is now complete (verse 29).”³

–John Piper

To illustrate this, John used an analogy of the friend of a bridegroom that his disciples would have easily understood.

The Jewish custom of the *shoshbin* [friend of the groom] was something like the practice of the best man in weddings today. Like other friends, this leading friend might offer speeches of encouragement at the wedding; he might also be a witness for the wedding, contribute to it financially, retain the evidence of the bride’s virginity, and so forth.²

The wedding was not about the *shoshbin*; as a friend of the groom, he “rejoices greatly at the groom’s voice” (John 3:29). The friend’s joy was complete not in his own accomplishments or his own fame but in honoring and pointing to the groom. Likewise, John’s work was coming to fruition. That which he hoped and prepared for was coming to pass, and he rejoiced.

How can you find contentment with the circumstances God assigned you rather than desiring greater prominence?

John Stepped Back to Point to Jesus

In his humility, John reflected the heart of everyone who surrenders to Christ when he said, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (v. 30). The level of humility John displayed is one to which all followers of Christ should aspire. John understood not only his role but the purpose of all humanity: to glorify Christ. As Christ-followers, we must be more interested in making Jesus’s name greater than our own. In fact, humbling ourselves before the Lord could be seen

as lifting Christ up. If Jesus is central and primary in our life's pursuit, then everyone else—including ourselves—must take a backseat. John's goal was not to rival Jesus but to assist Him in His redemptive work.

Notice the word “must” in John's statement. Jesus must increase, and John must decrease. It seems antithetical to the individualistic mind-set of our age that someone else should take all of the attention and credit. Our culture tells us that we are a big deal, that we deserve everything we desire and more. Our culture tells us to do everything we can to make a name for ourselves. Scripture, however, says we are to do everything we can to make much of Jesus.

Claiming that Christ must increase and we must decrease doesn't minimize our value. It puts our value and purpose into perspective. Our ultimate value and worth are found in Christ. Though contrary to a fallen mind, true flourishing comes not by bolstering our own self-esteem or our own name. To thrive in life, we must live in accordance with our design and function. We were created to herald the majesty of Jesus; anything less is treasuring the creation over the Creator.

John sensed that his work was coming to an end (vv. 29-30). His work was to prepare the hearts of the people to accept the Messiah, just as a farmer prepares the soil before planting. John completed his task. In a similar way, all Christ followers must do the work of honoring, glorifying, proclaiming, and pointing others to the Messiah.

What does glorifying Jesus rather than yourself mean practically in your current season of life?

We humble ourselves because Christ is supreme (John 3:31-36).

³¹ The one who comes from above is above all. The one who is from the earth is earthly and speaks in earthly terms. The one who comes from heaven is above all. ³² He testifies to what he has seen and heard, and yet no one accepts his testimony. ³³ The one who has accepted his testimony has affirmed that God is true. ³⁴ For the one whom God sent speaks God's words, since he gives the Spirit without measure. ³⁵ The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hands. ³⁶ The one who believes in the Son has eternal life, but the one who rejects the Son will not see life; instead, the wrath of God remains on him.

Jesus Is Above All

It is unclear if verses 31-36 are a continuation of John the Baptist's teaching or if they were given by the Gospel writer. Most commentators hold that John the Evangelist took over here. Verse 31 is a correlation between the words of Jesus (v. 3) and the words of John the Baptist (v. 27). These verses remind us of Jesus's discussion with Nicodemus: For someone to "see the kingdom of God," he or she must be "born again" (v. 3). The same word translated "again" in verse 3 is translated "from above" in verse 31. In order to be born again, we must be born from above. We can only be born from above by faith in the One who is above all, the One from heaven—Jesus.

This is one of the more direct claims of Jesus's divinity, authority, and power. John's statement cannot be overemphasized. Jesus is fully God and fully man—the God-man. Jesus is superior to all and supreme over all

because He is “from heaven” (v. 31). The Son became a man so that He might save humankind. That Jesus became a man means He assumed human flesh. Thus, He had both a divine nature and a human nature. In becoming a man, however, He did not stop being God; such abdication is impossible. Jesus remains the Second Person of the Trinity, distinct from the Father and the Spirit but one in essence with the Father and the Spirit. As the Athanasian Creed states:

We worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity. For there is one Person of the Father: another of the Son: and another of the Holy Ghost. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, is all one: the Glory equal, the Majesty coeternal. Such as the Father is: such is the Son: and such is the Holy Ghost.⁴

The doctrine of the Trinity is not an invention of philosophers or ancient theologians. It is the understanding of what Scripture teaches: God is one (Deut. 6:4; cf. 1 Tim. 2:5); the Father is God (1 Cor. 8:6); the Son is God (Col. 2:9); and the Holy Spirit is God (Acts 5:3-4); and Scripture also teaches that the Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is not the Father.

In John 3:34-35, each Person of the Godhead is referred to in a distinct way: The Father sent the Son and loves the Son, and the Father gives the Spirit to the Son. This would be an extremely odd teaching if the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were the same person. Thus, Christians believe, based upon the witness of Scripture, that God is three Persons in one essence. This is why Jesus is above all—He is God. It is impossible and inconceivable for anyone to be above Him.

Voices from CHURCH HISTORY

“Faith in the Bible is not, as existentialists make out, a leap in the dark, but rather a step in the light, whereby (to extend the metaphor) one puts one’s whole weight on the firm ground of God’s unshakeable promises.”⁶

–J. I. Packer
(1926–2020)

Jesus testified to this fact, but His testimony was not accepted (v. 32). Yet whoever does accept the testimony of Jesus accepts the testimony of God because Jesus is God (vv. 33-34). So to reject Jesus’s teachings is to reject God’s Word.

The word translated “affirmed” in John 3:33 can also be translated “seal” or “confirm,” like the sealing of an important document with a signet ring by pressing the seal into hot wax.⁵ The one who seals the document certifies or approves of the letter’s contents. So those who accept the words of Jesus accept the truthfulness of who He is and what He says, and Jesus is superior to all and above all.

Verse 35 states that “the Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hands.” The love of the Father for the Son is a repeated motif in John’s Gospel. The authority conferred here is demonstrated in other passages as well. For example, in Matthew 28:18, Jesus confirmed this teaching: “All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth.” The author of the book of Hebrews wrote: “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact expression of his nature, sustaining all things by his powerful word” (Heb. 1:3). Jesus has honor and authority and power. He rules over all the universe. Because the Father loves the Son and the two Persons are united in will and essence, the Son has equal power and authority with the Father.

To claim the Father gave the Son all things is not to say that the Son received His divine status or position at some point. Jesus is the eternal Son of God. His divine nature has never changed and cannot change, or He would cease to be God. In verse 35, John highlighted the shared power the Father and Son enjoy. In the way the Father is above all, so too is the Son.

What do you think is the most compelling reason to believe Jesus is God and supreme over all things?

Jesus Gives Eternal Life

Once again, the Gospel of John emphasizes that those who believe in the Son have eternal life, while those who reject the Son do not (John 3:36). John was direct in this passage—salvation comes through Christ alone. We cannot be saved through any other path or any other religious or philosophical means. Jesus is the only way.

If salvation is through Christ alone, then all who do not know Christ are not saved. This truth fuels the evangelistic fervor of the evangelical world. Souls are at stake. Outside of repentance and belief in Christ, people remain under “the wrath of God” (v. 36). As with John 3:18-20, verse 36 emphasizes the fallen condition of humankind. We are not born in good standing with God. We are born under His condemnation and wrath. We have inherited this sinful nature from our parents, and they from theirs. To be removed from under the wrath of God, we must believe in Christ. All who are under the wrath of God “will not see life.” All who die under His wrath will not be saved.

What are some common reasons people reject Jesus’s offer of eternal life?

Many non-Christians—and even some Christians—struggle with the exclusivity of these verses. Yet we do no one any good by watering down or twisting the truth. People can only be saved by repenting of their sins and believing in the gospel. Like it or not, “No one comes to the Father except through [Christ]” (14:6).

Voices from CHURCH HISTORY

“Many people will believe that the same God of Love, who created them, also has a purpose for their lives. . . . [M]any will even listen to you talk about Jesus Christ so long as you talk about him as a man who came to . . . set an example for us to follow. However, if you talk about the Lord Jesus Christ as the Savior, as the One who died to save sinners, there you will find hostility and vigorous rejection.”⁷

—James Montgomery Boice (1938–2000)

THEOLOGY Connection

FAITH: Biblical faith is the resting or trusting in Christ alone for salvation (John 3:16-21). More than being simply a mental agreement of historical facts, genuine faith begins with a recognition and confession of the truth of the gospel (1 John 4:13-16), followed by a receiving of Christ as Lord and Savior of one's life (John 1:10-13). Biblical faith is not blind faith, for it rests on the historical life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

Broken hearts for the lost should drive believers to spread the good news of Christ. It is counterproductive to distort the truth of Scripture if it makes unbelievers uncomfortable. This is the stark truth that has driven missions for two thousand years and called sinners to faith in Christ. The Holy Spirit has used this reality to fan the flames of gospel work all over the world.

Skeptics and antagonists alike may question the goodness of God because He restricts salvation to just one path, but we believers understand the true condition of humankind. All of humanity has sinned and is unworthy of God's grace and mercy (Rom. 3:10-18,23). Our hearts are wicked and full of deceit (Jer. 17:9). Each of us has turned from God. Our dire condition is magnified when we compare our sinful state to the infinite righteousness and holiness of God. In and of ourselves, we cannot measure up.

God does not owe us anything, and He would be completely just and fair in condemning us all for our sins. In His love and mercy, however, God has made a way. He sent His Son to die for our sins. And "the one who believes in the Son has eternal life, but the one who rejects the Son will not see life" (John 3:36).

The Bible describes faith as a trusting surrender. Thus, to have saving faith, we must trust in the saving work and power of Jesus. To truly trust in the Lord, we must humble ourselves before Him. Submission is the key. We cannot truly trust in Jesus's saving work and still be lord of our own lives. True faith is displayed by the bending of the knee to Jesus's supremacy and rule. Therefore, true belief is always accompanied by obedience (Luke 9:23; Rom. 1:5; 2 Thess. 1:8; Heb. 11:8). The two cannot be separated.

Key Concept: Belief involves acknowledging the supremacy of Jesus.

Notes



HEAD

How might a lack of knowledge about Jesus limit your ability to believe in Him?



HEART

In what ways should you commit to humble yourself before Jesus?



HANDS

How will you encourage someone this week to have a humble attitude before Christ?



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WATER TO LIVING WATER



CORE PASSAGE: JOHN 4:7-11,13-15,19-23,25-26

Context: In John 3, Jesus revealed to Nicodemus that belief in Jesus's death to pay for sins was required to enter the kingdom of God. In John 4, Jesus revealed to a non-Jewish woman with a sinful past that religious tribalism had no place in His mission to redeem sinners. Though Jews and Samaritans generally steered clear of one another, Jesus spoke with a Samaritan woman who needed the eternal satisfaction only He could bring.

Key Concept: Jesus came to give eternal life to all who believe in and worship Him.

DAILY READINGS

- Day 1:** John 4:1-10
- Day 2:** John 4:11-18
- Day 3:** John 4:19-26
- Day 4:** John 4:27-38
- Day 5:** John 4:39-42
- Day 6:** Psalm 42

Jesus gives us living water (John 4:7-11,13-15).

⁷ A woman of Samaria came to draw water. “Give me a drink,” Jesus said to her, ⁸ because his disciples had gone into town to buy food. ⁹ “How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a Samaritan woman?” she asked him. For Jews do not associate with Samaritans. ¹⁰ Jesus answered, “If you knew the gift of God, and who is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would ask him, and he would give you living water.” ¹¹ “Sir,” said the woman, “you don’t even have a bucket, and the well is deep. So where do you get this ‘living water’? . . .” ¹³ Jesus said, “Everyone who drinks from this water will get thirsty again. ¹⁴ But whoever drinks from the water that I will give him will never get thirsty again. In fact, the water I will give him will become a well of water springing up in him for eternal life.” ¹⁵ “Sir,” the woman said to him, “give me this water so that I won’t get thirsty and come here to draw water.”

A Divine Appointment

Jesus and His disciples left the Judean wilderness, where His disciples were baptizing people, and headed to Galilee (vv. 1-3). The straightest route would have been through Samaria. Many Jews, however, would go the long way around Samaria due to the disdain Jews and Samaritans had for one another. Their mutual contempt was due in part to the fall of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. In 722 BC, the Assyrians invaded Israel and transported large portions of the population to other nations while concurrently repopulating the land with other Assyrian captives. Some of the Israelites who were not deported intermarried with the foreigners and became syncretistic in their



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Notes

beliefs. The Samaritans were the descendants of these people. Eventually the Samaritans developed their own understanding of the religion and sacred writings—they only recognized their own version of the Pentateuch, the Law, as authoritative—and regarded Mount Gerizim as one of their holy sites.

John wrote that Jesus “had to travel through Samaria” (4:4). That would be true if Jesus were in a hurry to get to Galilee, but John didn’t mention that. More likely, this was a divine appointment.

In traveling through Samaria, Jesus and His disciples came to a well outside of Sychar (v. 5), and Jesus sat to rest beside “Jacob’s well” (v. 6). Kruse identifies Sychar as “very close to the site of ancient Shechem, . . . at the entrance to the valley separating the two mountains Gerizim and Ebal.”¹ The Old Testament doesn’t mention Jacob’s well, but the book of Joshua does mention that Joseph was buried in the area at Shechem on a piece of land his father, Jacob, had purchased and was an inheritance for Joseph’s descendants (Gen. 33:19; Josh. 24:32). Since landmarks such as wells rarely change over time, there is a historical site believed to be Jacob’s well. In fact, there is a church built over the traditional site of the well.

Wells are a source of life, especially in an arid land. With Jacob’s well, however, a traveler needed the right tools to access the water. A person couldn’t just walk up, reach in, and retrieve water from this well. If archaeologists are correct regarding the location of this well, it was about 100 feet deep.

Arriving around noon, the hottest time of the day, Jesus was tired from His journey, so He rested beside Jacob’s well (John 4:6). While He was sitting there (the disciples had gone into the town to buy food; v. 8),

“a woman of Samaria came to draw water,” and Jesus asked the woman, “Give me a drink” (v. 7).

The Samaritan woman came to the well at a strange hour; most people retrieved water in the mornings or the evenings. We can only speculate as to why she visited the well at an odd time. Whatever the reason, on this day, she had an extraordinary encounter.

Upon Jesus’s request, the Samaritan woman responded, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a Samaritan woman?” John added, “Jews do not associate with Samaritans” (v. 9). Generally speaking, devout, traditional Jews had nothing to do with Samaritans, whom they considered ritually unclean. Anything that touched the lips of a Samaritan was likewise defiled. Yet here Jesus asked a Samaritan for a drink—and not just a Samaritan but a woman.

In Jesus’s day, like some places in the Middle East today, it was improper and scandalous for a man to speak to any woman in public who was not his wife, mother, sister, or older family member. Some Jews were so strict in this regard that they wouldn’t even speak to their own wives in public, which could be why we know very little about the wives of the disciples. Additionally, this Samaritan woman appeared to be living in sin. Jesus later pointed out that she had five husbands and was now living with a man to whom she wasn’t married (vv. 16-18). This woman could have been rejected by her own people.

The spiritual significance of this event is unambiguous. Jesus fulfilled what Isaiah prophesied in Isaiah 55:5: “[Y]ou will summon a nation you do not know, and nations who do not know you will run to you.” Jesus was calling this woman from another nation to His side. People no longer needed to be ethnic

CHURCH Connection

Jesus crossed barriers to share the truth of Himself and the gospel. As believers today, we are to do the same, taking the gospel of Jesus to the ends of the earth.

Jews to be part of God’s chosen people. All nations, tongues, tribes, and people groups are called to God’s kingdom through faith in Jesus Christ. Those whom the world rejects will find their belonging with Christ.

In many ways, the Samaritan woman represents all of us. Though we are grave sinners, God in His love extends His grace to all peoples. Jerry Bridges said, “If God’s love for us is to be a solid foundation stone of devotion, we must realize that His love is entirely of grace, that it rests completely upon the work of Jesus Christ and flows to us through our union with Him.”² Jesus did not extend mercy toward the Samaritan woman because of anything good she did. Furthermore, He did not show mercy to her because of any unfortunate experiences in her life. He showed her love for the same reason He shows it to everyone—because He is love.

With what groups of people do you feel reluctant to share the gospel? Why?

The Living Water

After the Samaritan woman questioned why Jesus would ask her for a drink, Jesus immediately took charge of the conversation. He replied: “If you knew the gift of God, and who is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would ask him, and he would give you living water” (John 4:10). Jesus moved the conversation from a physical need to a spiritual one. Though Christians must be careful not to discard the physical needs of others, Jesus revealed that our greatest need is spiritual. Make no mistake, our physical life is dependent upon food, water, and shelter. And yet, our greatest need is not something the created world can

provide. As Paul wrote, we are dead in our “trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1). Though we may live a long earthly life, without Christ, we will perish for all eternity.

At first, the Samaritan woman did not understand Jesus. She asked: “Sir . . . you don’t even have a bucket, and the well is deep. So where do you get this ‘living water’?” (John 4:11). Jesus, however, was not speaking of a physical spring. Jesus was revealing Himself as God. In Jeremiah 2:13, God referred to Himself as “the fountain of living water” whom the people of Israel had rejected in favor of broken cisterns. Jesus was claiming to be a perpetual spring of clean, fresh, “living water.” He described Himself with a term used for God. Thus, Jesus was signifying His divine status.

The term “living water” can refer to spring water or moving water as opposed to stagnant or undrinkable water. But in the context of John’s Gospel, Jesus’s promise of “living water” is a reference to the gift of the Holy Spirit (John 7:37-39). Those who believe in Jesus will receive the Holy Spirit, who fulfills in us the promise of eternal life.

Jesus responded again to the Samaritan woman by saying: “Everyone who drinks from this water will get thirsty again. But whoever drinks from the water that I will give him will never get thirsty again” (John 4:13-14). Thirst is a natural and sometimes intense human craving. Jesus claimed to be able to satisfy such a craving, though not in the literal, physical sense. He was using something physical to teach something spiritual. Physical thirst can be satiated, but it will come back. We all crave something deeper, something more profound—we all crave the divine.

C. S. Lewis used the argument of desire to point to our greater need for God. Every natural desire we have

Voices from THE CHURCH

“Jesus gives the Holy Spirit as regenerator so believers are ‘born again.’ . . . The motif of water or ‘rivers of living water’ in the human spirit ‘springing up to eternal life’ refers to regeneration by the Spirit (John 4:13–14; 7:37–39; cf. John 3:5). Worship of and communion with God are possible only on the basis of the Spirit’s regenerating work (John 4:21–24).”³
–Malcolm Yarnell

has a corresponding reality to satisfy that desire. So Lewis wrote:

Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for these desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire: well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.⁴

Lewis was dovetailing off Jesus's claim: the most profound longing of humankind is to know God, and a corresponding person—Jesus—fulfills this desire.

In this narrative, Jesus encountered a woman who needed something more than water. She had spiritual desires that could not be satisfied by anything her religion offered, and Jesus was the remedy to her problem. He said: “Whoever drinks from the water that I will give him will never get thirsty again. In fact, the water I will give him will become a well of water springing up in him for eternal life” (v. 14). We all have a “God-shaped hole.” Looking to this world for satisfaction leaves us frustrated and empty. So Jesus promises something that cannot be found in this world: eternal, continuous satisfaction. He is the only One who satisfies our deepest longings and desires. He is the only One who offers eternal life.

How have you experienced the Holy Spirit's spiritual refreshing in your life?

Jesus clarified what worship is and that He is the Messiah (John 4:19-23,25-26).

Notes

¹⁹ “Sir,” the woman replied, “I see that you are a prophet.” ²⁰ Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews say that the place to worship is in Jerusalem.” ²¹ Jesus told her, “Believe me, woman, an hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.” ²² You Samaritans worship what you do not know. We worship what we do know, because salvation is from the Jews. ²³ But an hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in Spirit and in truth. Yes, the Father wants such people to worship him. . . . ²⁵ The woman said to him, “I know that the Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will explain everything to us.” ²⁶ Jesus told her, “I, the one speaking to you, am he.”

The True Worship to Come

The Samaritan woman had a spiritual sense, but it was misguided. She was, however, spiritually astute enough to discern that there was something different about Jesus. She said, “Sir . . . I see that you are a prophet” (v. 19). Of course, Jesus is the Prophet. He is the One to whom all other prophets pointed. Though Samaritans rejected the Jewish prophecies, even adherents of a syncretistic, false religion could detect that Jesus was no ordinary man.

The woman continued, “Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews say that the place to worship is in Jerusalem” (v. 20). The Samaritans developed an entire religious ideology that was distinct from the Jewish faith. The Jews rightly claimed the holiest

THEOLOGY Connection

EVANGELISM:

It is the duty and privilege of every Christian and of every church of the Lord Jesus Christ to make disciples of all nations. Missionary effort on the part of all is a spiritual necessity of the regenerate life and is expressly and repeatedly commanded in the teachings of Christ. The Lord Jesus Christ has commanded the preaching of the gospel to all nations.

and proper site for worship was in Jerusalem, the place God had chosen His name to dwell (1 Kings 8:29). The Samaritans claimed it was on Mount Gerizim. These differences distorted the Samaritans' understanding of who God is and how He interacts with His people. Not knowing who God is as He has revealed Himself in Scripture makes it impossible to worship Him correctly.

In response to her question, Jesus countered: "Believe me, woman, an hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem" (John 4:21). Upon the completion of Jesus's redemptive work, the geographical parameters for God's kingdom would expand. Jesus was not claiming His church would not need to meet regularly. He was not claiming we can worship however we prefer. As the Author, Creator, and Founder of our faith, Jesus sets the boundaries on our worship. Jesus was simply telling the woman that whom she worshiped was far more important than where she worshiped.

The Samaritans had lost their way. Jesus stated that the Samaritans worshiped what they did not know, and then He acknowledged that God's redemptive work and plan was carried out through the Jewish people (v. 22). As D. A. Carson said: "Just as the Jews stand within the stream of God's saving revelation, so also can it be said that they are the vehicle of that revelation, the historical matrix out of which that revelation emerges."⁵

Jesus continued: "But an hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and in truth" (v. 23). Jesus's incarnation, death, and resurrection created an intentional and planned spiritual revolution—a new era in salvation history. In the church age, all who repent of their

sins and believe in the gospel are adopted into the family of God (Rom. 8:14-17; Gal. 4:4-7). In the kingdom of Christ, worship is not limited by geographical or ethnic parameters. Since the Father is spirit, He is not bound by time and space. Under the old covenant, the Jews were required to appear in the temple at certain feasts for specific sacrifices, but Jesus's perfect, final sacrifice changed all of that. Thus, the kingdom of God spread out from Jerusalem and Judea to Samaria and to the entire world (Acts 1:8).

True worship of God the Father is done in light of and because of the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, and it is empowered by the Holy Spirit. But what did Jesus mean when He said we must worship in Spirit and in truth? In Jesus's day, it was assumed by devout Jews and religious Samaritans that encountering the divine only happened at the temple or holy site. Now, because of the redemptive work of Christ on the cross, all may truly worship and encounter God wherever they are. Not only that, but we ourselves are holy vessels for the service and worship of God. All other methods of worship are false. All other religions that claim to worship outside of Christ are false. Worship done in Spirit and truth is worship of the triune God.

How does the health of our personal relationship with Jesus impact our ability to worship in Spirit and truth?

The Awaited Messiah

Like the Jews, the Samaritans believed a Messiah was coming, although he would simply be a prophet like Moses. The Samaritan woman knew enough about Jewish beliefs to know the name "Christ." Yet her view

WORD Study

MESSIAH: The term *Messiah* comes from the Hebrew word which means “anointed one.” The Greek translation of Messiah is *christos*, “Christ” in English. The Old Testament prophesied that the Messiah would deliver God’s people from oppression. Specifically, He would do redemptive deeds (Isa. 61:1-2), be born of a virgin (7:14), and bear the sins of His people by suffering in their place (52:13–53:12).

of the Messiah was limited. To her, the Messiah would be a source of leadership and information but not a redeemer. In this passage, Jesus made one of His more direct claims of messiahship. He told the woman, “I, the one speaking to you, am he” (John 4:26).

This was no simple chance meeting. When the Samaritan woman encountered Jesus, it changed her life. She left her water jar and went about the work of an evangelist (vv. 28-30). Her whole reason for coming to the well was abandoned. What she received, however, was living water that offered eternal life to her and the people who came to meet Jesus based on the good news she shared (vv. 39-42).

When a person truly encounters Jesus, life gets disrupted. When we are confronted by the Savior of the world, we cannot continue on the same path. The Samaritan woman met Jesus, and He changed her life.

Amazingly, Jesus’s first direct claim to be the Messiah was to a sinful Samaritan woman. She wasn’t expecting to be introduced to the God of all creation that day. It probably was a day like every other until she met the Great I AM. God uses the mundane moments of our lives as His spiritual playground. Moses and David were tending sheep. Joseph was checking on his brothers. Mary was a betrothed Nazareth girl. Paul was riding to Damascus. The variable that changed the mundane to the extraordinary was an abrupt encounter with God. When God appears, things cannot go back to normal.

How can you take the gospel to people who do not realize Jesus is the Messiah?

Key Concept: Jesus came to give eternal life to all who believe in and worship Him.

 **HEAD**

What are some ways you can study about Jesus to know Him more deeply?

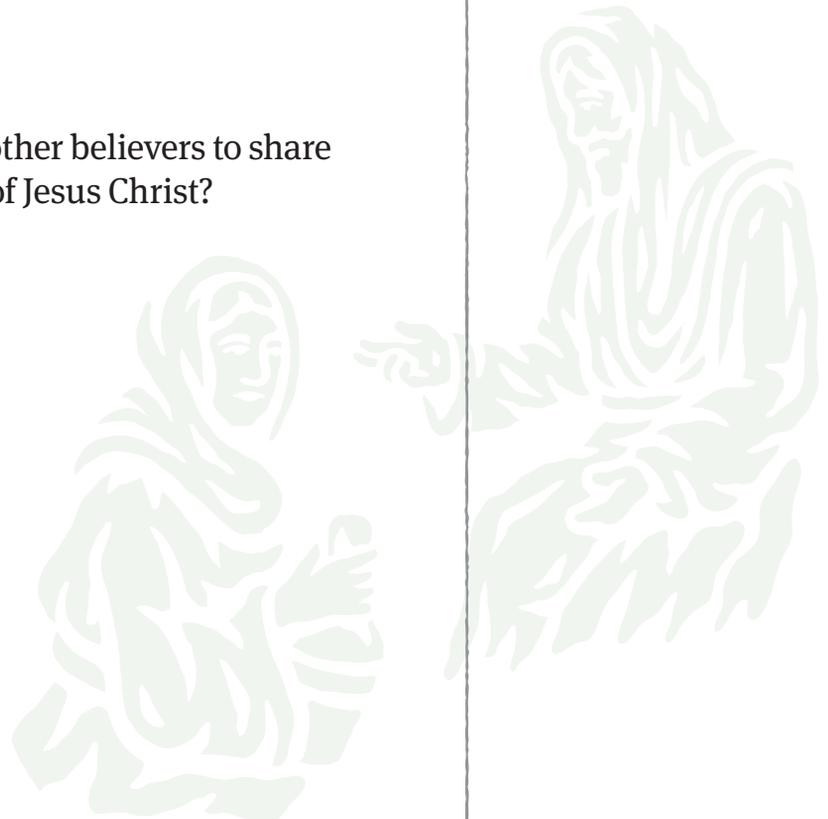
 **HEART**

How might your life evidence spiritual dryness and thirst, and how can you address that thirst?

 **HANDS**

How can you encourage other believers to share regularly the good news of Jesus Christ?

Notes



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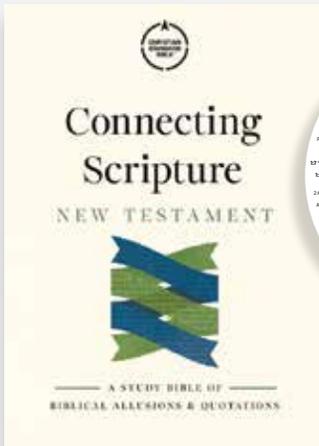
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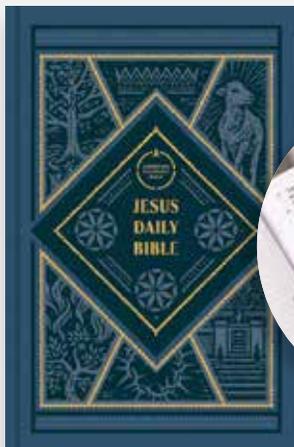
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THE SON HAS COME

The eternal Son of God entered history with humble beginnings as a baby but fulfilled prophecies from Old Testament writers. He came as fully God and fully man to grow in wisdom and stature. He was baptized and tempted but never sinned because He was the spotless Lamb of God we needed to take away the sins of the world. Loved by some and hated by others, Jesus disrupted the religious standards of the day to usher forth the kingdom of God to bring salvation to all nations. He truly is greater than us, for He is the Son of Man and the Son of God, our Savior.

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