

MATTHEW & MARK – REDISCOVERING JESUS

dr matthew jacoby

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AUG-OCT 2024

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THIS ISSUE

thrive

AUG-OCT 2024

MATTHEW & MARK

— rediscovering Jesus

In this edition of *Thrive* we will be following the life and teaching of Jesus in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark together. This will be the condensation of a series of messages I preached on the Life of Christ at my church. My desire was to combine the best of some very positive developments in recent Biblical scholarship with an open heart to what God is saying to us today through the teaching of Jesus and the events of his life. In the process of this series I feel like I rediscovered Jesus in a significant way and learned things that have become life changing for me. It is my hope that in this edition of *Thrive* I can communicate these things so that you will have the same experience.

MJ

THE MESSIAH IS COME

Matthew 1

THURSDAY

1 AUG

The Gospel of Matthew is an account of the life and teaching of Jesus written by a Jewish author for a Jewish readership. Matthew focuses on Jesus as the Messiah (anointed one) of Israel who comes to call his people into the new age of the Kingdom of Heaven. For the Jews, family history was vital, particularly when it comes to the Messiah who was to be a descendant of David. Matthew demonstrates that Jesus is not only a descendant of David but that his descent to David runs right through the royal lineage from Solomon to Zerubbabel. This is no ordinary Davidic lineage. Any Jew would have been impressed. When Jesus was born, Israel had only a half-Jewish king (Herod the Great) who was little more than a Roman puppet. Judea was under Roman occupation and the Jews considered themselves to be captives now as much as they were when they were exiles in Babylon. They were therefore longing for God to send his appointed deliverer, the Messiah, to release them from their captivity and rule over them as a free people. Matthew announces that, in Jesus, this hope is fulfilled. But Jesus is going to radically redefine this hope and give the prophecies of the new Messianic age a much deeper and broader meaning. What the people needed salvation from was not the Romans, but their own sins. If they could overcome the power of sin in their own lives, they would remain free whoever it was that ruled over them politically. God may not always give us what we want but he always gives us what we need.

Read Matthew 1

Ask God to lead you to greater freedom.

FRIDAY
2 AUG

NATIONS WILL COME

Matthew **2:1-12**

Matthew's Gospel focuses on the theme of fulfilment. Matthew wants to demonstrate how Jesus has fulfilled the Scriptures and, therefore, how God has been faithful to his covenant promises. It was predicted, to cite one example, that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. That, of course, is precisely where Jesus was born. In a number of different passages in the Old Testament it was also predicted that, in the Messianic age, the nations would come to God's people. Isaiah 60:3: "Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn." The visit of the Magi, probably a group of Zoroastrian astrologers from the region of Persia, signifies the beginning of the fulfilment of this promise. As soon as Jesus is born, God begins to summon the nations to him, as Isaiah also declares: "Surely you will summon nations you know not, and nations you do not know will come running to you" (Isaiah 55:5). Jesus tells us that we are the light of the world. God wants to make you into a beacon star in a dark world. If you shine, God will bring people to you who need light. He probably already has. A lot of Christians find it hard to engage others with their faith, and the reason is mostly due to a misunderstanding about what we must do. God doesn't want us to preach *at* people and win arguments. He simply wants us to be open windows to the light of God's Kingdom. Simply be open about your relationship with God and see what happens.

Read Matthew 2:1-12

Ask God to give you opportunities
to talk about your faith with others.

Opposition to Jesus – Matthew 2

The events of Matthew 2 foreshadow the opposition to the authority of Jesus that would continue throughout his life and even right through church history. When Jesus comes to us, he comes with an absolute claim over our lives. If you choose to obstinately hold on to goals and dreams that are not of God, then you will naturally see Jesus as a threat. A lot of people feel threatened by Jesus. Herod was a very ambitious man. He wanted to be a great king like Solomon, so he mimicked Solomon by making extravagant renovations to the temple. He did this to try and win the respect of the people, but the Jews continued to despise him, which only made him more desperate to hold onto power. So, it is not surprising that we find Herod willing to destroy all the baby boys in Bethlehem to eradicate any potential rivals, particularly if they happened to be legitimate candidates for the throne. The fact that foreign dignitaries, guided by a star, were coming to pay homage to a newborn king in Judea made it all the more evident to Herod that this rival was probably the real deal. You would think that Herod would be afraid to defy God like this. But he had his ambitions, and he was prepared to fight God for them. He had, after all, killed some of his own sons for similar reasons. Be careful of your ambitions lest they put you in conflict with God. Selfish ambition is the hardest thing to yield over to God, but it is also the thing that is most oppressive to us.

Read **Matthew 2**. Yield all your dreams and ambitions over to God and find freedom from the things that oppress you.

MONDAY
5 AUG

PREPARE THE WAY

Matthew **3** & Mark **1:1-13**

Throughout the Bible, God always announces what he is going to do before he does it. This word-act pattern signifies that God is not simply reacting to human circumstances. Rather, he acts according to his own predetermined plan. By announcing this plan God then enables his people to live goal-oriented lives. When God reminds them and confirms his plan, he does so to get his people back on the track of his purpose. So here, just before the much-awaited moment when the Messiah begins his ministry, God sends a prophet, John the Baptist. John's role is to get God's people back on track to prepare them for what God is about to do through Jesus. At this point the people had waited a long time without seeing much in the way of obvious divine activity. Naturally, many were losing hope. 'Hope' is an attitude of anticipation of things up ahead; it is a passionate expectation that motivates us in the present to keep working towards what is anticipated. Because they had lost hope, the Jews were also wandering off the path and taking their lives in their own hands. This can happen to us too, when we feel that God isn't doing much in our lives. The great danger, however, is that when God does act, we will miss it because our eyes are diverted from the goal. It was the greatest of tragedies that most of the Jews who saw Jesus did not recognise him. They missed the coming of their Messiah because their hopes were diverted to other things.

Read Matthew 3 and Mark 1:1-13

Reflect on how you may have lost hope and ask God to renew your vision for his purpose.

THE WAY IS DOWN

Matthew 4:1-11

TUESDAY

6 AUG

Jesus had just been declared by God to be the ‘Son of God’ when he humbled himself and submitted to John’s baptism. It seemed strange to John that the Messiah should stoop down like this, but Jesus had insisted on it because he had come to identify with broken people. Now, in chapter 4, we see that Satan challenges Jesus’ identity. He challenges Jesus to prove himself by certain works of power. But Jesus refuses and in doing so he teaches us a vital lesson. Satan will try to convince you that you are insignificant unless you prove yourself in some way through various achievements. He tells us: “The way is UP! You must prove yourself by rising up and being more successful and notable than others.” But Jesus tells us that the way is DOWN. Those who heed Satan’s lies end up being slaves to onerous endeavours to constantly validate themselves by what they do or how they look. But those who humble themselves and give up such worldly ambitions will find freedom. They will be declared to be God’s children, not by works, but by the grace of God alone who delights in lifting up those who yield to him. The way is DOWN. Look for opportunities to humble yourself and serve others. You will find God there. Search your heart for competitive and prideful agendas and cast these out. Submit to God alone. When you do this you will gain the same kind of victory over Satan that Jesus did.

Read Matthew 4:1-11

Think of ways in which you can serve others more.

WEDNESDAY

7 AUG

THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

Matthew 4:12-17

Jesus began his public ministry with a momentous announcement: “The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.” For centuries, the Jews had anticipated a time when God would deliver them from oppression and when he himself would rule over them through an anointed Davidic king. But they had interpreted the Scriptures through the lens of their own selfish ambitions, as we all probably would have done. For them, the Messianic promises meant that God was going to make life more comfortable for them. They believed that God was going to raise up a king who would lead them in a battle to deliver them from their political overlords, the Romans. Jesus announced that the expected time had come, but he would spend much of his ministry redefining the nature of the Kingdom. What he meant by his announcement was that God was re-establishing his liberating rule in people’s lives again. It was not the Romans who were oppressing the people but Satan who rules people’s hearts. He does this by enslaving us to onerous ambitions that are not of God (but are often made to look like God’s plan). Jesus’ message promised that, if the people would forsake their selfish agendas (i.e. repent), then they would be a free people whoever it was that ruled over them politically. Freedom is not a matter of getting what you want. A drug addict who gets his drugs is not free as a result; he is more a slave. Freedom is the ability to shun what is bad for you and to desire what is best for you. When God rules in your heart you are truly free.

Read Matthew 4:12-17

Turn away from selfish agendas and yield yourself to God’s rule.

THE FIRST CHOICE

Matthew 4:18-25

THURSDAY

8 AUG

When the Messiah, the Son of God, begins his ministry who does he go to first? Who does he call? Let's consider the candidates. First of all, there were the Sadducees, the ruling Priestly class. The High Priest was the most influential person in Judea at the time. To many, that would have been an obvious place to go. But he doesn't go to them. The most popular contenders would have been the Pharisees. They were the elders and 'rabbis,' the pious religious people of the day. But Jesus didn't call them. My choice would have been the Essenes, a monastic community of devoted followers of Yahweh who lived in the desert at Qumran next to the Dead Sea. They were waiting for the Messiah to come and in the meantime observed a rigorous life of austerity and spiritual discipline. When I read their writings (in the Dead Sea scrolls) I couldn't help but feel that they should have at least got a visit from Jesus, but we have no mention of them in the Gospels. The other likely candidates would be the poor peasants, given God's expressed concern for the poor, but it wasn't even the peasants that Jesus went to. So, who did he call? According to Matthew 4:13 Jesus went to Capernaum, a city that was far from being a hub of Jewish piety, and there he first called some fishermen to be his disciples. Not poor, not rich, just 'middle-of-the-road' fishermen. The significant thing about this choice is the seeming insignificance of the people Jesus chose. God loves to do extraordinary things through ordinary people!

Read Matthew 4:18-25

Give thanks to God that he still calls ordinary people today and works in and through our lives.

FRIDAY
9 AUG

SIGNS OF THE KINGDOM

Mark 1:21-2:12

We turn over today to the Gospel of Mark. Much of Mark is identical to Matthew though Mark includes a lot less material than Matthew. In the material that Mark does include though, he sometimes gives more details than Matthew. Here, Mark expands on Jesus' early ministry and the many miraculous deeds he did. Why did Jesus perform miracles? It is clear that Jesus did *not* perform miracles to pull a crowd. He would often tell people not to tell others what he had done precisely to avoid gaining a popular following. Admiring spectators are of no use to God's purpose. The important thing about Jesus' mighty deeds was *not* that he was breaking natural laws. That was not the point. Jesus' mighty deeds were *signs of the Kingdom*. When Jesus announced, "The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand," he was saying that God's rule was breaking into the world and that his purpose was prevailing over that of the forces of evil and corruption. It would have been meaningless to say this and not demonstrate it. It would be like me telling my kids that we have tickets to see a film and then not actually going to the cinema. If you are going to announce the good news that God has opened the doors of his Kingdom so that we can be reconciled to him and restored, then you better be ready to prove it. If positive change is now possible then let that be evident in you. Changed people change people. Show people the power of God by allowing God to change you.

Read Mark 1:21-2:12

Ask God to transform your life and make you an agent of his transformation in the lives of others.

The Highest Honour – Matthew **5:1-12**

When the Jews heard Jesus' announcement about the Kingdom of God they assumed this meant that Jesus was going to lead a revolution to oust the Romans by force and establish Israel as an independent state. So, as Jesus announces the coming of the Kingdom, he must also *redefine the nature of the Kingdom*. All of his teaching relates to this in some way. In the 'Beatitudes' that open the famous 'Sermon on the Mount', Jesus answers the question: 'Who is it that receives the highest honour from God? Who gets to lead the Kingdom charge? Who gets the top positions in this Kingdom?' Who, in other words, are the 'blessed ones'? The answer is staggeringly countercultural: it is not those who have it all together and who have succeeded in doing great works of piety. It is the poor in spirit, the broken hearted and the meek. It is not those who crusade against evildoers and rise up against the Romans, as was assumed at the time. It is the merciful; those innocent of vengeance; the peacemakers, and even those who are willing to bear persecution without retaliation. These are the kinds of people who will win the battle that Jesus wants to fight, not a battle against flesh and blood, but a battle against spiritual forces of evil in the world. If you feel that you are the last person that God would choose to lead the charge in his Kingdom, then you are probably the most likely person. The highest honour in the Kingdom of God goes to those who know they are not qualified, but who want to be a part of it.

Read **Matthew 5:1-12**. Ask God to use you to bless someone today.

In every life situation we should focus, not primarily on what we should DO, but on who God has called us to BE. Our actions must not flow from an achievement orientation but from an identity rooted in God. In the 'Sermon on the Mount' Jesus is redefining how God's Kingdom plan works. Rather than focusing on what his people must DO, Jesus focuses on what they must BE. This began in the Beatitudes and now continues with two pictures: he describes us as both salt and light. Jesus' charge against first century Judaism was that it had lost its flavour. It had the form of godliness but not the flavour. We are to be the flavour of God in the world, that is, the flavour of a loving father who wants to reach out in grace to people. You attain the flavour of God when you are filled with God's Spirit and filled with his love. In this way, we too become 'the light of the world'. When we are filled with light we become a light to others. Has your life lost the flavour of God? Has the light of God dimmed in you? If so, then don't try to compensate for this by doing more. It is not DOING that God wants us to focus on but BEING. Reconnect with God, yield yourself to him, be filled with his love and peace, rest in him, and then you will BE both salt and light in the world. Find where there is darkness and shine there. Find where you can add the flavour of God and be there. It is as simple as that.

Read Matthew 5:13-16

Reflect on who needs some light and flavour in their lives.

FULFILLING THE LAW

Matthew 5:17-20

TUESDAY
13 AUG

The problem with the Pharisees was that they were following the letter of the law but not *fulfilling* the purpose of the law. For them, the law was a spiritual test to determine who was in and who was out of the Kingdom of God. But the law was never meant to function this way. The law of God is like the markers on the edge of a road that help you to see where the road is. The law points to where we must go, but just because you keep the law does not mean you are going anywhere. Many Christians get preoccupied with upholding correct beliefs as though Jesus died to found a new theological school. Doctrine is important, as indeed the law is important. However, there are plenty of people in the world who believe all the right things but who are going nowhere. It is possible to get so preoccupied with ideas and so defensive about your theological persuasion that you mistake the mission of God with contending for a system of ideas. When this happens, the point has been missed. Jesus died on the cross so that we could have a relationship with God. Having a loving *relationship* with God that flows out into a life of love towards others is the point of everything written in the Bible. Everything else is a means towards this end. Life is not about keeping a law of ideas or religious practice. It is about *fulfilling* the purpose of the law.

Read Matthew 5:17-20

Reflect on the health of your relationship with God.

WEDNESDAY

14 AUG

CHARACTER FOCUS

Matthew 5:17-48

The purpose of the law is not to set a measure by which you can attain the acceptance and favour of God. If you treat it in this way then you will be inclined to always think about morals and how you are acting. You might even start thinking about what you can 'get away with'. This is not what Jesus wants us to focus on. Jesus wants us to focus on the kinds of people he wants us to *be*. He wants us to focus on *character*. God gives us our spiritual status as a gift. He receives us as sons and daughters without any reference to what we have or haven't done. Our failures are all covered by Jesus' death which paid for all our sins. Since you are a child of God, Jesus wants you to learn how to live up to who you already are. Your rate of success in this does not change your status. Now that we are God's children, we should be focused on aligning our hearts with the heart of God. When Jesus teaches on the law in Matthew 5 his focus is on *character*. God is not interested in mechanical ethics. He is not requiring us to earn his favour. He wants us to live the full life that he has freely opened up for us. Life begins in the heart and mind. When we recognise the dysfunctions in our desires and in our imaginations and when we allow God to transform us, here then we are truly walking with God.

Read Matthew 5:17-48

Think about the kind of person you want to be and ask God to mould you according to his desire for you.

Matthew 6:1–7:12

Whether you live for the approval of other people or the approval of God will make every bit of difference to how you live. In first-century Jewish society the people who were respected were those who were pious, wise and wealthy. A pious person was recognised by three habits: almsgiving, prayer and fasting. Many people did these things to be respected and admired by other people. Jesus exposes this in Matthew 6. He answers this problem by calling for a change in perspective. He calls us to lift up our gaze from the competitive rat-race of this world and live in the realm of God's Kingdom, allowing his values to rule our lives. When you live for the approval of other people you are making them the judges of your life. This is a kind of idolatry because only God has the right to approve your life. We must stop making man into the judge, whether it be us or other people. Only God has the right to assess our lives. We should therefore only concern ourselves with who and what God wants us to be. Whether you are successful in the eyes of the world is completely irrelevant. Lift your gaze beyond the futile competitive agendas of the world and step up into the Kingdom. Seek the Kingdom. Seek to have your eyes open to the reality of the Kingdom. And if you seek you will find; if you knock, the door will be opened to you; if you ask you shall receive.

Read Matthew 6:1-7:12

Ask God to open your eyes to what is most important.

FRIDAY
16 AUG

THE PATTERN OF PRAYER

Matthew **6:9-13**

The Lord's Prayer is a model or pattern for us to learn how to pray. In the first place we find an act of worship: the acknowledgement and worship of God as our loving Father. Nothing is more important to prayer than worship. Before you ask God for anything, let your heart be surrendered and sensitive to who he is and his fatherly love for you. When you find that posture of worship then your heart will be aligned with God's desires. This is when you can begin to pray for a specific situation where you would like to see the Kingdom of God invade your world. And it is only in the light of the bigger picture of God's Kingdom agenda that you can rightly perceive your own needs. You may well realise that God wants to give you far more than you imagined. Or, you may realise that what you have previously desired is not so desirable in the light of the greater things of God. The confession of sin, also included in Jesus' prayer, is important as a way of recognising where other agendas and motives have hijacked our hearts. This process of recognition and confession removes the obstacles within us so that the Kingdom of God can come fully into our lives and truly deliver us from evil.

Read Matthew 6:9-13

Worship and pray to God using the Lord's Prayer as your model.

Worry – Matthew **6:25-34**

It is possible to live without worry. Not only is it possible not to worry, but Jesus actually *forbids* us from worrying. Not only do you gain nothing from worry, but you can actually do yourself a lot of damage. It's bad for your physical and mental health. And what is the point? You cannot control your circumstances, so why stress over them? The real issue with worry is that it involves us taking on a prerogative that belongs to God alone. You belong to God and therefore your life is *his* concern. You are not meant to carry the weight of your own life. That is God's prerogative. Tomorrow belongs to God. It is not for you to try to determine what happens tomorrow. If you would only get your eyes off the future and engage with the present then you would discover God. God is *present*. If you are always looking to the future, then you will be distracted from what God wants to show you in the present. This is why we so often miss God. I encourage you today to *give tomorrow over to God*. Give it back as something that always belonged to him. As you do this, seek to discern what God is asking you to do *now*. You can't control the future but there are choices that you can make now that will determine *who you will be* tomorrow, whatever may take place. That is your responsibility. The rest is God's responsibility. Let God be God.

Read **Matthew 6:25-34**. Ask God to lift the burdens of your life off your shoulders.

God is the judge of mankind and only he has the right to an opinion on the spiritual status of a person. If God is willing to forgive and show grace and kindness to a person, then who are we to think and act differently? If God is willing to put aside a person's sins, then so should we. When we take the position of judge over other people, we are putting ourselves in God's place, which puts us in conflict with God. This is a serious sin and far worse than any surface level 'moral' transgression. We are most inclined to judge others for some moral failure. Ironically, however, when we take this judgemental attitude, we are committing a more serious sin than the one we are judging the other person for. There may be significant distinctions between people from a moral perspective. One may indeed be more morally observant than another. But moral failure isn't the main problem with people. The real core problem is that of independence and autonomy: we live without God and in defiance of his absolute claim on our lives. We all do this far too much, and, in this sense, we are all in the same boat. A person might live a moral life outwardly and yet do so independently of God. Such a person is in a far worse state than one who struggles morally but earnestly seeks God's grace and help. Let's stop preoccupying ourselves with other people's sins and start paying attention to our own. We would all be better off if we did this.

Read Matthew 7:1-6

Ask God to show you what concerns him
most in your life right now.

ASK, SEEK, KNOCK

Matthew 7:7-12

TUESDAY
20 AUG

God wants to give you good things. In fact, he wants you to have the best. If you pray for something and don't receive what you pray for it may be that God has a better idea than what you had. God wants to give us what we want, but most of all he wants to *transform* what we want *so that we always want what is best*. I now appreciate the healthy food my mother gave me when I was young, but I can tell you, I didn't appreciate it at the time. With maturity, however, I have come to love healthy food because I have acquired a healthier appetite. That is what God wants to do for us. He wants us to have a healthy appetite for what is best, and he wants to give us what is best in abundance. The way to develop an appetite for what is best is simply to pursue and consume it. The more of God's good gifts you pursue the more you will desire these things and the less satisfying other things will be. The greatest gift of God is the Holy Spirit who brings peace and joy into our hearts. When you gain *his* peace and joy, then you will be able to rest in contentment and you will be freed from the addictive need for things that satisfy the soul for only a moment. When you receive your peace and joy from God, then you will be free to enjoy other things for what they are because you won't need them to fill the gap left by the absence of God.

Read Matthew 7:7-12

Ask God to fill you afresh with his Spirit. Seek God's face and knock on the door of his presence.

WEDNESDAY

21 AUG

TRUE SUCCESS

Matthew 7:13-29

How does God assess our lives? Jesus answers this question in the last part of the Sermon on the Mount. God is not expecting us to rack up a list of great moral-spiritual achievements. It is not about how much money you give or how many people you minister to or how much good you do. What God wants from each one of us is simply to walk the path that he has for us. You have to be intentional about this because the path of worldly success is a broad way and most people find it hard to resist. This is ironic because, of all the options available to us, the path to worldly success is by far the hardest option. The criteria by which the world measures success is harsh. You must labour endlessly to keep up with its demands. All that God requires, on the other hand, is that you simply walk the path he has set before you and do what he has prepared for you to do. If you do this, you will attain something far better than worldly success: you will be *fruitful*. Your life will, in other words, have a lasting and significant effect within what God is doing in this world, and this is all that matters. The pathway of God may not be easy. As Jesus says, there will be 'storms'. But when you are walking in God's path and living for God's agenda these storms will not topple you because the pathway of God is a sure thing.

Read Matthew 7:13-29

Reflect on which pathway your life is on.

The Kingdom of God is not on the defensive. We are not defending ourselves against evil, we are conquering evil with good. The people of God in the first century were entirely defensive in their attitude toward outsiders. There was an aspect of this that was appropriate, because, for a time, God wanted his people to keep themselves from being contaminated by evil influences. But Jesus was announcing a new age in which the Spirit of God was being given to God's people so that they would be the ones doing the influencing. In God's Kingdom evil does not contaminate good but good transforms evil. Jesus shocked people by associating with those who were traditionally 'unclean' like lepers and particularly Romans. But Jesus was demonstrating the way the Kingdom of God works. We all have a tendency to live defensively. Thousands of years of bloody human history has ingrained a deep fear within us that sees us living like shell creatures in our little fortress-lifestyles. But God is calling you to break out of that shell and step into the world of others in love and care. The Jews could not accept Jesus because his works did not fit into their small-world defensive stance. God wants to do wonderful things in your life that are not going to fit into your small world. They may not fit into the way you see things. They may not fit with what you expected or even desired. So, if you are to accept Jesus you will need to allow God to break your world open.

Read Matthew 8:1-13

Ask God to open up your world.

FRIDAY
23 AUG

RECRUITING SINNERS

Mark **2:13-17**

Tax collectors were among the most despised individuals in first century Judea. They were mostly Jews who worked for the Roman occupation. They were therefore seen as traitors to their own people. This would have been bad enough. Worse still was the fact that they invariably enriched themselves by taking far more than they needed to fulfil the Roman quota. The tax collectors were, in other words, corrupt officials who exploited their own people. Scores of families in the area where Levi collected taxes would have been impoverished and subject to terrible deprivation because of this man's exploitation. That Jesus should then befriend Levi was a scandal to the whole region. That he should call him to be his disciple was unthinkable! But Jesus was signalling something about the nature of his movement. It is not a revolutionary movement that seeks to condemn evil, but a movement of grace that seeks to transform the lives of evil doers. And the best people to carry this movement forward would be very sinful people who had nevertheless received forgiveness. God is recruiting for mission, and he wants sinful people, not righteous people, to become his messengers of grace. There are, of course, no righteous people (Romans 3:10ff), but many people think they are 'good enough' by moral standards. That's a shallow standard. God looks deeper than this, and there at the core of our being we are deeply conflicted and corrupt. If you don't agree with this, then Jesus is not for you. But if you feel this to be the case with you, then you are just the sort of person Jesus wants to recruit.

Read Mark 2:13-17

Thank God for his grace to you and ask him for opportunities to share this with others.

Restored Humanity – Matthew **8:14-9:8**

The Jews saw themselves as being still in 'exile' so long as the Romans occupied their land. God had promised that he would send his people a deliverer, the Messiah, who would save them from captivity. Jesus fulfilled this role, but he also redefined it. It was much broader than the Jews thought. Jesus wasn't coming to save them from Roman oppression; he was coming to reverse the exile of humanity since Adam and Eve's expulsion from Eden. Jesus had come, not just to give Israel authority in the promised land but to give humankind authority on the earth. What Jesus is doing through his 'works of power' is demonstrating what this looks like. These works are not just demonstrations of what God can do. It goes without saying that God can do anything. These mighty works are demonstrating the authority that God gave to human beings in the beginning to subdue the earth and rule over it (Genesis 1:28). Jesus portrayed himself as the second Adam who had come to restore to humankind what the first Adam lost. Following the series of mighty works described in chapters 8-9 we find Jesus sending his disciples out to do the same things that he did (10:1ff). This doesn't mean that we are to be walking miracle sideshows. That's not the point. God wants to restore humankind to a position of authority on earth. But note that authority implies responsibility. When you take responsibility, you step into authority. God has committed himself to working through us. Take responsibility for your world and the people around you and see what God will do through you.

Read **Matthew 8:14-9:8**. Reflect on the situations and the people you will encounter today. Take responsibility for what God is calling you to be and pray for those people.

MONDAY
26 AUG

KINGDOM POWER

Mark 4:35-5:20

When reading the Gospels, it is important to take note of the way the Gospel writers ordered the events of Jesus' life. They are often ordered thematically, rather than chronologically, to say something about Jesus. This is the case in the series of miracle stories that follow the parables of the coming of the Kingdom in Mark 4. This sequence of miracles is intended to demonstrate the power of the Kingdom that Jesus had taught about in his parables. The first miracle, the calming of the storm at sea, is particularly significant given the strong Ancient Near Eastern association of the seas with the primeval forces of chaos and death. We see this association reflected elsewhere in Scripture, for example, with the beasts of Daniel 7 and Revelation 13 coming *out of the sea*. Ancient pagan myths abound in stories of divine warriors who conquer the forces of chaos and death (or a sea-dwelling dragon) represented by the sea. So, to the disciples, this miracle did not just demonstrate Jesus' authority over nature but also over the demonic forces of chaos which raged against God's purpose. It is not surprising that this miracle is followed (in Mark 5) by the exorcism of a whole legion of demons. Jesus is highlighting his victory over Satan. There are many things that can come to control our lives and it is easy to feel defeated by the issues that keep us bound. Jesus' authority, however, supersedes all others. The more he rules your life the freer you become. Don't try to solve your own problems. Take them to Jesus and follow him.

Read Mark 4:35-5:20

Take your biggest present problem to Jesus
and ask him to help you and guide you forward.

I have pointed out how the sequence of events in the Gospels is significant. We looked at the calming of the storm on the Sea of Galilee and the exorcism of the legion of demons and how Jesus was demonstrating his absolute unrivalled authority over evil and chaos. This theme continues with the next two miracles. Jesus raises a dead girl and, on the way, a sick woman is healed just by touching the hem of his garment. The message of the whole miracle sequence from Mark 4:35 to 5:43 could not be more emphatic. Jesus is showing that he is Lord over all, nature, chaos, evil, sickness, even death. The healing of the woman who suffered from bleeding says something particularly important for then and now. For Jewish people bodily emissions like this rendered a person ceremonially 'unclean' and contact with them rendered others unclean too. This meant that they could not enter the temple courts. When this woman touches Jesus, however, he does not become 'unclean,' rather, she becomes 'clean'. So, Jesus is not only declared by these miracles to have authority to defeat evil, rule nature and raise the dead. He is also shown to be the one who purifies those who are impure. If you feel the stain of spiritual impurity on your life, no matter how great this stain is, all you need to do is 'touch' Jesus in faith and you are made pure. You don't need to do any great work to receive God's grace. You only need to reach out to Jesus and he will change your life.

Read Mark 5:21-43

Reach out in faith to Jesus and ask him to make you pure.

The saying of Jesus about new wine in old wineskins is used proverbially in all kinds of situations. The main idea of the saying is that old customs, when doggedly held to, can impede or even spoil desirable new things. This metaphor, however, is used by Jesus in a specific situation and it is another example of how different anecdotes of Jesus work together to convey a unified message. Look at what happens before and after this saying. Jesus tells a crippled man that his sins are forgiven, and the religious leaders complain that this is not the way it should be done. Jesus had bypassed the customary channels (the temple) through which forgiveness was imparted. The issue of fasting that Jesus is questioned about in 9:14 is connected with this. Fasting was seen as a form of penance through which forgiveness was gained. Not only were Jesus' disciples not fasting but Jesus had just called a sinful tax-collector to join them (9:9-13), saying specifically that he had come to call sinners! This went right against the grain for the Jews. Their whole religious system, including these customs, was aimed at achieving righteousness to secure God's blessing. Jesus was completely baffling them! It is here that we have Jesus' saying about the new wine (note what follows it too). The new wine is the grace of Jesus Christ. One of the greatest struggles that many Christians have is the struggle to accept this grace and believe that they are truly accepted and loved by God. In many cases it is because they are trying to find this new grace in an old religious way of thinking.

Read Matthew 9:1-17

Reflect on God's love for you and ask him to help you receive his grace.

PLENTIFUL HARVEST

Matthew 9:18-38

THURSDAY

29 AUG

We come now to another well-known saying: “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few.” Here is yet another example of how context gives meaning to individual stories in the Gospels. Immediately *after* this saying we have the account of Jesus sending his disciples out to proclaim the Kingdom of God and to demonstrate the power of this Kingdom by *healing the sick, raising the dead and driving out demons* (10:1ff). Immediately before this saying we have some stories of Jesus *healing the sick, raising the dead and driving out demons*. There is a clear and intentional symmetry to the arrangement of these accounts. In the stories of Jesus’ works before the ‘harvest-is-plentiful’ saying there is a clear emphasis on the role of people’s faith. They were healed because they believed Jesus had authority to do these things. Jesus asks the blind man, “Do you believe that I am able to do this?” This is not a question about Jesus’ healing *skills* but about Jesus’ healing *authority*. In other words, Jesus is asking the blind man, “Do you believe I am Lord over all creation?” Saying “yes” here was an act of surrender to this authority. In the next anecdote (10:1ff) we are then told that Jesus gave authority to his disciples to do the things he was doing. It seems to me, therefore, that there is a connection between being *under* Jesus’ authority and *operating in* Jesus’ authority. The extent to which we entrust our lives to Jesus will be the extent to which we can receive from him.

Read Matthew 9:18-38

Give your life, your plans, your circumstances and all your problems over to Jesus and let him be Lord.

FRIDAY
30 AUG

VIRAL MINISTRY

Matthew **10:1-16** & Mark **3:13-19**

The restoration of God's Kingdom on earth means a restoration of God's authority structure on earth. So, the natural result of the coming of the Kingdom is people doing what they were made to do. In other words, the manifestation of the Kingdom is not just that we see God do things but that we see *people* do things in God's name. Jesus commissioned his disciples to go to Israel first but, once they had done this, he would commission them (and us) to take the transforming power of Jesus to all people. If you feel that this task is out of reach then you are absolutely right. You do not have the resources in yourself to do what God wants you to do. Neither did the disciples. This is why Jesus gave them *authority*. 'Authority' is the *right to exercise power*, in this case, a power not derived from ourselves but from God. It is just like a political leader who is given authority to wield a power given to him/her by a nation. The pattern of Christian ministry is therefore that of *receiving and giving*. We receive from God and we give out of what God puts into us. To do things 'in Jesus' name' means representing *his* agenda and exercising *his* power which is at work within us. Inasmuch as God has worked in your life you have something to give. The power at work in you is like a positively transformative virus. And like a virus it is catching. God wants you to spread it around.

Read Matthew 10:1-16 and Mark 3:13-19

Ask God to transform you.

Peace & Conflict – Matthew **10:16-42**

The message of the Kingdom is that God is establishing his rule of peace in people's lives. In Matthew 10 Jesus sends his disciples out to proclaim this message of peace, but, as he sends them out, he predicts that this message of peace will cause *conflict*. What Jesus predicts here is that this message of peace will bring the inner conflict in people's hearts to the surface. People who seek to live autonomously (i.e. living their own way) are in conflict with God because only God has a right to rule their lives. The last thing people want is to have their autonomy challenged. This is the root of all human conflict. It is impossible to live autonomously without your interests being challenged by others. And when this happens conflict ensues. People conflict with each other because they are first in conflict with God. This inner conflict is in each of us to the extent that we are not fully submitted to God. It is like a car with one blown-out tyre. The conflict or misalignment between the busted tyre and the other tyres causes the car to shake and veer off course. This is how it is when our hearts are out of alignment with God's will. Whenever a person is confronted with God, naturally they feel their autonomy being challenged by the one who has a rightful claim over their lives. Most people respond by defending their autonomy, even with hostility. Such people will never live in peace. The only way to gain peace with God is to surrender to him.

Read **Matthew 10:16-42**. Is there a conflict between your desires and goals and those of God? Find peace by surrendering to God today.

Mark records the commissioning of the disciples in briefer form than Matthew. But, unlike Matthew, he then records their return, and he places the well-known account of the feeding of the 5000 in this context. When the disciples note that the multitude following Jesus needed to be fed, Jesus turns to them and says: “You give them something to eat.” Their response focused on their lack of capacity to meet this need. Jesus is going to teach them something in this moment that they should have learned already on their ‘short-term mission trip’. When they went out and healed people, they were not drawing on their own resources but on the resources of heaven. So now Jesus was testing them to see if they would apply that here. Their despair led to Jesus demonstrating how Kingdom ministry works. Jesus asks them to give him the little that they have. When they give him the loaves and fish, Jesus takes them and looks, not to these meagre resources, but *up to heaven* and he gives thanks for the abundance of God. As they give out of the little that they have God multiplies it and it is more than sufficient to feed the multitude. You may not think much of your capacities, but your ability to serve God is not dependent on those. For you to fulfil your role in God’s mission you must simply give to him the little you have. He will then use this to bring about marvellous things. Give yourself to God and see what happens.

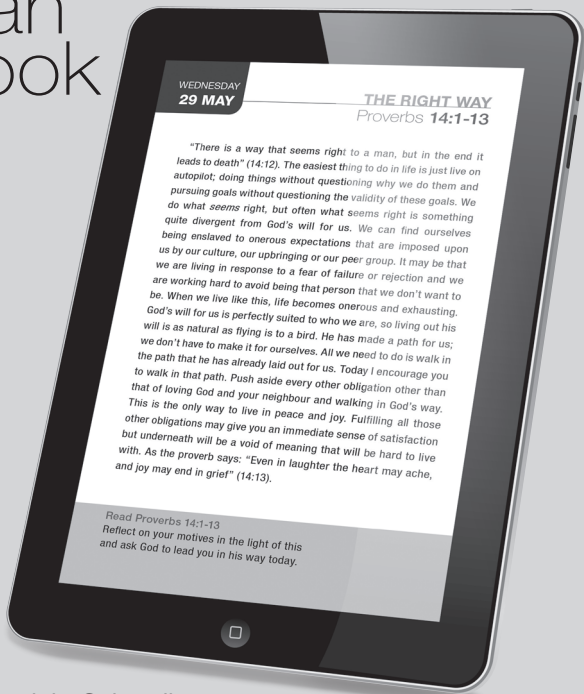
Read Mark 6:7-13, 30-44

Think about the capacities and resources that you have and dedicate them to God to use to bless others.

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Both John the Baptist and Jesus were announcing a new age: the age of the Kingdom of God. John the Baptist dressed like Elijah to indicate that Israel was as much in need of a complete turnaround as they were in the time of Ahab and Elijah. He also lived in the desert to symbolise the state of his people. Jesus always stressed that entering God's Kingdom involved a radical shift of life. This point is spelled out in the Sermon on the Mount, and it is also highlighted here in 11:11b when Jesus says that the least person in the new Kingdom of God is greater than John, who was the last old covenant prophet. The point here is that there is a radical discontinuity between the worldly way of living and Kingdom living. To make the transition from one to the other is a radical shift into an entirely new order of things. It is not a smooth and direct transition. It is not a matter of simply relabelling, or even slightly adjusting, all your previous expectations, goals, desires, mindsets, and priorities. When the disciples stepped into this new life, they left everything behind. Likewise, when people joined the early church, they sold their properties and invested the money into the Christian movement. They understood that to be a part of the Kingdom of God is a completely different kind of life. It is a radical shift. It may not always require us to do what they did, but if it isn't that, what is the radical difference? What is the radical difference between your life and the lives of the non-believers around you?

Read Matthew 11:1-19

Are you willing to give your life over to God?

Do you believe it will be better that way?

God was speaking through Jesus but not everyone was able to receive the message. God is always speaking to us, but who is able to receive the truth? If you think you are already right about everything, and if you don't want your viewpoints challenged, then you won't get it. Some people want to be right more than they want to know the truth. Some people would rather that the truth remains abstract and academic because then it doesn't challenge their 'rightness'. If you want to know the truth then you have to become like a little child. You have to be changeable and humble-minded. In verse 27 Jesus tells us that he can reveal God the Father to us. If you become like a child who simply wants to embrace the Father, if you are discontent with just having head knowledge *about* God, then Jesus says, "Come to me". *Ideas about* God won't change you. *Ideas about* God won't dissolve your autonomy, which is why many people prefer their faith to remain theoretical. What will change you is a real relationship with the real God. God changes people. If you are not willing to change then you will instinctively avoid any real encounter with God. All the proof in the world will not convince a person who doesn't want to change. Our minds always serve the desires of our hearts. If you are willing to change you can know God. If you are unwilling to change then you will always be trying to avoid him. It's no wonder that people rejected Jesus when he came.

Read Matthew 11:20-30

Ask God to soften your heart and make you changeable.

THURSDAY
5 SEPT

THE YOKE OF REST

Matthew 11:28-30

Most people find life exhausting and they strive to find a point of rest for themselves. However, most people don't get the rest that they need because they don't know what they need rest from. Jesus' offer of rest in the form of a 'yoke' gives us the answer. A yoke is a kind of harness placed on oxen to pull carts or ploughs. We all get yoked to various 'carts'. These carts are the self-expectations and agendas that we live for. They are the things we feel we *must* achieve in life to be acceptable and significant. Every expectation and agenda that is not of God will be an oppressive burden to you. It will be like pulling a heavy cart. Ironically, when we strive to validate ourselves through our achievements, we are actually *less likely* to achieve what we have the potential to achieve because the expectation to achieve is so oppressive to us. The yoke of these expectations and agendas is designed only to inhibit and crush you. Jesus invites you to throw off the oppressive yoke of your own goals and self-expectations and take on his yoke, the yoke of his purpose. When you yoke yourself to Jesus' cart you no longer have the endless exhausting task of making life happen. It is an easy yoke because when you yoke yourself to the cart of God's Kingdom, you don't have to pull that cart, that cart pulls you. In Kingdom life, God makes things happen, and you only have to respond to what he is doing. This is what it means to live in rest.

Read Matthew 11:28-30

Throw off all those expectations that burden you and give yourself to God's agenda.

LORD OF THE SABBATH

Matthew 12:1-21

FRIDAY
6 SEPT

In the Bible 'rest' is connected with authority. When Israelite kings submitted to God they were free from foreign oppression and they were said to be at 'rest'. God's authority over them was like a blanket of protection that relieved them of any concern about future threats. When God owns your life then tomorrow is his concern. We are therefore able to find tranquillity in the present without the perturbing worry about the future which belongs to God. The Sabbath was meant to be a day in which the people recognised and rested in the authority of God. Jesus represented this authority and therefore he is the fulfilment of the Sabbath. When we come under his authority we have *rest* because our lives are in his hands. In Jesus' time the Sabbath had become just another legalistic requirement that people felt they had to fulfil to validate their membership in God's people. It had, in other words, become the very thing that it was designed to prevent. God gave human beings the Sabbath so we would be reminded that our security is in God, not in our own achievements. There are those who would use Scripture to burden you with the lie that you must earn your acceptance with God. Jesus wants to lift this burden off you. You do not become acceptable to God by your sacrifices. You become acceptable to God by Jesus' sacrifice. When you give yourself over to God it is not so that you can *earn* his favour. It is so that you can *enjoy* his favour as you live restfully in his hands.

Read Matthew 12:1-21

Put your life in God's hands and trust him
for all that you may be worried about.

7/8 SEPT

weekend

Resisting Correction – Matthew 12:22-37

Satan is a spiritual being who rebelled against God and coaxed the first human beings into joining his rebellion (Genesis 3). Once they came out from under God's authority they were at the mercy of Satan's influence, in that sense, under his authority. When Jesus resisted the temptations of Satan in the desert (Matthew 4) he proved that he was not under the authority and influence of Satan. He was therefore able to exercise authority *over* Satan as Adam could and *should* have done with the authority that God gave him. Jesus often came across people who were 'demonized' (the word 'possessed' is not present in the original Greek). When he drove out demons, Jesus was demonstrating his authority. This made it clear to the Jews that Jesus was their Messiah, and so it caused a dilemma for the Pharisees. If Jesus was the Messiah then they were on the wrong track, and they did not want to be wrong. They wanted to be right. In fact, they want to be right more than they wanted to know the truth. So, to escape this clear implication they made the absurd claim that Jesus was able to do these things because he was under Satan's power (when it should have been clear that the reason he was able to do this was precisely because he *wasn't* under Satan's power). Beware of using theology to protect yourself against the Spirit's correction. You are *not* perfect and all-knowing and therefore *you will always be wrong about something*. If you resist correction you put yourself, in a sense, beyond redemption (vs.31).

Read **Matthew 12:22-37**. Ask God to correct you and teach you.

ON BEING WRONG

Matthew 12:38-50

MONDAY
9 SEPT

We saw yesterday how the Pharisees had to resort to an absurd argument to defend themselves from the obvious conclusion that they were on the wrong track. Jesus' exorcisms were a sign that he was the Messiah, but, if he was the Messiah, then they were wrong. So, they argued that Jesus' exorcisms were possible only because he was under Satan's influence. What happens next is full of irony. The Pharisees say things to Jesus that echo the very temptations that Satan flung at Jesus in the desert. They challenged him to prove his divine sonship by doing a miracle. Jesus calls their bluff and cuts to the heart of the issue. They were defending themselves against God because they were unwilling to change (the Greek word for 'repent' literally means 'to change one's mind'). Never reject something because it challenges where you are, because it makes you feel uncomfortable, because it is outside your set way of understanding things, or because it might show you up to be wrong about something. The primary work of the Holy Spirit is to show us where we are at odds with God's will. Don't let your desire to be right overtake your desire for truth. You are always wrong about something. The journey into truth is a process in which the Spirit of God wants to expose our false securities and our self-devised agendas. He wants to expose the hidden conflict within us to lead us to peace. You will want to resist this, and many do so using theology as a mask. Be intentionally open to correction.

Read Matthew 12:38-50

Have you resisted the Holy Spirit in the past?

Ask God to forgive you and lead you to change.

The block of teaching recorded in Matthew 13 is prompted by the presence of the large crowds that were beginning to follow Jesus. In response to his popularity Jesus does a strange thing. He starts speaking in riddles beginning with a story about a sower. The people would have had no idea what he was talking about. When his disciples asked him why he was doing this he told them, in summary, that the knowledge of the Kingdom of Heaven is not given to spectators but to those who are really willing to change. True knowledge is not knowing *about* the truth but an experience of the truth through *appropriation and involvement*. This does not depend on intellectual ability but on a willingness of heart. If you are not willing to be involved in the Kingdom and to submit your life to the Kingdom agenda, then you shut yourself out of it. It remains a secret to you. Jesus used parables to create a polarisation effect. He will only speak to those who are willing to know. The disciples were willing, clearly, because they had made this the top priority for their lives. They had given themselves to God's agenda. So, Jesus says, "I am speaking to you because you are willing to know. The spectators are listening but they are not willing to hear, so I am not going to speak to them." If you want God to reveal himself and his truth to you, he will. But you must be willing to change. Your ability to hear from God is only ever as great as your willingness to be changed.

Read Matthew 13:1-17

Ask God to enable you to receive his truth.

ENTERING THE KINGDOM

Matthew **13:18-23**

The parable of the sower was Jesus' response to his growing popularity. Lots of people were coming out to listen to him but few were really willing to hear. The disciples did not understand his parable, so Jesus explained it to them. He told them that the message of the Kingdom is like a seed. Most Christians think that the seed in this parable is the Word of God. This is correct, but it is too general. In our age of information people can tend to think that the message is a bit of abstract information that we must believe in order to get to heaven. The seed *is the message of the Kingdom* which was not just a theological proposition for people to agree with *but a summons for people to obey*. God was calling people to come into the Kingdom of Heaven, that is, to come under his rule and centre their lives around his agenda. He was not telling them how they could get to heaven when they died but how they could enter the Kingdom of Heaven NOW. Of course, when you enter the Kingdom of Heaven now, you enter it for all eternity, but the transition does not happen in the 'afterlife,' it happens in *this* life. Are you willing to come under God's purpose? Are you willing to enter the Kingdom of Heaven? Heaven is not just future. Jesus' message was that the Kingdom of Heaven is *at hand*. The good news is that you *can* enter now, no matter who you are or what you have done. You *can* enter, but *will* you?

Read Matthew 13:18-23

Give yourself over to live under God's rule now.

THURSDAY
12 SEPT

THE WEEDS & THE WHEAT

Matthew **13:24-30, 36-43**

‘The parable of the weeds’ gives us a key insight into how things will unfold in this age. Jesus likens the world to a field in which the Kingdom is growing (the wheat). Eventually, by the end of this age, the Kingdom will come to full fruition. But as the Kingdom grows so too does the opposition, so that, up to the end times, there will be a growing polarisation. It is important not to be pessimistic about the growth of the Kingdom of God *in this age*. The Kingdom is coming and will fill the earth in this age. Jesus is clear on that. If things get worse in the world it is only because the Kingdom of God is *increasing* in the world, not decreasing. The brighter the light the darker the shadows, that is how it will be up to the end of this age. In his explanation of the parable of the weeds, Jesus says that his angels will come and “weed *out of his Kingdom* everything that causes sin and all who do evil”. In other words, by the end of this age, the world will, in some sense, be permeated with the Kingdom of God. Jesus will return, not to bring his Kingdom, for that is what Jesus came to do at his first coming and is doing by the Holy Spirit right *now*. Jesus will return to finally weed all *evil out of his Kingdom*. Jesus was far more optimistic about the ministry of the Spirit through his church in this age than we are inclined to be. Perhaps we should be more so.

Read Matthew 13:24-30 as well as verses 36-43

Pray for God’s Kingdom to come in and through your life.

THE KINGDOM IS LIKE...

Matthew 13:31-35

FRIDAY
13 SEPT

Most of Jesus' parables are designed to redefine the nature of the Kingdom of God for people. The Jews believed that the age of the Kingdom would see a swift political uprising in which Israel would become a sovereign state once again and, under her Messiah, would dominate the earth. Jesus was announcing that the age of the Kingdom had arrived, but he therefore needed to correct this view which, from his perspective, was far too *narrow*. The Kingdom of God would indeed subdue the earth, but the process would be much more pervasive and would take much longer than the Jews thought. The Kingdom, Jesus explained, would not come in a swift political revolution. This kind of change is superficial and short lived. The Kingdom would gain dominion on earth in slow viral fashion just as yeast spreads throughout dough. It would start like a seed and then, slowly but surely, grow into the mighty 'tree' that the prophets envisaged. Consider how a tree grows. It takes a long time and you tend not to notice the progress. You only really notice it in retrospect. The increments of growth are small but the result, over hundreds of years (for some trees), is great. Every act of service that you render for God's Kingdom is like one small increment of growth. You may not notice the significance of it, but it is a vital increment. A great tree is the result of many small increments of growth. So it is with the Kingdom of God. Your contributions are part of something great and one day you will see the culmination of that.

Read Matthew 13:31-35

Think about how you are going to serve God today.

The Hidden Kingdom

— Matthew **13:44-58** & Mark **6:1-6**

The Jews were expecting the Kingdom of God to break into the world in an overt political fashion. Jesus corrected this view.

The Kingdom of God *will* spread in the world, but it will not be in an overt fashion. It will be a hidden viral movement like yeast spreading through dough. Jesus likens the Kingdom to hidden treasure. God hides his Kingdom from people because he doesn't want people entering it *unless they really want to*. He wants people to find *by seeking*. He doesn't want to convince people. He isn't interested in providing miracles to compel people to believe who don't want to believe. He hides, in a sense, from those who are unwilling to know him. But to those who are willing for God to be their God; to those who are willing to therefore give themselves wholly to him; to them God will reveal himself. The Kingdom of God was coming in the person of Jesus but all that most people saw was a humble carpenter's son from Nazareth. The Kingdom was hidden from them, not because Jesus didn't want them to see but because they were unwilling to see. The extent to which you are willing to let God be God over your life is the extent to which you will know him. You must surrender yourself to God if you are to know him. Are you willing to give yourself over to God? If so, you will see the Kingdom and you will meet the King who comes to those who will truly accept him as their Lord.

Read **Matthew 13:44-58** and **Mark 6:1-6**.

Ask God to take charge of your life and circumstances and commit yourself to him.

Jesus went out into the desert to avoid a conflict with the 'not-quite-a-king' Herod Antipas. He didn't want to play power games with Herod. He was living on a different plane. Matthew evidently wants us to see a parallel between Jesus and Moses in Chapter 14. First of all, the context is similar: that of God's people being led out into the desert. Secondly, Jesus' miracles of the miraculous provision of food and the walking across the water also echo the exodus miracles (the manna and the parting of the sea). Jesus was acting as a new Moses setting his people free from the competitive chaotic world. In Genesis 1:2 and in the flood of Genesis 7 *the sea* is a symbol of a world in chaos. In Genesis 1 God brings order to this chaos and in Genesis 7 God returns the world to chaos in answer to the spread of sin. Both Jesus and Moses crossed seas on foot to demonstrate something about the life of faith: it involves walking with God above the competitive chaos of this world and not getting 'drawn down' into the world system. To achieve this we must, like Peter, keep our eyes on Jesus. This means trusting God as our provider and keeping our hearts set on God's purpose. When Jesus enabled Peter to walk on the water, he wasn't just teaching him a new trick. This is deeply symbolic. Jesus is saying, "This is how I want you to live. I want you to walk on top of the watery chaos because I have called you to subdue the chaos."

Read Matthew 14

Reflect on your life in the light of this.

TUESDAY
17 SEPT

WALKING BY FAITH

Matthew **14:22-36**

Your experience of God will not be any greater than the extent to which you trust God. If you trust God little, you will experience God little. If you trust God a lot, you will experience God's goodness and faithfulness a lot. How much are you trusting God right now? We tend to think of faith in a general way, as a set of beliefs about God. But faith is far more practical than that. It is trusting God with our lives and, again, not just in a general sense, but also for specific aspects of our lives. God wants us to trust him for specific things because faith is dead if it is not exercised. What is something specific that you are trusting God for right now? I remember once asking myself this question and being shocked at my inability to bring anything to mind. I could not identify anything that I was really depending on God for! I realised that my deficient experience of God was due to my self-reliance. Most people will celebrate self-reliance, and in one sense this is valid. It becomes a problem, however, when we lose a sense of our ultimate dependence on God. God wants you to grow beyond your own capacities. He is calling you out of the 'boat' of your self-reliance, to walk upon the water. He is calling you to aim for goals that you cannot achieve in your own power. And right now, there will be one small step of faith that God is asking for. There always is. Identify this and you will have begun your walk on the water.

Read Matthew 14:22-36 again

How does God want you to exercise faith right now?

MISSING THE POINT

Matthew 15:1-20

The laws of cleanliness and defilement that were instituted by Moses were given to teach the Israelites about something deeper than physical cleanliness. The daily practice of certain ceremonies relating to cleanliness was intended to ingrain a mindset about purity and impurity which they could then apply in a spiritual and moral sense. The Israelites were called to be a holy people who would shine as a light to the world. So spiritual purity was of utmost importance. However, by the first century, they had focused on the laws themselves and lost sight of the principles that the laws were intended to ingrain. They even added new laws which contradicted the principles of the original Mosaic laws. It was a tragic exercise in missing the point completely. It is also remarkably common for people to get involved in Christian activities in ways and with attitudes that completely contradict the principles that every Christian activity should be upholding. How is it that so many Christian churches get splintered by quarrels over how things should be done? It happens all the time and it completely misses the point. If things aren't the way you would like them to be, try stopping and reflecting on the bigger picture and whether you are really going to strengthen your church. Focus on your responsibility and the role that God has assigned to you. What matters most is not what comes *to you* from others but what comes *from you* to others. In every situation ask yourself, am I missing the point here? Don't focus on what *you* want but on what *God wants from you* in this situation.

Read Matthew 15:1-20

Reflect on how you responded to the last contentious situation you were in.

“What goes into someone’s mouth does not defile them, but what comes out of their mouth, that is what defiles them.” What Jesus means here is that our words inevitably reveal the state of our hearts. As he said, in another dispute with the Jewish religious leaders: “The mouth speaks what the heart is full of” (Matthew 12:34). If you want to know what is in your heart, then listen to yourself speak. Have you ever felt shocked by things you have said? Have you ever wondered why you said what you said? The heart will inevitably express itself verbally. All the sins of your heart; all the selfish ambition, pride, envy and bitterness that you allow to grow in your heart will inevitably come out in words. Have you found yourself using conversations to make people like you? Have you found yourself subtly undermining the reputation of someone who you don’t like? Listen to yourself speak and, if you find things coming from your mouth that you are ashamed of, then ask where it is coming from. Ask God to show you where your heart has become disoriented. These revelations can lead to positive change if you bring them to God and open your heart to allow him to reveal the roots of your attitudes. Transformation is a wonderful experience and possible for all who are willing to see what it is within them that needs to be transformed.

Read Mark 7:1-23

Reflect on the things you have caught yourself saying lately and bring this to God.

The dispute with the Jewish religious leaders over the nature of purity in Mark 7:1-23 precedes, significantly, a foray of Jesus out into Gentile (non-Jewish) territory. The next two stories locate Jesus in the region of Tyre and Sidon and down again into a region called 'Decapolis'. Here he heals two Gentiles and miraculously feeds a Gentile multitude. The connection of these stories with the teaching about ritual purity is similar to that of the story of Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10. In both cases Jesus' corrective teaching on ritual purity precedes a mission to Gentiles who were considered 'unclean' by Jews. The point is this: God is now in the business of purifying what is impure. Previously the focus was on resisting impurity, and, while this is important, it is not the whole picture. The whole point of being made pure by God is not that we should form a pure enclave that repels impurity. Rather, God wants us to take the purifying power of Christ to the impure world. The love of Christ is a purifying love. It is like a spring of clean water. A spring needs to flow unimpeded to remain pure. If it stops flowing, it stagnates and becomes impure. So too the purifying love of Christ must not only flow into us but *through us* into others. The more you focus on your own moral purity the harder it will be to maintain. You must focus on loving others because love has a purifying effect on you and others in the process. Let Christ's purifying love flow from you and make you pure.

Read Mark 7:24-37

Pray for those who need to experience Christ's purifying love.

Faith Manifested – Matthew **15:21-28**

In his dispute with the Jewish religious leaders, Jesus accuses them, ironically, of a failure to understand the point of the law (Matthew 15:1-20). They used the law as an identity badge. The disciples also struggled at times to understand what Jesus was on about. So, who did get it? A Canaanite woman of all people appeals to Jesus and becomes a model of faith in contrast to the religious leaders and Jesus' disciples. Why did this Gentile woman believe that the Jewish Messiah would help her? Simply because Jews practiced various laws that declared God's purpose to bless outsiders, particularly the needy. It appears that she was aware of this, as would any poor foreigner who had visited Jewish areas. For, when Jesus pushes her, she appeals indirectly to a law in Leviticus 19:9 which stipulated that Jews harvesting their crops should not harvest to the edges of their fields or pick up what falls to the ground. These were to be left for the poor and the alien. This woman felt like Jesus' neglect contradicted the promises of God. Have you ever been in a situation that appeared to be in contradiction with God's promises? These might seem like times for losing faith. However, these situations of tension are the furnace in which faith itself is birthed. It is times like these when faith applies and becomes fully manifested. This is what Jesus is doing here. He is not lacking in care and compassion for this woman. He is drawing out her faith. Perhaps God has you in a similar situation and he is wanting to see an expression of faith from you.

Read **Matthew 15:21-28**. Reflect on how you can exercise faith today.

MULTIPLYING SMALL THINGS

Matthew 15:29-39

MONDAY
23 SEPT

A Canaanite woman has just displayed great faith and Jesus evidently wanted her faith to be manifested to his disciples so that they would learn from it. Now comes their turn to exercise faith. Many were following Jesus and he was performing miracles of healing and restoration. This is the kind of atmosphere in which it should have been easiest to believe for the impossible. It is at this time that Jesus turns to his disciples and expresses his desire that this multitude of people be given something to eat. They respond with despair even though they had been in this situation not long before and they had seen Jesus feed many more people than were now present with fewer provisions to begin with (Matthew 14:13-21). They should have learned from the first miraculous feeding of the multitude, but Jesus is giving them another chance. This is why things happen here in the same pattern. First, Jesus asks them to give him what they have, which they nervously do. Then he multiplies what they give to feed thousands and, in the end, they find their own supply replenished many times over. Jesus was teaching them how Kingdom service works. When it comes to your contribution to the Kingdom of God, the extent of your resources, personal or material, is irrelevant. It's not about how much you have but about *your willingness to give what you have*. If you give, God will expand what you give and replenish you many times over. God is not asking you for big things. He wants continual small acts of obedience. This is how we change the world.

Read Matthew 15:29-39

Think about what small acts of obedience
God is asking from you today.

A small mind cannot grasp great things. The most intelligent people in the world can be small-minded and the simplest people in the world can be the most broad-minded. Broad-mindedness is not a result of intelligence but of a willingness to see things that are not convenient for you to see. It is the willingness to recognise truth even when it discomforts you and when it exposes the untruth in you. It is ironic that, after Jesus has performed so many miraculous signs in front of so many thousands of people, the Pharisees and Sadducees should demand that he prove himself with some sign from heaven. They were *unable* to recognise their Messiah in Jesus because they were *unwilling*. They feared being wrong more than they feared missing the truth. And so, they defended their error rather than acknowledging the truth. Jesus warns his disciples of the 'leaven' of the Pharisees' attitude but, ironically, they were too busy being small-minded to grasp what Jesus was telling them. They were preoccupied with their own provisions even after the miracles of provision they had witnessed! They had seen the proof, but they were still not willing to trust. As a result, their vision was shortened, and they focused on inconsequential things even while such amazing things were happening around them. They were blind, not because they could not see, but because they would not make the decision to lift their eyes to greater things. It is God who gives us eyes to see his Kingdom, but it is our choice to look or not look. If you seek you will find.

Read Mark 8:1-26

Ask God to heal your blindness and help you to see and focus on what really matters.

Do you have in mind the things of God or the things of men? This is the question that flows out of Matthew 16. The Pharisees and Sadducees of all people should have had the things of God in mind, but they were too busy defending their positions of prominence against the threat they saw in Jesus. They had in mind the things of men. Jesus warns his disciples of this small-mindedness but, ironically, they miss his point because they are being too small-minded. They are still, even after two miraculous acts of provision, obsessed about provisions. In this context Jesus asks his famous question: “Who do you say that I am?” Peter acknowledges Jesus to be the Messiah (Greek: ‘Christ’) but, at the same time, he cannot accommodate the idea of Jesus suffering. Why? Because he is still thinking from a human point of view. He wants Jesus to take power in the human way by rising up and forcing change. But Jesus was not fighting with the weapons of man. He was fighting with the weapons of God. He would give up his life as a sacrifice and this would become the key to the establishment of God’s Kingdom on earth. God wants to give us the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven in every situation but to use these we must forsake “the things of men”. He calls us not to assert ourselves for success but to sacrifice ourselves for service. The one who wins is not the one who keeps his life but the one who gives it.

Read Matthew 16

Reflect on where your attitude might reflect the things of men rather than the things of God.

THURSDAY
26 SEPT

HIGHER REALITY

Matthew 16:21-17:13

It seems strange that Jesus should have to tell his disciples that they must deny themselves and follow him. Hadn't they already done this? Well, not really. The disciples, at least at first, assumed that Jesus was a political Messiah come to establish a political kingdom. They dreamed of being part of this revolution and getting the good positions in the end. This is why, when Jesus started talking of his sacrificial death, Peter responded so negatively. As Jesus said, he did not have the things of God in mind, but the things of men. Peter was willing to sacrifice anything for his dream, but Jesus was calling him to sacrifice his dream. Jesus wanted to liberate the disciples from their human dreams because he had something much better in store. Imagine a prisoner who has lived in a cell for a long time. One day he is acquitted and given a large amount of money to start a new life as a free man. So, he goes out and buys ornaments, rugs and furniture and brings them back and refurbishes his cell. No doubt his acquitters will say to him, "We are not giving you this money to refurbish your old life but to begin a new life. Invest these resources in starting a new life." Jesus wanted to draw his disciples into a higher reality. He gave them a glimpse of this higher reality when he was transfigured before them (17:1-13). Jesus wanted them to think outside their box because he wanted to free them from their box. Their box was too small for what God wanted to give them.

Read Matthew 16:21-17:13

Ask God to give you a bigger view of life.

MOVING MOUNTAINS

Matthew 17:1-28

FRIDAY
27 SEPT

The account of the transfiguration at the start of Matthew 17 and the anecdote about the temple tax at the end of the chapter demonstrate that Jesus and his followers belonged to a heavenly Kingdom, not a worldly Kingdom. In God's Kingdom things do not operate the way they do in worldly Kingdoms. Jesus demonstrated this by paying the temple tax the way he did (and also thereby demonstrating that it should be a voluntary offering, not a compulsory tax). In the middle of these stories, significantly, is the account of the demonised boy. Jesus' response to his disciples' failure to drive out this demon seems somewhat harsh. But his saying about the mustard-seed-size faith shows that the issue was not their inability but their connection with the heavenly reality they had just witnessed in the transfiguration. Faith (that is, our willingness to trust God and let him be God) brings this heavenly Kingdom into our hearts and, through us, into the world. The point here is that it only takes a mustard seed of this Kingdom in our hearts, by faith, to throw aside any obstacle. Jesus' disciples were slow to form this connection, as indeed we all are, because they were still disconnected from the ways of the Kingdom (as was demonstrated in 16:22-23). Jesus would persevere with their slowness to entrust themselves to his ways. And, eventually, they would all go on to move mountains of worldly obstacles to see God's work advance. Jesus perseveres with us too. Are you persevering and growing in your faith?

Read Matthew 17:1-28

Ask God to keep you connected with his heavenly Kingdom.

Becoming a Child

– Matthew **18:1-9** & Mark **9:33-37**

We all have a deep childlike need for the love, affirmation and validation that comes from God alone. There was a time in our lives when our parents acted as messengers of God in their love for us. Growing to maturity doesn't mean we outgrow this need. Rather it means that we learn to transcend being our parents' children and rise up to be children of God. To access the father heart of God we must become the children that we are. You can't know the father until you choose to be the child. We must take off the garb of our self-made identities and let the child emerge. God wants to strip back your self-made dignity-mask because he loves the raw child underneath and he wants to bless this child. God doesn't want to embrace a mask; he wants to kiss the face of the vulnerable child. When I was a child, I never remember being afraid with my parents. As long as I was with them, I felt secure. The only thing I feared was *not* being with my parents. This is how it should also be for us as a child of God. Tragically, however, many people choose to trust and depend on their own abilities to get through life. In doing this they place a burden on themselves that no human being was meant to bear. Jesus calls us to become like little children again so that we can know God as Father. The more you trust, the more you will know him.

Read **Matthew 18:1-9** and **Mark 9:33-37**. If you feel alienated from God do what a child would do. Cry out to him.

THE FATHER'S ZEAL

Matthew 18:1-20 & Mark 9:38-50

MONDAY
30 SEPT

In these chapters we see two aspects of Jesus' teaching working together that many people find hard to reconcile: on the one hand, the seeming severity of Jesus' teaching and, on the other, his tender generous grace. On the one hand Jesus says things like: "If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire." On the other hand, in this same block of teaching, we also have his most generous expressions of grace: the parable of the lost sheep, in which the shepherd rejoices more over one redeemed sinner than over ninety-nine righteous; and the parable of the unmerciful servant in which the king shows mercy to a subject who then fails to pay that forward. The unifying factor here is *God's tender love for his children*. A loving father gets angry when he sees his little children being spiritually abducted and hurt. Jesus is expressing the heart of the father when he rails against evil in this chapter. It is not because God wants to condemn people. On the contrary, God wants his children to come home and he laments the things that lead them astray. Every evil doer in the world is a lost child that God longs for and those who are hurt by them are also the objects of God's longing. There are not good and bad people in the world. There are only lost people who God wants to be reconciled with. You are one of those people.

Read Mathew 18:1-20 and Mark 9:38-50

Ask God to draw you closer to him.

TUESDAY

1 OCT

HEALTHY CONFLICT

Matthew 18:15-35

God wants us to become like little children so he can be a father to us. He wants us to be like little children not just to him but also *to one another*. It is impossible for a loving father not to want to cultivate and protect a loving family environment where all members of the family share a mutual love for one another. The creation of a spiritual family, a true human community, is therefore also a top priority for our heavenly Father. This in turn means that the highest agenda for us must be the cultivation and preservation of genuine relationships, first with God the father and then with our brothers and sisters. In the second part of Mathew 18, Jesus gives us instructions on how to preserve healthy relationships with others in situations of conflict. In the first place he encourages communication. Communication is when you explain to the other person the effect that their actions had on you. Often, when someone hurts us, we do everything but communicate: we accuse, we judge, we insult and we push them away. This is when conflict becomes a quarrel. Conflict is inevitable, but quarrelling is optional. If someone tries telling you that you hurt them in some way, however badly they may communicate this, be sure to listen and hear their feelings. You don't have a right to defend your actions until you have really listened to them. The other necessary ingredient for relationships is grace. You must be willing to forgive and keep no record of wrongs. Those who choose to withhold forgiveness bring themselves into conflict with God because God never withholds forgiveness.

Read Matthew 18:15-35

Think about who you need to communicate with and who you need to forgive.

Matthew 19:1-12

In the context of Jesus' teaching about preserving relationships and engaging in healthy conflict, Matthew places Jesus' teaching on marriage and divorce. In Matthew's mind this is the perfect application and clarification for the very principles that Jesus has been addressing. The Pharisees wanted Jesus to enter into a debate currently raging among two schools of Pharisaic thought. The debate was not over the lawfulness of divorce but the grounds for divorce. The allowance for divorce is given in Deuteronomy 24. There were many who believed that this law gave license for a man to divorce his wife for *any* reason. Jesus responds to the Pharisees' question by effectively pointing out that both sides of the argument miss the point. God doesn't want us to focus on what we can get away with. He wants his priorities to become our priorities. God's priority is always for the building and preservation of loving relationships. This is where Jesus puts the emphasis, and he wants us to focus on this. But it takes two to make a relationship work. If one person sabotages that relationship beyond repair then God wants the other person to be released from the marriage covenant so that they can move on toward restoration and into a healthy relationship. The law is not given for the sake of the law. It is given to protect people. God is always committed to restoration. If your relationships have failed, however much at fault you may have been, God still wants to restore you and enable you to have healthy relationships in the future.

Read Matthew 19:1-12

Reflect on your priorities and whether you rate relationships above everything else in importance.

THURSDAY

3 OCT

WHO FITS THROUGH?

Mark 10:13-30

Who gets the highest honour in the Kingdom of God? Jesus answered this question already in the Beatitudes and here are two encounters that demonstrate Jesus' countercultural answer to this. The rich young man who came to Jesus was the perfect candidate in the eyes of most first-century Jews. He was law abiding and he was rich which meant, in their minds, that he was favoured by God. Naturally, everyone was therefore shocked when Jesus declared that this man was lacking what was necessary to enter the Kingdom of God. Who then can be saved? If not this model of Jewish piety, then who? Jesus had already given them the answer: "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these." The door to the Kingdom is open to all, but it is very small, and you need to be very small to enter it. If you come walking on the stilts of self-dependence and pride, then you won't fit through the door. You must come humbly and dependently. You must put aside inhibitions as a child does when it cries for its parents. You must be teachable and malleable like a child, not full of preconceptions and puffed up with theoretical knowledge. You must cast aside self-dependence and autonomy and be willing to be like a little child in relation to God. Only little children can know God as father. The rich young man was too self-dependent to know God. His pride made him too big to enter through the small doorway.

Read Mark 10:13-30

Ask God to dismantle your unhealthy self-confidence and lead you into a state of greater dependence and humility.

QUALIFYING?

Matthew 19:13–20:16

FRIDAY
4 OCT

The rich young man, along with most of his fellow Jews, saw obedience to the law as a way of qualifying for God's favour. Ironically, his self-dependence actually robbed him of the ability to embrace the life of blessing that Jesus wanted to give him. This is why Jesus exhorted him to give up his wealth: because it was filling the God-space in his life. The disciples were disturbed by Jesus' response to the young man, but, on second thoughts, they figured that, if giving up everything was the criteria, they must be perfect qualifiers for the Kingdom. Jesus honours their devotion, but he corrects their point of view. The relinquishment of wealth was not a criteria for entering the Kingdom. If it was then Jesus would have spent all his time with the devout Jewish followers down at Qumran (the Essenes). These people gave up everything and lived lives of strict discipline to qualify for the Messianic age. And yet there is no mention of them at all in the Gospels! Jesus gives himself to those *who recognise their need for him*, and those who need a saviour most are those who know they *don't* qualify. The parable of the workers in the vineyard illustrates Jesus' desire to show favour to those *who don't deserve it*. God is not looking for people to qualify for his favour. He wants to give gifts not wages (which is just as well because the only thing we ever earned was judgement). Receive from God like a child, in dependence and humility, and you will find the generosity of the Father.

Read Matthew 19:13-20:16

Receive God's love and favour.

5/6 OCT

weekend

Rising Up & Raising Up

– Matthew **20:20-34** & Mark **10:32-52**

The mother of two of Jesus' disciples assumed, along with everyone else at the time, that Jesus was on the ascent to oust Herod and the Romans and establish himself as king. So, she asked for her sons to be given good positions in his Kingdom. But Jesus wasn't taking the road of worldly success. That road of competitive living, in which each person seeks to rise up over the other, is what has ruined the world and Jesus had come to *save* the world. He hadn't come to rise-up over others, but to stoop down to give his life for others in order that we could all be raised-up. He had not come to *rise-up* but to *raise-up*. He calls us to do the same. Our natural tendency is to want to rise-up to be important and great in the eyes of others, to compete with others for positions of influence, and to gain control over others. We have this little voice within us that says, 'Rise-up, rise-up!' But Jesus says, 'Raise-up, raise-up!' He calls us to stoop down and become servants to lift people up; to empower them. Jesus came down, not to be served but to *serve*. This was how Jesus exercised the authority that was given to him and it is how we must exercise the authority that he gives to us. So, we must be a people who are constantly thinking, not, how can I *rise-up*, but who can I *raise-up*. When people are being empowered and released then you know that God's authority is at work.

Read **Matthew 20:20-34** and **Mark 10:32-52**. Think about who you can raise up through encouragement today.

DONKEY RIDING

Matthew 21:1-11

MONDAY

7 OCT

The people who were following Jesus' ministry were hoping that he would rise-up to oust Herod and the Romans and become their king. He had come to become their king, but he would be a different sort of king; not a king who rises up to subjugate people but a king who stoops down to empower people. The prophet Zechariah (9:9) had predicted this critical difference by signalling that this king would be the ideal king in *God's sight*, not like the egotistical, megalomaniac kings of the world who ride aloof on their great warhorses. No, this king would not come astride on a warhorse but would come, "lowly and gentle, riding on a donkey". Have you ever seen a man riding a donkey? There's certainly nothing grand about it. Most of us would rather ride through life on the 'high horse'. We ride into situations of interaction with others on the high horse trying to prove ourselves and force our way. This approach won't bless anyone. You will only make others feel smaller. Have you been approaching conflict by riding in aggressively on the warhorse? When you do this you only start a never-ending war. Jesus has called you to follow him and become a donkey rider. You are called to be an instrument of peace. You can only do this by forsaking your bloated sense of entitlement and self-importance. Get off the horse and hop onto the donkey. Life is much more peaceful that way. Become a donkey rider today.

Read Matthew 21:1-11

Reflect on when you have taken the 'warhorse' approach and how you can change this.

TUESDAY
8 OCT

THE TEMPLE ACTION

Matthew **21:12-17**

When Jesus came into the Jerusalem temple he saw a system designed to aid tokenistic piety; to help people pay their dues as conveniently and comfortably as possible. The people who ran this system were happy with that because they made money out of it. So, the outer temple court had become a bustling marketplace when it was meant to be a prayer space for Jew and Gentile alike. People were no longer there to connect with God. They were just there to tick the religious box so that they could move on with living their own lives. Even if someone at the time really did want to worship there, they would have struggled with all the activity around them. Significantly, there were at this time a whole lot of people who were barred from the temple because they were considered 'unclean': anyone with a disease or physical infirmity. After Jesus drove the marketers out, he proceeded, provocatively, to invite these 'unclean' people in and began to heal them. The temple action described here in Matthew is one of the most important and provocative prophetic actions of Jesus' ministry. The Jews expected the Messiah to come and judge their enemies but instead he came to the heart of the nation and judges them. He is declaring that they had missed the point, and he is demonstrating what true piety is all about: it is about the restoration of broken people. He won't countenance token piety. He is saying to all worshippers: come with the willingness and expectation to be transformed. You should keep this in mind on the weekend when you walk into church.

Read Matthew 21:12-17

Reflect on why you go to church.

NEXT ISSUE

thrive

NOV'24-JAN'25

HEBREWS TO JUDE

- words of life

In the next edition of *Thrive* we will read through the letter to the Hebrews as well as the epistles of James, Peter, John and Jude. These biblical writers bring a different and complimentary perspective to that of Paul who wrote the other New Testament epistles and they are full of profound lessons for us today. I have drawn a lot from these books and I am confident that they can be as life changing for you as they have been for me. So, join me again in the next edition of *Thrive* as we continue reading the Bible together.

MJ

WEDNESDAY

9 OCT

FRUITLESSNESS

Matthew 21:18-22
& Mark 11:12-25

Jesus is acting in his role as judge and, having completed his provocative action in the temple, he now does something else in the sight of his followers that is rich in symbolism. He curses a fig tree because it had no figs. Mark tells us that it was not even the season for figs. So, this is not just a case of Jesus losing his temper because he was hungry. This is a prophetic act. The fig tree is used here as a symbol of Israel, as it often is in Old Testament prophecies. Jesus is looking for the fruit of God in Israel. They had been called to be a people of blessing, to raise-up and restore humankind and transform the earth. But they had burrowed down and were self-focused and defensive. They were obsessed with securing their own lifestyles. Moreover, the very people whom God was calling them to bless, they warded off as a threat to their ambitions. In all this they justified themselves by their observance of the law and the temple, all the while completely missing the point of both. So, Jesus declares judgement, and that judgement is *fruitlessness*. It is a curious response: he finds no fruit and so he forbids any possibility of fruitfulness in the future. In other words, he finds a bad situation and his judgement is to make the bad situation worse. Sometimes God will make things worse in your life to ultimately make things better. If you are not bearing fruit for God, then may he help you to notice that.

Read Matthew 21:18-22 and Mark 11:12-25

Reflect on the fruitfulness of your life.

The religious leaders in the temple questioned Jesus about his authority to do what he had done. Jesus' reply is to the effect: "I'm glad you brought that up, let's talk about authority." He then proceeds to challenge *their* legitimacy as spiritual leaders. They thought themselves superior to others on the basis of their moral standards but, according to Jesus, this is no indication of spiritual status. Jesus uses the parable of the two sons to illustrate the fact that the godly are not recognised by their convictions and their display of moral fervour. Rather, the godly are recognised by their *willingness to change* and the momentum of transformation in their lives. The last thing these leaders wanted was change. They were secure in their positions and they didn't want God disturbing their little controlled world. The reason they reacted so negatively to Jesus was because he was threatening their authority which was simply the expression of their spiritual autonomy. Leo Tolstoy comments on the parable of the tenants (in his book *Resurrection*): "The workers in the vineyard imagined that the vineyard in which they were sent to work for their master was their own, that everything in it had been put there for their benefit, and that their business was to enjoy life in this vineyard, forget all about the master and kill anyone who reminded them of the master and their duty towards him. Are we not doing the same when we imagine ourselves to be masters of our lives? We were sent here by someone's will and for some reason." Let us yield ourselves then to God.

Read Matthew 21:23-46

Are you treating your life as your own? Talk to God about this.

FRIDAY
11 OCT

THE WEDDING FEAST

Matthew 22:1-14 & Isaiah 55:1-2

The image of the wedding feast was a common picture used by the Old Testament prophets to depict the new age of the Kingdom. Jesus was announcing that the new age of the Kingdom was *at hand*; the doors of the wedding feast were open: “Everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet.” It is important to recognise that this is not just pointing to something that is future. Jesus used this metaphor of the wedding feast to emphasise that the Kingdom had come *in him* and that he was sending out the call to come to the feast. The image of the feast is one that symbolises the joy and blessing of the Kingdom of God. This joy and blessing is available to us *now*, but we will only experience it in its fullness after Jesus’ return in ‘the new heavens and the new earth’ (Revelation 21). Perhaps we could say that the present age is like the *entrée* that wedding guests are served as people are still arriving and while the doors are still open. It’s good but it’s just the ‘*hors d’oeuvre*’. The main course will be served when Christ the bridegroom comes and after the doors are closed. However we envisage it, the point is that the call is out to *come to the table now*. God is inviting us to come to the table now and receive from him. God calls us to give ourselves over to him so that we can receive from his abundance. We give our lives to him so that he can fill us with “the good things of his house” (Psalm 65:4).

Read Matthew 22:1-14 and Isaiah 55:1-2

Ask God to fill you with the good things of his house.

The Showdown – Matthew **22:15–23:39**

The religious leaders in Jerusalem felt threatened by Jesus. His life and works demonstrated what they lacked, and they didn't want to see their deficiencies, even though that could have saved them. What do we do when someone makes us feel that we might have some spiritual deficiency? We might be tempted to try and find an excuse to reject them. That is what the religious leaders did with Jesus. They interrogated him on matters of law and theology to try to 'catch him out' and find some justification to reject him. Not only did they not catch Jesus out, however, but Jesus calls their bluff and comes down hard upon them. They were meant to be the messengers of the Father's love to his children. But instead, the carers had become oppressors; they were control-freaks who wanted to secure their position of power over the people. They upheld a religion that was too hard for the common man to attain, and which therefore made them look superior. They wanted a Messiah who would support their positions, not one who would challenge them. What sort of Messiah are you willing to accept? Will you only respond to God if he confirms all your prejudices and makes you feel like you are right about everything? Or are you willing to be corrected? Are you willing for God to shift you and change you? Are you willing for God to do things you don't expect or understand? Are you willing to be discomforted and stretched? These are things that Jesus did then, and this is what he does now. Will you surrender, or defend your ground?

Read **Matthew 22:15-23:39** and consider whether you have taken a defensive stance towards God.

“Will we still be married in heaven?” I am often asked that with respect to Jesus’ teaching here in Mark 12:18-27 (and Matthew 22:23-33). People feel that Jesus is saying that in heaven our present relationships won’t matter. On the contrary, the point here is that after the day of resurrection, in the new heavens and the new earth, things will be better than we imagine. This includes better and closer relationships with all, including our present loved ones. The next section about love in Mark 12:28-34 helps to solve this issue. Love is the highest state-of-being and, in heaven, love is made perfect. At present we love some people more and others less. But then we shall love everyone with a perfect love, that is, a love that could not be more or less. So, we won’t love our spouses or even our children more than others because there will *not be a lesser love*. You will still have these relationships and they will no doubt carry a special significance. We can only conjecture about this. But there will surely only be perfect love in the perfect future state. Think about those you most love now. In the new heavens and the new earth, you will love everyone with an even more *perfect love* than that. This is precisely what makes heaven ‘heavenly’: love. God is love (1 John 4:8) and to reflect God’s glory is to love as he loves. There is no higher life than the life of love. If you love others, then you have fulfilled the whole law of God! Love is the ‘atmosphere’ of heaven. When we love others, it is like giving them a taste of heaven.

Read Mark 12:18-34

Ask God to give you a greater love for all those you spend time with.

Mark 12:35-44

Mark doesn't include Jesus' lengthy denunciation of the religious leaders as Matthew does but he gives an adequate summary of the main issue. For these leaders, life was a stage-show and they were the actors looking to win the adulation and devotion of the people. They invented a religion that only they could fulfil to gain a sense of superiority. They were men trying to be gods. It is tragically ironic that they used the Bible and the law to achieve this. They made a show of their devotion and piety to win the respect of the people. Imagine how humiliating it must have been to have Jesus point these things out before the crowds of people. No wonder they would work so hard to have him executed! As he is decrying the pride of these religious leaders to his disciples Jesus notices an old woman putting an unimpressive amount of money into the offering box. He points out that she had done what these proud leaders had failed to do. They were not willing to really resign anything to God. Their giving was just an investment in their sense of self-righteousness. They gave no more than they had to make themselves feel good. God was calling them to give up their 'turf' to him, but they were not willing to move an inch. But this old woman was prepared to give everything to God. Are you prepared to hand your life over to God? Will you let him be in charge? Or are you defending your turf? There is peace and rest in surrender.

Read Mark 12:35-44

Give yourself over to God today.

Matthew 24 contains Jesus' remarkable predictions of the 'Jewish wars' and the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD. Many Christians, when they read this, end up making the very mistake that Jesus warns against here. They assume that the cataclysmic events Jesus describes in this chapter are precursors to his "coming" (Greek: *parousia*, a technical term referring to the formal manifestation of a king). That is what the disciples assumed, and Jesus corrects them (vss. 3-4). The confusion, for us, arises because Jesus speaks of his "coming" (*erchomai*) on the clouds "immediately after the distress of those days" (vss.29-30). But Jesus isn't using the word *parousia* here. Jesus draws on the same symbolic language used by Old Testament prophets, to describe God's acts of judgement and international upheaval. He also clearly says that all these things would happen within that generation (vs. 34). But his *parousia* would be beyond that. Something else must happen first: the Gospel must be preached throughout the world. The messengers of God must go out and "gather his elect". When Jesus returns it will be visible to everyone "as lighting from the east is visible even in the west". And moreover, unlike the destruction of Jerusalem, whose timeframe Jesus pinpoints in this chapter, *no one knows* when his *parousia* will be, not even him (vs.36). It's a complex chapter but the message is this: don't bunker down in fear and wait for the end to come. Focus on the task at hand: the Gospel must go out. The end will not come until that happens.

Read Matthew 24:1-35

Pray for the spread of the Gospel in your city and country.

COMING SOON

Matthew **24:36–51**

THURSDAY

17 OCT

It is characteristic of biblical prophets that they predict events both in the near future and in the distant future. The idea is that their prophecies can be tested (see Deuteronomy 18:21-22). If the immediate event predicted by the prophet comes true, then we can be assured that the distant one will come about as well. Jesus' prophecies have this same near-future-distant-future element. Jesus said that the war leading up to the destruction of the temple would take place within a generation. A generation was understood to be about 40 years. Jesus said that around 30AD and the temple was destroyed at the end of the Jewish wars in 70AD. That's a remarkable prediction and even more remarkable that it came about on the clock! All Jesus' predictions in Matthew 24:1-35 came true. The Jewish wars were as cataclysmic for the Jewish people as Jesus described them to be, far worse even than the previous destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586BC. But, in the light of this fulfilment, Jesus wanted his followers to look forward to the greater event in the distant future that he was predicting, the timing of which he could not say. We may not know when it will happen, but it *will* happen, and we had better be ready. Jesus has given us the customary assurance of his prophetic veracity as well as clear warning that he could come at any moment. Moreover, he also emphasised the importance of being found faithful when he comes. You cannot afford to slacken off and lose your focus. Jesus is coming soon to call us to account for our lives.

Read Matthew 24:36-51

Ask God to forgive you for your failure and ask him to help you engage with his purpose.

To underscore the importance of 'being ready' for his second coming Jesus tells two parables. The first illustrates the *consequences* of not being ready. The parable of the ten virgins depicts the unready as being shut out of God's Kingdom. This begs the question: What does it mean to be ready? The parable of the talents or bags of gold answers this. The answer is that we must be found *in God's purpose*. The parable is not saying that there are certain things we must do to qualify for God's Kingdom. Otherwise, the criteria would be the same for all. As it is here, each person is judged by a different criterion. The point is that each person will be judged by the fruit of their faith and the expectation is different according to each person's gifting. It is faith by which we are saved (Romans 3:22) but faith is seen by its actions (James 2:17). It is not the actions that qualify us. The actions show our faith. God isn't asking you to rack up spiritual achievements to earn your place in heaven. He is simply asking you to exercise the gifts he has given you for his purpose. You are only expected to bear fruit according to your God-given capacities. And you are already equipped for that. So, living out this purpose will be as natural as swimming is to a fish or flying is to a bird. It is actually harder to live any other way since we are made for God's purpose. You would have to be deeply resistant to God to bury your gifts in a burrow of selfish living.

Read Matthew 25:1-30

Ask God to show you what he wants
of you and pray for fruitfulness.

For Self-Examination – Matthew **25:31-46**

Jesus has been telling his disciples not to be alarmed by the cataclysmic events that would befall their country within their generation (Matthew 24). He doesn't want them to bunker down and think that the end of the age has arrived when these things happen. They have a job to do, and Jesus wants them to focus on this, because the end of the age will not come until this job is done. This is an age of mission. God is reaching out to people in love through Christ and we are Christ's body, his hands and feet. To be a Christian means to orient your life around Jesus' *mission*. To follow Jesus means to be about his business. Whatever our occupation may be, this should be our *preoccupation*. Jesus therefore calls us to examine our lives to make sure we really are following him. This is what this judgement scene in Matthew 25:31-46 is about. It is not intended to provide criteria by which we can work at earning our salvation. Salvation is given freely. It cannot be earned. We are not saved by serving God. Rather, we are saved *to* serve God. In Matthew 25 Jesus is giving us criteria by which we can *examine ourselves* to see if our lives are on track. It is hard-hitting teaching, but the purpose is to *wake us up* so that we can be watchful, that is, so that we don't lose sight of the 'main game'. If you find this teaching alarming, then it has done its job. Make sure then that you wake up to what is most important in life.

Read **Matthew 25:31-46**. Examine your life by Jesus' teaching in this chapter.

MONDAY
21 OCT

WHO WEARS THE PERFUME?

Matthew **26:1-16** & Mark **14:3-9**

Right after Jesus has been talking about what people do and don't do for him (in Matthew 25:31-46) we have two contrasting responses to Jesus that demonstrate his point. First, the leaders of the people are plotting to kill Jesus. Then we have a remarkable account of a woman who pours perfume over Jesus' feet. This is a remarkable act of devotion because that perfume was precious in more than a financial sense. In those times most people smelled terrible. They didn't have deodorant like we do. If you wanted to stand out and feel beautiful then perfume was the way to do that. The perfume, for that woman, was something that gave her identity and made her feel beautiful. But instead of using that for herself, so that people would notice her, she pours it on Jesus. As a result he is the one wearing the attention-grabbing aroma. This is why Jesus makes such a big deal out of her gesture, because it typifies the essence of true worship. She was happy to recede into the smelly rabble of ordinary people so that Jesus would stand out. We expend so much effort in life trying to stand out from the crowd. Our efforts to make people notice and admire us amount to a kind of self-worship. Living a life of worship *means that we live to make Jesus known*. If people admire and envy you it won't make their lives any better; it might even make them worse. But if they come to notice and worship Jesus they will be saved. Which outcome are you living for?

Read Matthew 26:1-16 and Mark 14:3-9

Ask God to use you to draw people's attention to Jesus.

SYMBOLS OF GRACE

Matthew 26:17-35

TUESDAY
22 OCT

Jesus' disciples would all fall away. They would all fail. Judas would betray Jesus and Peter would deny him. John alone would re-appear at the cross, but Jesus would go to his trial utterly abandoned by them all. It is in the context of the 'last supper' that Jesus predicted this, and this fact highlights the significance of the symbols he instituted and which we celebrate today as the 'Lord's Supper' or 'Eucharist'. In the symbols of the bread and the wine Jesus was instituting a new covenant, one that is the culmination of the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants. He was about to lay down his life for his people, to open an inexhaustible source of grace for them. His broken body and shed blood become our point of reconnection with God. Just as the temple and its sacrifices were once this point of reconnection, so now it is Christ. In fact, it was always Christ since he fulfils the symbolism of the temple and the animal sacrifices. This supper echoes the parable of the wedding feast and it also follows as the natural conclusion to Jesus' warnings about judgement in Matthew 25. If you felt like a failure against the criteria of Matthew 25 then you join the ranks of the disciples. Jesus knows we will all fail, so he instituted these symbols to remind us continually that there is always grace for us to make a fresh start. Where sin abounds, grace abounds much more (Romans 5:20). Don't wallow in failure. Jesus' sacrifice makes a way forward and gives you a new beginning.

Read Matthew 26:17-35

Confess your failures and receive God's grace in Christ.

How can God look upon all the evil in the world without doing anything? Both Isaiah and Jeremiah answered this commonly asked question by using the symbol of a cup (Isaiah 51; Jeremiah 25; Cf. Revelation 16). Into this cup, they said, was being stored all the guilt of the nations and one day God would make them drink the consequences of their evil. They describe the horrors of this cup in what is the biblical expression of what Indian religions call 'Karma': you reap what you sow! I find this term useful in explaining the Gospel since most people acknowledge the justice of the idea of reaping what we sow. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus is facing his sacrificial death and he says to God: "If it is not possible for *this cup* to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done." He is talking about the cup described by Isaiah and Jeremiah. He wants the cup of judgement to be taken away from us so that *we don't get what we deserve*. It turns out that the cup of judgement could not be taken any other way. The only way this cup could be taken from us was if Jesus swallowed the consequences for us. Most world religions diagnose the problem of human guilt and most predict some form of future judgement. But there is only one name by which we can receive *grace*. Jesus takes the cup of the consequences of our actions out of our hands and he drinks it himself. He then puts another cup into our hands: the cup of blessing.

Read Matthew 26:36-46

Receive forgiveness from God.

Throughout his arrest and trial Jesus does not defend himself. He had come to absorb the full force of evil and now the time had come for him to let people do their worst to him. The events from hereon are a disturbing demonstration of the natural animosity of human beings towards God. We protect our autonomy at all costs, even against the truth. When Jesus is accused before the Sanhedrin he does not try to vindicate himself and prove otherwise. There would have been no point. These people wanted to discredit and indict Jesus; they were committed to this before they started. They would therefore not allow themselves to see the truth. They were looking for any excuse to reject Jesus. To this end they focused on minor statements which they twist and take out of context. This is a universal human tendency. We create a reality that we feel comfortable with; one that makes us sovereign and one that reduces reality to something we can understand. In other words, we love lies. It is human nature. Before you shake your head at Jesus' accusers, and before you decry the state of humanity in general, remember that you are not without sin yourself (1 John 1:8). This means that you are holding onto lies in some form. God is gracious and he wants to set you free from those lies so that you can be more fully devoted to him. Jesus came for this purpose, and he still comes to us to bring to light all that is false and set us free. Are you willing to see the truth?

Read Matthew 26:47-68

Ask God to show you any lies that you are holding onto.

FRIDAY
25 OCT

PETER & JUDAS

Matthew **26:69–27:10**

It is interesting to compare the experiences of Judas and Peter. Peter went on to become a great man of God, but Judas committed suicide. And yet they both betrayed Jesus. Why was one restored and the other not? Judas could have been forgiven if he had repented, but Judas was committed to a way of doing things which excluded grace. He was a zealot who wanted a Messiah who would come to judge evil people. He probably assumed that Jesus was going to destroy the Romans and establish a Jewish kingdom. He would then have hoped to benefit from this. It is no wonder then that he abandoned Jesus when things seemed not to be going this way! Perhaps Judas even thought that if he betrayed Jesus to the Jewish leaders he could force a confrontation that would compel Jesus to assert his authority. But when Jesus submitted to his accusers and did not defend himself Judas had nowhere to go. He had betrayed innocent blood, and for a Jewish zealot that was a serious load of guilt to carry. There was no grace or forgiveness in Judas' belief system. Jesus tried to show him the way of grace, but he would not see it. Judas wanted a God of judgement who would destroy evildoers, and so, when he became the evildoer, that left him no hope. Peter betrayed Jesus but he was able to be restored because, unlike Judas, he seems to have been able to grasp the notion of grace. If you stand for judgement and vengeance then you have nowhere to go when you become the guilty one.

Read Matthew 26:69–27:10

Are you standing for grace in all your relationships?

Making Choices Clear - Matthew **27:11-26**

Matthew, in the way he narrates the events of Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin and particularly before the crowd, clearly wants to highlight how these events served to make *the people's choice* very clear. Matthew writes his Gospel for a Jewish readership and he wants to highlight the fact that Jesus was condemned to death by his *own people*, the people of Israel. This passage has been wrongly used to condemn the Jews, but this was not Matthew's intention. In the spirit of Jesus, Matthew is highlighting their bad choice so that they may be delivered from it. It is recorded here that they might find *grace*. What did Jesus say when his people mocked him on the cross? "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Matthew wants them to realise what they did so that they can acknowledge Jesus as their Messiah and receive this forgiveness. It is very often the case that we make choices without really being conscious of the choices we are making. God wants us to be conscious of these choices and so he will often arrange circumstances so that they become very clear. This is what happens here in this famous scenario of Jesus before the Jewish leaders and then before the crowd. They chose a murderer over the prince of peace. The situation brought out their true spiritual stage. God will likewise arrange circumstances to help us see our true spiritual state. The purpose is not to condemn us, but to alarm us and lead us to repentance. Watch yourself carefully so you don't miss what your responses reveal about you.

Read **Matthew 27:11-26**. What choices are you making?

MONDAY
28 OCT

THE CRUCIFIXION

Matthew 27:27-44
& Mark 15:16-32

It is interesting to note what the dominant theme throughout the 'passion narratives' is. The crucifixion itself is referred to but is given no descriptive space at all. All the descriptive space is given to the *mocking and humiliation* of Jesus. This is what Matthew and the other Gospel writers all focus on. This was, in fact, the main purpose of crucifixion. It was rated as the most severe of all punishments because, as well as inflicting prolonged pain on its victims, it was also a tool of humiliation. It wasn't just a form of execution alongside others; it was seen as offensive and obscene. They did it *because* it was offensive and obscene. It was therefore reserved for those regarded as the worst of the worst: rebel slaves, murderers, thieves and insurgents. Most people found the very mention of crucifixion traumatic and shameful. It brought to mind those naked victims, nailed up in agony. It was a symbol of *shame*. This is what Jesus submitted to. It is why Paul speaks of the cross as *offensive* (1 Corinthians 1:23) and why he talked about Jesus submitting to death, "*even* death on a cross" (Philippians 2:8). For all of us who know the inner agony of shame, Jesus bids us to look to his cross and he says to us: "I know that shame because I bore it for you on the cross." The cross is a symbol of shame that says to humankind: "No one has to live with shame anymore." Jesus met us in the place of our shame to give us a new start.

Read Matthew 27:27-44 and Mark 15:16-32

Do you carry shame for things you have done? Give this over to Jesus.

THE CURTAIN

Matthew 27:45-56

TUESDAY
29 OCT

When Adam and Eve sinned against God they were barred from the tree of life. God placed two cherubim and a flaming sword to guard the way. Mankind was guilty and so he lost his access to the life of God. When God commanded Moses to build a tabernacle, he instructed him to build a room in the tabernacle called the Holy of Holies. This was to be the 'throne room' of God. God commanded Moses to close off this chamber with a great curtain and he told him to embroider *cherubim* on the curtain. In other words, this curtain represented the closed way to the tree of life. In the moment Jesus died something amazing happened. The great curtain in the temple was *torn in two from top to bottom*. Jesus' death atoned for the guilt of his people and therefore the *way to the tree of life was now opened* for anyone who would come by faith in his sacrifice. The way is open to live with God and to be filled with his life, imparted to us by his Spirit. Jesus did not die so that you could know *about* God. He died so that you could be reconciled to God and have a relationship with him. The problem is, we tend to accept this fact intellectually but then continue to live life on the *wrong side of the curtain*. God calls you to live life on *his side of the curtain*. Here there is fullness of life, peace and joy. On which side of the curtain are you going to live?

Read Matthew 27:45-56

"Draw near to God and he will draw near to you."

WEDNESDAY

30 OCT

THE RESURRECTION

Matthew 27:57–28:15
& Mark 15:42–16:14

From about 33 AD onwards we see a strange thing happening in Judea. A group of Jews are going about telling people that Jesus, who was given over by the Jews to be crucified on a Roman cross, had been vindicated by God as the Messiah of Israel and revealed to be the Son of God. By every standard this was a ridiculous claim. It was also dangerous; it would cause a lot of suffering for those who testified to this. Many of them would even die for their message. You would have to be pretty sure about something to give your life for it. So, what made them so sure that Jesus was the Son of God? They believed this *because they had seen Jesus resurrected from the dead*. They couldn't deny it. No one at the time doubted that he had died, and they could not doubt that *together* they had seen him alive again. The early church was a *resurrection movement*. Everything for them flowed from their belief that Jesus had been raised from the dead and all of their beliefs and actions only make sense in the light of this. The historical phenomenon of the early church cannot be adequately explained unless we accept that these people were telling the truth. Given how much suffering this claim caused them, they would not have lied about this. But the truth of it is also seen in the power of their testimony. The resurrection meant that the way to the tree of life was opened and they lived in this reality. It changed everything for them and should for us too.

Read Matthew 27:57-28:15 and Mark 15:42-16:14

Ask God to fill you with his resurrection life.

THE GREAT COMMISSION

THURSDAY

31 OCT

Matthew 28:16-20
& Mark 16:15-20

All nations? This is the part of the great commission that would have stood out to the disciples. Up to this point Israel's main concern was with Israel. But now Jesus was telling them to go and make disciples of *all nations*. This commission signals the graduation of God's people. Everything previously was designed to prepare them for their mission in the new age which Jesus inaugurated. The people of God were leaving university and getting a real job. No longer should they just practice their faith in-house and work with models. Now was the time to begin the real thing. The church should therefore reflect this graduation. Churches are not just support clubs for Christians. The church is the body of Christ and Christ wants to reach the lost. He wants to embrace people in grace and draw them into a discipleship journey. The church, therefore, whatever size or shape it might take, must orient itself around this great commission. Each of us, moreover, must make this our preoccupation in whatever our occupation might be. Whatever you do and wherever you are, you are called to represent Christ and help people to connect with God through him. If that sounds daunting, remember that you yourself are also a disciple of Christ. This means that you follow him, which means responding to what he is doing. He is the one with the power and authority to change lives. Your role is to bear witness to him and participate in what he is already doing. That is the only way to be truly fruitful and to *THRIVE*.

Read Matthew 28:16-20 and Mark 16:15-20

Ask God to draw you more into what he is doing around you.



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