



EXPLORE **THE BIBLE**®

Adults

Matthew 14–28

Personal Study Guide (CSB)

Spring 2026



WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS

If you're an adult of a particular generation, you'll probably remember a toy called The Magic 8 Ball™. For those who aren't as familiar, this was a foolproof tool for getting answers to any questions about the future . . . sort of.

In one sense, the 8 Ball guaranteed you an answer to every question. If you asked about your future spouse or whether you were going to pass your history test, the 8 Ball had an answer. The problem was that the Magic 8 Ball carried about as much prophetic authority as a fortune cookie. At best, the answers were vague. At worst, they were irrelevant.

Then again, it was designed for entertainment. No one with a modicum of sense would entrust their future to an oversized pool ball.

Of course, human nature still longs to know what's ahead. Whether we're thinking about this life or the next, we seek clarity. We want to see what's just around the bend.

Jesus understood that. That's why He often talked with His disciples about what would happen in the short term and in the distant future. Throughout the Gospels, including Matthew's Gospel, Jesus reminded His followers that He holds the future. He is God. He loves us more than we can imagine. He remains in control, and His people can trust Him.

Jesus might not give you every answer you've ever wanted, but He has promised to give you peace for today, tomorrow, and eternity. That starts with a personal relationship with Him. If you're seeking answers to the most important questions in life, here's what you need to do . . .

- **Admit** to God that you are a sinner. Repent, turning from your sin.
- **By faith receive** Jesus as God's Son and accept His gift of forgiveness from sin. He took the penalty for your sin by dying on the cross. Jesus also rose from the dead, making a new, eternal life possible for us.
- **Confess** your faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. You may pray a prayer similar to this as you call on God to save you: "Dear God, I know that You love me. I confess my sin and need of salvation. I turn away from my sin and place my faith in Jesus as my Savior and Lord. In the name of Jesus I pray, amen."

After you have received Jesus Christ into your life, tell a pastor or another Christian about your decision. Show others your faith in Christ by asking for baptism by immersion in your local church as a public expression of your faith.

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*Evangelistic Emphasis

MEET THE WRITER



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Terms listed here are identified in the Bible commentary with a dot (•).

Caesarea Philippi [sess uh REE uh FIH lih pigh]—a city located in the upper Jordan Valley along the slopes of Mount Hermon; the place where Jesus asked His disciples who they thought He was (Matt. 16:13-20); the transfiguration (17:1-13), which occurred about a week after Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi, was probably also in this area

Centurion [sen TYOOR ee uhn]—an officer in the Roman army in command of one hundred soldiers; generally presented in a favorable light in the New Testament (Matt. 8:5; 27:54; Acts 27:3)

Herodians [hih ROH dih uhns]—an aristocratic Jewish group who favored the policies of Herod Antipas and supported the Roman government; they allied with the Pharisees in trying to trap Jesus with their question about paying taxes to the Romans (Matt. 22:15-22)

Galilee [GAL ih lee]—small region in the northern part of Israel where Jesus did most of His ministry (Matt. 3:13; 4:18,23; 17:22; 26:32); following the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, Galilee became the major center of Judaism

Mount of Olives—a two-and-a-half mile-long mountain ridge running in a north-south direction due east of Jerusalem; the name came from its extensive olive groves, well-known since ancient times

(Zech. 14:4); at its peak it rises over 200 feet above the Temple Mount across the Kidron Valley

Passover—one of the three annual festivals, it commemorated the final plague on Egypt when the firstborn of the Egyptians died and the Israelites were spared because of the blood on their doorposts (Ex. 12)

Pharisees [FEHR uh sees]—religious group in Israel that controlled the synagogues and exercised great control over much of the population; the term means “separated ones”

Sadducees [SAD joo sees]—religious group in Israel that controlled the temple and its services; they rejected the oral law of the Pharisees and accepted the Pentateuch as the ultimate authority; materialistic in their outlook, they did not believe in life after death or rewards or punishment beyond this life and denied the existence of angels and demons

Scribes—during the exile in Babylon, scribes became the experts in God’s written word, they copied, preserved, and taught it; Ezra was a scribe (Ezra 7:6); in the New Testament, most were Pharisees (Mark 2:16). They were considered the experts in cases where people were accused of breaking the law of Moses.

BIBLE READING PLAN



MARCH

- 1. Matthew 14:1-5
- 2. Matthew 14:6-12
- 3. Matthew 14:13-21
- 4. Matthew 14:22-27
- 5. Matthew 14:28-33
- 6. Matthew 14:34-36
- 7. Matthew 15:1-9
- 8. Matthew 15:10-20
- 9. Matthew 15:21-28
- 10. Matthew 15:29-31
- 11. Matthew 15:32-39
- 12. Matthew 16:1-4
- 13. Matthew 16:5-12
- 14. Matthew 16:13-20
- 15. Matthew 16:21-23
- 16. Matthew 16:24-28
- 17. Matthew 17:1-8
- 18. Matthew 17:9-13
- 19. Matthew 17:14-21
- 20. Matthew 17:22-23
- 21. Matthew 17:24-27
- 22. Matthew 18:1-5
- 23. Matthew 18:6-9
- 24. Matthew 18:10-14
- 25. Matthew 18:15-20
- 26. Matthew 18:21-22
- 27. Matthew 18:23-35
- 28. Matthew 19:1-6
- 29. Matthew 19:7-12
- 30. Matthew 19:13-15
- 31. Matthew 19:16-22

APRIL

- 1. Matthew 19:23-26
- 2. Matthew 19:27-30
- 3. Matthew 20:1-16
- 4. Matthew 20:17-19
- 5. Matthew 20:20-23
- 6. Matthew 20:24-28
- 7. Matthew 20:29-34
- 8. Matthew 21:1-5
- 9. Matthew 21:6-11
- 10. Matthew 21:12-13
- 11. Matthew 21:14-17
- 12. Matthew 21:18-22
- 13. Matthew 21:23-27
- 14. Matthew 21:28-32
- 15. Matthew 21:33-46
- 16. Matthew 22:1-14
- 17. Matthew 22:15-22
- 18. Matthew 22:23-33
- 19. Matthew 22:34-40
- 20. Matthew 22:41-46
- 21. Matthew 23:1-7
- 22. Matthew 23:8-13
- 23. Matthew 23:14-26
- 24. Matthew 23:27-36
- 25. Matthew 23:37-39
- 26. Matthew 24:1-8
- 27. Matthew 24:9-14
- 28. Matthew 24:15-28
- 29. Matthew 24:29-31
- 30. Matthew 24:32-35

MAY

- 1. Matthew 24:36-44
- 2. Matthew 24:45-51
- 3. Matthew 25:1-13
- 4. Matthew 25:14-30
- 5. Matthew 25:31-40
- 6. Matthew 25:41-46
- 7. Matthew 26:1-5
- 8. Matthew 26:6-13
- 9. Matthew 26:14-16
- 10. Matthew 26:17-25
- 11. Matthew 26:26-30
- 12. Matthew 26:31-35
- 13. Matthew 26:36-46
- 14. Matthew 26:47-56
- 15. Matthew 26:57-68
- 16. Matthew 26:69-75
- 17. Matthew 27:1-5
- 18. Matthew 27:6-10
- 19. Matthew 27:11-14
- 20. Matthew 27:15-26
- 21. Matthew 27:27-31
- 22. Matthew 27:32-37
- 23. Matthew 27:38-44
- 24. Matthew 27:45-49
- 25. Matthew 27:50-56
- 26. Matthew 27:57-61
- 27. Matthew 27:62-66
- 28. Matthew 28:1-7
- 29. Matthew 28:8-10
- 30. Matthew 28:11-15
- 31. Matthew 28:16-20

BIBLICAL BACKGROUND



“When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, because he was teaching them like one who had authority, and not like their scribes” (Matt. 7:28-29). Sprinkled throughout Matthew’s Gospel are nine references to the authority of Jesus. Matthew’s emphasis on Jesus’s authority, or power, served his purpose of proving that Jesus was God’s long-awaited Messiah.

To back up that claim, the Gospel is filled with numerous prophecies showing how Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament concerning the coming Messiah. In addition, Matthew interspersed the teachings of Jesus with numerous miracles attesting to Jesus’s divine nature. His intent was to show through the narration of teachings and miracles that Jesus was indeed God’s Messiah and that response to Him brought either blessing or judgment.

While there is no direct reference to the writer of this Gospel as the disciple named Matthew, early church tradition and references from several church leaders in the early second century point to Matthew the apostle as the writer.

At first appearance, the Gospel might be thought of as a chronological summary of the life and ministry of Jesus. It is more than that. The book is a carefully constructed collection of the key teachings of Jesus. While it begins with the genealogy and birth of Jesus, and closes with His death

by crucifixion and resurrection, the central part of the book contains five sections of the collected teachings of Jesus. These five sections are found in chapters 5–7; 10; 13; 18; and 24–25. Each section closes with a formulaic statement, “when Jesus had finished” these teachings (7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1). Between each of these sections of teachings, Matthew narrated the actions of Jesus in healing, casting out demons, raising the dead, and feeding thousands with only a small amount of food.

A second organizing principle in the Gospel was the separate ministries of Jesus in Galilee (Matt. 4:12–14:12) and in Judea (17:22–28:20). In the interval between these two sections was a brief journey into the region of Tyre and Sidon. The climactic section of the book is the final week of Jesus in Jerusalem, culminating in His arrest, crucifixion, burial, and resurrection.

In the pages of this Gospel, Matthew the tax-collector-turned-disciple, presents to us a snapshot of the life and teachings of Jesus. This certainly is not a complete biography nor an exhaustive collection of Jesus’s teachings. Instead, it is a reliable glimpse into the period of time when God came to earth in flesh and bone to bring about salvation for all who place their trust in Him.

OUTLINE



MATTHEW

- I. Birth and Infancy of Jesus (1:1-2:23)
- II. Beginning of Jesus's Ministry in Galilee (3:1-4:25)
- III. Discourse One: The Sermon on the Mount (5:1-7:29)
- IV. Jesus's First Miracles (8:1-9:38)
- V. Discourse Two: Ministry of Jesus's Disciples (10:1-42)
- VI. Responses to Jesus's Ministry (11:1-12:50)
- VII. Discourse Three: Parables about the Kingdom (13:1-58)
- VIII. Close of Jesus's Ministry in Galilee (14:1-17:27)
- IX. Discourse Four: Character of Jesus's Disciples (18:1-35)
- X. Jesus's Ministry on the Way to Jerusalem (19:1-20:34)
- XI. Jesus's Ministry in Jerusalem (21:1-23:39)
- XII. Discourse Five: Olivet Discourse (24:1-25:46)
- XIII. Betrayal, Crucifixion, and Burial (26:1-27:66)
- XIV. Resurrection and Commission (28:1-20)



Courage

JESUS IS GREATER THAN ANYTHING WE FEAR.

MATTHEW 14:22-33

Fear is a powerful foe that hinders us from progressing in life. Listen to people around you and you will hear any number of fears mentioned. Many people are terrified at the idea of public speaking. Others have fears of heights, failure, the dark, crowds, spiders, and snakes. Personal fears include injury and illness. Our fears impact our thinking, relating, and acting. Fear influences all aspects of life. Dealing with fear correctly is essential for a well-balanced life.

 **What do you consider to be your biggest fears?**

UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

MATTHEW 14:1-36

Much of the opposition Jesus faced arose out of fear. The religious leaders opposed him, in part, because they feared the wrath of Rome if there was a new “king” on the scene. They also feared they would lose power as leaders of the people.

At the close of Matthew 13, the people in Jesus’s hometown of Nazareth were overwhelmed by something they couldn’t explain—how Jesus had obtained such authority and learning. The theme of fear continued into chapter 14 with the account of Herod Antipas, a man motivated by fear.

Herod Antipas was the son of Herod the Great. He was a Roman appointed ruler over the provinces of Galilee and Perea. Jews hated him because he was not Jewish. His father, Herod the Great, was Idumean and his mother was a Samaritan. Antipas was denounced by John the Baptist because of his marriage to Herodias. Herodias had been the wife of Philip, half-brother to Antipas. She was also the niece of Antipas. Salome, Herodias’s daughter, tricked him into having John the Baptist beheaded. Antipas was too motivated by fear of the opinion of others to go back on his promise to kill John.

Matthew 14:1-2 calls attention to Herod’s fear that Jesus was John the Baptist risen from the dead. Herod was certain John had come back for revenge.

Following John’s death, Jesus withdrew to be alone with the disciples to sort through His response to such tragedy. This desire to be alone was interrupted by the crowds that followed. Jesus showed compassion by healing the sick late into the afternoon. The result was a hungry crowd of five thousand men, not including the women and children. Jesus miraculously fed all of them. This miracle fueled the crowd to attempt to forcibly enthrone Jesus as king (see John 6:15). Again Jesus removed Himself from the crowd by sending the disciples by boat across the lake while He sought solitude for prayer. At this point, a second miracle occurred that included overcoming the forces of nature.



Read Matthew 14:22-33 in your Bible. Identify the variety of fears experienced by the disciples in this passage.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

JESUS'S PRESENCE (MATT. 14:22-27)

²² **Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds.**

²³ **After dismissing the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. Well into the night, he was there alone.**

²⁴ **Meanwhile, the boat was already some distance from land, battered by the waves, because the wind was against them.**

²⁵ **Jesus came toward them walking on the sea very early in the morning.** ²⁶ **When the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified. “It’s a ghost!” they said, and they cried out in fear.** ²⁷ **Immediately Jesus spoke to them. “Have courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.”**

VERSE 22

The phrase *immediately he made the disciples get into the boat* sets the tone for the urgency of this moment. That urgency was brought on, according to John 6:14-15, by the fact that the crowd who had been miraculously fed was scheming how they might force Jesus to be their king and military deliverer. Quite possibly, the disciples were caught up in this fervor. Matthew used an unusually forceful verb to describe the action of Jesus as He *made* the disciples leave the scene. Jesus realized the urgency of removing them from the influence of the crowd. Therefore, He made the disciples proceed by boat to the *other side* of the Sea of Galilee.

The language of verse 22 reflects a reluctance on the part of the disciples to leave Jesus. Nevertheless, at His directive, they obediently set out. Jesus *dismissed* the crowd, ignoring their attempt to make Him king.

DID YOU KNOW?

An ancient fishing boat, called “the Jesus Boat” by archaeologists, was discovered in 1986 on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. It is dated from the first century AD and is the size and construction of boats used by fisherman like Peter and John, measuring 27 feet long, 7.5 feet wide, and 4.5 feet deep.

VERSE 23

After dismissing the crowd, Jesus *went . . . by himself to pray*. This had been His intention before the crowd interrupted Him with requests for healing (Matt. 14:13). Jesus sought solitude after hearing the news of the death of John. Remember, while Jesus was fully God, He was also fully man and experienced the same wide range of emotions we do. Prayer was a regular part of Jesus's life, but this was an occasion of a special need for prayer. Despite His need for rest, Jesus prayed long into the night.

Prayer was a regular part of Jesus's life.

VERSE 24

Matthew's narrative next turned attention to the disciples who were struggling in the boat. They had reached a distance from land. The text literally called it "many stadia away." The measuring unit "stadion" was approximately 600 feet. John's Gospel indicates they had rowed perhaps three or four miles (John 6:19). However, as they rowed, *the wind was against them* and pushed them further from their destination. The Sea of Galilee was notorious for intense squalls that swept down from the slopes of Mount Hermon and other mountains surrounding the lake.

The severity of the storm is seen further in the words *battered by the waves*, which could be translated as the waves "tormented" the disciples. Mark 6:48 states the disciples were "straining at the oars."

VERSES 25-26

Jesus finally came to them *very early in the morning*. The Greek translation sets the time as the "fourth watch," or sometime in the pre-dawn hours between three and six in the morning. This meant that the disciples had probably been rowing in the storm for at least six to nine hours by the time Jesus arrived.

Jesus came to the disciples for two reasons: to join them and to help them. Initially, though, His coming created fear. The panic came in the way in which He came to them: *walking on the sea*.

When the disciples saw Jesus walking on the sea, they *cried out in fear*. There was no mistaking what they saw. All the disciples saw the figure on the water. In fact, the Greek word *saw* means to stare intently. This was not a passing glance, but a studied and prolonged

gaze to comprehend what was being seen. Their conclusion from this careful observation was that this was a **ghost** or a disembodied spirit. The Greek term means “phantom” or apparition from the realm of the dead. This would have been the natural conclusion; a human being walking on the water seemed impossible.



KEY DOCTRINE: *God the Son*

Christ is the eternal Son of God. (See John 1:1; Philippians 2:5-8.)

VERSE 27

When His disciples cried out in terror and fear, Jesus **immediately** called out to them. His words were intended to encourage them and allay their fears. **Have courage**, He said, **it is I**. Literally, Jesus declared, “I am,” using the divine name for God (Ex. 3:14). With this short exclamation, Jesus was hinting at the presence of the great “I Am,” the Lord God Almighty. This was God Himself who was with them during the wind and waves. There was no need to **be afraid**. The disciples may not have recognized Jesus as He walked toward them among the mist and the waves, but the moment He spoke, they recognized their Master’s voice.



When has Jesus’s presence been especially meaningful to you?

Literally, Jesus declared, “I am,” using the divine name for God.

JESUS’S INVITATION (MATT. 14:28-30)

²⁸ “Lord, if it’s you,” Peter answered him, “command me to come to you on the water.” ²⁹ He said, “Come.” And climbing out of the boat, Peter started walking on the water and came toward Jesus. ³⁰ But when he saw the strength of the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, “Lord, save me!”

VERSE 28

As soon as Peter heard Jesus's voice, he wanted to do what Jesus was doing. He called out to Him, **Lord, if it's you**. The word *if* does not express uncertainty. Rather, the Greek grammar points to the meaning being "since it's you."

Among the key elements of a disciple following a rabbi was both knowing what a rabbi knew and doing what the rabbi did. It could be that Peter wanted to emulate his teacher in doing what the teacher did. This was also an act of devotion to Jesus. We typically focus on Peter's lack of faith in this instance (vv. 30-31). But what about the others? Peter, at least, was willing to take the risk to be like his Master and be with his Master. He knew there was safety with Jesus; without Him there was only danger.

Peter was willing to take the risk to be like his Master and be with his Master.

VERSES 29-30

Peter realized that he would have been unable to walk to Jesus without the permission and command of Jesus. At Peter's request, Jesus commanded Peter to **come**. Jesus rewarded Peter's devotion by inviting him to do the impossible. This was a genuine expression of Jesus's love in response to Peter's intense loyalty and devotion. Peter's faith started out strong. After all, Jesus was walking on the water and had bid Peter to walk as well. Initially, the water supported Peter as he walked toward Jesus.

Peter soon realized the situation outside the boat was radically different than inside the boat. Quickly, he became distracted by the wind, and his faith and confidence wavered. As his doubts began to sink him, Peter cried out, **Lord, save me!** These words, *save me*, were the same words used by the disciples in the previous storm recorded in Matthew 8:25. The word *save* means to "rescue from death" or "keep alive."



What step of faith are you prayerfully considering right now?

JESUS'S RESPONSE (MATT. 14:31-33)

³¹ **Immediately Jesus reached out his hand, caught hold of him, and said to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?”**

³² **When they got into the boat, the wind ceased.** ³³ **Then those in the boat worshiped him and said, “Truly you are the Son of God.”**

VERSE 31

As soon as Peter began to sink and cried out to Jesus, Jesus *immediately* pulled him from the water. Next came a rebuke, *why did you doubt?* The word *doubt* pictures a person being pulled in two directions. Peter had been caught between his desire to be where Jesus was and do what Jesus did, and the terror of the storm and the waves. The fear of the situation won the tug-of-war and down went Peter. Jesus chastised him for having *little faith*. This was the exact rebuke Jesus gave to all the disciples during the first storm narrated in Matthew 8:26: “Why are you so afraid, you of little faith?” The implication of Jesus was that if Peter had not doubted, he would have continued to walk on the water.

Their worship of Jesus was the remedy for their fears.

VERSE 32

Unlike the calming of the storm in Matthew 8, Jesus said nothing to the elements of nature. The storm apparently stopped without a word from Jesus. Calm occurred the moment Peter and Jesus got into the boat. The presence of Jesus in the boat most likely calmed the storm in the hearts of the disciples as well. Not only did the wind stop, but suddenly the boat was at the shore, a goal the disciples had labored for most of the night to accomplish.

Keep in mind that these nature miracles of Jesus were not for show, but always to meet the need of the moment. In this case, it was the rescue of the disciples. This was a tangible response to a desperate situation.

VERSE 33

Verse 33 is the climax of this passage. The target of the whole incident was the declaration by the disciples of the deity of Jesus. The disciples *worshiped* Jesus and declared, *Truly you are the Son of God*. This chapter is the halfway point of the

book of Matthew. This is the first time the disciples have declared that Jesus is the *Son of God*. With that thought we are confronted by their slowness to comprehend the significance of Jesus. They experienced the calming of nature once before, they saw His miraculous healings and demon-deliverance, they participated as He miraculously fed a huge crowd of people. Yet here they are again astonished at His power and authority to overcome their fears and allay their situation. But they were more than simply amazed. They declared Jesus was worthy of worship because He was and is the Son of God. Their worship of Jesus was the remedy for their fears. They would waver again in their understanding of Jesus and His purpose on earth; yet this was a high point of these disciples following their rabbi!



How do you tend to respond to Jesus’s power when you experience it?



BIBLE SKILL: *Examine and reflect on similarities between two passages.*

Look for similarities between the event in Matthew 14:22-33 and Matthew 8:23-27. Then look for differences between the two events. Explain why you can be certain these were two different events.

APPLY THE TEXT

- + We can trust Jesus to walk with us in the storms of life.
- + When Jesus issues an invitation, we can step out with confidence knowing that He is with us.
- + Jesus’s power should lead us to worship Him.



As a group, discuss various fears people face. How might the presence and power of Jesus allay those fears? Spend time in prayer giving those fears to Jesus and asking for His authoritative power to prevail over those fears.



Consider what it means to fear the Lord rather than fearing the storms and difficulties of life. How can you build “fear of the Lord” into the daily routine of your life? Take time to memorize Matthew 14:27 and use that verse in prayer when you are confronted with fear.

Memorize Matthew 14:27.

Prayer Needs



Explore the Bible Prayer Guide

Scan here for a weekly prayer guide based on this quarter’s Bible passages.



Real Devotion

JESUS REJECTS SUPERFICIAL RELIGION.

MATTHEW 15:1-11,16-20

We tend to like things that are genuine. We generally say no to knockoffs, artificial, or substitute anything. Don't give us blended vegetables and call them hamburgers. We've developed an eye for spotting imitation leather and knockoff purses. Our taste buds can discern the real thing compared to artificial sweeteners. We like the genuine. The same is true in relationships. We want friends who are genuine, not superficial. Likewise, God desires our relationship with Him and the practice of our faith to be genuine.

 **What are some things that you demand to be genuine in your life?**

UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

MATTHEW 15:1-39

In Matthew 12, the Pharisees had challenged the disciples and Jesus over failure to keep their traditions regarding the Sabbath. In chapter 15, these religious leaders challenged the disciples and Jesus concerning their failure to keep dietary laws regarding the ceremonial cleansing of the hands.

Jesus condemned the Pharisees and scribes for their unbelief and their adherence to man-made tradition. To the crowd who had observed the interchange about dietary laws between Jesus and the Pharisees, He pointed out that what a person eats doesn't make a person unclean. Rather, uncleanness comes from within a person's heart.

The disciples were puzzled by Jesus's response to the Pharisees. They also didn't understand His answer to the crowd about what defiles a person.

After answering the disciples, Jesus, with the disciples, left Galilee and traveled into the region of Tyre and Sidon (modern-day Lebanon). He also was not ready for the final confrontation with the Jewish authorities. Teaching still needed to be done to prepare the disciples.

It was here that a shift took place. While in Tyre, Jesus was petitioned by a Canaanite woman who wanted healing for her daughter. Jesus initially ignored the woman's plea, stating He was sent to the Jewish people. But after much persistence, Jesus granted the healing to the daughter of this Gentile woman. The implication is that Jesus extended the kingdom of God into the Gentile world.

This shift is reinforced by the narration of healing people and feeding four thousand men plus women and children in the Gentile region of the Decapolis. These two incidents portend the expansion of the kingdom of God to the Gentiles that is explored in great detail in Acts 10–28.



Read Matthew 15:1-11,16-20 in your Bible. Identify what was superficial about the religion of the Pharisees.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

BROKEN RULES (MATT. 15:1-6)

¹ Then Jesus was approached by Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem, who asked, ² “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they don’t wash their hands when they eat.” ³ He answered them, “Why do you break God’s commandment because of your tradition? ⁴ For God said: Honor your father and your mother; and, Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must be put to death. ⁵ But you say, ‘Whoever tells his father or mother, “Whatever benefit you might have received from me is a gift committed to the temple,” ⁶ he does not have to honor his father.’ In this way, you have nullified the word of God because of your tradition.”

VERSE 1

In reading the Gospels, we discover that almost every time Jesus healed or taught, representatives from the **•Pharisees and •scribes** were present. This was especially true in the latter part of Jesus’s ministry in Galilee. The Pharisees were the leading religious party in Israel and were strict adherents to the law of Moses. Even more radical was their personal interpretation and application of the law. Their interpretation, or oral law as it was called, took precedent over the law given by God to Moses. Many of these Pharisees were also scribes who were learned scholars and copyists of the law. As such, they joined the Pharisees in a constant scrutiny of every word and move of Jesus.

What is prominent in this particular confrontation is that these Pharisees and scribes were **from Jerusalem**. Perhaps they were sent by the Jewish Sanhedrin to check out the rumors circulating about Jesus’s activity in Galilee. Because they were from Jerusalem, they would pose a greater and more serious threat to Jesus; they had greater authority than the religious leaders from Galilee.

VERSE 2

Following a typical pattern seen throughout the Gospels, the critics of Jesus questioned the actions of His disciples. This perhaps was a ploy at being respectful toward Jesus while actually aiming their accusations against Him. Their complaint focused on why the disciples (and Jesus) violated the **tradition of the elders** by

not performing the ceremonial washing of hands before eating. The phrase *tradition of the elders* indicated the interpretations and applications of the law of Moses developed over many years.

Specifically, the Pharisees wanted to know why Jesus's disciples didn't **wash their hands** before eating. This practice was more than just personal hygiene. It was part of their man-made rules and regulations. The issue wasn't whether they washed their hands but specifically how they did it and the exact amount of water used. The rules regarding hand washing were very precise and cumbersome.

This was an issue of man-made traditions versus the God-given law.

VERSES 3-4

Jesus ignored the specific criticism concerning hand washing and moved to the heart of the matter. This was an issue of man-made traditions versus the God-given law.

Jesus set the groundwork for His position against the superficial religion of the Pharisees by pointing to the fourth commandment: "Honor your father and your mother so that you may have a long life in the land that the LORD your God is giving you" (Ex. 20:12). He added another line from Exodus 21:17 to highlight the deadly penalty for failure to honor one's parents. Having reminded the Pharisees of what the law actually said, Jesus turned to point out the contradictory nature of their man-made traditions.

VERSES 5-6

Jesus zeroed in on the Jewish practice of "corban" (see also Mark 7:11). Corban was the dedication of money and other resources to the temple treasury to be paid upon one's death. This pledge money could not be given to anyone else. It was dedicated in advance and the pledge could not be revoked. Here's the barb in the whole thing: the money that was pledged in corban could still be used for the benefit of the person pledging it as long as they were alive. In Jesus's example, a person could live high off his wealth, but when his indigent parents had a need, he could declare that his wealth was pledged to the temple, and he couldn't share any of it.

This extremely selfish practice violated the command to **honor** one's parents. The apostle Paul said, "But if anyone does not provide for his own family, especially for his own household,

he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever” (1 Tim. 5:8). Thus, this superficial religious tradition violated both the letter and spirit of God’s law given at Mount Sinai.



Why is it easy to confuse human rules with God’s commands?



KEY DOCTRINE: *Salvation*

Regeneration is a change of heart wrought by the Holy Spirit through conviction of sin, to which the sinner responds in repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. (See Luke 13:3; John 3:3.)

LIP SERVICE (MATT. 15:7-11)

⁷ **“Hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied correctly about you when he said: ⁸ This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. ⁹ They worship me in vain, teaching as doctrines human commands.” ¹⁰ Summoning the crowd, he told them, “Listen and understand: ¹¹ It’s not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth—this defiles a person.”**

VERSES 7-9

After detailing the way in which the Pharisees circumvented the law of Moses with their man-made traditions, Jesus scathingly denounced them. He called them *hypocrites*, a word that means to play act, to be a pretender, to put on a mask and act out a part. Angrily, Jesus called them two-faced.

To add weight to His denunciation, Jesus quoted from the prophet Isaiah (Isa. 29:13). In that passage, Isaiah denounced the people of his day for their inauthentic worship. They gave the appearance of a genuine relationship with God through their worship. In reality, they were simply going through the motions while ignoring God’s desires. Their relationship with God was shallow at best and non-existent at worst.

This tendency to substitute a human-based rule system for following God’s directives has always plagued mankind. Paul said

the attempt to keep the law would not put a person in a right relationship with God. “For no one will be justified in his sight by the works of the law, because the knowledge of sin comes through the law” (Rom. 3:20). God’s law was designed to show us how sinful we are and how much we need a Savior. Because following God’s law perfectly is unobtainable, it was easier to create man-made rules that could be followed successfully. Keeping these traditions would provide a sense of self-satisfaction and pride. But following man-made traditions actually moved them farther from God.

Following man-made traditions actually moved them farther from God.

VERSES 10-11

Apparently, the Pharisees left in disgust. Turning to *the crowd* Jesus explained His condemnation of the Pharisees. The words *listen and understand* were often used to introduce something very important that was being said. *Pay attention* is what Jesus meant. With that introduction, He challenged the whole system of the oral tradition regarding dietary laws. The extensive system of hand washing was worthless and meaningless.

The law of Moses differentiated between “clean” and “unclean.” Much of this related to good hygiene practices, but also to rid Israel of the influence of the Egyptian religion. Over the centuries, oral traditions related to clean and unclean became complex. These man-made layers to the written law were the things to which Jesus strongly objected. Jesus declared that people weren’t defiled by the food put into their mouths, but by what came out of their mouths. Defilement comes from what’s inside a person. What’s in the heart comes out of the mouth (vv. 18-19). As a result, genuine purity before God is defined by what we allow to rule our hearts.



What tempts our hearts to drift from God?

REAL PROBLEM (MATT. 15:16-20)

¹⁶ **“Do you still lack understanding?” he asked.** ¹⁷ **“Don’t you realize that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the**

stomach and is eliminated?¹⁸ But what comes out of the mouth comes from the heart, and this defiles a person.¹⁹ For from the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, sexual immoralities, thefts, false testimonies, slander.²⁰ These are the things that defile a person; but eating with unwashed hands does not defile a person.”

VERSES 16-17

Peter, as spokesman for the disciples, asked for an explanation of the parable that Jesus had given. It was not so much that the disciples didn't understand what Jesus had said. More likely, they found such a hard teaching difficult to accept. Jesus's response to Peter's question was a sad question: ***Do you still lack understanding?*** Jesus most likely was grieved at the slowness of the disciples to grasp His meaning. They had been with Jesus almost two years, and they often were as thick-headed as the unbelieving crowds.

Jesus began His reply by setting up a contrast between the physical and the spiritual. He told the disciples that food is only physical and does not impact the spiritual. Instead, what is eaten goes through the digestive system and ***is eliminated***. No matter how “clean” or “unclean” food might be, eating it does not impact a person spiritually.

***The way to be “clean” is to allow
God to cleanse your heart.***

VERSES 18-20

The spiritual dimension of life is reflected in the attitudes, motives, and desires of the heart. The words of one's mouth reflect the condition of a person's heart. It is a person's evil attitudes, motives, and thoughts that corrupt the spiritual condition of a person.

Continuing His explanation, Jesus elaborated on the things that defile the heart—***evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, sexual immoralities, thefts, false testimonies, slander***. Many of these defiling elements are contained in the sixth through ninth commandments of the Ten Commandments.

Each of these outward actions—***murders, adulteries, sexual immoralities, thefts, false testimonies***, and ***slander***—arise first as a thought or an attitude of the heart. Eating food doesn't produce this kind of behavior. These actions and attitudes arise from the

motives of an unregenerate heart. It is the heart that needs to be transformed.

Scripture is plain that the “heart is more deceitful than anything else, and incurable” (Jer. 17:9). The unregenerate heart is filled with pride, selfishness, and sin of every sort. That is what defiles a person. A person’s life is certainly not defiled by food eaten with unwashed hands. The way to be “clean” is to allow God to cleanse your heart. That doesn’t come from a person washing his or her hands. Remember, God rejects superficial religion.

 **How can we evaluate our hearts to prevent sinful attitudes from taking root? Why is it important to examine our hearts for sinful attitudes?**

 **BIBLE SKILL:** *Take seriously all biblical commands for Christian living.*

Read Matthew 15:1-6. Identify in these verses the commands based on God’s Word. Identify any practices based on human tradition. Why do you think some people make man-made traditions the measure of spirituality (v. 2)? Make a list of ways you can avoid the trap of substituting human expectations for obedience to God’s Word.

APPLY THE TEXT

- + Honor God’s laws above all other rules.
- + Pray for your heart to remain close to God.
- + Reject superficial religion and focus on what matters most.



As a group, identify areas where it becomes easy in life to accept the superficial. Pinpoint the areas that are especially difficult for your group members. Discuss ways you can encourage one another to develop a deeper relationship with God that will avoid the inauthentic in your walk with God.



Take time to prayerfully evaluate your life. What are some things you are substituting for a genuine relationship with God? In prayer, confess these to God. What steps can you take to ensure that your relationship with God is not becoming superficial?

Memorize Matthew 15:8-9.

Prayer Needs



Following Jesus

JESUS IS THE MESSIAH, THE SAVIOR OF
THE WORLD SENT BY GOD.

MATTHEW 16:13-26

The world is made up of leaders and followers. The majority of us are followers. As followers, it is critically important who we follow. History is replete with people who followed others to destruction and death. Leaders like Jim Jones of the Jonestown massacre, cult leader Charles Manson of the murderous Manson family, or David Koresh of the Branch Davidian tragedy, all led their followers to disaster. Each of us must choose leaders wisely. Follow those who lead to life and not to death. You'll be glad you did!

 **What are the traits of leaders you want to follow?**

UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

MATTHEW 16:1-28

Matthew 16 begins with another confrontation. Matthew introduced another group who opposed Jesus: the Sadducees. These leaders of Judaism were the wealthy aristocrats. Their political party oversaw the temple. From this group came the high priest and the high priestly family. They were the power-brokers of Judaism. They were conservative in their approach to Scripture and rejected the oral traditions of the Pharisees. They sought to follow only the writings of Moses.

These Sadducees had teamed up with the Pharisees, their archenemies, to trap and eliminate Jesus. In verse 1, they asked Jesus for “a sign from heaven.” Although Jesus had performed many miraculous signs, they were not really interested. They simply wanted to get rid of Jesus.

After a scathing condemnation of the Pharisees and Sadducees (vv. 2-4), Jesus withdrew with the disciples to the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee (v. 5). Their journey would take them north to the area of Caesarea Philippi, where the events in this week’s study take place. Thus began a new phase in the ministry of Jesus. From Caesarea Philippi, Jesus would travel south directly to Jerusalem. This move signaled the end of the Galilean ministry and the beginning of the final weeks of Jesus’s earthly life, culminating in His arrest and crucifixion in Jerusalem.

At some point on the trip to Caesarea Philippi, Jesus warned the disciples about the teachings, “the leaven” (v. 6), of the Pharisees and Sadducees. The disciples missed the intent of Jesus and thought He was chiding them for not bringing food with them for the journey. Jesus reminded them of the baskets of leftovers from the two miraculous feedings He had performed. Matthew used two different terms for “baskets” (vv. 9-10), pointing to the probability that the feeding of the five thousand (14:13-21) took place among Jews, while the feeding of the four thousand (15:32-39) took place in Gentile territory.



Read Matthew 16:13-26. Contrast the opinion of the Pharisees and Sadducees and the opinion of the disciples regarding Jesus.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

KNOW THE MESSIAH (MATT. 16:13-20)

¹³ When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”

¹⁴ They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others, Elijah; still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” ¹⁵ “But you,” he asked them, “who do you say that I am?” ¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” ¹⁷ Jesus responded, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father in heaven.

¹⁸ And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will have been loosed in heaven.” ²⁰ Then he gave the disciples orders to tell no one that he was the Messiah.

VERSE 13

The ancient city of **•Caesarea Philippi** was prominent for its many shrines and worship centers of a variety of pagan gods. Later it became an early center for the beginnings of emperor worship for the Romans. Quite possibly Jesus intentionally used the backdrop of all this religious fervor to ask the disciples their opinion of Himself.

The phrase **Son of Man** was the most-used designation of Jesus to point to His identity as God’s Messiah. Jesus clearly embraced this title for Himself. It speaks of His dual nature of being fully God and fully man. Jesus used His question and this occasion to sharpen the understanding of the disciples concerning who He is.

VERSE 14

The disciples gave a variety of answers they had heard from the crowds. **John the Baptist** had been executed by Herod Antipas some time before this, thus the identification that this was John the Baptist raised from the dead. The same would be true of the other names mentioned. Malachi prophesied that **Elijah** would appear before the coming of the Messiah (Mal. 4:5). John the Baptist also spoke of this anticipation but denied that he was Elijah (John 1:21). **Jeremiah**, who preached judgment and was oppressed by his

enemies, was also mentioned as well as **one of the prophets**. Obviously, the crowds were trying to comprehend who Jesus really was. He spoke for God, He performed miracles, and He rebuked the current religious establishment. Yet He had not given any indication that He would soon lead a revolution against Rome on behalf of the Jewish people.

The common belief was that one or more of these prophets would serve as a forerunner to the Messiah. Thus, the crowd most likely thought Jesus was a forerunner to the Messiah and not the Messiah Himself. They struggled to embrace Him as Messiah because He didn't fit their profile.

VERSES 15-16

Jesus turned to the opinion of the disciples. **But**, in contrast to the crowds, **who do you say that I am?** The pronoun *you* is emphatic and plural. This was a question for all the disciples. By now, they ought to have had a clearer understanding of Jesus than the multitudes did.

Peter answered on behalf of all the disciples. This is the only place where Matthew calls him **Simon Peter**. This more formal sounding name prepares the reader for the twist on Peter's name that Jesus used in verse 18.

Peter declared that Jesus was **the Messiah**. In the Greek, this word means "the Christ." The name *Christ* (taken from the Greek *Christos*) means "the Anointed One." Peter acknowledged that Jesus was uniquely the Messiah; there is one and only one Messiah. The name pointed to the Deliverer who was coming from God.

Peter also acknowledged that Jesus was **the Son of the living God**. The use of the definite article "the" pointed to the fact that Jesus is uniquely the Son and there is no other. *Living* points to the perpetual nature of God—He has always existed and will always exist.

VERSES 17-18

Jesus called Peter **blessed** and declared that his answer was given under the Father's inspiration. There was no human intuition or consultation used, nothing of **flesh and blood** (meaning from human resources).

Verse 18 is one of the most debated passages in the Gospels. The debate centers around the interpretation of Jesus's statement, **on this rock I will build my church**. The issue revolves around who or what Jesus was referring to with the term *this rock*.

One explanation uses the difference in the name **Peter** (*petros* in Greek, meaning an isolated rock or small stone) and the Greek term *rock* (*petra*, meaning cliff or massive rock). Using the difference in these two terms, the thought is that the “massive” rock Jesus referred to was either Himself as the foundation stone for the church (see Acts 4:10-12) or the confession of Peter that Jesus was the Messiah. However, the play on words *Peter* (masculine form of *petra*) and the root word *petra* (feminine) is not present in Aramaic, which is most likely the language Jesus spoke. Aramaic only has one word for rock.

A second interpretation is that Jesus was speaking of Peter as the rock. Following the conventional rules of Greek grammar, the words **you are Peter** immediately followed by the declaration *on this rock* would indicate that Peter is the rock. The Gospels and the first chapters of Acts point to Peter as being the recognized leader of the apostles. Peter, however, most certainly was used as a representative of all the disciples. They were the ones Jesus was training to continue the movement He had begun. While Peter and the apostles would be foundational to the church in a unique sense, Jesus is uniquely the cornerstone of the church. (See Eph. 2:20.)

This is the first usage of the term *church* in the New Testament. Matthew will use the term two more times in Matthew 18:17. These occasions are the only use of the word in the Gospels. The word *church* means “called-out ones.” The picture is that Jesus called His followers out of the kingdom of darkness and out of the world to be His unique family. Note also it is *my* church that Jesus would build. He is the head (Col. 2:19) and the cornerstone (Eph. 2:20) of the church.

The church that Jesus builds will withstand any onslaught from Satan. This is seen in the statement **the gates of Hades** cannot destroy Christ’s church. The meaning behind **overpower it** is to “have strength against” or “to prevail against.” Nothing will be able to stop the growth of the church.

VERSES 19-20

Peter again is representative of all the disciples, and for that matter all believers. Jesus has given to the church He established the **keys** or the authority to **bind** and **loose**, or to close and open. Note that the **keys** are to the **kingdom of heaven**. This, of course, represents the rule and reign of God in the hearts of men and women who are a part of God’s family.

The idea, then, of binding and loosing relates to entrance into God's kingdom. The apostles and prophets, and for that matter all believers, open the kingdom or close the kingdom to others through witnessing and proclamation of the good news of Christ. Such action will also involve assurance of forgiveness to those who were enslaved to sin (see John 20:23).

Here is another instance Jesus gave the command to **tell no one** concerning His identity (Matt. 8:4; Mark 7:36; 9:9). Jesus was aware that He was part of a timetable that must play out during His time on earth. This particular moment was not the proper time for revealing Jesus's identity as the Son of God. There would be time for that later.



Why is it important to understand who Jesus is?

EMBRACE HIS MISSION (MATT. 16:21-23)

²¹ **From then on Jesus began to point out to his disciples that it was necessary for him to go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders, chief priests, and scribes, be killed, and be raised the third day.** ²² **Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, “Oh no, Lord! This will never happen to you!”** ²³ **Jesus turned and told Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me because you’re not thinking about God’s concerns but human concerns.”**

VERSES 21-23

From then on. . . . This was the turning point in the ministry of Jesus. Not only is this the transition point between the Galilean ministry and the events in Jerusalem, but it is also a shift in focus for Jesus. No longer are His teachings about the kingdom and His compassionate healings the central thrust. Now Jesus's life moved rapidly toward the real reason He came. It was **necessary** for him to **suffer** and **be killed** and then **be raised** from the dead.

Presumably **Peter** knew what was best for Jesus and took it upon himself to **rebuke** Jesus for speaking of His impending death. This may have arisen from Peter's brash personality, or his supposed “authority” he had received from Jesus calling him the “rock.” Or it could have arisen out of love for Jesus and fear of the future.

Jesus rebuked Peter using very similar words of rebuke given to Satan in Matthew 4:10. Peter took the perspective of Satan in trying to keep Jesus from carrying out God's plan of salvation. In rebuking Peter, Jesus was really, once again, rebuking Satan and denouncing this latest temptation thrown His way.



How do we let our own agendas replace God's greater plans?



KEY DOCTRINE: *God the Son*

In His substitutionary death on the cross Christ made provision for the redemption of men from sin. (See Isaiah 53:5-6; 2 Corinthians 5:21.)

BECOME HIS DISCIPLE (MATT. 16:24-26)

²⁴ **Then Jesus said to his disciples, “If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.**

²⁵ **For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life because of me will find it.** ²⁶ **For what will it benefit someone if he gains the whole world yet loses his life? Or what will anyone give in exchange for his life?”**

VERSE 24

Jesus set His face toward the suffering that awaited Him. He also knew that the path of following Him would lead many of His followers to suffer also. His warning to them was that following Him would involve self-sacrifice and even suffering.

Those who follow Him must *deny* themselves. This points to a denunciation of self being on the throne of one's life instead of God. God comes first. The follower seeks to live life fully under the lordship of Christ in following God's will in all aspects of life.

The one who follows Jesus must also *take up his cross* in absolute abandonment to whatever lay ahead. The cross was an instrument of death. The follower of Christ must be ready and willing to pay any price that following Jesus might bring. It certainly involved suffering and even the possibility of death. Many of those following Jesus would experience this all too soon.

VERSES 25-26

Following Jesus involves quite the paradox. Through a willingness to **lose** his life through unconditional obedience to Christ, one will find eternal life. The one unwilling to sacrifice all for Jesus in an effort to **save his life**, will ultimately lose the eternal life promised through Jesus Christ. The paradox is that life comes through death and self-denial; death, on the other hand, comes to those seeking to live.

Verse 26 reinforces what Jesus taught in the prior verse. Using an amazing hyperbole, Jesus pictured a person gaining all that the world has to offer in riches, fame, security, and pleasure. Tragically none of this will rescue them at the end of life. Death and judgment will not be delayed by the accumulations of life.

The ultimate question in life is simply this: what are we willing to **exchange** to experience life to the fullest, now and for eternity? Don't settle for anything short of a total sell-out to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.



What does it mean to deny ourselves and to carry our cross?



BIBLE SKILL: *Read, reflect on, and apply a Bible passage.*

Focus on Matthew 16:24. Identify the three qualifications for becoming a true disciple of Jesus. Reflect on the meaning of each qualification by responding to these questions: What does it mean to deny oneself? What are some things that hinder me from denying myself? What does it mean to take up your cross? What does it mean to follow Jesus? For you, what is the next step in following Jesus?

APPLY THE TEXT

- + We cannot follow Jesus fully until we know and accept His true identity.
- + We cannot follow Jesus fully until we accept His mission as Messiah and Savior.
- + We cannot follow Jesus fully until we sacrifice our personal agendas to Him.

 **Discuss in your group about the various contemporary opinions regarding Jesus. Why do you think people hold these opinions about Jesus? Ask your group members why they hold their opinion about Jesus.**

 **Jot down the costs of following Jesus. Then create a list of the costs of not following Jesus. Which will you choose?**

Memorize Matthew 16:24.

Prayer Needs



Glory

JESUS FULFILLS GOD'S MESSAGE OF HOPE
FOUND IN THE LAW AND PROPHETS.

MATTHEW 17:1-13

Decision making can be difficult. Often, we seek some sign that this is the right direction and the correct decision to make. Is this the right job to take? Is this the best house to buy? Is she the one for me? How do we know for certain? If we only had a sign! Wouldn't it be great if someone magically appeared to give you affirmation that what you are doing is correct? How about a sign in the sky, or a voice out of the blue?

 **What kind of sign would you like to receive concerning a decision you need to make?**

UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

MATTHEW 17:1-27

Matthew 16 ends with Jesus’s curious statement that some of the disciples would live to see “the Son of Man coming in his kingdom” (Matt. 16:28). Most likely, He was referring to the transfiguration event in the opening verses of chapter 17. Following this event, Jesus descended the mountain with Peter, James, and John to where the other disciples were waiting. Jesus found them embroiled in confusion and frustration. This descent from the sublime experience on the mountaintop down to the chaos of the disciples’ dilemma mirrors so much of life for many of us. In fact, partially arising out of this event in Jesus’s life comes the common expression of going from the “mountaintop experience” down into the valley of reality.

The “valley” that the disciples faced was their inability to meet a father’s request for healing his demon-possessed son (17:16). The nine disciples had failed to heal the boy, even though earlier they had been given authority to cast out demons (10:8). Speaking to the crowd as well as the disciples, Jesus condemned their unbelief (17:17). The words of Jesus’s condemnation echo a similar condemnation on the people of Israel in the wilderness (Deut. 32:5). After the healing, the nine disciples questioned Jesus: “Why couldn’t we drive it out?” Jesus’s answer pointed to the little faith of the disciples (Matt. 17:19-20).

Later, as the group was gathering in Galilee for the journey to Jerusalem, Jesus once again predicted His impending death (vv. 22-23). Such a statement brought great grief to the disciples. Now, instead of fighting against the idea of Jesus’s approaching death, they were greatly distressed at the prospect of His death.

Matthew 17 closes with a question to Jesus concerning the temple tax. Jesus answered the question by paying the tax in a most unusual way (vv. 24-27).



Read Matthew 17:1-13 and jot down questions you have about the narrative in these verses.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

TRANSFIGURED (MATT. 17:1-3)

¹ After six days Jesus took Peter, James, and his brother John and led them up on a high mountain by themselves. ² He was transfigured in front of them, and his face shone like the sun; his clothes became as white as the light. ³ Suddenly, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with him.

VERSE 1

The words *after six days* indicate the incident narrated in these verses is linked with what went before. This refers to the statement of Jesus that some of His disciples would not die until they had seen the Son of Man (Matt. 16:28). Now, a week or so later, this declaration by Jesus took place.

Most likely this event was for the benefit of the three disciples, **Peter, James, and John**. These, along with Andrew on occasion, formed Jesus's inner circle. Matthew emphasized the pronoun **them** throughout the narrative (vv. 1,2,3,5,7,9,13). This event served as a visible affirmation of Peter's confession that Jesus was "the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (16:16).

The question might be asked, Why take just three disciples? Hebrew law called for the affirmation of two or three reliable witnesses for verification in a court of law. These three would serve as trustworthy witnesses to speak to the other followers of Jesus concerning the glory of Christ. In addition, Peter, along with James and John, appeared to have emerged as leaders in the group of disciples. Again, Jesus wasn't ready for everyone in the region to know of His messianic identity. Three witnesses would be enough for now.

With the three disciples, Jesus climbed a **high mountain**. This would have been a mountain near the location of Caesarea Philippi where they had been the week before. It would have been in Northern Galilee and accessible as Jesus made His way toward Jerusalem. Although the popular tourist attraction of Mount Tabor is promoted as the traditional site, a more likely choice might be Mount Meron that lay northwest of the Sea of Galilee.

VERSES 2-3

Once they reached the mountaintop, Jesus was **transfigured** before the disciples. The word *transfigured* speaks of being

transformed. It is the Greek word from which we get the scientific term *metamorphosis*, which means to change into another form. Matthew, Mark, and Luke describe the transformation as a change in Jesus's appearance. Suddenly, Jesus shone with incredible brightness. Matthew said that His **face shone like the sun**. In addition, **his clothes became as white as the light**. Hebrews 1:3 talks of Jesus as being the radiance of God's glory. Here was that glory shining through. The disciples received a glimpse of Jesus's glory and splendor.

The disciples received a glimpse of Jesus's glory and splendor.

This transformation was like the Shekinah glory of God in the Old Testament where God appeared in the form of dazzling and blinding light. Peter wrote about this event in his second epistle: "We were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory. . . . We ourselves heard this voice when it came from heaven while we were with him on the holy mountain" (2 Pet. 1:16b-17a,18). John also wrote of this in John 1:14, "We observed his glory."

Moses and Elijah also appeared with Jesus before the three disciples. What was the significance of their appearance during this confirmation of Jesus as the Messiah?

KEY DOCTRINE: *The Scriptures*

All Scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is Himself the focus of divine revelation. (See Luke 24:44-46; John 5:39.)

Moses, of course, was directly connected to the law given to Israel. He was representative of the unique covenant relationship between God and Israel. Elijah represented all the prophets of Israel that pointed to the coming Messiah. Here were the representatives of the law and the prophets. In the New Testament, the Scriptures were sometimes called "the Law and the Prophets" (Matt. 7:12; Rom. 3:21). Their purpose was to point to the coming Messiah. With the presence of Moses and Elijah, the affirmation of Jesus as the Messiah moved to an even higher level in the eyes of the three disciples.



OVERSHADOWED (MATT. 17:4-8)

⁴ Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it’s good for us to be here. If you want, I will set up three shelters here: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” ⁵ While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased. Listen to him!” ⁶ When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown and were terrified. ⁷ Jesus came up, touched them, and said, “Get up; don’t be afraid.” ⁸ When they looked up they saw no one except Jesus alone.

VERSE 4

Peter’s reaction was to get involved in hosting Moses and Elijah. How Peter, James, and John knew these two men were Moses and Elijah, we are not told. Perhaps Jesus greeted them by name or there was something in the conversation between Jesus and the two that allowed the three disciples to know who they were.

Mark and Luke comment that Peter was at a loss for words and uttered the first thing that came to mind (Mark 9:5-6; Luke 9:33). His declaration was that it was *good for us to be here*. Most likely, Peter was indicating that it was good in the sense that he, James, and John were there to help. He was not content to observe this scene but wanted to be in the scene. Apparently, Peter didn’t grasp the significance of the conversation of Jesus with Moses and Elijah concerning His coming arrest and crucifixion (see Luke 9:31).

Peter thought that such distinguished guests needed shelter from the sun. He probably had in mind the shelters of branches and leaves used at the Feast of Tabernacles. Such a shelter might encourage these visitors to stay longer! Luke 9:33 indicates that Moses and Elijah were starting to leave when Peter spoke. Perhaps Peter hoped such a move would keep them from departing.

VERSE 5

Peter’s suggestion was interrupted by the appearance of a *bright cloud* filled with light. This is reminiscent of several Old Testament appearances of God in a cloud such as during the events of the

exodus from Egypt (Ex. 13:21). The cloud **covered them** or overshadowed them, implying that it produced shade.

Out of the cloud came a **voice**. The word emphasizes that the volume startled the disciples. The Gospels record two other occasions when the voice of God spoke words of affirmation to Jesus. In Matthew 3:17, God spoke at Jesus's baptism. The words given there are almost identical with the words spoken here on the mountain. The voice of God was also heard in John 12:28, as Jesus prayed that God's name would be glorified.

The voice heard on the mount of transfiguration served as another affirmation of Jesus as the Messiah. This verbal endorsement, the visual transformation of Jesus, and the supernatural visitation of Moses and Elijah, served as unmistakable proof that Jesus was the Messiah.

This is my beloved Son. The word *this* signifies that there is only one unique Son and no other. The phrase *beloved Son* speaks of Jesus as being of the same essence and divine nature as God the Father. The phrase *beloved Son* is used in Scripture only of Jesus. By speaking from the cloud, God the Father wanted the three disciples to know of Jesus's uniqueness and superiority over spiritual giants like Moses and Elijah. God instructed the disciples to **listen** to Jesus; that is, they were to pay attention and submit to His authority in obedience.

VERSES 6-8

The startling voice from the cloud produced fright and awe in the disciples—**they fell facedown**. They were **terrified** at the supernatural sights and sounds of the experience. Mark's Gospel pointed to this fear as the reason Peter spoke without thinking (Mark 9:6).

As the terrified disciples lay with their faces to the ground, Jesus came up and **touched them**. He told them, **Get up; don't be afraid**. In the presence of Jesus, there was no reason to be afraid.

**Everyone else was gone,
but they still had Jesus!**

When the disciples stood up, everything had returned to normal. Jesus's appearance was as it used to be. Moses, Elijah, and the bright cloud were gone. They **saw no one except Jesus alone**. Everyone else was gone, but they still had Jesus!



What hinders our ability to hear and act on Jesus's words? What may hinder a person from taking Jesus's teachings seriously?

INSTRUCTED (MATT. 17:9-13)

⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, “Don’t tell anyone about the vision until the Son of Man is raised from the dead.” ¹⁰ So the disciples asked him, “Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?” ¹¹ “Elijah is coming and will restore everything,” he replied. ¹² “But I tell you: Elijah has already come, and they didn’t recognize him. On the contrary, they did whatever they pleased to him. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands.” ¹³ Then the disciples understood that he had spoken to them about John the Baptist.

VERSE 9

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded the disciples to keep what they had seen to themselves. This was the final time that Jesus asked for silence about His miracles and identity. This time, however, He gave a time limit on His prohibition. They were to remain silent until *the Son of Man is raised from the dead*. The experience that the three disciples had witnessed would be impossible for others to believe. This included even the other disciples. Once the miracle of the resurrection took place, the transfiguration would easily be accepted as fact. Keep in mind that this event on the mountaintop was a foreshadowing of the glory of Jesus’s resurrection and second coming.

This was a foreshadowing of the glory of Jesus’s resurrection and second coming.

VERSES 10-13

The presence of Elijah raised a question for the disciples. If Jesus was the Messiah, then why didn’t Elijah come first, as *the scribes* said? Jesus affirmed the scribes were right about Elijah coming. The problem was that the religious leaders didn’t recognize Elijah when

he came. Jesus was alluding to John the Baptist. Luke 1:17 indicated that John the Baptist would “go before him [the Messiah] in the spirit and power of Elijah.”

Not only did the religious leaders fail to recognize John the Baptist as the promised coming of Elijah, but they treated him harshly. ***In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands.*** The ill-treatment of John the Baptist served as a foreshadowing of the Messiah’s own suffering. Jesus pointed to the death of “Elijah”—John the Baptist—as a harbinger of His own death by the Jewish leaders.

The three disciples were able to connect the dots and realize that Jesus was speaking of the coming of ***John the Baptist***. Slowly, the disciples were growing in their understanding of Jesus, His identity, and His mission. Such an understanding, though, only heightened their sadness about the days ahead.

 **How are you making an effort to grow in your understanding of Jesus, His identity, and mission?**

 **BIBLE SKILL:** *Use cross references to gain a better understanding of a biblical concept.*

The New Testament not only records accounts of Jesus’s transfiguration but also teaches that believers likewise will experience transformation. Read the following passages and determine what each says about a believer’s transformation: Romans 12:2; 1 Corinthians 15:51-55; 2 Corinthians 3:18; and Philippians 3:20-21. How and when does this transformation take place in the life of a believer? How is our transformation similar to or different from what Jesus experienced?



◀ *Forgiveness* ▶

JESUS CALLS US TO FORGIVE ONE ANOTHER
AS HE HAS FORGIVEN US.

MATTHEW 18:21-35

“I’m sorry!” Those two words carry worlds of meaning. When a waitress uses them over and over during the thirty minutes or so that you are at her table, they often lose any meaning. But when they come from someone who has hurt you and you can sense their anguish over that hurt, those words can be liberating to you—and to them. Forgiving others can be difficult but is essential for good spiritual and mental well-being. Jesus calls us to forgive others as He has forgiven us.

 **Why is it often so difficult to forgive someone who has offended you?**

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

MATTHEW 18:1-35

At the end of Matthew 17, Jesus sent Peter on a special mission. The disciples assumed Peter was once again singled out for something special (Matt 17:27). Not only that, but Peter, James, and John had spent time with Jesus on the mountain. Motivated by jealousy, the disciples argued about who was greatest and who should be given special privileges and assignments.

The immaturity of the disciples led Jesus to teach extensively about relationships. First, He placed a small child in their midst. Referring to the child, Jesus pointed out that the greatest in the kingdom of heaven was the one who, like a child, was characterized by humility. That humility would be seen in absolute dependence on the Father for grace and mercy just like a child depends on parents for nurturing in life (18:1-5).

Jesus spoke of “little ones,” by which He was speaking figuratively of those who follow Him. He gave a stern warning about causing a fellow believer to stumble. The one who caused “one of these little ones . . . to fall away” would be better off suffering a terrible drowning than to face God’s wrath for their actions (vv. 6-9).

Jesus supported His concern for His little ones by telling a familiar story about a lost sheep among ninety-nine who did not stray. This reinforced God’s care for His little ones, showing that He was willing to do whatever was necessary to protect them (vv. 10-14).

In addition to God’s searching for them when they go astray, He gives to the community of believers—the “church” (v. 17)—the responsibility to work with straying believers to restore their relationship with God and with other believers.

Arising out of these teachings about relationships, Peter approached Jesus with a question concerning forgiving others (v. 21). The remainder of the chapter records Jesus speaking of the need for His followers to forgive one another just as God has forgiven them.

 **Read Matthew 18:21-35 and list some principles concerning forgiveness.**

EXPLORE **THE TEXT**

QUESTION OF FORGIVENESS (MATT. 18:21-22)

²¹ **Then Peter approached him and asked, “Lord, how many times must I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? As many as seven times?”** ²² **“I tell you, not as many as seven,” Jesus replied, “but seventy times seven.”**

VERSES 21-22

In verses 15-20, Jesus spoke about the situation where one believer sins against another. This raised a question in Peter’s mind. He asked, **How many times must I forgive?** He wondered, what’s the limit on forgiving and restoring **my brother**, a fellow believer?

Peter most likely was aware of the teaching of the rabbis that forgiving three times was the limit. One rabbi had written, “He who begs forgiveness from his neighbor must not do so more than three times.”¹ At an earlier point in his life, Peter may have balked at forgiving even three times. But his life was being transformed. His suggestion of forgiving **seven times** is evident of that transformation. Peter probably thought he was being generous with his suggestion.

Jesus’s answer must have surprised Peter. He told Peter to forgive **seventy times seven** instead of just seven times. Some translations follow the Greek and use the number seventy-seven. Regardless, Jesus was not calling on His followers to keep track of the number of times they offer forgiveness. Rather, He was speaking of unlimited forgiveness.

God’s forgiveness is not restricted and is unlimited. That should be the way we relate to those who sin against us. Jesus reinforced this principle with a parable in verses 23-35.

 **What do you think is a reasonable number of times to forgive someone who hurts you?**

COMPASSIONATE KING (MATT. 18:23-27)

²³ **“For this reason, the kingdom of heaven can be compared to a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants.**

²⁴ **When he began to settle accounts, one who owed ten**

thousand talents was brought before him.²⁵ Since he did not have the money to pay it back, his master commanded that he, his wife, his children, and everything he had be sold to pay the debt.²⁶ At this, the servant fell facedown before him and said, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you everything.’²⁷ Then the master of that servant had compassion, released him, and forgave him the loan.”

VERSES 23-25

The *king* in the parable represents God, and the *servants* represent those who are His followers. The picture of the king wanting to *settle accounts* is a picture of judgment. It was an occasion to take inventory and balance the books.

As this king began to settle accounts with his servants, he came across a servant who owed him an enormous sum of money—*ten thousand talents*. A talent was a unit of measurement that equaled around 70 pounds. This would have been an inordinate amount of money in the Roman and Hebrew monetary system. While various scholars have sought to estimate the debt of this man as being in the millions of US dollars, Jesus was not attempting to set an exact amount. The Greek word for *ten thousand* was the highest number in that language and is the word from which we get our term “myriad,” meaning a great number. Jesus’s point is that the man owed an enormous amount that he would never be able to repay.

For the king, the only remedy was that the man, his family, and all his possessions be seized and *sold to pay the debt*. Such actions were not uncommon in that day and time. Keep in mind that Jesus was moving to a conclusion to Peter’s question, showing that those who follow Christ have a huge debt that we cannot pay—the debt of our sin against God. The result of that debt is that we deserve to suffer the consequences of such a debt.

VERSES 26-27

Upon hearing the sentence from the king, the servant threw himself on the ground in penitence. This servant recognized how desperate his situation was and how bankrupt he was before the king. His only hope was the mercy of the king.

In hopes of eliciting mercy for his situation, he begged the king to *be patient*. The English word *longsuffering* loosely translates the Greek word for patient.

After crying out for mercy, the servant made a promise that he couldn't possibly keep, ***I will pay you everything***. His attitude was genuine, but his stated goal was impossible. In many ways, his approach mirrors that of people today who try to bargain with God and work to make things right. Such an approach is a fruitless effort at solving a problem that can't be solved through sincerity alone. Only an undeserved pardon from the King can resolve the problem.

Only through the ***compassion*** of the king was this man's debt forgiven. The word *compassion* signifies intense feelings of empathy and pity. The servant's pleading moved the heart of the king toward forgiving the debt. As a result, the king ***released*** the servant and ***forgave*** the debt. In no way did the servant deserve this. The release and forgiveness came solely because of the compassion of the king.



How do you see grace at work in these verses?



KEY DOCTRINE: *Man*

Only the grace of God can bring man into His holy fellowship and enable man to fulfill the creative purpose of God. (See Romans 5:6; Ephesians 2:8-10.)

UNFORGIVING SERVANT (MATT. 18:28-35)

²⁸ “That servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him, started choking him, and said, ‘Pay what you owe!’ ²⁹ At this, his fellow servant fell down and began begging him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.’ ³⁰ But he wasn’t willing. Instead, he went and threw him into prison until he could pay what was owed. ³¹ When the other servants saw what had taken place, they were deeply distressed and went and reported to their master everything that had happened. ³² Then, after he had summoned him, his master said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. ³³ Shouldn’t you also have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ ³⁴ And because he was angry, his master handed him

over to the jailers to be tortured until he could pay everything that was owed.³⁵ So also my heavenly Father will do to you unless every one of you forgives his brother or sister from your heart.”

VERSE 28

Jesus introduced another servant who owed the forgiven servant a paltry amount—a *hundred denarii*—the equivalent of 100 days’ wages. This was a debt that could reasonably be paid off over time. But when the forgiven servant found this debtor, he **grabbed him** and **started choking him**, demanding immediate payment in full. The forgiven servant had become the unforgiving servant.

Callous indifference in no way reflects the mercy and grace of God the Father.

VERSES 29-31

In a manner like the pleading of the forgiven servant in verse 26, this debtor **fell down** and begged for more time to repay the debt. Using almost the same words as the first servant, he pleaded, **Be patient with me, and I will pay you back**. One would have thought that the similarity between the two petitions would have stirred the unforgiving servant to also be forgiving. After all, he had been forgiven an impossible sum of debt. The amount owed him was nothing in comparison.

But he wasn’t willing points to the fact that this forgiven servant made the deliberate choice to close his heart to mercy. He who had been forgiven so much should have been able to show tenderness toward someone who owed such an insignificant amount. Keep in mind that Jesus was illustrating the need for forgiveness between fellow believers. Callous indifference in no way reflects the mercy and grace of God the Father.

Instead of forgiving, the unforgiving servant **threw him into prison until he could pay what was owed**. This begs the question, how can an imprisoned person ever repay what is owed when he is deprived of the opportunity to earn money?

The actions of the unforgiving servant didn’t go unobserved. The indebted slave didn’t need to cry out on his own behalf. His fellow **servants** observed all the action. The text says they were **distressed**, a Greek word meaning “grieved and greatly

disturbed.” Possibly, they were thinking that this unforgiving servant might treat them in a similar way even if there was no debt owed. The unforgiving servant’s actions revealed that his heart was evil, an evil that could spill over in other situations. Because of their consternation, they went to the *master* and gave a full report of *everything that had happened*.

We who have been forgiven so much must willingly forgive others who have offended us.

VERSES 32-35

The king (called *master* here), who once was benevolent and merciful, boiled with anger as he summoned the unforgiving servant into his court. Notice now that the king called the servant *wicked*. The servant’s true nature had been revealed. At his very core, this man was *wicked*, and it showed in how he treated a fellow servant. Now there was no doubt that the mismanagement of the king’s wealth was not incompetence, but rather intent to defraud the king.

The king reminded the unforgiving servant of the huge debt that had been forgiven for him: ***I forgave you all that debt because you begged me.***

An important principle is this: those who have received mercy must show themselves merciful to others. The king reminded the unforgiving servant of this truth: ***Shouldn’t you also have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?***

How quickly the king’s attitude toward his servant changed. Moving from mercy and forgiveness, the king exacted a worse punishment than he had proposed before. He turned the servant over, not to the jailers, but to the tormentors. The Greek word translated *jailers* here is more accurately translated “tortures.” The unforgiving servant’s situation was much worse at this point. He wasn’t just facing imprisonment; now he would endure torture as well because of his wickedness.

As in the case of the unforgiving servant, an unwillingness to forgive others exposes the true condition of the heart. A person who can’t forgive others is in no condition to accept God’s forgiveness. Paul summed it up with these words in Ephesians 4:32: “And be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as God also forgave you in Christ.”

A note of caution on the interpretation of this parable. A believer who is unwilling to forgive another believer does not forfeit the forgiveness of God that comes through salvation in Christ. That forgiveness is permanent and all encompassing. Rather, an unforgiving spirit breaks down the fellowship that the believer has with the heavenly Father. A person who has experienced God’s forgiveness at a deep heart level will be eager to share forgiveness with others to whom forgiveness is due.

Thus, the response of Jesus to Peter’s question has returned full circle. We who have been forgiven so much—a debt we couldn’t pay—must willingly forgive others who have offended us. This is especially true with the one who is a brother or sister in Christ.



What are some dangers of believers failing to forgive others?

BIBLE SKILL: *Compare passages to gain insight into a biblical teaching.*

Compare Matthew 18:27 with verses 34-35. In verse 27 the king released and forgave his servant’s huge debt. In verse 34 the king revoked his forgiveness and cast the unforgiving servant into a place of torture. Verse 35 states this is what God will do to “every one of you” unless you forgive other believers “from your heart.” Reflect on the following questions: What is the danger of basing a doctrine on a parable? What other passages can you cite to indicate that a believer does not lose his or her salvation? Summarize the main point of Jesus’s parable and how His warning in verse 35 should be understood.

APPLY THE TEXT

- + We are not to put limits on our willingness to forgive.
- + We can know that God is compassionate and willing to forgive.
- + We are to forgive one another in the way God has forgiven us.

 **As a group, consider the excuses people often give for not forgiving others. Discuss whether these excuses are valid and if they can apply to our relationships as followers of Jesus. How should the experience of God’s forgiveness impact how we approach fellow believers who offend us?**

 **Spend time thinking through your relationships. Who comes to mind when you think about the need to forgive? What might be the consequences of not offering forgiveness? What might be the benefits of forgiving that person?**

 **Memorize Matthew 18:33.**

Prayer Needs

1. John F. MacArthur Jr., *Matthew*, vol. 3, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985-1989), 145.



Our Task

BECAUSE JESUS ROSE FROM THE GRAVE, WE ARE TO TAKE THE GOSPEL TO ALL PEOPLE.

MATTHEW 28:1-10,16-20

Most of us often remember the details of the moments we received bad news. We probably remember where we were and what we were doing on September 11, 2001. Interestingly, sometimes we don't remember details when we receive good news. The joy of the news overshadows the specifics of how and when the news was received. This was not the case for the eyewitnesses to Jesus's resurrection. They could look back on the greatest news of all and remember vividly.

 **Why do you think we are selective in what we remember and what we forget?**

UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

MATTHEW 28:1-20

The resurrection of Jesus is central to our faith as Christians. All the Old and New Testament find their fulfillment in Christ—His death and resurrection. The resurrection is crucial to the gospel message of salvation through Jesus. If Jesus had not risen, nothing would have been accomplished by His death. The resurrection is God’s stamp of approval on all that Jesus did on the cross.

The resurrection is also factual. One of the most powerful testimonies in court is the word of eyewitnesses. Each of the Gospel writers in their own way highlighted the role of eyewitnesses to Jesus’s resurrection. Matthew, in his account, chose to emphasize the eyewitness account of two women: Mary Magdalene and another woman named Mary. In addition, Matthew’s Gospel highlights the witness of the eleven disciples that met Jesus in Galilee.

The previous chapter is needed to understand some of the narrative in Matthew 28. Matthew 28:12-14 speaks of the Roman guards receiving a bribe from the Jewish priests and elders to spread the rumor that the disciples had stolen Jesus’s body from the tomb. Reaching back to Matthew 27:62-66, we learn that the Jewish leaders remembered Jesus’s prediction of His resurrection. Because of that, they went to Pilate and secured Roman soldiers to guard the tomb. Matthew 28:4 indicated that these guards fainted in fear at the angels.

Later, these guards reported what had happened to the chief priests. It was at this point that they were given a bribe to spread the lie that Jesus’s body had been stolen. Matthew, writing sometime around AD 63, indicated that this false story was still circulating in an attempt to deny the reality of the resurrection.



Read Matthew 28:1-10,16-20 and note the reactions of those who encountered the risen Savior.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

BELIEVE (MATT. 28:1-7)

¹ After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to view the tomb. ² There was a violent earthquake, because an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and approached the tomb. He rolled back the stone and was sitting on it. ³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing was as white as snow. ⁴ The guards were so shaken by fear of him that they became like dead men. ⁵ The angel told the women, “Don’t be afraid, because I know you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. ⁶ He is not here. For he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. ⁷ Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has risen from the dead and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; you will see him there.’ Listen, I have told you.”

VERSES 1-4

Jesus was crucified on Friday and then hastily laid in a tomb before the Sabbath began at sundown. Nothing could be done with His body during the Sabbath. That would wait until *after the Sabbath* ended at sunset. Jesus’s resurrection occurred *as the first day of the week* began. This detail is the root of the practice of Christians from that day forward worshiping on Sunday.

In Matthew’s Gospel, the eyewitnesses to the resurrection included the angels, the soldiers, and a group of women. Specifically, Matthew identified two of the women as *Mary Magdalene and the other Mary*. These two women plus several others were at the crucifixion and had witnessed the burial of the body (see Matt. 27:61). *Mary Magdalene* was the one whom Jesus delivered from demon possession (Luke 8:2). *The other Mary* is identified in Mark’s Gospel as the mother of the disciple James, known as James the younger to set him apart from James the brother of John (Mark 16:1). These two women were joined by Salome, the mother of James and John (compare Mark 16:1). These women had prepared spices to anoint the body of Jesus. Early on Sunday they went to the tomb with the intent of finishing the burial procedures.

As they approached the tomb, a severe *earthquake* occurred. This was the second earthquake accompanying the death and resurrection of Jesus (see Matt. 27:51). Matthew cites the cause of

this earthquake as the coming of an **angel of the Lord** to the **tomb** to roll away the **stone** covering the entrance. His purpose was not just to show that the tomb was empty but also to announce that Jesus was risen.

The description of the angel harkens back to the angels who appeared in the announcement and birth of Jesus. As with other angels, this one was aglow with the glory of God shining through. There was no mistaking that this was a heavenly messenger. The appearance of the angel terrified **the guards** who had been dispatched to guard the tomb. They were **so shaken by fear** that they evidently passed out from the sight. The word *shaken* is from the same root word as *earthquake*. These soldiers had their own earthquake! They, too, became eyewitnesses to this event and had to be paid off by the priests (28:11-15) to prevent them from telling what they had seen and heard.

VERSES 5-7

No doubt the women also were terrified by the sight of the angel. While the Gospels of Luke and John speak of two angels, Matthew and Mark mention only the one who spoke to the women. **Don't be afraid** were the same words given to Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds about the birth of Jesus (Matt. 1:20; Luke 1:30; 2:10).

The angel indicated that he knew why the women were there. However, there was no body to anoint with oil. Jesus had **risen** from the dead. The angel reminded the women of the words of Jesus about His coming resurrection (see Matt. 17:22-23). The angel verified his announcement by showing the women the empty **place where he lay**.

The angel also had a commission for them to carry out: **go quickly and tell his disciples**. In addition, they were instructed to tell the disciples that Jesus would meet them in **Galilee**. This meeting would be a fulfillment of the promise given by Jesus in Matthew 26:32: "But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you to Galilee." This upcoming appearance in Galilee was one of several appearances recorded in the Gospels. Keep in mind that Jesus continued to appear to the disciples for forty days after His resurrection (Acts 1:3).

Why Galilee? Perhaps Jesus wanted privacy from all the turmoil of Jerusalem. Also, Galilee was a mixed population of Jews and Gentiles. At this appearance, Jesus would give His disciples a commission to take the gospel message into all the world, including both Jews and Gentiles.



What obstacles might cause some people to struggle with faith in Christ?

WORSHIP (MATT. 28:8-10)

⁸ So, departing quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, they ran to tell his disciples the news. ⁹ Just then Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” They came up, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. ¹⁰ Then Jesus told them, “Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to leave for Galilee, and they will see me there.”

VERSES 8-10

The angel told the women to “go quickly” (v. 7) to tell the disciples the news of the resurrection. In obedience, they departed **quickly from the tomb**. As the women **ran** from the tomb, they were filled with mixed emotions of **fear and great joy**. Fear because they had just experienced the supernatural—the earthquake, the angel, the empty tomb. But overriding their fear was an elation of great joy. After the days of desperate grief and uncertainty, suddenly there was unexpected hope.

Matthew stated that **just then** Jesus appeared to them. The words *just then* carry the meaning of “behold” and call attention to something extraordinary. **Greetings** was much like our “hello.” Imagine the scene. Suddenly, here is Jesus and He is saying to you, “Hello!” No wonder the immediate response of the women was to take **hold of his feet** in worship.

Matthew’s Gospel is the only one to record this brief encounter of Jesus with the women as they made their way to the disciples. This is just one instance of how each of the Gospels has a unique eyewitness account of the resurrection of Jesus. Such a variety of stories of the resurrected Christ add to the authenticity of the account. If all the Gospels contained the exact same content, suspicion could be raised of a collaboration and conspiracy to create a false narrative. Such is not the case. Each writer had his own primary resources of eyewitness accounts that speak to the truthfulness of the Gospel accounts.

Jesus knew of both the fear and joy of the women. He told them, ***Do not be afraid.*** This was not a time for fear but joy. The joyful news of Jesus’s resurrection must be shared. That is why Jesus repeated the instructions of the angel to the women, ***Go and tell*** the disciples. Note, however, that Jesus made these instructions much more personal. He called His disciples ***brothers.*** His instruction to the disciples was that they should meet Him in ***Galilee.*** Jesus understood what His followers had gone through. His every word and move from this time forward would encourage, affirm, and prepare them for the assignment ahead.



What part of the resurrection story leads you to worship?

SHARE (MATT. 28:16-20)

¹⁶ The eleven disciples traveled to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped, but some doubted. ¹⁸ Jesus came near and said to them, “All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. ¹⁹ Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

VERSES 16-17

This appearance of Jesus in ***Galilee*** is unique to Matthew’s Gospel. For Matthew, Galilee was central in the story of Jesus. While Jesus was crucified in Jerusalem, He spent most of His ministry in “Galilee of the Gentiles” (Matt. 4:15). Thus, it was appropriate for Jesus to issue His “Great Commission” to take the good news into the whole world from this region of a mixed Jewish and Gentile population.

Any attempt to pinpoint the time frame for this appearance within the forty days after the resurrection is sheer speculation. However, a probable estimate would be that this occurred around three weeks after the resurrection.

This, however, is not the appearance from which Jesus ascended into heaven. That would take place outside of Jerusalem at Bethany

some days later (see Luke 24:50-51). Again, each of the Gospel writers chose to include appearances of the risen Lord that fit the intent of their narrative.

The identity of this *mountain* is not given. Obviously, the instructions Jesus gave to the women (v. 10) *directed* the disciples to a specific location. For Matthew's readers, the details of the location were irrelevant.

Who was Matthew speaking of when he says *they saw him*? Was this the eleven disciples only? Could this include the five hundred that Paul spoke of in 1 Corinthians 15:6? Many scholars lean toward the five hundred believers being present on this occasion as Jesus charged His followers to spread the gospel message throughout the world.

Two responses to Jesus's appearance are mentioned. *They worshiped* Him, but *some doubted*. The worship of Jesus no doubt took the form of bowing before Him. Over the many months spent with Jesus and culminating with the resurrection, His followers became fully convinced Jesus was God and was worthy of worship. The word *doubted* means "to hesitate." For some in the crowd, this may have been their first glimpse of the resurrected Christ. They may have been thinking, "Is this really Jesus?" Perhaps they weren't sure how to act in His presence.



KEY DOCTRINE: *Evangelism and Missions*

The Lord Jesus Christ has commanded the preaching of the gospel to all nations. (See Luke 24:46-49; Acts 1:8.)

VERSES 18-20

Regardless of the reason for their doubts, Jesus set them at ease when He *came near* to them. He approached the disciples and spoke concerning His *authority*. The *authority* of Jesus has been central in Matthew's Gospel (see for instance Matt. 7:29). The word *authority* speaks of kingly power and the right to act. All authority over all the created world has been *given* to Jesus from the Father. In this commission, Jesus is giving to His followers His authority to make disciples throughout the world.

The training of the disciples was now complete. The time had arrived for them to carry on the work Jesus had begun. Based on Jesus's kingdom authority, the disciples were to draw more of God's chosen ones into the kingdom. They were to *make disciples*.

Verse 19 begins with a Greek participle that says, “As you are going.” Next came the command: *make disciples* or followers of Jesus. These disciples were to come from **all nations**. This term *nations* speaks of all people groups everywhere. From all the nations these disciples were to make strong, committed followers of Jesus.

Making disciples involved two actions. First, they were to “mark” these disciples by **baptizing them**. Baptism was an outward declaration that one belonged to Jesus Christ by faith in His atoning work. Through baptism one is uniquely linked with the fullness of the Godhead of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Second, making disciples involved **teaching them to observe** all that Jesus taught and commanded. Bringing the nations to faith was only part of the job. They would need to be nurtured in the teachings of Jesus.

The task would not be easy. However, they would not be alone in the job. Jesus promised that ***I am with you always***. The master Teacher was not abandoning them; rather, the Holy Spirit would indwell them permanently (Acts 1:8). Because of that, they were assured success.

 **What does this passage teach us about our role in Christ’s mission?**

BIBLE SKILL: *Compare passages that share the same account.*

Read Matthew 28:1-15 again and record significant points related to the resurrection. Then, read the resurrection passages in Mark 16:1-20; Luke 24:1-52; John 20:1-22 and do the same for them. What similarities do you see in these passages? What are some differences that help you get a more complete picture of the events surrounding the resurrection?

APPLY THE TEXT

- + We can trust that Jesus is risen because the tomb was empty.
- + Our appropriate response to Jesus's resurrection is worship.
- + Believers are to share the gospel with people of all nations.



Consider how your group might have responded had you met Jesus in Galilee. Would you worship or doubt? Ask each participant how their choice would impact their daily life. Discuss ways that your group can share the good news of the resurrection of Jesus with those in their world.



While there are many proofs to the resurrection of Jesus such as the many eyewitnesses and the unexplained empty tomb, perhaps the greatest proof is the transformed lives of the disciples. Looking at your own life, is there evidence of the resurrection through the changes Jesus has made?

Memorize Matthew 28:19-20.

Prayer Needs



Eternal Life

JESUS'S GIFT OF SALVATION DEMANDS
HUMILITY AND SURRENDER.

MATTHEW 19:16-30

An ideology once prevalent in America is something called the “Protestant work ethic.” In its genuine expression, a strong work ethic is a logical progression from one’s relationship with God. It is an abuse of this tradition, however, to think that work is the means of a right relationship with God rather than an expression of it. The reasoning of some people is, the harder you work, the better chance of earning God’s favor.

 **Do you agree or disagree that nothing is free and everything worth having must be worked for? Explain.**

UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

MATTHEW 19:1-30

Leaving the region of Galilee, Jesus and His followers made their way down the east bank of the Jordan River to the region of Judea (Matt. 19:1). Jesus apparently spent several weeks in this region approximately twenty to thirty miles from Jerusalem. This is the first mention in Matthew of Jesus traveling to the region of Judea. While John's Gospel indicates Jesus traveled there frequently for various Jewish festivals, Matthew, Mark, and Luke do not mention any other visits to Jerusalem before these final weeks leading up to His crucifixion. Matthew focused solely on the Galilean ministry of Jesus until the narrative moved toward the crucifixion.

During this time, Jesus was again confronted by the Pharisees with a question designed to trap and accuse Him (v. 3). Their question concerned a law in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 and the legitimacy of divorce. Jesus responded by stating that God's design from the beginning was for marriage to be a permanent relationship between a man and a woman (vv. 4-6). To this response, the Pharisees called attention to the law of Moses, where divorce was permitted for indecency (v. 7). The definition of this indecency was an ongoing debate at that time between two leading rabbis of Judaism.

Jesus replied by pointing to the ideal—no divorce. Then He pointed to the reality—sin had hardened the heart and violated God's perfect design. Divorce was the result, which was permissible only in cases of adultery. Jesus's reply caused the disciples to question the feasibility of marriage. In response, He pointed out that for a select few, God's design for them was to not marry (vv. 8-10).

Next came some parents bringing their children so that Jesus might pronounce a typical Jewish blessing on them by laying hands on them in prayer. Jesus spoke of the dependence of children as an example of the childlike humility needed by all to be a part of the kingdom of God (vv. 13-15). This thought links this humility with the proper way to enter eternal life as explained in the next verses in this chapter.



Read Matthew 19:16-30 in your Bible. How would you describe what the young ruler thought would give him eternal life?

EXPLORE THE TEXT

UNWILLING (MATT. 19:16-22)

¹⁶ Just then someone came up and asked him, “Teacher, what good must I do to have eternal life?” ¹⁷ “Why do you ask me about what is good?” he said to him. “There is only one who is good. If you want to enter into life, keep the commandments.” ¹⁸ “Which ones?” he asked him. Jesus answered: Do not murder; do not commit adultery; do not steal; do not bear false witness; ¹⁹ honor your father and your mother; and love your neighbor as yourself. ²⁰ “I have kept all these,” the young man told him. “What do I still lack?” ²¹ “If you want to be perfect,” Jesus said to him, “go, sell your belongings and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” ²² When the young man heard that, he went away grieving, because he had many possessions.

VERSES 16-17

Using the words *just then*, Matthew linked the visit of a young ruler to the blessing of the children. As Jesus was engaged with the children and their parents, this man ran up and knelt at Jesus’s feet (see Mark 10:17). From verses 20 and 22 we learn he was young and rich. Luke 18:18 states that he was a ruler of some sort, perhaps a synagogue official.

His question was, *what good must I do to have eternal life?* From every indication this inquiry was sincere. What is surprising is the fact that this wealthy young man would admit he lacked eternal life. He knew something was missing from his life. Mark 10:17 described him as running up to Jesus and kneeling before Him out of respect. He was eager to fix his emptiness. Here was a young man seeking hope for this life and for life after death.

He knew something was missing from his life.

In both Mark and Luke, the young ruler called Jesus “Good teacher.” The Gospel of Matthew omits the descriptor “good” from this word of address. This variation produces some confusion regarding Jesus’s answer to the young man. Did Jesus answer, “Why do you call me good?” Or did he answer, as here in the CSB translation, *Why do you ask me about what is good?*

Scholars are divided on the answer. Whichever is more precise, each accurately conveys the meaning of Jesus’s words. He used the occasion to point the young ruler to the only one who is good, an obvious reference to God the Father. If this young man was wondering about what good he must do to obtain eternal life, then He needed to meet the benchmark of what good really is—the standard of the holiness of God. Attempting to earn eternal life through doing good will always fall short of the One who is ultimately good.

Jesus continued to challenge this man’s notion: if he wanted to measure up to God’s standard, he must **keep the commandments**. Jesus was not teaching salvation by works. Instead, He wanted for the young man to recognize his sinfulness. The commandments were ultimately given to show us our sinfulness.

VERSES 18-19

Jesus’s answer was not what the young man expected. Perhaps with some puzzlement, he asked Jesus, **Which ones?** For this young man, his reply was, *which ones am I not keeping?* He felt secure in his adherence to the law.

Jesus responded by listing the commandments that were a part of what is called the “second table” of the commandments. These were commandments that dealt with the horizontal relationships of life—family, neighbors, and other people. These would be commandments that could be observed externally. Keeping these commandments would be very demonstrable. Jesus did not start with the “first table” of the commandments that dealt with the vertical relationship with God. Following those commandments is more internal. Obviously, based on Jesus’s next statements, these were the commandments with which the young ruler struggled.

Get rid of that which stands between you and God.

VERSES 20-22

The ruler replied, ***I have kept all these. . . . What do I still lack?*** Jesus then pinpointed the problem facing the rich young ruler. He had violated the first commandment by putting his riches first in his life. His wealth was the god he worshiped. **Go, sell your belongings.** Get rid of that which stands between you and God. Surrendering his wealth and demonstrating that surrender by giving to the poor would signify a new priority in his life. When he

did that, He could then follow the second half of Jesus’s command of following Jesus as His disciple. Only then would he have ***treasure in heaven***—that is, the eternal life he sought.

The words of Jesus cut deeply into the young man, attacking him at the very core of his being. ***He went away grieving***, being unwilling to part with his idol of wealth and ***possessions***.

Jesus’s instructions to this man confronted his idolatry. These are not necessarily instructions for each of us to follow for salvation. Each of us has our own area of idolatry. We must willingly give up whatever stands in the way of our surrender to Jesus. Only then will we enter the kingdom of heaven.



What are some common views on how to receive eternal life?



KEY DOCTRINE: *Salvation*

There is no salvation apart from personal faith in Jesus Christ as Lord. (See John 14:6; Acts 4:12.)

POSSIBLE (MATT. 19:23-26)

²³ **Jesus said to his disciples, “Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. ²⁴ Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” ²⁵ When the disciples heard this, they were utterly astonished and asked, “Then who can be saved?” ²⁶ Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”**

VERSES 23-24

The idea that riches could be a barrier to entering the ***kingdom of heaven*** flew in the face of the beliefs of the Jews in Jesus’s day. They looked on the rich as closer to God because of His obvious blessing on them. To say, as Jesus did, that the poor are closer to the kingdom than the wealthy was most surprising. That startlement will be seen in the disciple’s reaction in verse 25.

Jesus reinforced His statement with a hyperbole, speaking of a *camel* passing through the *eye of a needle*. The *camel*, of course, was the largest animal seen by the Jewish people in that day. The *eye of a needle* would reflect perhaps the smallest opening present in that day. The picture of the camel trying to fit through the tiny opening of a needle would have produced laughter among Jesus's hearers. Impossible, they thought. That would be the precise reaction Jesus desired. It would also be impossible for someone who substituted wealth for a relationship with God *to enter the kingdom of God*.

VERSES 25-26

The disciples *were utterly astonished* because Jesus's statement here was in direct contradiction to the traditions of Judaism that intimated that a person's wealth gave evidence of God's favor. Wealthy Jews often thought they could purchase a more favored position with God through their gifts to the temple or through the giving of alms to the poor. Jesus, however, taught something very different.

Based on Jesus's statement that the rich would not enter the kingdom of heaven, it would appear that no one could be saved. If the rich who were blessed with God's favor could scarcely be saved, what hope was there for the rest of humanity?

In His answer to the question from the disciples, Jesus implied that the disciples were right: there is no way for anyone to be saved on their own effort. *With man this is impossible*. Wealth or poverty didn't matter. Only God can bring salvation to a person, for with Him *all things are possible*. Salvation and entrance into the kingdom of God is dependent on God and God alone.



Why was Jesus so hard on rich people?

REWARD (MATT. 19:27-30)

²⁷ **Then Peter responded to him, “See, we have left everything and followed you. So what will there be for us?”** ²⁸ **Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, in the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes**

of Israel. ²⁹ And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields because of my name will receive a hundred times more and will inherit eternal life. ³⁰ But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”

VERSE 27

Still shaken by Jesus’s words concerning those who rely on their riches, Peter asked for clarification. Jesus had told the rich young man that he would have treasures in heaven if he abandoned his earthly riches. Speaking on behalf of the other disciples, Peter wanted to know if that promise applied to them. They had **left everything** to follow Jesus. **So what reward will there be for us?** The testimony of Matthew 4:20,22, and 9:9 was that these disciples had indeed left everything to follow Jesus. So the question was, “What’s in it for us?”

VERSES 28-30

While Peter’s words may seem crass and greedy, Jesus did not chastise him. Instead, He called for His disciples to pay attention: **Truly I tell you.** Jesus spoke concerning the coming age of glory, which He called **the renewal of all things**. The Greek word is the word for “regeneration” and speaks of the new heaven and the new earth (see Isa. 65:17; Rev. 21:1). This will be the day when God makes all things new (Rev. 21:5). It will also be a day when Jesus will sit **on his glorious throne**. This is a picture of the power and honor that will be conveyed on Jesus as King of kings and Judge of all the earth.

To the disciples, Jesus gave the promise that they would also **sit on twelve thrones** and judge over the **twelve tribes of Israel**. Jesus made the same promise in Luke 22:30b, and you will “sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.” The reference to the twelve tribes of Israel might refer to the actual tribes of Israel or could be a reference to all of God’s redeemed people. Jesus answered Peter’s question by pointing to His promise that they will be honored and rewarded because they left everything to follow Him. This was in spite of coming persecution and the possibility of death.

Jesus next included all those who make Him their priority. They, too, will be rewarded. **Everyone who** forsakes everything and everyone **because of my name** will be rewarded **a hundred times more**. The reward of *a hundred times more* speaks of a reward that

is out of proportion to what is sacrificed. It will be much more than is expected. This reward may be referring to rewards in the coming age or the present age. It also might be pointing to rewards both now and in eternity.

Some interpreters link the words of verse 30, ***but many who are first will be last, and the last first***, to the parable in Matthew 20:1-16. That parable closes with very similar words: “So the last will be first, and the first last” (v. 16). The parable of the vineyard workers in chapter 20 continues the theme of rewards. Those who give up houses and lands, relationships and riches, for His sake will receive more than they give up. On the other hand, people like the rich young ruler may be regarded as first in this life, but in the judgment to come will find they are last and left out of God’s heavenly reward.



What have you left behind to follow Jesus? Is there anything that hinders you from following Jesus?



BIBLE SKILL: *Dig deeper into a doctrine or biblical teaching.*

Compare Jesus’s teachings in Matthew 19:16-22 to Matthew 6:19-24. Identify Jesus’s statements in chapter 6 that are represented in the life of the would-be disciple in chapter 19. Reflect on the following: How might possessions become detrimental to a believers’ commitment to follow Jesus? What are some things that God might be calling you to surrender in order to follow Him?

APPLY THE TEXT

- + We can affirm that eternal life cannot be achieved by human achievement.
- + We can be encouraged knowing salvation is received as a gift from God.
- + We can know that following Jesus is worth it, no matter what it costs—the greatest reward being eternal life.

 **Discuss as a group the concept that everything worth having must be worked for. Allow participants to discuss how this impacts our approach to Christianity. How might your group help others to correct their understanding of salvation by grace and not by works?**

 **Write a brief paragraph outlining the things you have given up to follow Jesus. How do you think Jesus would evaluate that paragraph?**

 **Memorize Matthew 19:26.**

Prayer Needs



Explore the Bible Prayer Guide

Scan here for a weekly prayer guide based on this quarter's Bible passages.



Grace

JESUS OFFERS GRACE TO ALL PEOPLE.

MATTHEW 20:1-16

Everybody wants to be treated fairly. We become resentful when we perceive we have not received equal treatment. “Unfair,” we cry as we demand justice. “He got a bigger piece of cake!” “Her bonus was larger than mine, and I did most of the work.” We always want what we think we deserve. Yet life often is unfair. Life never levels the playing field for all those participating. Some are treated better, others are pushed down, but all suffer under the inequalities of life.

 **Why do you think we perceive life as being continually unfair?**

UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

MATTHEW 20:1-34

The parable in Matthew 20:1-16 is the capstone of the larger section of teaching found in 19:16–20:16. This sequence of events and teachings began with the inquiry of the rich young ruler. It continued with a discussion between Jesus and the disciples concerning the rewards of following Jesus. To illustrate the truths concerning eternal life and eternal rewards, Jesus shared the parable that begins chapter 20. What is profound about this section is the reversal of all that might be expected from a human perspective. The rich young ruler expected to hear steps he could take to gain eternal life. The people of Jesus's day expected the rich would be treated differently than the poor. The disciples were surprised at Jesus's teaching about the impossibility of the rich entering the kingdom of heaven. Jesus turned all these expectations on their ear. God's ways are not man's way. Eternal life is not earned by doing, riches are not a sign of God's favor, and they don't buy entrance into the kingdom of God. In this parable, Jesus taught His followers that God's graciousness toward humanity is based on His love and not on human effort.

Following the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, Jesus again spoke to the disciples about His coming death. This is the third time in Matthew's Gospel that Jesus spoke explicitly about the crucifixion (see also 16:21; 17:22-23).

Jesus continually spoke of greatness in the kingdom of God (for example, see Matt. 18:1-4). Even so, the rivalry among the disciples continued. One glaring example of this is found in 20:20-28, where James and John enlisted the help of their mother to petition Jesus to elevate the rank of her two sons over the other disciples. Such open jockeying for position must have brought Jesus much grief.



Read Matthew 20:1-16 in your Bible and put yourself in the story. How would you react had you been among those who were hired at the first hour?

EXPLORE THE TEXT

WORKERS HIRED (MATT. 20:1-7)

¹ “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. ² After agreeing with the workers on one denarius, he sent them into his vineyard for the day. ³ When he went out about nine in the morning, he saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. ⁴ He said to them, ‘You also go into my vineyard, and I’ll give you whatever is right.’ So off they went. ⁵ About noon and about three, he went out again and did the same thing. ⁶ Then about five he went and found others standing around and said to them, ‘Why have you been standing here all day doing nothing?’ ⁷ ‘Because no one hired us,’ they said to him. ‘You also go into my vineyard,’ he told them.”

VERSES 1-7

This parable by Jesus is like other parables about the rule and reign of God. The *kingdom of heaven* is the sovereign rule of God over all things. The kingdom has a ruler—God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. The kingdom also has subjects—those who have entered a relationship with God through faith in Jesus. Once again, Jesus was explaining what life in the kingdom is like, using a short story with a central theme.

The *landowner* in this parable is representative of God Himself. Because most landowners would not have enough household help to prepare the soil, prune the vines, or harvest the crops, hiring more laborers was a common practice. This landowner arose *early in the morning* to hire the *workers* needed to work the vineyard. Early morning would be around 6 a.m.

By beginning this parable with the word *for*, Jesus was linking this story back to Matthew 19:30 and the discussion of the rewards of the disciple. This parable is illustrating the statement that “many who are first will be last, and the last first.” The parable is book-ended by that statement (19:30; 20:16).

An agreement was reached with these laborers for *one denarius*. This was an equitable amount for a full day’s wage. Having agreed to the wages, these laborers were sent into the vineyard.

The landowner was back at the *marketplace* around *nine* o’clock. The *marketplace* was the center of the village and a

gathering place for day laborers. These would be men who did not have regular employment. They were dependent on finding work each day so they could feed their families. Unless they were hired, their family could go hungry the next day. The phrase **doing nothing** doesn't imply they were lazy but just unemployed at the moment. They were unskilled day laborers waiting to be hired for the day.

The landowner enlisted these men to work in his vineyard as well and told them, **I'll give you whatever is right**. The implication was that they would receive pay for about nine hours of work, from 9:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.

Again, the landowner hired more day laborers around **noon** and around **three**. To this point, it became obvious the landowner was filled with compassion for these laborers who desperately needed to work each day. It wasn't so much that more workers were required. Instead, this was a benevolent landowner giving to these workers what they desperately needed. The text says he **did the same thing**—that is, he promised to give them *whatever is right*. Once again, these workers expected to be paid partially for the hours worked.

Finally, the landowner went back to the marketplace around **five** o'clock, where he discovered still more men **standing around** hoping to be hired. Perhaps by now they had almost given up for the day since no one had hired them. The benevolent landowner asked them, **Why have you been standing here all day doing nothing?** Perhaps they had arrived late or were in an area of the marketplace where those hiring had not observed them. They could have been the least desirable of workers and had been passed over. Once again, the landowner sent them into the vineyard to work the final hour of the day. No doubt they realistically expected to earn an hour's wage.

Note again, the agreed-on wage at the beginning of the day was one denarius. Each group of workers hired assumed that they would receive a portion of a denarius for the time they worked.



What is the significance of the detail about the landowner and workers agreeing on the amount of pay?

EQUALLY PAID (MATT. 20:8-12)

⁸ “When evening came, the owner of the vineyard told his foreman, ‘Call the workers and give them their pay, starting with the last and ending with the first.’ ⁹ When those who were hired about five came, they each received one denarius. ¹⁰ So when the first ones came, they assumed they would get more, but they also received a denarius each. ¹¹ When they received it, they began to complain to the landowner: ¹² ‘These last men put in one hour, and you made them equal to us who bore the burden of the day’s work and the burning heat.’”

VERSE 8

The law specified that day laborers were to be paid at the end of each day they worked (Deut. 24:15). Their family would depend on that pay for daily expenses. What is interesting is the order of payment. The landowner directed the *foreman* to start with the last of those hired and end with the first group of laborers.

As far as the foreman and laborers were concerned, the order didn’t matter, as long as each laborer received what was coming to them. For the landowner (and for the intent of Jesus’s parable) the order did matter. This rhetorical device of reversing the order set up the amazing contrast of treatment of each group. The reversal of order served as a clue that the hearers were in for a surprise ending. This reversal is the point where the parable connected to Jesus’s statement in Matthew 19:30 (and 20:16) that the first shall be last and the last first.

He doesn’t give us what we deserve!

VERSES 9-12

All the laborers, regardless of when they were hired, ***received one denarius***. Those who were hired last received a full denarius—twelve times what they were expecting! Can you imagine the shock experienced by Jesus’s followers as He told this parable? They reacted probably as we do—that’s unfair! There is a tremendous truth here about God the Father. He doesn’t give us what we deserve!

Obviously, the payment made to those hired at the five o’clock hour was made in the presence of all those hired. Expectations arose for the others thinking that maybe they would

receive proportionately more than was contracted. They all eagerly awaited their bonus. But such was not the case.

No mention was made by Jesus of those hired at three, noon, or nine o'clock. Instead, He skipped to the climactic portion of the story and spoke of the initial hired laborers. ***They assumed*** they would receive more. They were expecting “fair” treatment, since they had worked more and should receive twelve times what the last group received. But they, too, received a denarius. Incensed, they demanded equality. They had worked more and believed they should be paid for their work. But the landowner paid each group as he had promised (see vv. 4,5,7). He did not renege on any agreement.

The laborers hired first began to ***complain*** as they recounted the details of their day-long labor in the sun. The others labored far less and in the cool of the evening. As these first-hires compared themselves to the others, their anger only deepened. Their whole perception was that they had been treated unjustly.

The ways of God as pictured here are completely different from our ways.

In compassion, the landowner had not given each man what he deserved but what they needed. For some, this would be over and above what they deserved. From a human standpoint, those first hired had the right to complain. From a divine standpoint, the ways of God as pictured here are completely different from our ways.



**How do people today question God's fairness?
How do some view His just nature?**



KEY DOCTRINE: *God*

God is infinite in holiness and all other perfections.
(See Isaiah 40:25; Matthew 6:9.)

GRACE EXEMPLIFIED (MATT. 20:13-16)

¹³ “He replied to one of them, ‘**Friend, I’m doing you no wrong. Didn’t you agree with me on a denarius?**’ ¹⁴ **Take what’s yours and go. I want to give this last man the same as I gave you.** ¹⁵ **Don’t I have the right to do what I want with what is mine? Are you jealous because I’m generous?’** ¹⁶ **So the last will be first, and the first last.”**

VERSES 13-15

One person emerged as the spokesman of this group of complainers. To him, the landowner spoke directly: ***Friend, I’m doing you no wrong.*** The term *friend* was not the word used for an intimate friendship but more of a business associate or a casual acquaintance. The landowner wanted them to know that they were out of line with their grumbling. He had fulfilled his word to them. They worked the number of hours to which they agreed, and he had paid them accordingly. There was nothing unfair about this. The landowner was not in their debt because they worked longer and harder than others.

Take your wage and be content, the landowner told them. There was no explanation needed. If the landowner chose to act out of compassion toward those last hired, that was his prerogative. The landowner had every ***right to do*** with his money and his vineyard as he chose. He was not acting unjustly; instead, the complainers were ***jealous*** of the payment others received. Their complaints didn’t arise from some vaulted sense of justice but from sheer greed and jealousy based on their faulty expectations.

As Jesus wrapped up this parable—and this section of teaching (19:16–20:16)—His desire was that the disciples realize that participation in the kingdom of heaven is not based on human effort, with those who work the hardest expecting the biggest reward in glory. Entrance into the kingdom is based on the benevolence of God, pictured here as the landowner. He deals with us according to grace.

He deals with us according to grace.

VERSE 16

Jesus closed the parable with the same thought He began with in Matthew 19:30. While the word order is reversed, the intent is the same. All are equal before God and need His mercy and grace.

We should be grateful that God doesn't give us what we deserve. Instead, He deals with us in mercy and grace. What we all deserve is God's judgment. Instead, God gives us grace. Grace is simply God giving to us that which we don't deserve. We receive His unmerited favor and the gift of eternal life.

God's grace applies equally to all. There must never be a time when we cry out to God that He is being unfair. All of us stand condemned before God, and all of us desperately need His generous grace. Through this parable, Jesus taught that God's justice (fairness) and His generosity are not mutually exclusive. He is both.



What does this parable teach us about comparing ourselves to others?



BIBLE SKILL: *Use Bible study resources to gain more insight into a passage.*

Read articles on “vineyards” and “denarius” from a Bible dictionary. Record significant insights you gain as you consider what you read in light of this session's focal passages. In addition, consider what made the setting of Jesus's parable (hiring day-laborers to work in a vineyard) so effective for the audience He was addressing.

APPLY THE TEXT

- + We can trust God to always do what is right.
- + We should be thankful God gives us more than we deserve.
- + We should never cease to be amazed by God’s grace.



Discuss in your group what you believe to be the main lesson of Jesus’s parable of the vineyard workers. How should it impact the way we evaluate ourselves in relation to others? How does it impact the way we relate to others?



On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being very often, how often do you feel you must earn God’s love by doing right things and thinking right thoughts? Contemplate in prayer that God’s love for us is based on what He has done for us and not what we do for Him.



Memorize Matthew 20:16.

Prayer Needs



Authority

JESUS HOLDS ALL AUTHORITY, AND THOSE WHO
REJECT HIM WILL BE CONDEMNED.

MATTHEW 21:23-32

Steady erosion can eventually undermine a foundation, resulting in destruction. In the same way, erosion of respect for authority can undermine an institution, a business, a government, or a country. Authority is the right to influence or command another. The weight of authority is eroding in our society. Fewer and fewer people respect or even recognize authority. Many actively reject established authorities.

 **What are the results of rejecting established authority?**

UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

MATTHEW 21:1-46

Matthew 21 moves into the final week of Jesus’s ministry before His crucifixion. Much of the action recorded by Matthew in chapters 21–22 occurred in the temple. The week began with Jesus entering Jerusalem to the shouts of praise from the crowd of pilgrims entering the city for the Feast of Passover. Once inside Jerusalem, Jesus moved into the temple precinct. Here began a series of confrontations with the religious leaders who opposed Jesus.

The first confrontation began in the outer courts of the temple (the Court of the Gentiles) when Jesus cleansed the temple of the money changers and sacrificial animal sellers. Because so many of the worshipers during the Passover Festival were from out of town, for convenience’s sake the priests had set up selling points in the outer court so that pilgrims could buy their sacrificial animals. Also, they would need to have the exact coinage to buy these animals and pay the temple tax. This had to be the coinage of the temple, so those from foreign lands would need to exchange foreign currency with the coin of the temple. This action and the triumphal entry led the priests and scribes to challenge Jesus when the children in the temple precinct began singing His praises.

The next confrontation occurred the following morning with the unusual act of Jesus cursing a fig tree. The fig tree had long represented the nation of Israel, and Jesus was symbolically condemning the nation for their lack of the fruit of repentance and faith. This led immediately to a challenge by the religious leaders to Jesus’s authority as recorded in the passage for today’s study.

Matthew 21 closes with another parable that brought indictment on the leadership of Israel for their rejection of Jesus as God’s Messiah. The rejection of Jesus would grow stronger and stronger throughout the week.



Read Matthew 21:23-32 in your Bible. Note the frequency of the use of the word “authority” and jot down how the word is used in these verses.

EXPLORE **THE TEXT**

AUTHORITY CHALLENGED (MATT. 21:23-27)

²³ When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching and said, “By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority?” ²⁴ Jesus answered them, “I will also ask you one question, and if you answer it for me, then I will tell you by what authority I do these things. ²⁵ Did John’s baptism come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” They discussed it among themselves, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Then why didn’t you believe him?’ ²⁶ But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we’re afraid of the crowd, because everyone considers John to be a prophet.” ²⁷ So they answered Jesus, “We don’t know.” And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.”

VERSE 23

After the events of the previous day, Jesus was confronted by the *chief priests and the elders* as He arrived at the temple. They questioned His right to do what He had done the day before. Jesus was not officially recognized as a rabbi. He had not gone through the training and ordination to be recognized as a rabbi. Because of this, they asked, ***By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you*** the right to throw the merchants and money exchangers out of the temple precinct? They had brooded overnight about Jesus’s actions and now wanted an answer. They were seeking to trap Him into saying or doing something with which they could accuse Him of violating the law, both of Rome and of Judaism.

The *chief priests* consisted of Caiaphas the high priest, Annas his father-in-law who had served as high priest before him, and several other leading priests in the Jerusalem temple. *The elders* referred to leading Pharisees and Sadducees who were part of the Sanhedrin, or high council of Judaism.

Jesus was aware of the trap being set for Him. If He told them the truth that His *authority* came from His heavenly Father, they would accuse Him of blasphemy against God. This was not the first time these men had questioned His authority. On other occasions He had told them that He spoke for His Father and that His power

to do miracles came from His Father (see John 5:17-18). They saw the authority with which He healed the sick, blind, lame, and demon-possessed. These religious leaders could not deny the miracles of Jesus but had attributed them to the power of Satan. They also heard the authority in His teachings. They simply refused to believe or acknowledge Jesus's authority.

Jesus didn't need the permission of men to carry out His purpose on this earth. His authority came from God, and nothing would detour Him from accomplishing the Father's will.

VERSES 24-27

Jesus answered their question with one of His own: ***I will also ask you one question.*** This technique of answering a question with a question was typical of Jewish rabbis. In so doing here, Jesus tied His authority to the ministry of John the Baptist.

Many in Israel recognized John the Baptist as a prophet of God (see Matt. 21:26). Yet John had prophesied concerning Jesus that He was "more powerful than I" (3:11). Herod Antipas made a connection between the authority of John and Jesus when he spoke of Jesus as being John raised from the dead (14:1-2). The disciples also linked the authority of John to Jesus when they spoke of the crowds identifying Jesus as John the Baptist (16:13-14).

With His question concerning the source of ***John's baptism***, Jesus laid His own trap for these leaders. They did not recognize the divine authority of John; therefore, Jesus knew they would not recognize His own authority. Not only had they rejected John, but they had rejected John's testimony concerning Jesus (John 1:29,34). What was the source of John's baptism—was it from ***heaven*** or from ***human origin***? John's baptism stood for the entire ministry of John. Was his calling from God (***heaven***) or was it simply human creation? If John's ministry was from God, then equally true is the fact that Jesus's authority also came from God.

The chief priests and elders were confronted with the possibility of losing face before the crowds surrounding Jesus. They could say how they truly felt about John's ministry, but then they would suffer the wrath of the crowd for that opinion. Or they could admit that John was a prophet with divine authority, and by association, admit that Jesus had the authority of God on His own ministry. Either way, they would come out the loser. Because of that they responded, ***We don't know.*** It wasn't that they didn't know, they just refused to admit the truth.

The pattern of the Jewish religious leaders was to deny and attack anything that didn't line up with their man-made rules. They weren't interested in truth. Their interest was more self-centered in securing their stranglehold on the religious system of Israel. For these religious leaders, it was all about maintaining power.

Because they refused to answer Jesus, He refused to answer them. He was not going to fall into their trap, which would have resulted in His arrest and death. Those events would have to wait a few more days until Jesus declared His identity to the high priest Caiaphas after His arrest (Matt. 26:62-64).



For what reasons do people not accept Jesus's authority?



KEY DOCTRINE: *God*

To Him we owe the highest love, reverence, and obedience.
(See 1 Peter 1:15-17; Hebrews 12:28-29.)

AUTHORITY RECOGNIZED (MATT. 21:28-32)

²⁸ **“What do you think? A man had two sons. He went to the first and said, ‘My son, go work in the vineyard today.’ ²⁹ He answered, ‘I don’t want to,’ but later he changed his mind and went. ³⁰ Then the man went to the other and said the same thing. ‘I will, sir,’ he answered, but he didn’t go. ³¹ Which of the two did his father’s will?”** They said, **“The first.”** Jesus said to them, **“Truly I tell you, tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God before you. ³² For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you didn’t believe him. Tax collectors and prostitutes did believe him; but you, when you saw it, didn’t even change your minds then and believe him.”**

VERSES 28-30

Jesus told a parable that served as an indictment against these religious leaders. Using a familiar pattern, He spoke of a superior figure giving directions to subordinates. In this case, it was a

father and his **two sons**. What is key for interpretation here is that these two were related—they were sons and brothers. Jesus was equating both sons to the Jewish people. This was a parable about the response to Jesus by the people of Israel, including the religious leaders.

The **vineyard** was symbolic of Israel. Both sons were given the direction, **go work in the vineyard today**. Each son responded in a vastly different way. The first son responded to the father with the words, **I don't want to**. Later, however, this son **changed his mind** and **went** to work in the vineyard. This son is later linked with “tax collectors and prostitutes” (v. 32). These were the spiritual outcasts of Judaism. They found themselves outside of the orthodox religion of Judaism. However, they were the ones who responded in obedience to the gospel message Jesus brought.

The second son said, **I will** but then **didn't go**. This son represented the religious leaders of Israel. Although they claimed to be called by God to tend His vineyard of Israel, they had failed miserably. Jesus had denounced their hypocrisy throughout His ministry. Because of their failings in recognizing God's Messiah, the entire nation of Israel failed.

VERSES 31-32

Jesus brought the issue to a head with His next question: **Which of the two did his father's will?** On the surface, this would appear to be teaching that actions speak louder than words. While this would be a true application of the parable, that was not the aim of Jesus in this parable.

When the religious leaders answered by saying **the first** carried out **his father's will**, they indicted themselves for their response to John's message and subsequently to Jesus's ministry. Jesus compared the response of the religious leaders to His ministry with that of **tax collectors and prostitutes**. These groups of people would be the last that the religious elite would expect to be a part of the **kingdom of God**. *Tax collectors* were considered to be traitors to the Jewish people. *Prostitutes* represented those who were without any morals whatsoever. For Jesus to compare these two groups to the religious leaders would be an extreme affront to these leaders.

Jesus told them that these outcasts would enter God's kingdom **before you**. This does not necessarily imply that these leaders would eventually make it into God's kingdom. The phrase *before you* could be translated “take the place of.” Simply stated, unless

the priests and elders changed their thinking about the Messiah, they would be left behind.

The discussion returned once again to John the Baptist and his baptism. Although the religious leaders would not acknowledge the authority of John's ministry, Jesus did. He exclaimed that ***John came to you in the way of righteousness***. That is, John's preaching set forth the way in which a person is made right before God: repentance and belief. Not only did John point to *the way of righteousness*, but he illustrated it with righteous living.

Jesus had endorsed John and his ministry earlier: "Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one greater than John the Baptist has appeared" (Matt. 11:11). The outcasts of Jewish society, the ***tax collectors and prostitutes***, accepted his teachings and baptism. These religious leaders did not. They had checked him out (***when you saw it***) but rejected John and his baptism (see John 1:19-25). As a result, they stood condemned and under God's judgment.



Practically speaking, what does it look like to recognize Jesus's authority?



BIBLE SKILL: Use a Bible dictionary to learn more about people in the Bible.

Using a Bible dictionary, collect information on the following topics: the chief priests, the elders, tax collectors, and prostitutes in first-century Israel. Reflect on the role each played in Jesus's ministry. How did each one impact Jesus's message and ministry? Spend time in prayer asking God to help you understand Jesus's work more clearly and to relate to people in a way that reflects His character.

APPLY THE TEXT

- + We can expect some to oppose or reject Jesus’s authority.
- + We demonstrate our acceptance of Jesus’s authority by our obedience to Him.



As a group, discuss the consequences of rejecting Jesus’s authority. What steps might each of your group take to ensure they recognize and respect Jesus’s authority?



Intrinsic authority comes from innate qualities in a person, such as the authority belonging to God because He is sovereign Lord. Delegated authority arises from a commission given to someone by a person with intrinsic authority. Based on this, why is obedience to Jesus absolutely essential? Who might be some delegated authorities in your life?



Memorize Philippians 2:9.

Prayer Needs



Honor

BELIEVERS' HIGHEST CALLING IS TO HONOR GOD
IN EVERY ASPECT OF THEIR LIVES.

MATTHEW 22:15-22,34-40

For years in schools across America, the day began with the Pledge of Allegiance. As children, we were taught to honor and respect the American flag and the nation it represented. That is one of many allegiances in life. We give honor and loyalty to any number of causes and people. The critical issue is how we select what we give honor to. Allegiance to wrong things leads to potential disaster. Allegiance to honorable things can result in more joy and fulfillment in life. Choose wisely.

 **What is your highest allegiance in life?**

.....

.....

UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

MATTHEW 22:1–23:39

The conflict between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders had been brewing for months. With the cleansing of the temple (Matt. 21:12-13), it had reached a boiling point. What followed would be several more days of confrontation with the chief priests and elders. The thrust of the confrontation centered around Jesus's authority and the rejection of His authority by the religious elite.

In His indictment of the establishment, Jesus had used three parables to teach about the kingdom of God. The first will be last, Jesus had said. In saying that, He was pointing to the fact that those who seemed to be farthest from the kingdom of heaven would enter the kingdom and the religious leaders would not.

The first two of these parables are in Matthew 21. The third one begins chapter 22. This final parable (vv. 1-14) pictured a wedding feast where those invited declined the invitation by treating violently the ones who had delivered it. The result was devastating to those invited. Their failure resulted in the invitation being extended to all who would come. This parable continues the theme of those who might be considered outside of the kingdom actually entering the kingdom.

Matthew's Gospel is full of triplets—groupings of threes to form his narrative, whether it is three parables, three healings, and now, three questions from three different groups opposing him. These will be the Pharisees and Herodians, the Sadducees, and finally a Pharisee. Each of the three questions was designed to trap Jesus, but He adeptly handled each question to the amazement of the crowds. Teeing off from these questions, Jesus questioned the leaders concerning David's assertion that the Messiah was his Lord. This section closes with a long condemnation of the scribes and Pharisees in chapter 23. Jesus warned the disciples and the crowd to avoid the hypocrisy of these leaders as He pronounced a series of woes on them for their wickedness.



Read Matthew 22:15-22,34-40. Identify the ways we are to respond to the different authorities Jesus identified.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

GOVERNMENT AUTHORITY (MATT. 22:15-22)

¹⁵ Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to trap him by what he said. ¹⁶ So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians. “Teacher,” they said, “we know that you are truthful and teach truthfully the way of God. You don’t care what anyone thinks nor do you show partiality. ¹⁷ Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” ¹⁸ Perceiving their malicious intent, Jesus said, “Why are you testing me, hypocrites? ¹⁹ Show me the coin used for the tax.” They brought him a denarius. ²⁰ “Whose image and inscription is this?” he asked them. ²¹ “Caesar’s,” they said to him. Then he said to them, “Give, then, to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” ²² When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away.

VERSES 15-17

This begins a section in which Jesus was questioned by three groups, all attempting to trick Him into saying something that could be used to arrest Him. He had just condemned the religious leaders with a series of three parables. Verse 15 says *then*—arising out of Jesus’s rebuke—the *Pharisees* plotted how they might *trap him*.

Since the intent of this encounter was to trick Jesus, the Pharisees, who would be identifiable by their clothing, sent *their disciples* to do their dirty work. They were joined by the *Herodians*, a group of loyalists to Herod’s family who were friendly with the Roman government. These unlikely allies normally would be oceans apart, for the Pharisees despised both Herod and the Romans. Yet they worked together in trying to get Jesus to speak against either the Mosaic law or the Roman rule in Israel.

The confrontation began with flattery: *we know that you are truthful*. Their barbed hook was covered with honey in hopes that they could catch Jesus off guard. The flattery continued, saying they knew Jesus could not be swayed by what others think. The trap was in place; next came the bait—the question. *Tell us, then, should we pay taxes to Caesar or not*. This tax was resented by the Jews because it represented Roman occupation. The idea of paying tribute to Rome was incredibly distasteful.

The payment of this tax formed the perfect bait for trapping Jesus. For Jesus to declare that the hated tax should be paid would bring the ire of the crowds and the loss of popularity among the people. For Jesus to denounce the tax would bring the wrath of Rome (represented by the Herodians), and Jesus could be accused of treason by the Roman government. This was a trap with no apparent way to win.

VERSES 18-22

Jesus saw their *malicious intent* and rebuked them as *hypocrites*. It was apparent what they were trying to do. He would not be drawn into their trap.

The *coin used for the tax* was not just any coin. It had to be the silver coin of Rome. Roman taxes were required to be paid with Roman coins minted under the direction of the Caesar and bearing the emperor's image on the coin.

In response to Jesus's request, they gave Him a *denarius*. The value of the denarius would equal a day's wage for a worker. While the tax was not a huge amount of money, the idea of the tax itself was repugnant to the Jewish people. Add to that the fact that the coin needed to pay the tax had the image of Caesar on it. That was even more offensive. The Mosaic law forbid the use of graven images, giving double offense to the whole situation.

Quite possibly the coin given to Jesus was minted by the current emperor, Tiberius Caesar. The inscription on that coin included the emperor's face and, on the backside, a picture of him sitting on a throne. In the image of the throne, Caesar was wearing a priestly robe. The inscription read "God and High Priest." While this was highly offensive to the Jews, this was not the focus of Jesus's attention. Turning to His critics, He asked, *whose image and inscription is this?* In asking this question, Jesus had turned the trap on those seeking to entrap Him.

The antagonists readily answered Jesus's question by stating that the image and inscription was *Caesar's*. They were confident they had trapped Jesus and waited for His next reply. What came next was not what was expected.

Jesus told both the Pharisees and the Herodians what they wanted to hear. *Give . . . to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's*. Both sides of the issue received the answer they sought. When Jesus said, *give*, He used a word that meant "give up, or give back," meaning render to Caesar and to God what is rightfully due to them.

In stating this, Jesus recognized the legitimate responsibility of His followers to be obedient to the government, which includes paying lawful taxes. Paul spoke of the fact that governments are established by God and believers have an obligation to submit to them. He said that we are to “pay taxes, since the authorities are God’s servants” (Rom. 13:6).

We must not forget the second part of Jesus’s response: we are to give *to God the things that are God’s*. While believers are to give the government taxes that are due, their ultimate duty is to honor God, the Creator and Giver of all things. Jesus will spell out in the next section what allegiance or honor to God looks like.

Jesus’s response caught everyone by surprise: ***they were amazed***. That amazement no doubt involved two things: the clever way Jesus had avoided their trap and the deeply profound answer Jesus had given.



What does it look like to honor our government in today’s culture?

KEY DOCTRINE: *The Christian and the Social Order*

Means and methods used for the improvement of society and the establishment of righteousness among men can be truly and permanently helpful only when they are rooted in the regeneration of the individual by the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ. (See Romans 13:1-2; 1 Timothy 2:1-2.)

GOD’S AUTHORITY (MATT. 22:34-40)

³⁴ When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they came together. ³⁵ And one of them, an expert in the law, asked a question to test him: ³⁶ “Teacher, which command in the law is the greatest?” ³⁷ He said to him, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. ³⁸ This is the greatest and most important command. ³⁹ The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands.”

VERSES 34-36

After the question about paying taxes, Jesus was approached by the •**Sadducees** with a question about the resurrection. The *Sadducees* were the wealthy aristocrats of Judaism and included those who served as the chief priests. They did not believe in supernatural things like angels, demons, and the resurrection.

Next the **Pharisees . . . came together** for a second try at trapping Jesus. This time the Pharisees themselves confronted Jesus; there would be no more sending their disciples. **One of them** served as the spokesman for the group. The man is identified as an **expert in the law**, or a scribe and teacher of the law who was perhaps the most learned among the gathered Pharisees. He posed a question to Jesus to **test him**.

The scribe began his question by addressing Jesus as **Teacher**. Based on Mark's account, this scribe may have been showing respect for Jesus (Mark 12:28-34). Perhaps he wasn't as mean-spirited as his fellow Pharisees.

His question was one of theology: **Which command in the law is the greatest?** This was an age-old debate among the rabbis. The rabbis taught that Moses had received 613 laws on Mount Sinai. Could they be boiled down to the most important ones? A scheme had been created that labeled some laws as "heavier," meaning they were a higher priority. Some were not as critical and were called the "lighter" laws. In Psalm 15, David boiled the essential laws down to eleven. Isaiah pared them down to six (Isa. 33:15-16), while the prophet Micah got them down to three things required by God (Mic. 6:8). Finally, both Amos and Habakkuk boiled them down to one central command (Amos 5:4; Hab. 2:4).

VERSES 37-40

Jesus answered the question outright. This was the first direct answer in these instances of confrontation in Matthew 21-22. He quoted Deuteronomy 6:4-5. This keystone passage of Judaism was and is known as the *Shema* of Israel. The word *shema* means "hear" or "listen" and the verses Jesus quoted begin, "Listen, Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one." In these verses is wrapped up how God's people are to honor Him and show allegiance to Him. **Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.**

The word *heart* includes our affections. *Soul* speaks of all our life surrendered to God and His service. *Mind* speaks of our intellect and thinking capacity. The Gospel of Mark includes one

more aspect to this command. It speaks of loving God with all our strength (Mark 12:30). This would be to love with all our efforts. These words describe giving God our ultimate allegiance to honor Him.

Jesus proclaimed that loving God wholeheartedly was the **greatest and most important** of all the commandments. However, Jesus wasn't finished. The Mosaic law is symbolically represented by the "two tablets" of the law—the first four commandments dealt with the vertical relationship with God, while the last six commandments related to horizontal relationships with others. Because of this, Jesus said, there was one more command that was essential. **The second is like it**, meaning a commandment that is equally important. **Love your neighbor as yourself**. This is the command to love others unselfishly and to demonstrate that love through intentional acts of caring.

These two commandments rise above all else that is taught in **the Law and the Prophets**. In fact, all other laws come from these two. What had initially started as a question about the priority of government versus religion ended in an emphasis on honoring and loving God completely and demonstrating His love to others.



**What's at the heart of this command to love other people?
What does this demonstrate?**



BIBLE SKILL: Use multiple Scripture passages to understand a Bible passage.

In Matthew 22:17-21, Jesus spoke about giving to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. Compare this to Acts 5:27-29; Romans 13:1-7; and 1 Peter 2:13-17. Based on all these passages, write a description of the Christian's responsibilities toward government.



Alert

JESUS IS COMING BACK.

MATTHEW 24:36-51

Many people are curious—and perhaps fearful—about the end of the world. Everyone from the preppers and survivalists to the general skeptic finds the prospect of the end of the world to be a fascinating subject. We read books and watch movies that portray the final days of the planet. Doomsday theories abound. People in general want to know the when, how, who, and what regarding the end of the age. In that, we are not too far removed from Jesus's first disciples.

 **What is it about the end of the world that most fascinates or frightens you?**

UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

MATTHEW 24:1-51

After the confrontations in the temple in Matthew 21–23, Jesus left the temple never to return again. As He left, He spoke of the coming destruction of both the temple and Jerusalem (23:37-39).

Chapter 24 begins with the disciples marveling over the magnificence of the temple. Jesus informed them that the temple would be destroyed. His disciples asked when this would happen and what signs would signal His return and the end of the age.

Jesus’s response prompted what is known as the Olivet Discourse, an extended teaching given on the Mount of Olives found in Matthew 24–25. Not every scholar agrees on the meaning of Jesus’s teachings. A good rule of thumb is to always let the context guide the interpretation. With that in mind, consider that the disciples asked two questions of Jesus: when would the temple be destroyed, and what signs will signal His coming and the end of time? A valid approach, then, would be to understand that Jesus was answering these questions.

In verses 4-14, Jesus described events that would occur before His return. These events could be misinterpreted as signs that Jesus’s coming was near. Jesus told the disciples to not be deceived by false messiahs. As a part of this warning, Jesus told them they would suffer persecution “because of my name” (v. 9). He challenged them to stand firm during these days.

Jesus spoke specifically of the coming destruction of Jerusalem and the temple (vv. 15-28). Some, however, see these verses as being a prophecy concerning the tribulation or a period of great distress.

In verse 29, the Olivet Discourse shifted to the question regarding Jesus’s return and the end of the age. This discussion continues to the end of the chapter. The bottom line is that the follower of Jesus is to be alert for His coming again. We do not know when. What can be known is that Jesus will return!

 **Read Matthew 24:36-51. Identify words and phrases that challenge us to be ready for Jesus’s return.**

EXPLORE **THE TEXT**

AN UNKNOWN HOUR (MATT. 24:36-41)

³⁶ “Now concerning that day and hour no one knows—neither the angels of heaven nor the Son—except the Father alone. ³⁷ As the days of Noah were, so the coming of the Son of Man will be. ³⁸ For in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah boarded the ark. ³⁹ They didn’t know until the flood came and swept them all away. This is the way the coming of the Son of Man will be. ⁴⁰ Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. ⁴¹ Two women will be grinding grain with a hand mill; one will be taken and one left.”

VERSE 36

Implied in the disciples’ question about signs of Jesus’s coming was the question, “When?” The answer, according to Jesus was, ***no one knows—neither the angels*** nor He Himself knew God’s timetable. Philippians 2:6-8 speaks of the Son of God limiting Himself of divine attributes when He came to earth and took on flesh and blood. Here, Jesus spoke of limitations on His omniscience.

Because no one knows the time of Christ’s return, any attempt to speculate and calculate it is a waste of time and energy. Instead, preparedness is the proper response to the fact that Jesus will return. Jesus used the next verses to challenge His followers to be ready because His return could happen at any time.

***Preparedness is the proper response to
the fact that Jesus will return.***

VERSES 37-41

Jesus used the account of ***Noah*** and the flood to point to the need to be ready. When the ***flood*** arrived, the wicked were unprepared. They were engaged in the normal activities of life—***eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage***. Nothing was wrong with these activities. But they had given no thought beyond the immediate. Such will be the coming again of Jesus. Everyone will be impacted, and no one will be exempt from the events surrounding His return.

Noah and his family, just like the others in his day, did not know the exact timing of the flood event. God had warned them the flood judgment was coming. Noah's family heeded the warning and was prepared. Because **Noah boarded the ark** along with his family, they were saved from this judgment event.

The suddenness of the flood served as a warning concerning the suddenness of the day when **the Son of Man** returns. As those in Noah's day, people will ignore warnings and obvious signs of Christ's return and be unprepared to meet Him. Tragically, people dismiss the prospect of standing before God with disdain and indifference. The coming judgment will find people responding in much the same way as they did in the days of Noah.

People dismiss the prospect of standing before God with disdain and indifference.

Jesus further illustrated His point with illustrations from daily life. The pictures are of **two men** working in a **field** and **two women** milling grain. **One will be taken and one left.** Some scholars see the words *be taken* to point to being taken away to judgment when Christ returns. Those *left* will enter the kingdom of God. Other scholars understand the Greek word translated *be taken* to picture a gentle gathering of believers to the Lord. This interpretation also sees the Greek word for *left* to carry the meaning of "abandoned" or "sent away." Regardless of the two interpretations, the point is the same: separation of the wicked from the righteous.



What do we learn about God's plans for Jesus's return in these verses? How do the two illustrations given help us better understand the nature of Jesus's return?

KEY DOCTRINE: *Last Things*

According to His promise, Jesus Christ will return personally and visibly in glory to the earth; the dead will be raised; and Christ will judge all men in righteousness. (See 1 Thessalonians 5:1-3; Revelation 1:7.)

BE ALERT (MATT. 24:42-44)

⁴² “Therefore be alert, since you don’t know what day your Lord is coming. ⁴³ But know this: If the homeowner had known what time the thief was coming, he would have stayed alert and not let his house be broken into. ⁴⁴ This is why you are also to be ready, because the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.”

VERSES 42-44

Verse 42 builds on the warning given in the previous verses. Because no one can know the *day* when the *Lord is coming*, Christ’s followers are to stay awake; they are to maintain watchfulness; they are to *be alert*. The verb used here is in the present tense and calls for continuous alertness. Because the moment of Jesus’s return is hidden from everyone but the Father, believers have no idea as to when it will happen. Therefore, we need to live on the alert with the expectation that it could happen at any moment. The identity of the one coming is *your Lord*.

Jesus used another illustration—the *homeowner* and a *thief*. The idea of Jesus’s return being like a *thief* coming at an unknown time became a common metaphor for the early church as they anticipated Jesus’s coming. It is used in the New Testament seven times to describe this event (Matt. 24:43; Luke 12:39; 1 Thess. 5:2,4; 2 Pet. 3:10; Rev. 3:3; 16:15).

The command is not just to be alert or stay awake but to also be ready.

Verse 44 summarizes the entire warning to be ready. No one knows when Jesus will return. The day is not known (v. 42), no one knows during which “watch” He may come (v. 43), and no one knows the hour of His return. Constant watchfulness is essential because Jesus’s return will be *at an hour you do not expect*. The command is not just to be alert or stay awake but to also *be ready*.

While these verses challenge believers to be constantly watching and expecting Christ’s return, they also serve as a strong notice to us not to attempt to pinpoint the date of His return. That is a temptation to which many have succumbed. Jesus said, “No one knows,” and “it will happen when least expected!”



If Jesus said it is not possible to know the time of His coming, why do people keep trying to predict the date of His return?



What does it mean to be ready for Jesus's return? Why is it important to be ready?

BE FAITHFUL (MATT. 24:45-51)

⁴⁵ “Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his master has put in charge of his household, to give them food at the proper time? ⁴⁶ Blessed is that servant whom the master finds doing his job when he comes. ⁴⁷ Truly I tell you, he will put him in charge of all his possessions. ⁴⁸ But if that wicked servant says in his heart, ‘My master is delayed,’ ⁴⁹ and starts to beat his fellow servants, and eats and drinks with drunkards, ⁵⁰ that servant’s master will come on a day he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know. ⁵¹ He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

VERSES 45-47

Jesus told a parable contrasting two responses to the absence of the *master* of a *household*. This parable could be featuring two different servants, one who was *faithful and wise* and the other who was *wicked*. Or it is speaking of two alternative scenarios a *servant* might follow.

In the first scenario, the *master* considered him to be trustworthy and sensible. Because of this, he left him in charge of *his household*. The implication based on the second half of the parable is that the master was away for an extended period. This servant was given authority over the household and the responsibility to administer the household.

The *servant* who carried out his assigned task and was found *doing his job* when the master returned was applauded by Jesus. The word *blessed* is a word that can mean “congratulations” or “how fortunate” is this person. It is the same word used in

Matthew 5:3-11 in the Beatitudes. Note that this servant wasn't sitting idly waiting for the master to return. He was busy doing the job he had been given to do. This applies to Christians today. We are not to be idly waiting for Christ's return but are to be engaged in the commission He has given us—to make disciples of the nations.

Jesus emphasized the truth He was teaching with the words ***truly I tell you***. These words mean: pay attention! Because of the loyal servant's continued diligence in carrying out his assignment, the master promoted him out of his temporary assignment into a permanent position of responsibility. That promotion most likely was to the position of "steward" of the household since he was ***put . . . in charge of all*** the master's ***possessions***. He now had the permanent responsibility to watch over and use wisely all that the master possessed. It was a position of great accountability and great prestige.

We are not to be idly waiting for Christ's return but are to be engaged in the commission He has given us.

VERSES 48-51

Next came the contrast. What if the servant did just the opposite? What if he didn't take his responsibility seriously? What might be the outcome?

In this part of the parable, the servant is labeled as ***that wicked servant***. He reasoned in his heart that his ***master*** was ***delayed***. The word *delayed* carries the idea of being away for a long time. Thinking that he had plenty of time, he began to mistreat those under his authority. Not only did he fail to care for those in his charge, but he neglected other duties by partying ***with drunkards***. His attitude was a reckless disdain for the fact that the master could return at any moment.

His carelessness about the return of the master is reminiscent of the words of 2 Peter 3:3-4: "Above all, be aware of this: Scoffers will come in the last days scoffing and following their own evil desires, saying, 'Where is his "coming" that he promised? Ever since our ancestors fell asleep, all things continue as they have been since the beginning of creation.'"

In Jesus's parable, this servant does not represent a follower of Christ. If this parable represents two different servants,

Jesus could well be setting up a contrast between a true follower of Christ who is faithful and alert for the return of his Lord, and an unbeliever who has no saving relationship with Him and scoffs at the idea of His return.

Just like the thief who comes at an hour when he is not expected, so the ***servant's master will come*** when least expected. Again, Jesus spoke of both an unexpected ***day*** and an unexpected ***hour***. This sudden return applies, of course, to the faithful and wise servant, as well as the wicked servant. One was ready for his return, the other was not.

The consequences on the wicked servant for being unprepared were devastating. The word picture is that the master would ***cut him to pieces***. This literally means “to cut in two” or “cut asunder.” The term is used in Scripture for the dismemberment that takes place in animal sacrifices. The picture is that of a terrible end for those who fail to be alert.

Jesus's intent in using such a brutal picture was to shock His hearers into realizing the extreme seriousness of being ready for His return. In addition, the wicked servant will be assigned ***a place with the hypocrites***, that is, those who are not true followers of Christ. Their place will be in hell ***where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth***.



How are you preparing yourself for Jesus's return?

BIBLE SKILL: Use cross references to learn more about a word or phrase.

In Matthew 24:51, Jesus used the expression “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Examine these other passages where Jesus used the phrase: Matthew 8:12; 13:42,50; 22:13; 25:30; and Luke 13:28. Observe the context and setting of these passages. Write a summary of what the expression refers to and why it should be a warning to all.

APPLY THE TEXT

- + We can be certain that Jesus will one day return.
- + Believers should be ready for Christ's return.
- + Believers are to remain faithful while we await Christ's return, stewarding well the resources God has given us.

 **As a group, consider how often we tend to be like the wicked servant as we allow the things of life to distract us from anticipating Christ's return. What are ways that your group can assist each other in staying alert?**

 **Think through your typical day. What activities do you engage in that assist you in remaining faithful as you await Christ's return? How can you enhance those activities in your daily schedule? Are there other actions you can take to stay alert?**

Memorize Matthew 24:44.

Prayer Needs





Active Faith

THE WAY WE TREAT JESUS'S FOLLOWERS REVEALS
THE NATURE OF OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH HIM.

MATTHEW 25:31-46

Annual performance reviews can create both anticipation and anxiety. Many employees experience this year after year. In most cases, managers have a metric or checklist by which they evaluate your work performance. In some unfortunate cases, an employee has no clue what the criterion will be for the review. It is helpful to know the benchmarks we are striving for as we carry out our daily responsibilities.

 **What are the advantages of knowing the criteria by which you will be evaluated? What are the disadvantages of not knowing?**

UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

MATTHEW 25:1-46

Chapter 25 continues Jesus’s Olivet Discourse (chaps. 24–25). He spoke about the preparation needed in anticipation of His return. Beginning in Matthew 24:45, Jesus told three parables about preparedness. The first contrasted the actions of a wise, sensible servant with the actions of a wicked servant while the master was away (24:45–51). The second parable (25:1–13) concerned ten virgins who were part of a wedding celebration. The word *virgin* here refers to young women of marriageable age. Their job was to accompany the bridegroom to the wedding feast. However, the bridegroom was delayed for some unexplained reason. When he finally arrived at an unexpected hour—midnight—these ladies roused from sleep. At that point it was discovered that five of them had prepared their lamps with plenty of oil. The prepared virgins accompanied the bridegroom to the feast. The unprepared ones failed to be ready and lacked enough oil to light the bridegroom’s way to the marriage feast. They had to go buy oil, then found themselves locked out of the feast. This was a clear warning that we must always be ready.

The third parable in the Olivet Discourse tells of a master and servants (vv. 14–30). Once again, the master was absent. The time of his return was unknown. He entrusted three of his servants with sums of money. Two wise servants faithfully carried out their duties by investing and earning profit on the master’s money. The third servant was driven by fear of the master. As a result, he failed to seize the opportunity to increase the money placed in his stewardship. When the master returned, the first two servants were rewarded for their wisdom. The fearful servant was punished for allowing fear to paralyze him. This servant’s penalty corresponds to that of the wicked servant in 24:51. The bottom line is that we are to be prepared and faithfully carrying out the work given to us by our Master.



Read Matthew 25:31–46 in your Bible. Summarize the difference between the faithful and the unfaithful.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

THE JUDGE (MATT. 25:31-33)

³¹ “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. ³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate them one from another, just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on the left.”

VERSES 31-33

While these verses are preceded by parables about Jesus’s return, the account described in 25:31-46 is not a parable. It is a prophecy about the coming time when the **Son of Man** will sit in judgment. *Son of Man* is taken from the messianic prophecy in Daniel 7:13. The words **glory** and **glorious** speak of Jesus’s heavenly splendor, majesty, and radiance. The picture echoes the one in Daniel 7:9-10.

In this picture, the Son of Man is sitting on His throne to bring judgment. The word translated **nations** can mean either people groups or Gentiles. The word case in the Greek implies that it is here referring to individuals rather than nations.

Several interpretations have been offered concerning the identity of the ones standing before the throne. Their identity is impacted by how one interprets the phrase “these brothers and sisters of mine” in verse 40. One view sees “these brothers and sisters” as a reference to the Jewish people, with the thought that *the nations* of the earth will be judged by their treatment of the Jews. Another interpretation is that these “brothers and sisters” are the down-and-out, the social outcasts, the marginalized. Those around the throne will be judged by how they treated these vulnerable members of society. Still another interpretation identifies “these brothers and sisters” as followers of Christ. We will wait until verse 40 to determine which interpretation is more in keeping with what Jesus was saying.

These nations or people will be separated **one from another**. Two distinct groups will be formed. Jesus used a metaphor to picture the two groups, **sheep** and **goats**. The sheep Jesus put on **his right** and the goats on **the left**. Often in the fields of first-century Israel, sheep and goats grazed together. While sheep tend to be obedient, goats can be troublemakers. Because of this, shepherds sometimes separated the sheep and goats. In the same way,

a separation will occur at the judgment. The basis for this separation will be plainly stated in the following verses.

 **What do these verses teach about Jesus's role in the final judgment?**

THE RIGHTEOUS (MATT. 25:34-40)

³⁴ “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger and you took me in; ³⁶ I was naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you took care of me; I was in prison and you visited me.’ ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸ When did we see you a stranger and take you in, or without clothes and clothe you? ³⁹ When did we see you sick, or in prison, and visit you?’ ⁴⁰ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’”

VERSES 34-40

The *right* side of a throne was seen as the place of honor. To those put in this place of honor, Jesus says *come*, meaning come to the reward *prepared* for you. Jesus said this group was *blessed by my Father*. They enjoyed the Father's favor. For them, God had prepared a reward *from the foundation of the world*. (See Eph. 1:4.) That reward will be a *kingdom* where the righteous will live and reign with Christ (2 Tim. 2:12).

The reason for the reward is introduced by the word *for* (v. 35). The rewards were based on their actions of ministering to the King. In each case, the King was the recipient of the care they had given. A note of caution and clarification is necessary at this point. Although these righteous ones were applauded for their acts of compassion, these acts did not earn them the reward of the kingdom. This account is not teaching salvation by works. The clear teaching of the New Testament is that no one can merit or earn

God’s gracious gift of salvation. That comes by the grace of God through Christ’s achievement on the cross. These actions of compassion by the righteous ones were the outflow and evidence of a right relationship with God (see Eph. 2:8-10).

Jesus used the word *righteous* to identify the sheep. They will express great surprise that their acts of compassion were done for the King. Their question is understandable, “When did we have opportunity to do this?” The surprise of the righteous points to the fact that their deeds of compassion were carried out selflessly.

The key to understanding the identity of *these brothers and sisters of mine* may be found in the phrase *the least of these*. This phrase has appeared in Matthew’s Gospel several times as an identifier for followers of Jesus (see Matt. 10:42; 18:6,10,14). In Matthew 12:50, Jesus identified those who followed Him as disciples and did the will of the Father as “my brother and sister and mother.” Thus, these acts of compassion were ways in which the righteous responded to followers of Jesus. Some Bible scholars see these least ones as Christian missionaries and evangelists. Therefore, the response of the righteous was a positive response to the gospel message. The basis, then, for inheriting the kingdom was an acceptance of the good news of Jesus. Out of that relationship with Christ, these righteous ones ministered to the needs of others and, in doing so, they were caring for Jesus as well.

 **What evidence distinguishes between a righteous and unrighteous person?**

 **What obstacles prevent us from ministering to the needs of others?**

THE FAITHLESS (MATT. 25:41-46)

⁴¹ **“Then he will also say to those on the left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels!’** ⁴² **For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat; I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink;** ⁴³ **I was**

a stranger and you didn't take me in; I was naked and you didn't clothe me, sick and in prison and you didn't take care of me.'⁴⁴ Then they too will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or without clothes, or sick, or in prison, and not help you?'⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'⁴⁶ And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

VERSES 41-46

The action now turned to the *left* side of the throne. Once again, the King made a pronouncement. This time, however, it was a condemnation of those who had been separated from the righteous. The words of this condemnation mirror the words spoken to those on the right. However, instead of *come*, the King said *depart from me*. Instead of *blessed*, they were *cursed*. Instead of a kingdom prepared there was *eternal fire prepared*. Notice that this fire was not for the wicked but *for the devil and his angels*. Nor is this fire prepared from the foundation of the world. Eternal punishment was not part of God's original plan for His created ones. It was put in place after the open rebellion against God by both the fallen angels and sinful mankind. In addition, the wicked enter this eternal punishment of their own choice by their rejection of Jesus.



KEY DOCTRINE: *Last Things*

The unrighteous will be consigned to Hell, the place of everlasting punishment. The righteous in their resurrected and glorified bodies will receive their reward and will dwell forever in Heaven with the Lord. (See 2 Thessalonians 1:9; Revelation 21:8.)

The King read the indictment against these wicked ones for their indifference to *the least of these*. As before, the hearts of those gathered before the throne were weighed by their compassionate care for others. In this case, this group lacked the compassion for others, which came about as a result of rejection of the message of Jesus. That rejection rendered them unable to show compassion to others, especially to those who are followers of Christ. None of the basic human needs mentioned in these verses were met by those who failed to respond to the message of Jesus.

Those who did not show compassion expressed surprise as they were confronted with their failure to do so. These actions are the same as those expressed in verses 37-39 but are listed in shortened form. In fact, the entire dialogue of the King with this group (vv. 41-46) is a summary of the same dialogue between the King and the righteous (vv. 34-40).

By their failure to love and serve *the least of these*, the wicked ones revealed their rejection of Jesus Christ and His gift of salvation. The bad fruit of their life spoke to the bad condition of their heart.

Verse 46 sets forth the eternal contrast between the two groups. The ones who failed to trust in Christ and demonstrate that through serving others were sent away *into eternal punishment*. For the righteous, their final destination is that of *eternal life*. As *eternal life* speaks of life that will last for eternity, so the words *eternal punishment* no doubt speak of punishment that lasts eternally.

 **What prevents some people in our culture from believing the biblical teaching about hell and eternal life?**

BIBLE SKILL: Respond emotionally to a principle of doctrine

Read Matthew 13:40-43,49-50; 18:7-9; and 25:41,46 and record your thoughts about the eternal destiny of the lost. What is their prospect? How is it described? How long will it last? Is there any reprieve? How should knowing the destiny of the lost impel believers to share the gospel with others? Spend time talking to God about your level of concern for the lost and how you can see them the way He sees them.

APPLY THE TEXT

- + We should live our lives knowing we will stand before Jesus one day.
- + We demonstrate our love for God when we minister to other believers.
- + We should recognize that unbelievers will be eternally separated from God and will face everlasting punishment.

 **Within your group, create a list of acts of compassion that you as a group and as individuals have carried out. How do these acts of compassion reflect the condition of your heart?**

 **Spend time evaluating how much you show compassion and ministry to others. Consider ways you can engage in acts of compassion this week. Analyze your motive for wanting to extend merciful treatment to others.**



Memorize Matthew 25:40.

Prayer Needs



Our Atonement

JESUS CAME TO DIE ON THE CROSS FOR OUR SINS.

MATTHEW 26:17-30

None of us knows the precise time and date of our death. We do know, however, that death is a certainty for all. Consider this scenario: you know the exact day of your impending death, but no one else knows. You throw a dinner party for your family and friends, knowing this will be the last meal you will have with them. What emotions do you think you would experience if this scenario played out in reality?

 **How does death sometimes sharpen our focus on the things that really matter in life?**

UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

MATTHEW 26:1-75

The extensive narrative of confrontation in Jerusalem that began in chapter 21 reaches its conclusion with the arrest, trial, and crucifixion of Jesus. Matthew 26:1-46 sets the stage by recounting several preparatory events leading to the arrest and the beginning of the trials of Jesus. Each incident plays an important part in the preparation for Jesus's atoning death. The events in chapter 26 are not necessarily presented in chronological order. For instance, the narrative of the woman anointing Jesus's body with costly perfume in verses 6-13 took place on Saturday evening according to John's Gospel. John also identified this woman as Mary, the sister of Lazarus and Martha (see John 12:1-3).

Matthew began chapter 26 with the fourth prediction of Jesus's death (see also 16:21; 17:9,12,22-23; 20:18-19; 26:2). With the mention of His impending death, Jesus gave a clue as to the time these events took place. Passover began on Thursday evening at sundown. Therefore, Jesus most likely spoke these words on Tuesday, the same day of His Olivet Discourse (chaps. 24-25). Also on that day, or perhaps a day earlier, the chief priests met to initiate Jesus's arrest (26:3-5). Sometime that afternoon, while Jesus spoke of end times under the olive trees on the Mount of Olives, Judas the betrayer sold Him out (vv. 14-16).

Sometime on Thursday, Jesus sent John and Peter to prepare for the Passover celebration (see Luke 22:8). Following the Passover meal, Jesus returned to the garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives, where He spent an agonizing time in prayer as He faced the coming event of the crucifixion (vv. 36-46).

During the short journey to the garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives, Jesus predicted the denial of Peter (vv. 30-35). The fulfillment of this prediction would take place following Jesus's arrest while Jesus was undergoing an informal trial before Caiaphas, the high priest (vv. 69-75).



Read Matthew 26:17-30 in your Bible. What emotions do you think the disciples felt at this “final meal” with Jesus, especially considering the statement about betrayal?

EXPLORE THE TEXT

COMING BETRAYAL (MATT. 26:17-25)

¹⁷ On the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Where do you want us to make preparations for you to eat the Passover?” ¹⁸ “Go into the city to a certain man,” he said, “and tell him, ‘The Teacher says: My time is near; I am celebrating the Passover at your place with my disciples.’” ¹⁹ So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them and prepared the Passover. ²⁰ When evening came, he was reclining at the table with the Twelve. ²¹ While they were eating, he said, “Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me.” ²² Deeply distressed, each one began to say to him, “Surely not I, Lord?” ²³ He replied, “The one who dipped his hand with me in the bowl—he will betray me. ²⁴ The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for him if he had not been born.” ²⁵ Judas, his betrayer, replied, “Surely not I, Rabbi?” “You have said it,” he told him.

VERSES 17-20

The week known as Holy Week reached Thursday, the *first day of Unleavened Bread*. This was the designation for an eight-day festival that began with the *•Passover* and continued for seven days after *Passover*. The terms *Unleavened Bread* and *Passover* were used interchangeably to speak of this festival remembering the event that began the exodus from Egypt.

Preparations for eating the Passover meal included buying the various items needed for the meal. According to Exodus 12:3, the lamb for the Passover sacrifice was bought on Sunday. It would be sacrificed on Thursday. Luke 22:8-13 indicates that Peter and John were entrusted with the preparation.

Jesus gave Peter and John specific instructions about *where* they were to *make preparations*. Luke indicated they would encounter a man carrying a water jug. They were to follow him (Luke 22:10). Some scholars have speculated the upper room was in a house belonging to the parents of John Mark, the cousin of Barnabas and writer of the second Gospel.

The cryptic instructions likely were designed to hide the location of the Passover meal from Judas, who may have jumped at the

chance to pass on its location to the soldiers of the chief priests. Judas, just like the other nine disciples, would not know the location of the upper room until they entered the room with Jesus.

Preparing the Passover involved leading the animal into the temple precinct through the Nicanor gates. Here a priest would cut the throat of the lamb, allowing its blood to flow out into a bowl and then poured it at the base of the altar. Peter and John would then carry the carcass of the sheep on two staves to the house where the upper room was located and roast it for the Passover meal.

VERSES 21-25

While Jesus had spoken several times about His upcoming arrest and crucifixion, this was the first time He mentioned a traitor among His followers. Eleven of the disciples were devastated by the statement of Jesus. **Each one** began to say, **Surely not I, Lord?** Each disciple was hoping for a negative answer from Jesus: “No, you are not the one.”

The Passover meal included several instances when each participant would dip a piece of unleavened bread in the bowl on the table. Even so, Jesus assured them that only one of them would betray Him. What made this statement even more devastating was the fact that in that culture, sharing a meal with someone was an expression of friendship. The Passover meal was also very sacred. For someone to reveal a betrayal during such an occasion added to the horrific nature of the betrayal.

While the impending death of Jesus was the fulfillment of both prophecy and the plan of God, the actions of Judas arose from his own willful choice. There is no conflict between God’s sovereign will and Judas’s free will. Jesus was not a victim of some political process but the center of God’s plan for the salvation of humanity. Judas was not merely a pawn in God’s plan but someone who acted out of his own decisions and perhaps flawed thinking. Because of this, Judas would suffer the consequences for his decision.

Notice how Judas’s question to Jesus was similar to that of the other disciples with one exception. Instead of calling Jesus *Lord*, as in verse 22, Judas called Him **Rabbi**. In the Gospel of Matthew none of the other disciples ever called Jesus *Rabbi*. This was a term used by others as they addressed Jesus. This perhaps points to the fact that Judas no longer was a part of these men who followed so closely to Jesus.

While there is much speculation on the motives of Judas for his willingness to turn Jesus over to the chief priests, the only

clue comes from John's Gospel. John tells us Judas was a thief (John 12:6). No doubt, however, there was more to Judas's thinking than just greed. Was there an attempt to force Jesus's hand and make Him begin His revolution against Rome? Was this His attempt to bring in a literal kingdom on earth?

 **What can we do to resist becoming immune to the dangers of sin?**

 **KEY DOCTRINE:** *The Lord's Supper*

The Lord's Supper is a symbolic act of obedience whereby members of the church, through partaking of the bread and the fruit of the vine, memorialize the death of the Redeemer and anticipate His second coming. (See 1 Corinthians 10:16; 11:23-29.)

COMING ATONEMENT (MATT. 26:26-30)

²⁶ As they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take and eat it; this is my body."²⁷ Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks, he gave it to them and said, "Drink from it, all of you.²⁸ For this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.²⁹ But I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."³⁰ After singing a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

VERSES 26-29

At this point in history, the Passover had been celebrated for over 1,500 years. Now Jesus was going to change everything. In God's plan of salvation, this evening in Jerusalem would be the last officially sanctioned Passover. Jesus would soon be the once-for-all sacrifice to bring deliverance from the penalty of sin.

The Passover meal included prayers, blessings, and sharing a variety of dishes with different meanings. One of those dishes was the *matzah* bread, a flat, unleavened piece of **bread** that

represented the bread eaten in haste in Egypt as the Israelites prepared to flee. Jesus broke and gave this *bread* to each disciple with the instructions to ***take and eat***. With this action, Jesus changed the meaning of this bread. The breaking of the bread pointed to His death. No longer was this a reminder of the exodus event; now it would serve as a reminder of Christ's atoning death.

Four cups of wine were used in the Passover ceremony. The sharing of each cup was accompanied by prayers and blessing. ***After giving thanks***, Jesus gave one of these cups to the disciples with the instructions to ***drink from it***. Most likely this was the third ***cup*** of the Passover, called the cup of redemption. This was based on the promise in Exodus 6:7 that God would redeem His people from slavery. Jesus transformed this *cup* into the cup of remembrance. Instead of a cup that looked forward to a promised redemption, the cup became a remembrance of Jesus's sacrifice that paid for our redemption.

Jesus called this cup ***my blood of the covenant***. A covenant is a binding agreement or an oath-bound promise between two parties. God's covenants in the Old Testament were ratified through blood sacrifices. In the death of Jesus, a new covenant was instituted through His blood, giving the pathway to a right relationship with God.

Verse 28 is perhaps the watershed verse in the Gospel of Matthew. This statement from Jesus—***my blood . . . is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins***—is the reason behind everything narrated in this Gospel. Jesus came for one purpose. Everything He taught, all He endured from His enemies, led to this purpose of shedding His blood so that sins could be forgiven. Jesus spoke of His *blood* being *poured out*, a phrase that echoes Isaiah 53:12, where God spoke of His servant voluntarily pouring out His life in death. The Old Testament declared that the life is in the blood (see Lev. 17:11). Thus, the picture of Jesus pouring out His blood on the cross was a statement that He poured out His life unto death to grant forgiveness of sin. This was done *for many*. This includes all who place their trust in Him.

Jesus's words, ***but I tell you***, were spoken emphatically to emphasize the statement to follow. In this statement about not drinking ***from this fruit of the vine from now on***, Jesus was speaking of His departure from this earth. While this statement of Jesus might convey hopelessness, Jesus didn't leave the thought there. He also spoke of drinking it ***new with you in my Father's kingdom***. This was a word of hope. His death would not

be the end. He would return to bring in the *Father's kingdom*. This statement of Jesus was both a looking back in remembrance of His sacrificial death for the sins of the world and a looking forward to His return and the establishment of His earthly kingdom.

VERSE 30

The Hallel psalms or Hallelujah psalms, Psalms 113–118, were used extensively in the Passover celebration. These psalms would have been sung by the temple singers during the time when John and Peter were sacrificing the Passover lamb in the temple that afternoon before the Passover meal. The Hallel psalms were sung throughout the Passover meal. Now, as Jesus and the disciples concluded the celebration, a final psalm was sung, most likely Psalm 118. As they finished, Jesus and His disciples returned to the area on the **•Mount of Olives** where they had spent much time during the final week (see Luke 21:37).



Why is it important for believers to remember Jesus's sacrifice on the cross?



BIBLE SKILL: Compare multiples passages to get a better understanding of a biblical truth.

Compare Matthew 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:17-20; and 1 Corinthians 11:23-26. Consider what each passage teaches about the Lord's Supper. What makes the passages unique? What elements did each writer seem to emphasize in their description? How did the writers encourage us to reflect on the past and look to the future? Which Gospel writer did Paul follow more closely?

APPLY THE TEXT

- + Believers must recognize their own capacity to betray Jesus.
- + We find forgiveness by accepting Jesus's death as the payment for our sins.

 **According to Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:27-29, Christians are to approach the Lord's Supper with care and examination. Discuss with your group some helpful approaches to using the Lord's Supper observance for personal examination. Share ways to prepare for participating in the Lord's Supper that have been meaningful for members of your group.**

 **While we will never know the mind of Judas as he betrayed Jesus, we can know our own mind. How might you be tempted to betray Jesus and deny Him as Peter did? What steps might you take to eliminate these false steps from your life?**

 **Memorize Matthew 26:28.**

Prayer Needs



Our Savior

JESUS ENDURED THE CROSS SO THAT WE
MIGHT HAVE ACCESS TO GOD.

MATTHEW 27:27-31,45-54

Biographers will spend hundreds of pages describing the life of their subjects, but generally limit the pages about their death to just a few. For example, the three-volume biography of Winston Churchill, *The Last Lion*, by William Manchester and Paul Reid devotes 2,622 pages to Churchill's life and only three to his death. This is not the case with the Gospel of Matthew's account of Jesus. Jesus's death was central, and Matthew devoted seven chapters out of twenty-eight to chronicle the events surrounding the crucifixion of Jesus.

 **What does the amount of space devoted to Jesus's death tell you about its importance? Why do you think it's important?**

UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

MATTHEW 27:1-66

With the transition between Matthew 26 and 27, the ordeal of Jesus's arrest and trial shifted from Thursday to Friday. During the night, Jesus endured an illegal trial. Jewish law prohibited night-time trials. In addition, most likely the entire Sanhedrin was not present. This, too, made the trial illegal. At daybreak, another hasty trial finalized charges against Jesus. Initially, Jesus was charged with blasphemy. No doubt, discussion was held concerning what charges to present to the Roman procurator that would prompt the death penalty. Once those charges were agreed upon, Jesus was taken to Pilate for the trial intended to end in His death.

In the meantime, Judas was filled with remorse and returned the money. Matthew is the only Gospel to include that Judas committed suicide by hanging himself. Luke mentioned it in the book of Acts (Acts 1:18-19).

The priests who easily violated the law in trying Jesus were sticklers for the law concerning the returned money. Tainted money could not be used for temple purposes. The priests chose to use the money to buy a plot of ground for a pauper's cemetery.

Next came the trial before the Roman procurator, Pilate, who alone could order an execution. Three charges were brought against Jesus: misleading the nation, refusing to pay taxes, and claiming to be a king (Luke 23:2). These political charges could result in the death penalty. After much wrangling with the Sanhedrin, Pilate finally condemned Jesus to death. Jesus was mocked, tortured by the soldiers, and led away to be crucified.

Matthew initially focused on those around the cross. Not until the end of the crucifixion scene does Matthew turn attention to Jesus and His final moments.

Chapter 27 closes with the burial of Jesus in a borrowed tomb. Although the disciples seem to have forgotten Jesus's promise to rise the third day, the religious leaders had not. They set a guard to prevent anyone from stealing the body. The sealing and guarding of the tomb in the end served as proof to Jesus's resurrection.



Read Matthew 27:27-31,45-54 in your Bible to gain an understanding of all Jesus went through.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

MOCKED (MATT. 27:27-31)

²⁷ Then the governor's soldiers took Jesus into the governor's residence and gathered the whole company around him. ²⁸ They stripped him and dressed him in a scarlet robe. ²⁹ They twisted together a crown of thorns, put it on his head, and placed a staff in his right hand. And they knelt down before him and mocked him: "Hail, king of the Jews!" ³⁰ Then they spat on him, took the staff, and kept hitting him on the head. ³¹ After they had mocked him, they stripped him of the robe, put his own clothes on him, and led him away to crucify him.

VERSE 27

The crucifixion event began with the wickedness of the Jewish leaders in arresting and creating trumped-up charges against Jesus. It continued with Pilate's decision to hand Jesus over for crucifixion. The wickedness continued as Jesus was handed over to the **governor's soldiers**. No doubt this **whole company** of soldiers, six hundred strong, accompanied Pilate from his residence in Caesarea on the Mediterranean Sea. These soldiers were not the famous Roman legionnaires. According to historians, there were no legionnaires assigned to Judea at this time. These were conscripted soldiers from the various nations conquered by Rome. The **governor's residence** most likely was the Antonia fortress adjacent to the temple precinct. The soldiers were probably housed in that fortress as well.

VERSES 28-30

The soldiers mocked Jesus. They picked up on the charge against Him that He claimed to be the King of the Jews. Using that, they mocked Jesus as a king by stripping Him of His clothing and putting **a scarlet robe** on Him. This **robe** was an outer garment a soldier used to keep warm as he stood guard.

Adding to the mockery of the robe, the soldiers fashioned a crown out of a thorn bush. The design was a copy of the wreath worn by the Caesar on special occasions. Pictures of this wreath are engraved on Roman coins. This fake crown was then pressed into Jesus's head.

A further symbol of mockery was a **staff** or flimsy reed they placed in His hand as a makeshift scepter. With this they began

verbally abusing Him and crying out ***Hail, king of the Jews!*** No doubt these words were accompanied by laughter and derision. The whole scene was designed to humiliate.

More atrocities followed as the soldiers ***spat on*** Jesus and continued ***hitting him on the head*** with the staff. Jesus had predicted these things would happen, “They will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked, flogged, and crucified, and on the third day he will be raised” (Matt. 20:19). All of this happened in addition to the severe flogging (27:26). Punishment by flogging was brutal in and of itself.

VERSE 31

Finally, the mockery and beating ended. The soldiers removed the cloak and put Jesus’s own clothes back on Him. This is an interesting fact because historians indicate that the normal procedure was to march a prisoner naked to the site of execution and then to crucify them naked. This action of putting clothing on Jesus may have been a move by the Romans to placate the Jews who had great aversion to public nudity.



What emotions does this passage evoke in you?

FORSAKEN (MATT. 27:45-49)

⁴⁵ **From noon until three in the afternoon, darkness came over the whole land.** ⁴⁶ **About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out with a loud voice, “*Elí, Elí, lemá sabachtháni?*” that is, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?”** ⁴⁷ **When some of those standing there heard this, they said, “He’s calling for Elijah.”** ⁴⁸ **Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and offered him a drink.**

⁴⁹ **But the rest said, “Let’s see if Elijah comes to save him.”**

VERSES 45-46

The wickedness surrounding the crucifixion continued with the horror of the physical suffering of the cross. The soldiers greedily gambled for His clothing. The religious leaders taunted Him, and two insurrectionists executed with Him also called out insults and taunts against Him. Finally, in verse 45, Matthew’s focus turned to Jesus Himself and the last three hours of His life.

Around **noon** the sky became unnaturally dark. This was the first of four supernatural events surrounding Jesus's death. The other three are the temple curtain being torn, the earthquake, and the dead raised (vv. 51-52). Matthew's inference is that the **darkness** was a sign of God's displeasure. It was reminiscent of the darkness in Egypt during the first deliverance of God's people (Ex. 10:22-23). This darkness covered **the whole land**. Whether this referred to the local region or a worldwide darkness cannot be determined.

Matthew makes no mention of when the crucifixion began. Based on information from Mark 15:25, it was probably at the third hour of the day, or nine in the morning. Verse 46 narrates the final hour or so of Jesus's life. While the other Gospels record more final words of Jesus, Matthew records only one. In a loud voice, He cried out in Aramaic these words taken from Psalm 22:1: **Elí, Elí, lemá sabachtháni**. This was a cry of despair that God had forsaken Him. Translated, this cry meant **my God, my God, why have you abandoned me?** This cry is at the same time a poignant plea and a strange declaration.

How could it be that God abandoned Jesus? God is holy and cannot look on sin. He turned away from Jesus bearing the sin of all the world and of all time on the cross. This is a deep look at the extreme seriousness of sin and its ultimate results. Not only does sin separate us from God (Isa. 59:2), but sin also separated God the Father from God the Son.

VERSES 47-49

Jesus's words were misunderstood by some surrounding the cross. When He called out *Eli*, He was speaking of God. But some at the cross thought He was calling out for **Elijah** the prophet. Based on the prophecy in Malachi 4:5 that Elijah would return before the day of the Lord, some thought Jesus was calling for Elijah to rescue Him.

In response, someone again offered Him vinegar or cheap wine that served to quench thirst and lessen the pain. Jesus had refused the drink earlier (v. 34). The sour wine offered at the beginning of the crucifixion was mixed with some type of narcotic to ease the pain of the cross. Matthew called this additive "gall" or "bile." Mark called it "myrrh," while Luke and John speak only of "sour wine." Whether this was the same wine offered in verse 48 is not known. Soldiers often had a supply of sour wine for their own re-hydration. This may be what was offered to Jesus. This entire incident echoes the words of messianic Psalm 69:21: "Instead, they gave me gall for my food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink."



How does Jesus's cry on the cross point to the greatness of our sin?

Jesus did not die with a whimper.

SON OF GOD (MATT. 27:50-54)

⁵⁰ But Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and gave up his spirit. ⁵¹ Suddenly, the curtain of the sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom, the earth quaked, and the rocks were split. ⁵² The tombs were also opened and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. ⁵³ And they came out of the tombs after his resurrection, entered the holy city, and appeared to many. ⁵⁴ When the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and the things that had happened, they were terrified and said, “Truly this man was the Son of God!”

VERSES 50-51

Once again, Jesus cried out with a ***loud voice*** (also in v. 46). Jesus did not die with a whimper. Most who were crucified would grow weaker with their voices barely audible, but Jesus ***cried out*** loudly. He was not defeated but in full control of His senses. His task was complete. John's Gospel indicates what Jesus cried out: “It is finished” (John 19:30).

With that cry, Jesus ***gave up his spirit***. This statement parallels Jesus's words from Luke 23:46: “Father, into your hands I entrust my spirit.” (See Ps. 31:5.) When the spiritual battle was complete—the sins of the world were atoned for—Jesus voluntarily gave up His spirit to His Father. “No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own” (John 10:18).

The word ***suddenly*** in verse 51 translates a phrase meaning “and behold, look.” The second phenomenal act of God while Jesus was on the cross was the tearing of ***the curtain of the sanctuary***. This occurred during Passover when the temple was filled with many thousands of worshipers. Dating back to the construction of the tabernacle during the exodus from Egypt, this curtain separated

the holy place from the holy of holies and was a symbol of separation (Ex. 26:31-33). The curtain in Herod's temple was reportedly almost twenty-one inches thick. For such a curtain to be split from **top to bottom** could only be an act of God. Symbolically, the barrier between Holy God and unholy humanity was removed by the death of Jesus. The way was now open for all to approach God (Heb. 4:16).

Coinciding with the curtain being torn in two was a violent earthquake. This earthquake evidently was the force behind another supernatural occurrence at the time of Jesus's death, the opening of the graves of a select group of people.

The barrier between Holy God and unholy humanity was removed by the death of Jesus.

VERSES 52-53

Matthew alone recorded this supernatural event. Interpreters are divided on exactly what occurred. Obviously, the earthquake **opened** the **tombs** of a select group of God's people who had died. The issue concerns the timing of when these people came forth from their tombs. Paul spoke of Jesus being the firstfruits of all who have died (1 Cor. 15:20). For these **saints** to come from their graves and appear to people *before* Jesus's resurrection would contradict Paul's statement. These verses indicate that while the tombs were opened during the earthquake, these saints did not come from their tombs until **after** Jesus's **resurrection**. They then **appeared** in Jerusalem. While Matthew doesn't tell us what happened to these people, we can only speculate that eventually they were taken to heaven.

Perhaps a larger question about this event is the question, why? What was significant about a select few being raised because of the death of Jesus? Again, we can only surmise. Sin ultimately is the thing that brought death into the world. The power of sin and death were broken through the crucifixion of Jesus. Had God not limited such resurrections, might all those enchained by death have risen as well? That is a testimony to the power of the cross and the resurrection!



KEY DOCTRINE: *Salvation*

Faith is the acceptance of Jesus Christ and commitment of the entire personality to Him as Lord and Savior. (See John 1:12-13; Titus 2:14.)

VERSE 54

Matthew focused next on several witnesses around the cross, specifically a Roman **centurion and those with him**. A centurion was a commander of one hundred soldiers. He, and others with him, were **keeping watch** over the entire proceedings. They were eyewitnesses to the **things that had happened**. This would have included the darkness, the manner of Jesus's death, and the earthquake. It is possible that word about the torn temple curtain had already begun to spread throughout Jerusalem. All these events pointed to the truth that Jesus was **the Son of God**.



What evidence from the day's events might be used to help others recognize that Jesus was the Son of God?



BIBLE SKILL: *Examine an Old Testament passage to better understand a New Testament truth.*

Of Jesus's seven cries from the cross, the only one Matthew recorded was Jesus's quote from Psalm 22:1. Psalm 22 is a messianic psalm that predicted much of what Jesus suffered on the cross. Read and reflect on Psalm 22. Why are these messianic prophecies so important today? Use what you learned from Psalm 22 as a cross reference for deeper study into Matthew 27:33-50; Mark 15:22-37; Luke 23:33-48; and John 19:17-37.

APPLY THE TEXT

- + Jesus's willingness to endure the shame and humiliation of crucifixion leads us to humble surrender and praise.
- + We can be confident in knowing that Jesus's death was part of God's redemptive plan.
- + The crucifixion of Jesus calls for the response of faith.



As a group, make a list of things people do to try to get into heaven. Why is each one a dead end? How do the events that occurred as Jesus was on the cross validate that all the work required for salvation has already been accomplished?



What can you personally take away from the account of Jesus's death on the cross? How should that impact your life every day? Are there truths that you discovered that you should share with someone else?

Memorize Matthew 27:50-51.

Prayer Needs

MATTHEW 14–28

Turning points are key to any story. A character moving in one direction suddenly transitions to a new path. Overcoming obstacles, the hero wins in the end. Matthew 14–28 represents a turning point in the life and ministry of Jesus. After preaching and healing in Galilee, Christ turned His face toward Jerusalem. His steps ultimately took Him to a cross—and an empty tomb. As believers, we benefit from this turning point. Through His example, we learn how to face our fears, overcome opposition, sacrifice for others, and embrace the hope that only He provides. By studying Matthew 14–28, we gain a better understanding of what it means to live out our faith each day—and how we can move forward to make disciples of all nations.

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