

# 25 Days

A Journey Through  
Matthew

By Kory Cunningham



# Genealogy

Matthew 1:1 ***“The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.”***

There are a variety of creative ways to grab a reader’s attention to keep him or her reading more. A genealogy is not usually one of those. So why does Matthew begin his gospel with a genealogy? He does so because he is connecting the person of Jesus to the giant story God has been telling for thousands of years, and here’s how he does it.

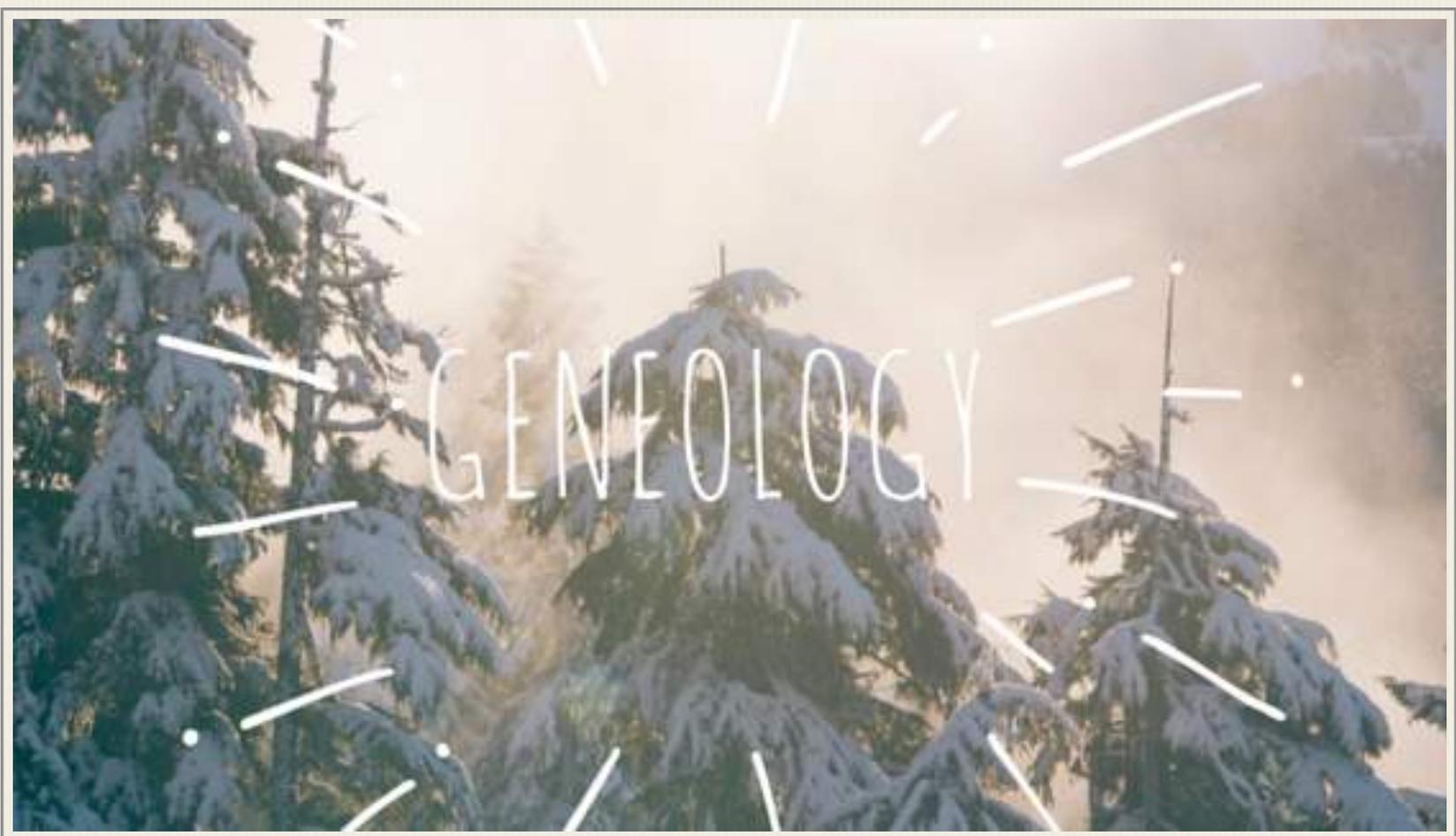
Right after the fall of man, God initiates a rescue mission through a series of promises, and two key players to receive promises were Abraham and David. God first promised Abraham that he would make him into a blessed nation, and through him all the people of the world would be blessed (Genesis 12:1-3). Then years later, God promised David, a descend of Abraham, that he would have a son who would reign forever as God’s King (2 Samuel 7:12-15).

So through Abraham, God promised to bless the nations, and through David, God promised to send a forever King.

Now read first line of Matthew again: “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.”

Matthew begins his gospel proclaiming Jesus as Abraham’s Son who has come to bless the nations, and Jesus as David’s Son who has come to rule and reign over God’s Kingdom Forever.

I guess starting with a genealogy wasn’t such a bad idea after all.





# Now the Birth of Jesus

What's the big deal about Jesus? How did a carpenter's son from the small town of Nazareth, become the largest figure in human history?

Every year secularized America tries to weigh in on how Jesus of Nazareth became, and still is the icon of the “holiday season” (just notice the magazine rack), even though He never traveled more than a hundred miles from his hometown, never wrote a book, never married, never bought a house, and died a violent criminal's death.

Was it His way with words, kind heart, revolutionary spirit, or white robe and perfectly manicured beard? No, it was none of those, it was much more. Jesus is God.

Matthew 1:18 ***“Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way.”***

**1) Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit** (Matthew 1:20).

Jesus had a biological mother (Mary) but no biological father. Jesus was not conceived by sperm and egg like every other human being on the planet. Instead He was conceived by a miracle of the Holy Spirit. Through the egg and DNA of Mary, Jesus became fully human. Through the absent of sperm, Jesus remained fully Divine. Joseph was not Jesus' biological father, because God was His father; and the baby crying in the manger was both fully God and fully man.

## **2) According to prophecy (1:23).**

Jesus' miraculous birth didn't just happen, it happened just as it was foretold 700 years prior. Isaiah predicted a virgin would give birth to a son, and Matthew records Mary as that virgin and Jesus as that son.

## **3) God with us (1:23).**

His name (identity) is Immanuel, which means God with us. The baby in Mary's arms, is very God from very God, who came to dwell with us!

## **4) To save us from our sins (1:21).**

Here is the heart and purpose for why Jesus came that first Christmas morning. He came to save us from our sins. He lived the perfect life we could not, and died the death we all deserve, so that in Him we might have life. That's why this carpenter from Nazareth is such a big deal.



# From You Shall Come A Ruler

This weekend I was pushing a stroller through blizzard like temperature towards the bright lights at the Opryland Hotel in Nashville. As we neared the scene, I began to hear the sound of the Christmas Story being read by what seemed like the voice of an archangel. The lights, statues, and sounds took my breath, and for a moment, I was stilled by the glory of it all. But this was not the nativity scene, but merely a shadow, a dim picture of the actual one some two millenniums earlier.

In Bethlehem something more real, more true, and more glorious was happening. As it was written from old,

***“And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.”*** (Matthew 2:6, quoting Micah 5:2)

God had told His people that a ruler would come from Bethlehem, and this ruler would be a shepherd over God’s people. At the

birth of Jesus, Matthew proclaims Jesus to be the ruler who has come to rule over God's people.

So how will this new King be welcomed? First, we find wise men from the east following a supernatural star so they might bring Him gifts and worship Him. Next, Herod (the current king) says he wants to see the baby and worship Him as well (he really just wants to kill this new king). When the wise men find Jesus, they rejoice exceedingly, worship Him, and give him expensive gifts.

For fear of Herod (who was killing all the babies and toddlers in Bethlehem), Mary and Joseph flee to Egypt until Herod died. Matthew says this was to fulfill the prophecy from Hosea, "Out of Egypt I called my son." This is interesting because if you read the prophecy from Hosea, "son" is referring to the nation of Israel, but in Matthew, "son" is referring to one Israelite; Jesus.

Why is this? I think it is because Jesus is true Israel. Jesus is the only Israelite who kept the covenant through obedience, and received the promised blessing. And the good news for us is that in Jesus we have become true Israel as well. In Jesus we have always obeyed, and therefore we receive His blessing rather than our curse.

Therefore, Jesus is the true Son of God and in Him, we are also beloved sons. That's the good news every living nativity scene this holiday season is trying to tell, but somehow always falls short of the living, breathing, beating heart laying in a manger.



# With Whom I Am Well Pleased

Jesus is now out of the manger, walking and talking, ready to set the world on fire. But before he does, there comes a camel hair wearing, locust eating, eccentric man from the desert named John the Baptist, who Isaiah calls “a voice crying in the wilderness: prepare the way of the Lord...” John’s message is simple and clear; “Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

Of course his message and ministry caused a scene and raised some obvious questions. In answering some of those questions, John made it clear that someone mightier than him was coming, and this person would baptize not with water, but He would baptize with the Holy Spirit.

Then it happened; the one greater comes, and He asked John to baptize Him. How could this be? The one greater, the one who has no sin, was asking John to baptize Him! So John interrupts, “No! I need to be baptized by you!” And then Jesus says this, “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” So John baptized Jesus.

What’s going on here? Why does Jesus ask John to baptize Him? Matthew doesn’t really tell us why, but I believe the reason is clear: Jesus was identifying with us, sinful humanity, by His baptism. When people come to faith in Jesus, they are commanded to be baptized to iden-

tify with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection. So here, in a similar way, Jesus is first identifying with us in His baptism before He asks us to identify with Him in ours.

If you have been baptized, you remember the fanfare. Dad smiled, the congregation applauded, and grandma made you blush when she yelled, “That’s my baby!” But your moment of fanfare and glory was nothing compared to Jesus’. When Jesus came out of the water, the heavens opened up, the Holy Spirit descended on Him, and God the Father spoke these words, **“This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”** (Matthew 3:17)

You may or may not know it now, but you have been spending your whole life seeking after those words. You have spent your life seeking approval, seeking acceptance, seeking a voice to sing over you, “in you I am well pleased.” Perhaps you sought it from a parent who never gave it, or a spouse who withheld it, or a job that wasn’t able to give it. As humans, we desperately want to hear those words, and we seek various voices to sing those words over us. But somehow, no matter how many times we hear it, it never satisfies us at our deepest layer.

That’s because there is only ONE voice that can sing that phrase over us and quench the deepest longings of our soul; our Heavenly Father. And the problem is none of us have been pleasing to Him because we have all rebelled against Him. But... here is the good news: in Christ, the one who was well pleasing to the Father, you have also been well pleasing to the Father. In Christ, the Father sings the same song over you, “You are my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased!”



# Tempted to Sin

After the glorious baptism scene, water still dripping off his forehead, ***“Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.”*** (Matthew 4:1) Jesus identified with us through His baptism, and now Jesus went into the wilderness to face the power we all fell prey to; temptation.

In the very beginning of the Bible, we find Adam and Eve in a perfect garden called Eden, enjoying a perfect relationship with God. It was in this perfect garden that our first parents gave into the temptations of Satan and disobeyed God’s Word.

Now, thousands of years later, a new Adam faced the same temptation from the same evil source, but this time in a desert-wilderness, rather than in a paradise-garden. This time the temptations would be stronger, and the stakes much higher.

Three temptations from Satan are recorded by Matthew.

The first temptation deals with trust, the second deals with identity, and the third deals with power and authority.

In the last temptation, Satan offers Jesus all the kingdoms of the world if He would bow down and worship him. Of course all the kingdoms of the world had already been promised to Jesus by the Father, but here Satan was offering them to Jesus apart from the cross. Here was a non-bloody way to have the Kingdom, a real temptation for the man Jesus Christ.

But here is where Jesus diverged from the pattern that had been set by every man and woman before Him. Instead of giving into temptation, He beat it. Instead of listening to the voice of Satan, He shut him up. For Jesus resolved in His heart to trust His heavenly Father no matter what. Jesus would trust and live by every Word of God, rather than the voices of temptation screaming in His ear.

So on an empty stomach in a barren desert, Jesus resisted temptation where Adam gave in. And in His resistance of temptation, He was qualified to be the blameless Lamb of God lead to the slaughter for you and me. And by His death He could die for sin, and in His resurrection He could defeat sin. Therefore in a desert wilderness, Jesus did the one thing you could not; say “no” to temptation. But because He said “no”, if you are in Him you can also say “no”. And through Him, and in Him, you can say “yes” to God, because in Him you are more like Him than you.



# Jesus, The Prince of Tolerance?

Jesus has fled Egypt as God's true Israelite Son, undergone baptism as God's beloved Son, and resisted Satan as God's obedient Son. Now it's time for Jesus to announce a message, and here it is: ***“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”*** (Matthew 3:2).

We live a culture dominated by our version of tolerance, which basically means everyone has to agree and celebrate everyone else's beliefs and practices with the same level of virtue as their own. Of course that is not at all what tolerance means, but that is what we are sold as tolerance.

Somehow in our tolerant culture, we have made Jesus to be the prince of tolerance. Jesus is the guy who says, “I love you no matter what you think or do. Whether you're gay or straight, promiscuous or chaste, whether you follow Mohammed or me, kill kittens or give to the poor, I just want you to know I love you, I don't judge you, and just keep on doing whatever makes you happy.”

If this Jesus sounds nice to you, you might need to buckle up as we continue through Matthew. Because here in chapter four, the first word out of Jesus' mouth is "repent". How about that for tolerant Jesus? He walks up to a crowd of people and basically says, "You're wrong. You're all wrong. And you all need to repent of being wrong because the Kingdom of Heaven is here."

The basic message of the gospel is directly opposed to our new version of tolerance. Instead of everyone is right in their own way, Jesus says everyone is wrong and needs to repent, for He is the right way. But what are we supposed to turn to? Well the next red letters are these, "Follow Me".

And now we have summarized the gospel, the good news of Jesus. It begins with a call to repent, a call to turn away from your beliefs, actions, lifestyle, and well...your sin. And it's a call to turn to the Lord Jesus Christ by faith. The gospel is a leaving and a coming event. You leave your sin and come to the Savior. You leave your life and come to Him who is Life. You leave your treasures and come to Him, the Treasure.

So if you're looking for Jesus this Christmas, you might want to start by turning around.



# Greater Righteousness

***“And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying...”*** (Matthew 5:2), and these sayings became the most famous sermon ever preached. The Sermon on the Mount.

And from this mount comes one of the most self-defeating verses in the Bible, “For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:20) Did you hear that? Jesus says unless your righteousness trumps the scribes and Pharisees, there is no hope for you. And trust me, your righteousness doesn’t even come close to their’s. Therefore, if they weren’t good enough, neither are you.

In fact, if you read the whole sermon with honestly you come away admitting, “I cannot do, what Christ commands me to do.” And that my friend is the most self-defeating and

self-liberating message in the whole world. Because only when you see that you cannot keep this radical Kingdom ethic, will you turn your eyes to see the only one who can, and the only one who did.

So how good must you be to “see the Kingdom of heaven?” Perfect. And if you are honest with yourself, you realize you are far from perfect. So what hope is there? The hope is this; the one who demands perfection, is the one who earned perfection for you, and gives it to you by faith in Him. Therefore, coming to Jesus is admitting you can’t keep the ethical requirements of the Kingdom, but He did, and in Him so have you.

And now that you are in Him, you have a new heart that beats to the rhythm of the new Kingdom ethic. So now you are salt and light. You are persecuted blessed ones, who turn cheeks and suffer wrong so that others can see right. For you are the guilty ones, who have nailed your guilt to the cross and buried it in the tomb, and three days later received righteousness forevermore. And now you have a righteousness that makes the Pharisees seem demonic, for you have the very righteousness of Christ.



# Preaching As God

***“And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.”*** (Matthew 7:28-29).

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus does something only God could do. He speaks as one who has authority over the Law of God. He is not an interpreter of the law (a scribe or Pharisee) but a definer and giver of the law.

Throughout the sermon Jesus says this phrase, “You have heard that it was said...(then quotes an OT law), but I say to you... (then adds to the OT law).” Did you catch that? Jesus brought up an OT law, a law given to Moses from the very mouth of God on Mount Sini, and then Jesus adds to the law by the phrase “but I say to you...”

If you read between the lines it is clear what Jesus is doing. He is claiming to have the same authority on this mount, as Yahweh did on the other mount generations be-

fore. To any scribe or Pharisee listening to this message, their hands are filling with rocks because this man is speaking as God.

And that is exactly what Jesus is doing. He is speaking with the same authority as God, because He is God. That's why the Sermon on the Mount is not just a good sermon, it's a God sermon. And the message is clear, God is not simply concerned about His people acting right, He is concerned about them being right. And that doesn't come through keeping all the rules giving on the first mount, it comes by receiving a new heart from the man standing on the second mount.



# Word with Authority

After most sermons, I'm ready for a nap. Jesus ends His Sermon on the Mount to go to work on sickness, sin, storms, and demons at the bottom. In just one chapter, Matthew records Jesus healing a leper and a paralytic, rebuking a fever, a storm, and His disciples, and then casting out two demons from men into pigs. By his words on the mount Jesus spoke like the Messiah, and now at the foot of the mount, Jesus showed himself to be the Messiah by his mighty deeds.

In this chapter, Jesus meets another man who had authority; a centurion. This man had authority over 100 men in the Roman army. He was the guy with the whistle who spits when he yells at his platoon "Down... Up... Down..." as their bodies follow the commands of his cracking voice. This was a man who knew authority, and knew when he saw it.

And it was this man who came to Jesus asking for a miracle. He had a paralyzed servant at home and Jesus volunteered to come and heal him. But then the centurion protested the thought of Jesus coming to his house, because he was not wor-

thy enough to have Jesus come under his roof. So he asks Jesus to merely speak a word, and his servant would be healed.

This man understood that just as he had command over his soldier's arms and legs by words that passed through his lips, Jesus had command over all things by the words that passed through his. And Jesus marveled at this man's faith. In fact, Jesus said this man had more faith than anyone he had encountered in all of Israel, and that the Kingdom was going to be made up of people with such faith, while many Israelites would find themselves on the wrong side of the door.

Here we observe that when Jesus speaks, things happen. Spots disappear; stiff bones move, violent storms calm, and demons sink to the bottom of the sea wrapped in bacon. And yet when his voice comes reverberating towards us through his word, it is often met with resistance, or even flat out disobedience. For in this kingdom his voice can be ignored, laughed at, or even mocked. But this is not so in the Kingdom to come. In that Kingdom, all things will hear his voice and drop to one knee and bow before him as LORD. For in that Kingdom he will have all authority over all things, including you and me.



# “But Jesus Never Claimed to be God!”

“But Jesus never claimed to be God.” If you haven’t heard that, you haven’t ventured very far from home. This popular statement expresses a belief that Jesus never actually claimed to God, never thought himself to be God, nor acted as God. So let’s take this claim for a spin through Matthew chapter 9.

In this chapter, Jesus causes a scene by healing a paralyzed man. Obviously anyone who tells a paralyzed man to walk, and he obeys, would cause a scene. But this event causes a scene for a different reason. Instead of just healing the man, Jesus “said to the paralytic, **“Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven.”** (Matthew 9:2)

And the religious leaders say to one another, “This man is blaspheming.” Blasphemy was a serious crime to the Israelites, because it meant you were profaning the name of God, or in this case, making yourself to be God, by doing something only God could do. So by saying, “Your sins are forgiven,” Jesus is claiming Deity, because only God had authority to say that.

You and I can forgive our friends when they sin against us, but we cannot forgive their sins in general. Jesus didn't forgive this paralytic of a sin done against him; Jesus forgave this man of his sins against God. Of course only God has authority to do that, so Jesus is either God, misunderstood, or a crazy man.

We can quickly rule out the possibility of him being misunderstood because he pushes the issue even farther with the Pharisees saying, "Why do you think evil in your hearts? For which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise and walk'? If Jesus had been misunderstood, he could have easily cleared the air by saying, "Oh wait! You guys think I am making myself out to be God. No, no, no...you must have misunderstood; I would never do that!"

But Jesus didn't say that. Instead he proved he had authority to forgive (like God) by telling this man to get up and walk. The Pharisees knew forgiveness of sins belonged only to God. Jesus knew forgiveness of sins belonged only to God. And yet Jesus forgave this man's sins. In case you didn't hear that, Jesus just shouted, "I am God!" louder than mere eardrums could take in. So now we are left with two choices about Jesus; either he is God, or a crazy man. There is no third option (C.S. Lewis).



# Unconventional Messiah

While John was in prison he heard about all the deeds Jesus was doing, so he sent his disciples to ask him, ***“Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?”*** (Matt. 11:3).

John was asking Jesus to say for certain if he was or was not the Messiah; giving Jesus an opportunity to either deny or declare himself to be God’s promised One from old.

And Jesus answered, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by” (Matt. 11:4-5). In this prophetically packed statement, Jesus references several prophecies from Isaiah (Isaiah 26:18-19, 29:18, 35:5-6, 53:4, 61:1), all declaring what the Messiah would do when he comes; all of which Jesus was now doing.

In other words, Jesus answered, “Yes”. Not with a nod of his head, but with proof by his hands and feet. Jesus was the

anointed one who had brought the “Day of Lord” to the people of God, but perhaps a different Day than they had expected. So Jesus added, “And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.”

All Israel longed for the Messiah to come and bring the Day of the Lord. A day when God would defeat His enemies (those pig eating Romans) and restore the land, prosperity, and Kingdom to Israel. And here is Jesus doing none of that. Instead, Jesus is healing the blind, mute, lame, and talking to the poor about good news. Instead of battling their Roman enemy, Jesus is battling another enemy, a bigger enemy; not pagan rebels but the root of rebellion itself: sin.

And if they were offended by him now, just wait a few chapters when their Messiah King is stapled to a tree by those Romans, whom he was suppose to defeat, but instead died for.

Most of the people then, and most today, saw the cross of Christ as an offense, and those who cursed it, in reality were cursed. But there were a few, a blessed few, who saw the cross and had no offense towards the Messiah who hung there. For they understood the Messiah to be the Savior, and the cross to be the curse that brought them their greatest blessing.



# The Greater Temple

***“I tell you, something greater than the temple is here.”*** (Matthew 12:7)

What an odd and explosive statement from Jesus’ lips. This happens in the middle of Jesus getting in trouble with the Pharisees once again over the actions of his disciples. They had plucked grain from a field and ate it, all on the Sabbath. And according to the law, that was a big no-no.

So Jesus uses the example of David to show he did a similar thing and God was okay with it, but then he went several steps further by claiming Himself to be Lord over the Sabbath (God) and saying that he is greater than the temple. So what does it mean that Jesus is greater than the temple?

In the days of Adam and Eve, God’s presence was fully and completely with his people. Then after Adam and Eve sinned, God removed his presence from his people and made them leave his perfect place. Next, we find God giving a man named Moses instructions for building a huge tent

known as the tabernacle, so that God could once again share his presence with his people.

Years later, the tabernacle got replaced with a temple, a new permanent place for God to dwell with his people. If you were one of the people of God, you knew where the presence of God was. It was in the temple, behind the veil, in the Holy of Holies. Or at least that's what you were told. After all, you could not go look for yourself, because if you saw, you would die.

So the temple is the place where the presence of God meets his people. It's the place on earth where the very footstool of heaven touches the dust of the earth. It's the place you could walk to, touch, and say, in here is the presence of God. And Jesus is claiming something greater than that sacred building is here; Him.

In the person of Jesus we find the new temple; the new manifestation of God's presence among his people. Though this time, his presence is not houses in brick and mortar, but in flesh and blood. This time the eternal Word, who was with God and is God, became flesh and dwelt among us. And this time we don't have to wonder if he is there; we can clearly see that he is here.



# The Greatest Treasure

We all have that one verse that changed everything for us. It's that one verse that caused us to see the whole thing differently. It's that one verse that passes through your teeth without hesitation every time someone asks you your favorite verse. Well, here's mine:

Matthew 13:44 ***“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.”***

In this chapter Jesus begins to teach the people in parables, which are short stories comparing something to the kingdom of God. In my favorite little two line parable, Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven, or you could say he compares himself, to treasure.

Treasure is value. Just put yourself in the man's shoes. You happen to take a walk through a field and discover a box in the middle of the field. You open the box to find treasure; gold, diamonds, silver, and money. Lots of money!

You immediately calculate the treasure to be worth millions, if not billions. Next, you notice a sign in the field that says, “For Sale by Owner”, with a phone number attached to it.

Without hesitation, you dial the number and inquire about the price. The voice on the other line says, “\$150,000”. You know this is way too overpriced for this two acre lot, but immediately you shout, “Sold!”, and hang up the phone. Next, you find yourself running as fast you can to your house, with your garage and your cars, TV, and all your stuff. At that moment, you take inventory of all your assets, all your money in the bank, all your retirement and stock options, which all adds up to about \$150,000.

Then it hits you. In order to buy the field, you must first sell **EVE-  
RYTHING** you have. And then a smile begins to fill your face, and you dial the realtor. As news begins to circle around town, people begin to ask questions, “Why in the world are you selling all your stuff? Have you lost your mind? Are you crazy?” But you just keep smiling.

You see, the point of the parable is not how much the field costs; it’s about how much the field is worth. Because the worth of the field outweighs the cost of the field a trillion to one. And the same is true with the gospel. As Jesus demands that we repent, sell, even give up our very lives in order to gain Him, Jesus gives us something a trillion times better. He gives us Treasure. He gives us Himself. And for those who have gained Him, the smile is still stuck to your face when you think about all you have gave up, versus all you have gained.



# Jesus is Worshiped

Chapter 14 is jam packed with action. John gets his head cut off, Jesus feeds 5,000+ people with a few fish and bread, walks on water, and then heals many who simply touch his clothing. But there is one thing done to Jesus that should catch our attention. Jesus is worshiped.

It happens right after Jesus walked on water, rescued Peter, and then calmed the wind beating against the boat. We read, **“And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, ‘truly, you are the Son of God.’”** (Matthew 14:33). If you grew up in Sunday School and spent your summers hopping from VBS to VBS, you may be asking, “What’s the big deal with them worshiping Jesus?” Here’s the big deal.

Jesus had already refused to worshiping Satan in the desert by quoting the law, “You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve (Deut 6:13).” Jesus knew worship belonged to God only. The Jewish disciples in the

boat knew worship belong to God only. And here Jesus is being worshiped and accepting worship.

There are a few cases in the Bible where folks give improper worship to others, but they are always quickly and sternly rebuked. In Revelation 19, John begins to worship an angel and the angel rebukes him and says, “Don’t do that! Worship God!” In Acts 14, some of the apostles are worshiped by the crowds, and they tear their clothes and beg them to stop because they are mere men.

But in the boat Jesus makes no protest, because He is exactly who they say He is, “the Son of God.” And as the Son of God He deserves the worship that is reserved only for God, because He is very God of very God.



# Hearts vs. Hands

If you can believe it, Jesus gets into another squabble with the religious leaders over the actions of his band of misfits. This time his disciples did the unthinkable, they forgot to wash their hands before they ate. Yikes! Call the police. These guys are clearly out of control. We may chuckle at this because we can't imagine hand washing, or lack of hand washing, would raise eyebrows. But the leaders of Israel saw this as something more, a rebellion against tradition.

Hand washing was a tradition that had been passed down, a tradition meant to help keep God's people clean before Him. Hand washing kept people from defiling themselves by what passed from their hands, through their mouth, and down to their stomachs. Keeping your hands washed meant keeping sin out, where it belonged.

And instead of rebuking his disciples for not washing their hands, Jesus turns the whole thing on its head and rebukes the hand washers. ***“Hear and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a person.”*** (Matthew 15:1-11). The hand washers were washing their hands to keep from being defiled, but Jesus tells them to stop worry about their hands, and instead start worry about their hearts.

***“For out of the heart comes evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, lying, slander;”*** says Jesus (Matthew 15:18). You see the Pharisees had it backwards. They thought sin was a problem outside them, a problem that could be kept away from them, a problem that could be cured by washing and avoiding sin and sinners. But Jesus stares into their eyes and looks deep into their souls, and exposes their real problem. Their hearts.

So while the pharisees and scribes were worried about the disciples defiling themselves, they were blind to the fact that they themselves were defiled. And their defilement could not be cured by soap and water, but only by the blood of the lamb who was standing in front of them.



# Who Do You Say That I Am?

Questions can be powerful, and the answers to some questions can mean either life or death. Have you ever been asked a question that really mattered? A question that, depending on your answer, you knew would have dramatic consequences? In Matthew 16, the disciples were asked such a question, and the world stood still as they processed their response.

Before asking the question, Jesus asked a general question, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” (Matthew 16:13) And in response his disciples repeated the various opinions circling around about Him. “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

Then Jesus moved from general to personal and added, **“But who do you say that I am?”** And here we have the question of all questions. A question for the disciples to ex-

press their understanding about the man they were following, and then to see if their understanding was right or wrong.

I can imagine the disciples standing before Jesus with sweaty foreheads, looking at each other thinking, “Who is going to answer? I want to say he is..., but what if I’m wrong? What if he isn’t?” And then the long silence is broken and these words come out of Peter’s mouth, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

And the next few seconds must have felt like an eternity to Peter. “Did I answer right? He is the Christ, right? Oh, I really hope He is!” And then these words come from Jesus’ mouth, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah!” And with that, a huge sigh of relief from Peter.

And since that day until now, the same question has been posed to every human being who hears the news about Jesus of Nazareth, “Who do you say that I am?” And for all those who answer correctly, who affirm He is the Messiah, they should not pat themselves on the back but rather give thanks to God. “For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.” You see, Peter didn’t just know the right answer; he had been given the right revelation. So don’t rejoice in your knowing this Christmas, rejoice in your Father’s giving.



# Gain Through Loss

After Peter confesses that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, Jesus introduces an unusual object into the conversation. He introduces an object that was used in the ancient world to execute violent criminals in the most excruciating way. This object was a curse to the Jews, and uncivilized for polite Roman conversation. This object was the cross. And not just his cross, but also yours and mine.

Matthew 16:21 says, ***“From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”*** Notice the urgency in his statement. Jesus doesn’t tell his men he is planning to go, or willing to go, but that he must go to Jerusalem and face the cross; and after the cross, rise again.

Of course this is scandalous coming out of the Messiah’s mouth. That’s why Peter objects and rebukes Jesus, telling

him he will certainly not die, for the Messiah is supposed to live and rule. And then after blessing Peter for getting his confession so right, Jesus now calls him Satan because here he gets it so wrong. Here he is trying to stand in the way of God's redemptive plan, a plan that had a cross as its centerpiece.

But Jesus doesn't stop his cross talk here. But he continues it by moving from his cross to our cross. This is what he says, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?"

The cross was an instrument of death, their version of lethal injection, though much more bloody and barbaric. And for the triune God to welcome us back into fellowship, Jesus had to climb a hill with a cross upon his back; a cross where he would lose his life so that we might find ours. And in a similar way, all those who come after him, also come by way of a cross. For every disciple of Christ walks through death, gives up life, and loses all for the sake of finding true life. Indeed, we forsake the whole world in order follow the One who created it.



# Transfiguration

I can still remember being awestruck standing in St. Peter's Basilica gazing at this reproduction of a painting by Raphael. It was one of those moments where I had to remind myself the moment was real, because for a moment I was swept away to another place, where beauty seemed more beautiful and reality seemed more real.

It's impossible to see anything before seeing Jesus when you glance at this painting. His beauty, and the beauty around him, is spellbinding. But once your eyes begin to notice there are other objects to see, you notice Moses and Elijah beside Jesus, and Peter, James, and John at below him. And then you begin to under-



stand that this painting is bringing to life the transfiguration of Jesus, as recorded in Matthew's gospel (Matthew 17:1-22).

And then your eyes begin to notice something. A contrast between the glory of what's happening at the top of the mountain, and the horror that is happening below. You notice that the top is full of light, and the bottom is filled with darkness. The top is marked with peace and serenity, while the bottom is full of demons and shadows. And this is exactly how Matthew records it in his gospel.

You see, right after Jesus reveals his glory at the top of the mountain to his inner circle; he then walks them down the mountain into the mess of ministry. And there at the foot of the mountain where they had just beheld his glory, they encounter a man with a demon possessed son, whom the disciples were unable to help for lack of faith.

And here we find the glory of Christ meeting the mess of this world, and those following Jesus experiencing both. You see, in the midst of the mess, the disciples needed to see greater glory. And after seeing his glory, the disciples needed to go back into the mess, to minister in the mess, for the sake of his glory. So as you stare at the beauty of this painting, soak up the glory at the top, because Jesus wants his eternal glory to sustain you as you minister in the temporary mess below.



# Jesus on Marriage

Marriage is a hot topic today, but truth be told, it has always been a hot topic. In Matthew 19, we find Jesus both rebuking cultural views of marriage, and defining true marriage. In the text, the Pharisees ask Jesus if it's ok to divorce for any cause (a common practice), and by his answer, Jesus speaks clearly and frankly to a host of marriage issues we face today.

Here is what Jesus says, *“Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.”* (Matthew 19:4-6).

To give the short answer, Jesus rejects no fault divorce because men have no right to tear apart something that God has joined together. But in this text, Jesus not only speaks directly to no-fault divorce, but he also speaks indirectly to homosexuality, so called “gay-marriage”, and the transgender movement. And he does so by affirming what is right and true about sexuality and marriage.

Jesus begins where all understandings about sex and marriage must begin; he begins with gender. Jesus declares that God created gender (male and female) on purpose, and with purpose. In contrast to the transgender movement where gender is supposedly chosen based on personal feelings and experience, Jesus says gender is a reality created by God, to be received from God, and then lived out to the glory of God.

So why did God create humans as sexual gendered beings? He did so for the purpose of marriage. So that boys would leave homes and marry girls, and girls would leave homes and marry boys (Unless called to singleness, as Jesus discusses in verses 11-12). And the reason boys are to marry girls and girls are to marry boys, is because they are both different, and in their differences they can become “one-flesh”. And this one-flesh (sexual) relationship is at the heart of what marriage is, and what marriage is for.

I’m sure you have heard that Jesus never spoke on the issue of homosexuality, so called gay-marriage, or transgender issues. But that’s not really true. Because speaking clearly and frankly about the truth, is at the same time exposing all the competing lies. And after defining and defending marriage here, a few chapters later, Jesus uses marriage to point to something that all brides and grooms are meant to point to; the great wedding feast that is to come, the wedding feast of the Son (Matthew 22:1-14). And in that wedding feast, Jesus Christ is the groom and we are his bride, and that’s why the meaning of marriage matters so much.



# True Greatness

What does it mean to be great? What does true greatness look like? For one mom in Matthew's Gospel, the answer was pretty simple. Greatness for her was one of her sons sitting on the right side of Jesus in his kingdom, and the other sitting on his left. She knew Jesus was the King of a new kingdom, and greatness must be found in the seats of power beside him; so that's where she asked for her boys to sit. For in that place, they would be great.

In light of this request for greatness, Jesus defines true greatness as self-sacrifice towards others, rather than self-promotion and power. Here are his words, *“But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the **Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.**”* (Matthew 20:25-28)

Their cultural version of greatness (and ours) meant being the boss and having others serve you for the sake of your

well being. But Jesus defines Kingdom greatness as just the opposite. Instead of seeking to boss, greatness seeks to serve. Instead of seeking your well being, greatness seeks the well being of those around you. This is true greatness, and this is exactly what the greatest One who ever lived did. Jesus came not to be served but to serve, and that meant bleeding on a cross to serve you and me.

Therefore go and be great, and do so for the sake of someone else.



# Who's in the Kingdom?

One of the most shocking developments in the Kingdom, is about who is in the kingdom and who is not. In a few short parables in Jerusalem, Jesus reveals that those who assumed they were in, were actually out, and those who assume they were out, found themselves welcomed in. Jesus says it like this, ***“Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you.”*** (Matt. 21:31)

Jesus spoke these words to the Pharisees, the “good guys”, the ones who had always obeyed God and followed His commands. And with three parables Jesus proved his point, the third parable detailing a wedding feast. In this wedding feast the invited guests were too busy to come to the banquet the king had thrown for his son. So in anger the king tells his servants to go through the streets and invite people who were not invited, and of course they gladly came to what would have been the greatest event of their lives!

Here is the point. Israel had been invited long ago to the wedding feast of the son, but now the son was standing in

front of them and they could care less about him or his banquet. So the invitation was extended to those who would come, to those who would care, to those who found Jesus and his banquet to be the best news in the whole world!

The Pharisees were offended and shocked at the thought that they were excluded from the kingdom, while sinners were let in. But if only the Pharisees could have seen that they too were invited to come, but they had to come the same way the prostitutes and tax collectors did, as sinners in deep need of a Savior. For the feast of the Kingdom is only for ex-sinners who have been made spotless brides through the blood of the King, who is also the groom.



# The *Already, Not Yet* Kingdom

Matthew proclaims Jesus as the long awaited Messiah, who is the sovereign King over God's kingdom, that is defeating the current kingdom of darkness, beginning in Bethlehem and culminating in a future New Jerusalem. So if the King has come and the Kingdom is here, then why isn't the world at peace?

First, its important to understand what theologians call the "already, not yet" aspect of Kingdom, meaning the Kingdom has come, but it is also still coming. When the Word became flesh in the virgins womb, the Kingdom began on planet earth and has been growing ever since through the spreading of the gospel to all nations.

In chapter 24-25, Jesus talks about his second coming, where the Kingdom will be fully realized and Jesus will stand as the sovereign King of the universe. It's at this second coming that justice will be served, all wrongs will be

made right, and only peace and righteousness will reign forevermore.

Here's what Jesus says, ***“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.”*** (Matt. 25:31-32). And then Jesus will say to the goats, ***“Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”*** (Matthew 25:41).

So the reasons we still have wars, slaughtering of children, computer hacking, school shootings, cancer, child abuse, spouse abuse, sex trafficking, fornication, adultery, homosexuality, antibiotics, children hospitals, prisons, and funeral homes; is because the Kingdom of Christ has invaded the kingdom of this world, but not yet defeated it. But when the King comes back, this will no longer be true, because the kingdom of this world will be destroyed. And those who follow Christ will shine forevermore in His glorious new Kingdom, while those who reject the King will face rejection from him, forevermore.



# The King's Death

***“When Jesus had finished all these sayings, he said to his disciples, “You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified.” (Matthew 26:1-2)***

And here's how the next two chapters went down (26-27).

The priests plotted against Jesus. Judas sold him out. Jesus revealed he was God's true Passover lamb during supper, the bread his body and the wine his blood. Jesus prayed in the garden for another way, but not his will, but Thine. Judas betrayed with a kiss. The priest arrested him though he had an army of angels waiting his command.

The priests conducted a false trial and called for false witnesses. They asked Jesus if he was God's Son and he confirmed it and told them he would return in glory. They beat him. Pilate questioned him. The crowd chose a criminal over him. Simon carried his cross to Golgotha, though in reality Jesus carried his.

They crucified him. The crowd mocked him as he died in their place for their sins. The Father forsook him because on the cross he became our sin. Then Jesus gave up his spirit and the king died.

And at his death the temple veil was torn from top to bottom and dead bodies burst from graves in resurrection. For the death of the king opened up our way back to God, and his death made it possible for us to escape ours, and have a resurrection to life forevermore.



# Separated no More

***“And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split.”*** (Matthew 27:51).

For centuries God’s people were kept out of His present by a curtain. A curtain that hung between the Holy of Holies and the people in the temple. The curtain was a constant reminder that God was not approachable by sinful man. Man on one side, God on the other.

But at the resurrection of Jesus something happen inside the temple. That curtain that stood between God and man was torn in two, from top to bottom. Meaning this was not man’s doing, but God’s. And this curtain now laying in pieces on the temple floor shouted for all to hear, the presence of God is now open to man, through the death of Jesus. Because Jesus died for our sins, so we could be made clean, and walk back into the presence of God. Never to be separated again.



# Christmas in the Curse

*This final devotion was written one year ago today, reflecting on how the joys of Christmas often collide with the sorrows of this world.*

“This will be a year of firsts.” I’ve heard that a lot since my grandmother passed away this past October. And so it has been. Thanksgiving was hard, but tonight will be even harder because our family will gather at Mammie’s house, but Mammie will not be there.

I was thinking through my sermon outline Sunday when my phone vibrated as I pulled into the Church parking lot. The text said a family in our church had just lost their newborn baby, who had been born premature a few weeks earlier. Tomorrow before opening presents at my in-laws house, I will preach a funeral, my wife’s grandad’s funeral.

And today is the day everyone says “Merry Christmas” and sings “Joy to the World”. And today I will join those voices and sing those choruses. Because today is a merry

day, not just because a baby once laid in a manger, but because that same God/man doesn't still lay in a grave.

“But the angel said to the women, ***“Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay.”*** (Matthew 28:5-6).

So today I will rejoice. Because though my heart aches in the absence of my own grandmother, my wife's grandad, and the parents who have no baby to hold this Christmas; I have hope.

I have hope because Christmas turned into Easter that first Sunday morning when Jesus rose from the dead, which was the first fruits of the resurrection to come. And in that resurrection, I will rejoice again, with Mammie, Papaw Bud, and two parents reunited with their son.

Merry Christmas.



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