

YOUR STORY

- ▶ **God kept His promises to Abraham and David to one day send a Savior. What does God's faithfulness in keeping these promises say about God's character?**
- ▶ **The reality of Jesus' coming changed the lives of Matthew's readers. How does that reality change the course of your own life?**
- ▶ **Like the Jews during their time in captivity, have you ever felt like you were in a spiritual exile? How does the gospel of Christ deliver you from that?**
- ▶ **How has this session challenged you in your own understanding of Jesus' birth?**

YOUR MISSION

Head

Contained in this first genealogical block are the names of four women. Surprisingly, Sarah (Abraham's wife), Rebekah (Isaac's wife), and Rachel (Jacob's wife) did not make the list! The first to make the list, Ruth, was a foreigner. Those that follow, Tamar and "Uriah's wife" (Bathseba), were both victims. Even Rahab, who might have been written off because she was a prostitute, gave shelter to the spies and saved their lives. What these women have in common is that they were non-Jewish women married to Jewish men. Their presence in the genealogy shines a spotlight on the promise that all nations would be blessed through Jesus.

- ▶ **What does the inclusion of these four women tell you about God's desire to bless the whole world?**
- ▶ **In what ways does God bless the world through Christians—those who have trusted in Jesus and are now part of this family tree?**

Heart

All throughout the Bible, we see a loving Father who consistently keeps His promises to His children. In fact, God keeps His promises even when His people live in disobedience to Him or doubt that He will do what He says. God's constant faithfulness should encourage believers. His consistency in remaining faithful not only means that God will always keep His word, but also that He will always work for our good and joy even when we don't deserve it.

- ▶ **How should the reality of Jesus' arrival increase your confidence in God's faithfulness?**
- ▶ **What are some areas of life where you have experienced doubt that God would come through for you? How does the Bible's testimony of God's constant faithfulness challenge those doubts?**

Hands

Jesus' arrival wasn't just for the people in the first century. And Jesus' arrival wasn't just for us—His arrival is for all people of all times. Instead of keeping the gospel of Jesus to ourselves, God calls us to proclaim Jesus as the central figure of history and the only One in whom salvation is found. We want others to know Him, and the fact that so many have never heard of Him should motivate us to go and tell others the good news of His arrival.

- ▶ **Who in your life was faithful enough to share the gospel with you for the first time?**
- ▶ **What is God's will for your life when it comes to sharing the gospel with others? What are some ways you are currently being faithful to that call?**

HIS STORY

Mary submitted to God's difficult plan

Gabriel responded, as angels often do, with poetry. The passage began with two Greek words—their most literal translation being “no fear”—often heard from the lips of angels.

The angel's poem addressed Mary's fears. He told her that God would show her favor by giving her a Son, who would be called “Yeshua” (Jesus). He would be the fulfillment of the promise God made to David and his descendants, of whom Joseph was one. He would reign over the house of Jacob forever in the kingdom that would never end. From the poverty-stricken Nazareth, an obscure town, would come the King to sit on David's eternal throne.

- ▶ **Gabriel's greeting troubled Mary. What should she have “rejoiced” over? What did the angel mean when he said she was “favored?”**

Mary magnified God for His goodness

The birth of Jesus was about more than just a baby being born—it was the birth of a new hope. The only appropriate response (whether you're a poor girl in an impoverished city or a glorious angel sent from heaven) is to sing. Let's take a look at how Mary's song magnified God for His goodness and mercy.

- ▶ **Make a list of things Mary praised God for in verses 46-50. What are the common themes?**

Mary trusted God to Keep His promises

Mary's song concluded with a refrain that celebrates the truth that the world would be turned upside down. This is Luke's favorite theme of radical reversal, presented in poetic form.

Mary's language revealed a heart and mind that must have been saturated with the Psalms. For the moment, she became a psalmist herself. And, like David, she understood that the new hope being born into the world was based on an ancient hope.

The God of the Gospels is a God who is always in the process of turning the world upside down. The new hope that was born—the hope that is the subject of so many songs in the Scriptures—was granted to the outsiders, to the poor in spirit. In order to be rich, we learn to let go of our riches. In order to become wise, we embrace the foolishness of the cross. In order to become mature, we become like little children. In order to become truly free, we become slaves. Jesus wins everything by losing everything.

Essential Doctrines

Angels: Besides the creation of humanity and animals, the Bible also speaks of other beings that God created—angels, who are also referred to in Scripture as “sons of God,” “holy ones,” “spirits,” “principalities,” and “powers.” In the original languages of the Bible, the word “angel” carries the meaning of a messenger, which indicates one of their primary reasons for existence. Angels carry out a number of other functions throughout Scripture: bringing God glory, carrying out God's plans and purpose, and reminding humanity that the unseen world is real.

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YOUR STORY

- ▶ **Why was Zechariah's question a sign of his weak faith but Mary's question a sign of her strength? What can we learn from the way Mary responded to the angel's message?**
- ▶ **How does Mary's response—calling herself the Lord's servant and willingly submitting to His will—reveal the posture every faithful Christian should have? What does submitting to God's plan look like in our culture today?**
- ▶ **Name two or three of your favorite songs that magnify the Lord for His goodness and mercy. Why do these songs resonate with you? What aspects of God's character do they celebrate?**
- ▶ **What are some ways that your church can display the "upside-down" nature of Christ's kingdom? How does your life challenge the values of the world with the values of the Kingdom?**

YOUR MISSION

Head

Mercy, by definition, is something we need the most when we deserve it the least. When God, in His mercy, sent His own Son, the natural human response to His over-the-top gift of hope was poetic and lyrical. Though we have no right to expect anything from Him, He gives us everything, including His one and only Son. That is the nature of His lovingkindness. We need mercy the most when we deserve it the least. That's exactly what Jesus' birth would perfectly provide for the world.

- ▶ **Why does mercy fail to be mercy when it is something that is deserved?**
- ▶ **Why is it important to always keep in mind that God gives mercy to undeserved sinners like ourselves?**

Heart

The image of the great angel Gabriel appearing to a marginalized teenager in an insignificant and impoverished village like Nazareth establishes a contrast that Luke maintained throughout his Gospel. Earlier in the story, Gabriel was forced to explain his identity to the unbelieving priest in the holy place (Luke 1:19). Zechariah questioned the truth of Gabriel's words, despite Gabriel's declaration that he stood in the presence of God (Luke 1:18). But Gabriel found a more faithful person in Mary. She also asked how Gabriel's message could be, but hers was more a question of process than disbelief. Luke intended for us to appreciate the contrast between the disbelieving priest in the magnificent temple and the trusting girl in impoverished Nazareth.

- ▶ **How does Mary's faith as a young teenager encourage you in your own obedience to God?**
- ▶ **If you were to compose your own song of thankfulness to God for His mercy in your life, what themes would you touch on and why?**

Hands

The stories of church history reveal that following Jesus cost His disciples everything. With the exception of John, death was the ultimate price of faithfulness for Jesus' closest followers. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German martyr, famously wrote: "When Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die."¹ New life in Christ is not intended to be easy. Jesus never promised earthly security—He calls us to be willing to give up everything to follow Him (Matt. 16:24).

- ▶ **What is your response to Jesus' command when He says, "Follow Me?" .**
- ▶ **What are some hindrances in your own life that you need to abandon in order to live faithfully for Jesus?**

HIS STORY

Jesus' birth demonstrated His humility

The humble birth of Jesus prepares us for one of the major themes we see throughout Luke's Gospel. Throughout his portrayal of the life and ministry of Jesus, Luke revealed that those who should understand Jesus' ministry rarely did. The wealthy, the educated, and the most religious missed what was happening. At the same time, those you'd never expect to understand what God was doing (the women, the poor, and the marginalized) intuitively grasped what Jesus' arrival meant.

This passage shows the reality of God becoming human and being born in a stable—it was the best that Joseph and Mary could provide. This “outsider” appearance would follow Jesus for the rest of His life. The One through whom God made all that was made was born for us into poverty, without a proper place to lay His head.

► **Based upon these passages, how does the biblical description of Jesus' birth differ from our modern day understanding?**

Jesus' birth is for the poor

At the time of Jesus' birth, the first announcement of the Messiah's arrival was carried to some of the poor and marginalized people in society: the shepherds.

The angel gave the shepherds two signs to help them find baby Jesus. First, the baby would be wrapped in strips of cloth. Second, He would be lying in a manger. The nature of a sign is that it represents something out of the ordinary. Everyone swaddled their babies, but this sign indicates it was unusual to find a baby wrapped in rags. Likewise, no one expected to see a newborn sleeping in a feeding trough. So, the One who came for the marginalized was described as an outsider who was unimaginably poor.

Jesus' birth is for the nations

By the time the magi arrived, Joseph and Mary lived in a house. The word used to describe Jesus indicates that He was a young boy, approximately two years old. The wise men fell to their knees in worship. Of all their vast knowledge and authority, there was something they still lacked, something that drove them to travel all the way from Persia on a journey that might have taken two years. They found all they longed for in that simple house. They offered Jesus their gifts (these gifts would provide for Jesus' family's escape to Egypt). Then, the magi were warned in a dream, so they returned home a different way.

Essential Doctrines

Virgin Birth: *The Bible affirms that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin (Matt. 1:18-25; Luke 1:26-38). The virgin birth affirms the historicity of the incarnation, where the eternal Son of God took on human flesh. The virgin birth is significant in that it serves as a reminder of Old Testament prophecies (Isa. 7) while also affirming both the deity and humanity of Christ.*

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YOUR STORY

- ▶ **What can we learn about God’s character by looking at the conditions surrounding Jesus’ birth?**
- ▶ **Why do you think our culture tends to value the character quality of pride over that of humility? How is this understanding challenged in the story of Jesus’ birth?**
- ▶ **What is the significance of God revealing the news of Jesus’ birth to shepherds first? How does this scene challenge the way we think of worth and importance?**
- ▶ **What are some ways that the church may unintentionally communicate that the gospel is only for certain kinds of people? How can we demonstrate the beauty of God’s love for those who are pushed to the side in our society?**

YOUR MISSION

Head

When we picture the magi, we often imagine only three men. This is based on the three gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. It is more likely that they traveled with a large entourage, including Persian cavalry. There could have been a hundred of them. Their intent was clear—to find and worship the new King. Their worship of Him would represent an endorsement of a new monarch.

- ▶ **What are some other misconceptions people often have about Jesus’ birth story?**
- ▶ **How might this information regarding the magi increase our confidence in Jesus’ identity?**

Heart

The magi were the elite, the educated. They held enormous power at the Persian court. Yet, with all their power and knowledge something was obviously lacking. They hungered for something more, and when they saw the sign of the star they seemed to understand that the star would lead them to the answer they sought. When they bowed before the new King of the Jews, it is as if their far-away kingdoms were bowing, foreshadowing the day every knee and every nation will bow to King Jesus.

- ▶ **How does knowing that the magi were well educated affect your own faith?**
- ▶ **In what ways has Christ satisfied the personal hunger for something more in your own life?**

Hands

The shepherds left the manger scene eager to tell others what they had experienced. This is how people responded when they met Jesus and understood who He was. The same response must be true for those of us who meet Christ, as well. Like the shepherds, we will naturally tell of God’s goodness to others once we have embraced the good news of what God has done in our own lives. We do not share begrudgingly or out of a sense of duty, but from a heartfelt delight as a result of knowing that our sins have been forgiven.

- ▶ **In what ways has your relationship with Jesus changed your own life?**
- ▶ **How can our willingness to share Christ with others serve as a sort of spiritual thermometer in our relationship with Him?**

HIS STORY

Jesus learned God's Word

In this passage, Jesus was twelve years old and growing in wisdom and knowledge. As a child, Jesus would have learned to read in the synagogue. It was a place where children were taught to read, using the alphabetical Psalms to learn their letters.

If you look closely at the text, you will notice that Jesus was not simply teaching the elders—Luke said Jesus was listening and asking questions. He was of the age where He was expected to interact with adults in matters of the Old Testament. However, those who heard Jesus in the temple were surprised by the understanding Jesus displayed in His answers.

► **Even though He is the Son of God, Jesus listened to and asked questions of the teachers in the temple. What can we learn from His example?**

Jesus was involved in God's work

When Jesus' parents found Him, He was surprised by their reaction to His "disappearance." Why did His parents have to search for Him? He seemed puzzled that they did not know to go straight to the temple. After all, He had to be there, right? Where else would He be? Look at how the story progressed.

Jesus' family misunderstood His task, but Jesus did not. In fact, in the temple, Jesus displayed a startling clarity. He knew precisely where He was supposed to be and what He was supposed to be doing—He was supposed to do His Father's work. He engaged with the text of Scripture, together with a community of men who had come together around God's Word. He did not appear to be dominating the scene; rather He asked questions right along with everyone else. The ability to formulate a meaningful question was and still is highly regarded among the rabbis. Often there is more learning in the question than in the answer.

Jesus grew in favor with God and others

Jesus' kindness and compassion, as well as the moving words He spoke, drew men and women to Him throughout the brief years of His time on Earth. This is what He had in mind when He encouraged His followers to shine like lights in a darkened world. We are not to hide our lights, just as Jesus did not. Whatever the cost, we must risk gaining favor as Jesus gained favor, by engaging with the Word and the world around us.

Essential Doctrines

Sinlessness of Jesus: *While the Bible affirms the full humanity of Jesus, it also affirms that Jesus was completely sinless throughout His earthly life (2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 7:26; 1 Pet. 2:22). Nevertheless, because Jesus was fully human, He experienced real temptation of sin, as seen during His trials in the wilderness (Matt. 4). Yet even though His trials and temptations were real and similar to the rest of humanity's, Hebrews 4:15 confirms that Jesus did not sin.*

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YOUR STORY

- ▶ **What are some ways your church cultivates a love of learning when it comes to God's Word?**
- ▶ **At this stage of Jesus' life, what do you think it meant for Jesus to say He was involved in His Father's work? How does our involvement in our Father's work grow as we mature physically and spiritually?**
- ▶ **What was the connection between Jesus' love for God's Word and His involvement in God's work? In what ways do God's Word and God's work intersect in your own life?**
- ▶ **Like Jesus, what character qualities should we try to cultivate in our own lives in order to grow in favor with those around us?**

YOUR MISSION

Head

Knowing Jesus was involved in biblical discussions as a young person teaches us that young people should be involved in biblical discussions today, as well. Not only that, but we should also realize that the questions students bring and the answers they offer are beneficial to the discussion. In other words, people shouldn't assume that a young person's contribution will be overly simplistic. The church is a community of believers that is centered on the Word, and all age groups should be a part of the discussion.

- ▶ **When was the last time you had a meaningful conversation about the Bible with someone in a different age group within your church?**
- ▶ **Why is it important for churches to learn from the Scriptures together?**

Heart

All young people arrive at a time in life when they must choose whether or not they want to make their parents' faith their own. Even though this account is unique to Jesus, the divine Son of God, we can nevertheless draw application from it for our own lives. Even if we have Christian parents and siblings or go to church on a regular basis, we have to reach a point in our lives where we take personal ownership of our faith.

- ▶ **Why is it important to emphasize that borrowed faith isn't real faith? What's the difference between the two?**
- ▶ **Have you grown up in a home with other Christians? If so, in what ways has that influence encouraged you to take ownership of your own faith?**

Hands

Being both fully human and fully divine, Jesus knew well what it was like to be a part of an earthly family. He was fully obedient in honoring His father and mother, and thus able to fulfill this law for us in our place. The fact He was obedient even when misunderstood reminds us that the authority God places over us is not dependent on our own feelings. In obedience to God's Word, we must honor those God has placed in authority over our lives.

- ▶ **How is our honor for those in authority a demonstration of our honor toward God?**
- ▶ **When is it difficult for you to show honor to those in authority? How can Jesus' example encourage you during those times of difficulty?**

HIS STORY

Jesus was tempted to satisfy His desires apart from God's will

Satan's intent was revealed in the opening words of his first assault: He questioned Jesus' identity as the Son of God. In order to understand the strategy Satan used against Jesus, we must understand how his opening move was intended to lead Jesus to doubt His identity and to indulge an earthly appetite.

Jesus fasted for forty days, so Satan attacked Him at His weakest moment. Behind the temptation to turn the stones into bread was the assumption that physical food is the most important nourishment we need, but Jesus' response said otherwise. In each of the three temptations, Jesus quoted from the book of Deuteronomy. His reference here, to Deuteronomy 8:3, noted the Word of God as the most needed nourishment.

► **In what way did the Word of God sustain Jesus when the Devil tempted Him? How did this relate to Jesus' identity?**

Jesus was tempted to test God and doubt His promises

Despite Satan took Jesus to the top of this magnificent building, and he altered his attack by adopting Jesus' method of warfare. Here, Satan also quoted the Bible—Psalm 91:11-12—which refers to God's tender provision of protection to the ones He loves.

Satan intended for Jesus to understand these two verses in isolation, apart from the larger context of the Psalm. But Psalm 91 speaks of a person who rests in faith and trusts in the Almighty. The psalmist wrote about why he was not afraid and why he had made the Lord his refuge. In short, the song is from someone who placed his total trust in God.

Jesus was tempted to exalt Himself apart from the cross

With the final temptation, Satan offered a shortcut for Jesus to arrive at exaltation—through bowing down and worshiping him instead of choosing to fulfill His calling as the Messiah.

However, Jesus knew who He was. He knew that His kingdom would be centered on a cross. He knew that His kingdom would be based on His self-sacrifice, not His self-exaltation. He knew that His glory would flow from His identity as the Son of God. And so, once again, He quoted Deuteronomy, saying that only God was deserving of His worship and service.

Essential Doctrines

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

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YOUR STORY

- ▶ **Why is knowing who you are in Christ so important in the fight against sin?**
- ▶ **What are some ways Christians attempt to battle temptation and sin and fail? What was Jesus' approach?**
- ▶ **Satan tried to manipulate the true meaning of God's Word in his attack on Jesus. What does this teach us about our need to properly understand God's Word?**
- ▶ **Do you hunger for God's Word just as much as you hunger for food? Why or why not? What are some ways you can begin to increase your appetite for God's Word in your life?**

YOUR MISSION

Head

The wilderness is the place God uses to establish our identity as His sons and daughters. In the Old Testament, God called His people to the wilderness so they could learn His worth and learn to truly worship Him. Pharaoh was told to let the people go to the wilderness to worship God. In the wilderness, Israel learned the words of God. The same can be said of the wilderness temptation of Jesus. Jesus' sonship was declared by the Father at the Jordan River, and His relationship with the Father was strengthened by His obedience in the wilderness. There Jesus demonstrated what it truly means to be a child of God.

- ▶ **When have you had a "wilderness" experience in your life spiritually? Did it seem like a test? Why or why not? .**
- ▶ **How does this account change the way you view difficult times in your life? What are some important lessons we can learn through times like these?**

Heart

Jesus' struggle in the wilderness is our struggle, and His victory there can become ours, too. As we study the Scriptures, we come to realize that the hunger of temptation in the wilderness can only be truly satisfied by trusting in the promises of God's Word. The identity we have received from God, as His sons and daughters, must be stronger than the false identities that Satan and the world may offer us.

- ▶ **When have you been tempted to "put God to the test"—to see if He would keep His promise to you?**
- ▶ **How does Jesus' victory over temptation give you confidence when you are in the wilderness?**

Hands

When talking about the armor of God in Ephesians 6, the apostle Paul mentioned only one offensive weapon—the sword of the Spirit—and identified it as the Word of God. Jesus' wilderness experience clearly illustrated Paul's point. When looking at how Jesus countered the temptations of the Devil, we see a perfectly good example of what it looks like to use Scripture in the fight of faith. Thus, instead of trying to overcome temptation or fight sin through self-strength or clever tactics, Christians are to unsheathe the Word of God by believing God's promises in the fight for faith.

- ▶ **Why would it have been wrong for Jesus to turn the stones into bread? What does Jesus' answer teach us about the importance of God's Word?**
- ▶ **How might you become equipped to use the power of God's Word in your own fight against sin? How equipped are you?**



GOD THE SON | SPECIAL SESSION

“WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?”

Matthew 16:13-28

The Point: The call to follow Jesus includes a call to self-denial.

HIS STORY

The disciples affirmed Jesus as Messiah

Meeting or being acquainted with people does not mean we know them well. Many people were acquainted with Jesus. He was popular with the crowds, but they had an insufficient view of His identity.

The general population put Jesus in good religious company. Some saw Him as a “revived John the Baptist” because Jesus’ message and ministry resembled John’s. Others saw Him as a prophet like Jeremiah, who ministered during the Babylonian captivity and spoke often of Israel’s future. John the Baptist and Jeremiah were heroes to the Jews in the first century, and it was seen as a compliment to Jesus that the crowds would put Him in such company.

Jesus challenged their understanding of the Messiah

Peter’s confession of Jesus as Messiah was a major moment in the life and ministry of Jesus. According to Matthew, Jesus spoke about His coming death from that point on. Jesus’ thoughts and actions turned toward the cross. From our perspective in history, we understand the reality and significance of Jesus’ death; however, from their perspective beforehand, the disciples could hardly imagine the Messiah dying.

Jesus challenged their understanding of personal joy

Deny yourself? Take up your cross? Lose your life? You may read this passage and wonder: Does Jesus want us only to focus on what’s negative? Not quite.

Jesus’ emphasis on self-denial isn’t just about what we lose, but what we gain when we give up our lives to Him. Deny yourself in order to be filled. Die today in order to rise tomorrow. Instead of focusing solely on what we should deny or the command to follow, we should focus instead on the One we follow—Jesus!

► What happens when we focus on the action of following apart from Jesus, the One we are called to follow?

Essential Doctrines

Union with Christ: *At the heart of our salvation is our union with Christ. The Bible describes salvation as entering into a covenant relationship with God and also describes the church (which is made up of believers) as the bride of Christ (2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:23-32). Christians believe that Christ dwells in our hearts through faith (Christ in us) and that we are simultaneously dwelling in Him (Eph. 3:17; Col. 1:27; 3:1-4). This union is indissoluble; it will last for all eternity.*

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YOUR STORY

- ▶ **What are some answers people might give to the question: “Who do you say Jesus is?” What answers are good, but insufficient?**
- ▶ **What was missing in Peter’s understanding of Jesus as the Messiah? What important aspects of Jesus’ identity are missing in the way most people think of Him today?**
- ▶ **In what ways do you notice people “saving their lives” instead of “losing their lives” for Jesus’ sake?**
- ▶ **What does self-denial look like? How can self-denial lead to greater personal joy?**

YOUR MISSION

Head

As is often the case in the Bible, an encounter with God can often result in a name change for the individual. Peter’s name wasn’t the first to be changed (Abram to Abraham), nor would it be the last (Saul to Paul). In this account, Jesus gave Simon a new name (Peter) based on the confession he made about Jesus as the Messiah. In Greek, Peter means stone. His name was a play on the words found in verse 18, about building the church on a rock. Consistent with his new identity, Peter would be a spiritual rock, and his confession would become the foundation of the church.

- ▶ **How has your identity changed as a result of following Christ?**
- ▶ **Why is it important that we understand ourselves based upon what God says regardless of what others say about us or what we believe about ourselves?**

Heart

Jesus corrected the disciples’ misunderstanding regarding what it meant to follow Him. They assumed knowing the Messiah meant they would experience earthly comforts and ease in a matter of time—just as soon as Jesus overturned the established government. However, Jesus taught them that the ultimate comfort and ease they sought wouldn’t be found that way. Worldly possessions, personal status, and achievements won’t satisfy in the end. Only following Jesus satisfies.

- ▶ **In your own words, summarize Jesus’ first question in Matthew 16:26.**
- ▶ **Why is Jesus more satisfying than any comfort the world has to offer?**

Hands

We make choices every day as disciples of Christ. The biggest choice for each of us is the daily decision to follow Jesus and live like He lived. Like Jesus, we are to avoid hanging on to the earthly things and treating them as though they are all we have. Like Jesus, we are to put others before ourselves. Like Jesus, we should be willing to even suffer for the sake of the gospel, knowing there is a greater joy that awaits those who do. All of this is part of what it means to follow Him. It is a costly thing to follow, but the cost quickly fades when we focus on the One we get to follow—Jesus.

- ▶ **How can we avoid following Jesus as if it is only a task to accomplish? How can we willingly, wholeheartedly follow instead?**
- ▶ **How does following Christ in your own life demonstrate to others the joy of following Him?**

YOUR STORY

- ▶ **Once again Jesus talked about repentance. What is the role of urgency in the call for people to repent?**
- ▶ **What strikes you the most in this account of Jesus calling the disciples?**
- ▶ **Why do you think the Pharisees felt offended by the people at the dinner? How does Jesus' response impact the way we think about ministering to those in our schools, on the athletic fields, or within our homes?**
- ▶ **What kinds of people should we minister to? Why is it sometimes difficult to minister to all people?**

YOUR MISSION

Head

Throughout the story of Jesus' earthy ministry, He called, ministered to, and forgave of the sins of various people. He healed an official's son (John 4:46-54), cleansed the Leper (Matt. 8:2-4), healed the Paralytic and forgave his sins (Matt. 9:1-8), healed the woman with the issue of blood (Mark 5:25-34), fed the multitudes (Matt. 15:32-38; John 6:1-14), and raised the dead (Luke 7:11-17; 8:41-56; John 11:1-44). Because Jesus calls everyone to repent, there is no specific "profile" that describes followers of Jesus. The only qualification is repentant faith.

- ▶ **What does Jesus' ministry to all types of people communicate about His character?**
- ▶ **As followers of Jesus, how can we model His actions to those around us who are in need?**

Heart

Today, Jesus calls people from every walk of life to leave their selfish pursuits and follow Him. That call may not require you to sell all your belongings or commit to living overseas as a missionary, but it will definitely require you to give up the idea that you command your own destiny. It will mean you give up any trace of selfish ambition that affects your life decisions. God's kingdom must be first, which is why we ask God to remove the remaining selfishness in our hearts and replace our desires with His heart for the world and His plan for our lives (Ps. 37:4).

- ▶ **What are some things you must leave behind in order to follow Christ?**
- ▶ **What are the advantages of setting aside selfish pursuits to follow after Christ?**

Hands

The beauty of God's call to repentance is that He brings together people from various backgrounds and groups, in order to highlight His glorious work of redemption. He calls people you'd least expect. He does things you would never predict. He doesn't just call "the cream of the crop" to be His spokespeople, but unlikely people whose changed lives will demonstrate the glory of His work. And since we are commanded to imitate Christ (Eph. 5:1), we have the privilege of taking the gospel to those who might be viewed as undeserving, neglected, and overlooked in our society.

- ▶ **If you were picking a team of people to help you change the world, what types of people would you want? Why?**
- ▶ **Why is it both comforting and empowering for believers to know and understand that God calls ordinary people to proclaim His extraordinary gospel?**

HIS STORY

Nicodemus Learns of the New Birth

As their conversation began, Nicodemus affirmed Jesus' ministry of teaching and healing. He recognized that Jesus had the blessing of God on His ministry and complimented Jesus for the signs He had performed. That's as far as Nicodemus went in attributing any special role to Jesus. It's clear that he saw Jesus as a good teacher, a moral person, and perhaps even a model of how people should live.

Jesus' response was abrupt. He didn't accept the compliments Nicodemus gave. Instead, He simply said no one would see the kingdom of God without being born again. In other words, unless you are reborn and made new, you will not see God's salvation.

Nicodemus didn't understand what Jesus' reply meant. So, he followed up with a question.

The New Birth comes through faith

The conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus continued, but now Jesus took the lead and began to explain further the "new birth" and its significance. This new and everlasting life comes through faith in Jesus.

Until that point the religious leaders had rejected Jesus' testimony, which raised an important question: How could the religious leaders compliment Jesus for His teaching on any matter if they rejected His testimony about Himself?

Jesus didn't wait for an answer. Instead, He claimed to be the One who had descended to earth from heaven. Jesus is the Son of God who took on human flesh in order to reveal the character of God to the world.

► **What did Jesus mean when He said He would be "lifted up"? Why is it important that He was "lifted up"?**

The New Birth is the result of God's love for humanity

The focus here is on how God loved the world, and the love described here is self-sacrificing.

Romans 5:8 tells us that God demonstrated His love for us by sending His Son, Jesus, to seek and save the lost by dying for us—while we were still in sin, separated from Him. John 3:16 reminds us that God gave Himself, in the person of His Son, to take the place of sinners like you and me.

Essential Doctrines

Regeneration: *When a person places faith in Christ, that person undergoes a fundamental change of identity. He or she goes from being an enemy under God's wrath (Eph. 2:1-3) to being welcomed into God's family as a beloved child (Eph. 2:19). The believer in Christ is declared righteous on account of Christ's perfect life and substitutionary death and resurrection. No longer is the person a slave to sin, defined by past failures or present struggles. The person has been delivered from the realm of darkness and now belongs to the kingdom of light (Col. 1:13). Anyone who is in Christ is a "new creation" in whom the old, sinful self is passed away and the new, redeemed self is alive and progressing, until the person becomes more and more like Christ (2 Cor. 5:17).*

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YOUR STORY

- ▶ **What is the connection between a person's identity and the value of their testimony?**
- ▶ **How would you respond to someone who says they consult Jesus as a good moral guide, but they do not recognize Him as the Son of God? Answers Andy gives are always incredibly insightful, so let's keep that trend going. Shall we?**
- ▶ **How would you explain the words "faith" and "believe" from a biblical perspective?**
- ▶ **What similar words would you use? How does this passage illustrate the meaning of faith?**

YOUR MISSION

Head

Nicodemus wasn't all that different from many religious people today. Maybe he assumed that since he was a religious leader, he automatically had a right standing with God or already knew God's plan for bringing His kingdom. Maybe he assumed that his religious observance gave him a better position from which to interpret and experience God's mighty works. Like him, it's easy for people who have been raised in church, or who have some sort of faith in God, to believe that they have an inside track to God and His ways. But if this account teaches us anything, it teaches us about the necessity of coming to God on His terms, and not our own.

- ▶ **What was missing in the life of Nicodemus?**
- ▶ **How does Jesus' interaction with Nicodemus provide a model for how we engage with those who are religious but not committed to Christ?**

Heart

Unfortunately, as this passage shows us, humans naturally love darkness (the sinful deeds and lifestyle we're born into) rather than the light, Jesus Christ. We live in a society where people entertain the false understanding that one can have Jesus plus their sin, or have Jesus as their light even while they pursue the deeds of darkness. But this passage shows us the reality of what life looks like for those who have embraced Jesus. Those who come to Jesus want His light to expose all of their lives so that He can continue His work of renovating us from the inside out.

- ▶ **In what areas of your life does it feel uncomfortable for the light of Christ to shine?**
- ▶ **How does God's gift of salvation impact these areas of your life?**

Hands

The work of regeneration is a supernatural work of God, not the natural work of man. Yet the responsibility of getting the message of the gospel out is the work God has called every believer to participate in. We should never assume that because people are familiar with church, Christianity, or even religion, that they know Jesus as their Savior. God has called every believer to trust in His power as we are transformed by the Holy Spirit.

- ▶ **How encouraging is it to know that salvation is not dependent upon how persuasive you are or how much you know, but is instead the work of God in your heart?**
- ▶ **Even though salvation is God's work, why do you think the Bible stresses our role in sharing the gospel with others?**

HIS STORY

John's mission was to point to Jesus

Some of John's followers approached him with a problem on their minds. More and more people were going to see Jesus and His disciples to be baptized. Who was this man? Why were people going to Him and not John? Did Jesus' ministry mean that John's work was no longer effective? Perhaps John's disciples felt like Jesus' rising popularity was a threat to their own work. Whatever their motivations, they went to John with questions.

John the Baptist's response was seasoned with humility. He attributed the growth of Jesus' ministry to God and nothing else. John recognized that Jesus' ministry was always designed to replace his own. That's why John reminded his followers that he was not the Messiah and that the Messiah's work would be greater than his. The remarkable thing about John's response is how content he seemed to be with those developments. He could be humble and confident because he knew his role—to point people to the Messiah!

John demonstrated humility in his mission

In the continuation of John the Baptist's response to his disciples, John revealed his own character and his joy at Jesus' arrival. Don't miss the connection between John's humility (v. 30) and joy (v. 29).

John the Baptist found complete joy in his subordinate role to Jesus. He recognized Jesus was the groom, the center of attention, the long-awaited Messiah. John understood that his role was to make sure that the groom would be exalted and that no distractions would hinder him.

▶ **How does the idea that decreasing leads to an increase in joy apply to us today?**

▶ **What are some areas where you could decrease to make more of Jesus in your own life? Why will this increase your joy?**

John's message was one of warning and grace

John the Baptist saw Jesus as superior, in where He came from and in what He taught. John's witness to Christ focused first on Jesus' origin. Jesus is the Messiah who comes from heaven, while John was a witness from the earth. The point here is that John the Baptist was under Jesus' authority because Jesus came from heaven.

This passage also shows that Jesus' teaching is superior to John the Baptist's. Everything Jesus taught was and is true. Everything Jesus said about Himself being the Messiah, the promised One, was and is true. The point here is that John was a witness to Jesus, while Jesus spoke the very words of God. Not only that, but Jesus also had the power to give the Spirit to those who believed and accepted His testimony.

Essential Doctrines

Evangelism: *It is the duty and privilege of every Christian and of every church of the Lord Jesus Christ to make disciples of all nations. The new birth of man's spirit by God's Holy Spirit means the birth of love for others. Missionary effort on the part of all thus rests upon a spiritual necessity of the regenerate life and is expressly and repeatedly commanded in the teachings of Christ. The Lord Jesus Christ has commanded the preaching of the gospel to all nations. It is the duty of every child of God to seek constantly to win the lost to Christ by verbal witness undergirded by a Christian lifestyle.*

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HIS STORY

Jesus encountered the Samaritan woman

The route Jesus selected to travel from Judea to Galilee was quick, but not common. It took Him through Samaria, an area that most Jews would avoid. The Samaritans were considered “half-breeds” whose forefathers were Jewish but had intermarried with Assyrians. A result of their history, they were despised by many Jews.

Jesus rejected the culturally acceptable route that went around the Samaritans. Instead, He took the direct route, and this decision placed Him at Jacob’s well around noontime, when the social outcasts came to draw water.

Jesus explained to her the meaning of true worship

It is interesting to note how Jesus took the conversation into a personal direction after having engaged this woman on friendly terms. The discussion about water prompted the truth about spiritual thirst that only God can quench. Then, the discussion about the woman’s marital history led to a demonstration of Jesus’ ability to know the hearts of people. “You are a prophet,” the woman said, and she was right.

The way Jesus engaged in conversation revealed His heart. He did not just talk. He also listened. He did not condemn the woman for her past; He continued having a meaningful conversation.

The Samaritan woman responded to Jesus by telling others about Him

This passage is all about mission! First, the woman made a comment about the Messiah coming to make things right; this was an attempt to put off any decision or claim that Jesus (as a prophet) might make on her. But Jesus instantly revealed to her that He was the Messiah she spoke about!

Then, the disciples arrived at the pivotal moment of Jesus’ conversation with the Samaritan woman, after having ventured into town to find food. They wondered about His motives for breaking cultural protocol, for ignoring ethical and cultural barriers. While they were questioning in their hearts what Jesus was doing, the Samaritan woman left her water jar and ran back into town. As soon as she understood that Jesus was the Messiah, she dropped everything and told others about Him.

► **When was the last time you broke “social protocol” to minister to someone? Why is it important that Christians be seen as breaking cultural barriers instead of creating them?**

Essential Doctrines

God is Infinite: *God’s infinity means that there are no boundaries on His qualities and existence (Job 11:7-9; Ps. 147:5). For instance, God is infinite when it comes to space and time, meaning He is not confined by material space nor is He restricted by time since He is timeless (Ps. 90:1-2). God’s infinity also extends to His knowledge of things as well as His power to do all things according to His will.*

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The Point: Jesus' followers will often experience rejection and opposition.

HIS STORY

Jesus claimed to be the Spirit-filled Messiah

It was customary for the Jewish people in Jesus' day to spend time in the synagogue where leaders would read and comment on the ancient Scriptures. When Jesus went into the synagogue, as was the custom, He stood up to read a passage of Scripture. The reading for that day was part of a prophecy from Isaiah that spoke of the coming Messiah.

In a dramatic moment that likely shocked the people in the synagogue, Jesus read a passage that described the ministry of the Messiah, and then He sat down. "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing," He said. The moment was shocking for a couple of reasons. First, Jesus implied that He Himself was the Messiah upon whom the Spirit rested. He was saying, in effect, "I'm the guy Isaiah was talking about."

Jesus faced rejection from His people

After Jesus read from the scroll of Isaiah, He saw the unbelief in the hearts of the people and anticipated their rejection of Him, just as God's people had often rejected the prophets.

Have you ever heard the saying, "A prophet is without honor in his hometown?" It comes from what Jesus said and is similar to a more common phrase that is used today: "Familiarity breeds contempt."

The idea behind the phrase is that the people in Jesus' hometown did not see Him as special or unique; they saw Him as ordinary. What's more, they didn't care for His message, even though they wanted to see His miracles.

► **How difficult do you think it was for Jesus, who came to rescue His people, to experience rejection?**

Jesus continued His ministry despite His people's rejection

The people were so enraged at Jesus's words that they wanted to throw him off a cliff so that He would fall to His death. Although Jesus' mission included His substitutionary death, this was not the appointed time for Him to die. We don't know exactly how Jesus passed through the crowd and avoided death in this moment. Some commentators think Jesus' escape was miraculous. Others believe He simply managed to get away. Either way, it is clear that the situation in Nazareth was dire.

Jesus' own people rejected Him, just as Isaiah predicted 700 years before. Despite the rejection from the people in His own hometown, Jesus pressed on to fulfill the ministry God called Him to.

Essential Doctrines

Christ as Prophet: *As one of His offices, Jesus fulfills the role of prophet: He alone is the ultimate teacher and has the words of eternal life (John 6:68). Jesus is also God's ultimate revelation of Himself.*

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YOUR STORY

- ▶ **What are some ways people try to discredit the uniqueness of Jesus today?**
- ▶ **What do you think about Jesus’ decision not to perform miracles in Nazareth? Why did Jesus respond to the Nazarenes’ rejection in this way?**
- ▶ **When have you faced rejection because of your faith?**
- ▶ **What encouraging words would you offer to a young believer facing rejection because of belief in Jesus?**

YOUR MISSION

- Head**
The rejection of Jesus goes back to the sinfulness of the human heart. John 3:19 reminds us: “This is the judgment: The light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil.” As people rejected Jesus in His day, sadly they still reject Him today. People react harshly to the truth of the gospel because it exposes the darkness of our hearts.
- ▶ **When have you seen people reject Jesus because He demands they live a certain way?**
 - ▶ **How does the truth of John 3:19 warn us when it comes to our own hesitations in trusting Jesus as Savior?**

- Heart**
As God’s people endure persecution and suffering, they can rejoice to be counted among believers who faced rejection just like Jesus. In times of rejection, we remember the words of the apostle Paul: As God comforted us during times of suffering and affliction, we are then able to walk alongside and comfort other believers who are suffering through various trials (2 Cor. 1:3-7). This is the tangible expression of God the Spirit’s ministry through our lives, benefiting those inside the body of Christ.
- ▶ **What do you think happens when unbelievers see Christians rejoicing in times of suffering rather than complaining?**
 - ▶ **In what ways does our endurance in the midst of rejection or opposition strengthen our witness and mission?**

- Hands**
According to Isaiah, the ministry of the Messiah would answer both spiritual and physical needs. For this reason, the church has always focused on both kinds of needs—spiritual and material. The church proclaims the work of Jesus for the salvation of the world, while simultaneously working alongside others in bringing physical and temporal relief to suffering. Believers should take these two attributes seriously: the pursuit of holiness and the expression of love and mercy to people in need (Jas. 1:27).
- ▶ **Jesus redeemed us from spiritual captivity. How does His redemption lead us to meet physical and temporal needs of people around us?**
 - ▶ **Why is it problematic for Christians to focus only on spiritual problems and fail to meet physical needs?**

HIS STORY

Zacchaeus overcame obstacles in order to see Jesus

Did you notice the characteristics Luke used to describe Zacchaeus? He mentioned two facts: Zacchaeus was the chief tax collector, and he was rich. In Jesus' day, the Jewish people despised tax collectors. Why? Because tax collectors were Jews, too, but they collaborated with the Roman officials who oppressed God's people. What's more, it was common practice for Jewish tax collectors to extort money above the Roman tax, and then they would use the extra money to pad their pockets and live in luxury.

What's interesting about Zacchaeus is that he actually wanted to see Jesus. Unfortunately, he wasn't very tall. Perhaps the people who hated tax collectors purposefully blocked Zacchaeus so that he wouldn't be able to get through, maybe as a way of getting back at him for his extortion. Whatever the case, Zacchaeus was determined to see Jesus, and so he climbed up into a tree.

Jesus reached out to Zacchaeus

Jesus took notice of this man, acknowledged him, and then expressed the desire to spend time in this traitor's home.

Not surprisingly, the people that saw this interaction were appalled. To be a guest in someone's home meant you were "in fellowship" with them. It was like having an outstretched arm of love and acceptance or giving a warm embrace. In the onlookers' eyes, Jesus spent time with one of the "bad guys"—someone who had done terrible and selfish things as part of his career. Why would a righteous teacher, someone who claimed to be the Messiah, want to spend time in fellowship with a man known for his wickedness?

Zacchaeus demonstrated repentance and faith in Jesus

Zacchaeus quickly came down from the tree to welcome Jesus, but maybe he heard the crowd, got convicted, and froze in fear. He stopped walking and just stood there. I can't imagine what went through his mind. Perhaps it was the fact that he knew that the crowd complained correctly: He was guilty of extortion!

Immediately, without being prompted directly by anyone else, Zacchaeus told Jesus he would give half of his possessions to the poor. If he had exhorted anything from anyone, he would pay back four times as much as he took. Zacchaeus was convicted of his wrongdoing—to the point he willingly confessed his extortion and demonstrated his repentance by vowing to make full restoration to those he had victimized.

- **Read 2 Corinthians 7:9-11, and describe the qualities of biblical repentance. In the brief encounter between Jesus and Zacchaeus, did Zacchaeus possess some of the qualities Paul listed in the passage you just read?**

Essential Doctrines

God is Gracious: *God's nature is delight in giving unmerited favor to those who are undeserving (Eph.2:8-9). His grace toward sinners is found most clearly in the salvation He has provided through Christ. Because of sin, humanity is undeserving of salvation—all of us have turned our backs on God, and as a result, we deserve death (Rom. 6:23). However, instead of leaving people in their sins, God has demonstrated His graciousness by providing atonement and forgiveness for our sins through the death and resurrection of Jesus (2 Cor. 5:21).*

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YOUR STORY

- ▶ **The crowds got in the way of Zacchaeus seeing Jesus. How do people sometimes get in the way of others seeing Jesus today?**
- ▶ **What are some categories of people we may be inclined to think of as “unreachable” by God’s grace? How do we biblically challenge this way of thinking?**
- ▶ **Why do you think Zacchaeus thought it was important to repay the people he extorted money from? What does this decision express about his heart?**
- ▶ **How does the gospel influence our level of generosity toward others?**

YOUR MISSION

Head

Before we judge the crowds too quickly, we should stop ask ourselves if our judgment is hypocritical because we do similar things. What about the times we hold grudges because of other people’s sinful actions against us? Or have written someone off as unreachable because they hurt us in some way? Or what about people who pursue addictions, engage in sinful exploits, express hostility or rage toward Christians—have we ever considered them beyond redemption?

- ▶ **How should our own salvation help us to understand the salvation of all sinners?**
- ▶ **When we rightly understand God’s grace to all sinners, what actions should follow?**

Heart

We learn from this account what happens when people meet Jesus and are transformed by His grace in their lives. Zacchaeus loved riches and the lifestyle that came from being rich. However, when he met Jesus, something drastically changed. Jesus’ grace and mercy toward him transformed the desires of his heart to the point that he was willing to let go of his riches and his former way of life in response to Christ. This is they type of heart change that happens inside of each person who comes to know the grace and mercy of Christ.

- ▶ **How has Christ transformed your life? How have the desires of your heart changed from knowing Him?**
- ▶ **Why is a transformed heart and life a good indicator that someone has Jesus as Lord over his life?**

Hands

We must treat every person that we meet as someone who might embrace Jesus as Savior. God often calls us to pursue people we may believe are beyond His saving grace; He calls us to show them the way to salvation in Jesus. We may face opposition for building friendships with lost people, but we can learn from the model of Paul’s ministry, as he shared both the gospel and himself with the people he encountered (1 Thess. 2:8).

- ▶ **What is the significance of Jesus ignoring His opposition in order to spend time with Zacchaeus?**
- ▶ **What does this say about Jesus’ heart for the lost? What implications does this have for the way believers are supposed to live?**
