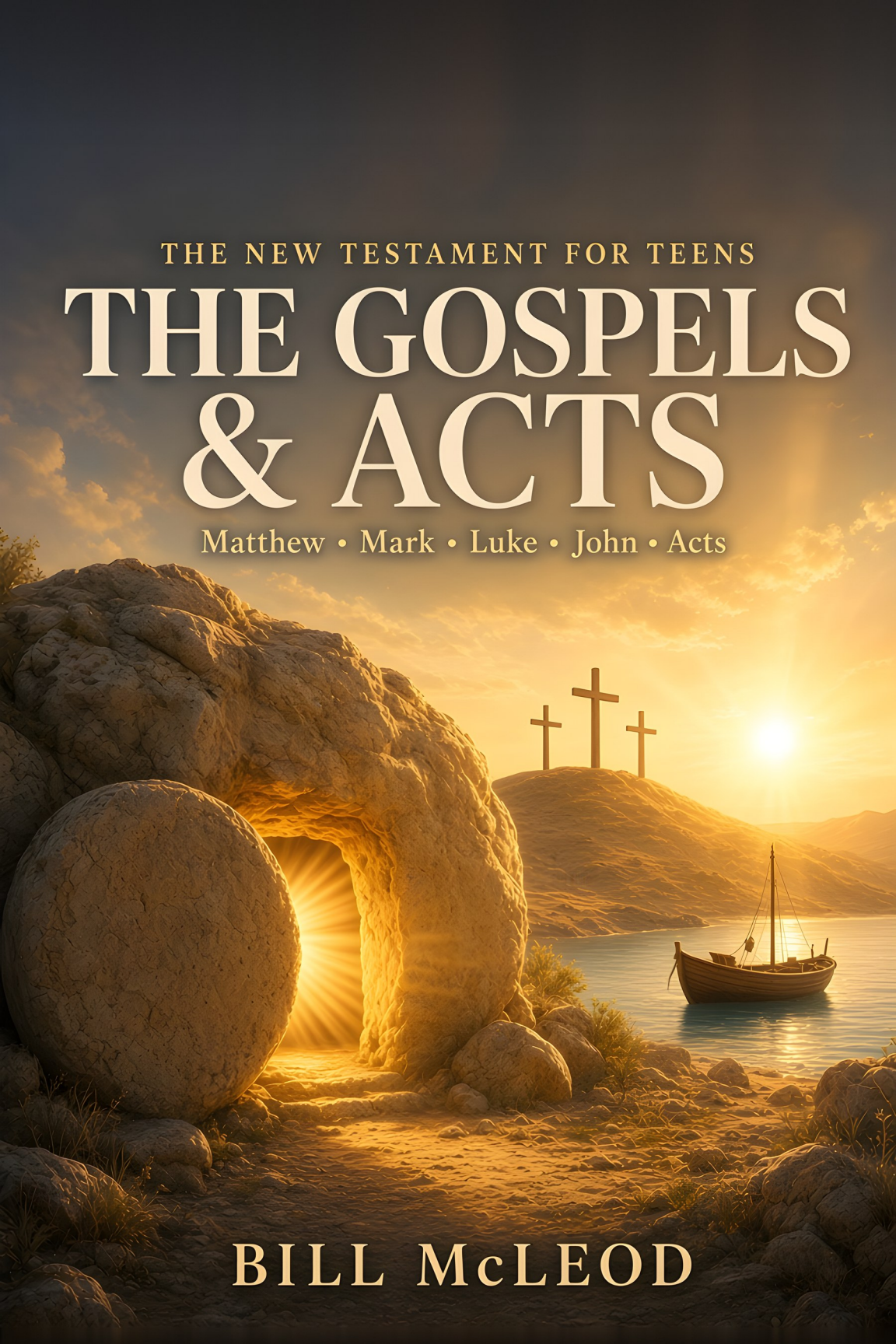
THE NEW TESTAMENT FOR TEENS

THE GOSPELS & ACTS

Matthew • Mark • Luke • John • Acts



BILL McLEOD

THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

The King Nobody Expected

Matthew, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

The King Nobody Expected: The Gospel of Matthew, Unfiltered

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All Scripture quotations in this book are from the NIV. Some are abridged, with omissions marked by ellipses; paraphrases are not placed in quotation marks.

Pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence in the author's own words. Inside Scripture quotations, capitalization and wording follow the 2011 NIV exactly.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

There's an old saying: "If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all."

Funny, right? Also a little rude. But here's the thing. It's at least partly a compliment. People your age are sharp. You can spot a fake from across the room. You can tell when an adult is talking down to you, and you hate being handed easy answers to hard questions. Good. Hold on to that. You're going to need it for this book.

Because this is the story of a lot of people who knew it all, and missed the most important thing that ever happened.

The Gospel of Matthew is full of experts. Scholars who could quote the Scriptures from memory. Religious leaders with the best reputations in the nation. A king with an army. A Roman governor with the power of life and death. They were smart, informed, and confident. And when God showed up in person, most of them didn't recognize Him.

Meanwhile, the people who got it were the ones nobody expected: fishermen, a tax collector, foreigners, a desperate mother, a Roman soldier, kids shouting in the temple. What they had in common wasn't intelligence or background. It was that they knew they needed something they didn't have.

So this book has a small challenge for you, and it's not "turn off your brain." It's the opposite. Bring your brain. Ask hard questions. Check the details. Push back. Just be willing to let Jesus push back

too. The most dangerous thing a smart person can say about Jesus isn't "I don't believe it." It's "I already know all that."

If you grew up in church, you've probably heard most of these stories. Maybe so many times they feel like wallpaper. Try reading them like it's the first time. If you didn't grow up in church, even better. You get to meet Jesus without the reruns.

How This Book Works

This book walks through all 28 chapters of Matthew, in order, in 28 short chapters. Each one tells what happened, adds background about the world Jesus lived in (Roman occupation, religious parties, Passover, crucifixion), and points out what Matthew wants you to notice.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the New International Version (NIV), the same translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (pronouns for God are capitalized in the author's own words out of reverence; inside Scripture quotations, capitalization follows the NIV exactly); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and sometimes a Try This challenge.

One more thing: this book is a guide, not a replacement. Keep a Bible open next to it. Read the actual chapters of Matthew. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. If you're a parent, grandparent, or youth leader, you already know that this age group can smell a sermon coming a mile away. So I've tried to write the way good youth workers talk: honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for how much these readers can handle.

This book follows the whole Gospel of Matthew, all 28 chapters, in order. I have worked to stay faithful to the text: no invented events, no rewritten dialogue that changes the meaning. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the New International Version (NIV); elsewhere I paraphrase and explain. Historical background is included where it helps the story make sense, and I've tried to stay with what's well established rather than speculation.

I haven't sanded off the hard edges. Jesus confronts hypocrisy head-on. He calls people to costly discipleship. Herod's massacre, John's execution, Judas' suicide, and the cross are all here, told truthfully but without graphic excess. Teenagers are already facing a hard world; they deserve a Jesus who is big enough for it.

A recurring thread runs through the book: in Matthew, the people who thought they had God figured out often missed Him, and the humble recognized Him. It's aimed at the proud heart in all of us,

not at teenagers in particular, and I've tried hard not to talk down to the reader.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will move from knowing about Jesus to knowing Jesus, the King nobody expected.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

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CHAPTER 1

Don’t Skip the Family Tree

Matthew 1

Most people skip the first seventeen verses of Matthew. It’s a list of names, half of which are hard to pronounce, and it reads like the credits at the end of a movie. But Matthew put it first on purpose. For his original readers, this list was the hook.

Matthew was a Jewish writer, and he was writing mainly for Jewish readers. Those readers had been waiting centuries for the Messiah, the King God had promised. They knew two things about Him: He would be a descendant of Abraham, the father of the Jewish people, and He would come from the royal family of King David. So the very first line of the book is a bold claim: “This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham.” Translation: the King you’ve been waiting for has arrived, and here’s the paperwork.

Matthew even arranges the list into three sets of fourteen generations: Abraham to David, David to the exile in Babylon, and the exile to Jesus. History, he’s saying, hasn’t been random. God has been steering it toward this moment.

Then look at who made the list. In that culture genealogies usually traced fathers, yet Matthew goes out of his way to name four women besides Mary: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba, who appears only as “Uriah’s wife”. Rahab and Ruth were foreigners. Tamar’s

story and Bathsheba's story involve some of the messiest scandals in the Old Testament. Matthew could have quietly left them out. He didn't. From page one, he's telling you that Jesus' family tree is full of outsiders and broken stories, and God worked through all of it.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Why "Christ" Isn't Jesus' Last Name**
>
> "Christ" comes from the Greek word for "anointed one." "Messiah" is the same idea in Hebrew. In Israel, kings were anointed with oil when they were crowned. So "Jesus Christ" really means "Jesus the King," and Matthew will spend 28 chapters proving it. That's also why the NIV, the translation quoted in this book, often simply says "the Messiah."

Now the story itself. A young woman named Mary is engaged to a carpenter named Joseph. In their world, engagement was nearly as binding as marriage; breaking it off required a formal divorce. Then Mary turns out to be pregnant, and Joseph knows the baby isn't his.

Think about what Joseph could have done. He had every legal right to make a public example of her. Instead Matthew says he was "faithful to the law," and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, so he decided to end the engagement quietly, to protect her from disgrace. Before he can act, an angel appears to him in a dream. The child, the angel says, is from the Holy Spirit. "She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

The name matters. "Jesus" is the Greek form of the Hebrew name Yeshua (Joshua), which means "the LORD saves." His name is His mission statement.

Then Matthew does something he will do again and again: he stops the story to point back to the Old Testament. This happened, he says, to fulfill what the prophet Isaiah wrote: the virgin will give birth to a son, and He will be called Immanuel, "God with us."

Watch for this pattern. Matthew quotes or alludes to the Hebrew Scriptures dozens of times. He's building a case, like a lawyer presenting evidence, that Jesus is exactly who the prophets said would come.

Joseph wakes up and does what God told him to do, even though it costs him his reputation. People would talk, and he knew it. No speeches, no arguments. Joseph never says a single word in the entire Gospel. He just obeys. It's a quiet start for a King, and that's the point. Nothing about this King is going to look the way people expected.

KEY VERSE

She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.

Matthew 1:21 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Matthew includes outsiders and people with scandalous pasts in Jesus' family tree. What does that suggest about who God is willing to work through?
2. Joseph obeyed God even though it would cost him socially. What is something that obeying God might cost someone your age?
3. Jesus' name means "the LORD saves." Saves from what, according to the angel? Why do you think that is the first thing we're told about His mission?

TRY THIS *Read Matthew 1:1-17 out loud, scandalous names and all. Pick one of the four women and look up her story this week.*

CHAPTER 2

Two Kings, One Throne

Matthew 2

Some time after Jesus is born in Bethlehem, a group of visitors shows up in Jerusalem asking an awkward question. Matthew calls them magi, often translated "wise men." They were probably scholars from the East, possibly Persia or Babylon, who studied the stars. They have traveled a long way, and they want to know: "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?"

Asking that question in Herod's city was like walking into a royal palace and asking where the real king lives.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Meet Herod the Great**
>
> Herod ruled Judea as a "client king," which means Rome let him wear a crown as long as he kept the region under control. He was a brilliant builder; he massively expanded the temple in Jerusalem. He was also famously paranoid. Ancient historians record that he had one of his wives and several of his own sons executed because he suspected them of plotting against him. A rival "King of the Jews"? Herod was not going to take that well.

Herod is "troubled," Matthew says, "and all Jerusalem with him." He calls in the chief priests and the scribes, the official Bible experts, and asks where the Messiah is supposed to be born. They answer instantly: Bethlehem. They even quote the prophet Micah to prove it.

Notice what just happened. The experts knew the exact answer. They had the address. And not one of them made the six-mile trip to go see. Meanwhile, foreigners who didn't have the Scriptures crossed hundreds of miles to worship. That's a pattern you'll see all through Matthew: the people who knew the most often missed Jesus, and the people nobody expected were the ones who found Him.

Herod secretly meets the magi and asks them to report back once they find the child, "so that I too may go and worship him." He's lying. The magi follow the star to the house where Jesus is, and they are overjoyed. They bow down and worship Him, and give gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Gold was fit for a king. Frankincense was used in worship. Myrrh was used, among other things, in preparing bodies for burial. Whether or not the magi understood it, those gifts tell the whole story in advance.

Warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, the magi go home another way. Joseph is warned in a dream too: take the child and His mother and run to Egypt. He leaves that same night.

What happens next is one of the darkest scenes in the Bible, and Matthew doesn't soften it. When Herod realizes he's been outsmarted, he orders soldiers to kill every boy in Bethlehem and its surrounding area two years old and younger. Bethlehem was a small town, so the number was probably not huge, but for those families it was devastating. Matthew connects it to Jeremiah's words about Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted.

Why include something so painful? Because Matthew is honest about the world Jesus was born into. It wasn't a peaceful greeting card. It was a world where powerful men crushed anyone who

threatened them. Jesus came into that world, not around it. And from the beginning, the powers of this world wanted Him dead.

After Herod dies, an angel tells Joseph it's safe to go back. Matthew sees another fulfillment here: "Out of Egypt I called my son," from the prophet Hosea. Originally that line was about Israel being rescued from slavery in Egypt. Matthew's point is that Jesus is reliving Israel's story, and this time getting it right. Joseph avoids Judea, where Herod's son Archelaus now rules, and settles the family in an unimpressive northern village called Nazareth.

Two kings. One was in a palace and would do anything to keep his throne. The other was a toddler who had to flee as a refugee. Only one of them is still worshiped today.

KEY VERSE

Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.

Matthew 2:2 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The chief priests and scribes knew exactly where the Messiah would be born but didn't go. How is it possible to know a lot about God and still not care?
2. Herod saw Jesus as a threat to his power. In what ways can Jesus feel like a threat to the "throne" people want to keep in their own lives?
3. Why do you think Matthew included the painful story of the children of Bethlehem instead of leaving it out?

CHAPTER 3

The Wild Man by the River

Matthew 3

Roughly thirty years pass between chapters 2 and 3. When the story picks back up, the spotlight is on a man named John the Baptist, and John is not subtle.

He lives in the wilderness of Judea. He wears clothes made of camel's hair with a leather belt, and he eats locusts and wild honey. If that outfit sounds strange, Matthew's Jewish readers would have caught the reference immediately: the great prophet Elijah dressed almost exactly the same way. The Old Testament ended with a promise that God would send Elijah before the great day of the LORD. Here comes a man who looks the part.

His message is one sentence long: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." To repent means more than feeling bad. It means to change your mind and turn around, to stop walking one direction and start walking the other way. Matthew says John is the voice Isaiah talked about, calling in the wilderness to prepare the way for the Lord.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Why "Kingdom of Heaven"?**
>
> Mark and Luke usually say "Kingdom of God." Matthew usually says "Kingdom of Heaven." Same idea. Many Jews of Matthew's day avoided saying God's name out of deep reverence, and sometimes used "heaven" in its place.

> Matthew is writing in a way his Jewish audience would recognize. Either way, the "Kingdom" means God's rule, God being King, breaking into the world.

Crowds pour out from Jerusalem and the whole region to hear John. People confess their sins and get baptized in the Jordan River. Baptism here was a public act of humility: you were admitting you needed to be washed clean.

Then some Pharisees and Sadducees show up. These were the religious elite. The Pharisees were known for strict devotion to God's law and the traditions around it. The Sadducees were the wealthy, priestly upper class connected to the temple. They didn't agree with each other on much, but they were the people who were supposed to have God figured out.

John looks at them and calls them a "brood of vipers." Then he says this: "And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham."

That's a stunning thing to say. These men were counting on their family background and religious status. John says God is not impressed by your pedigree. He's looking for fruit, a changed life. Being raised around religion is not the same as knowing God. That's a word worth hearing if you grew up in church and feel like you've heard it all.

John also tells them that someone far greater is coming after him. John says he isn't worthy even to carry His sandals. This coming one will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire, and He'll separate wheat from chaff.

Then Jesus arrives from Galilee and asks to be baptized. John tries to stop Him: I need to be baptized by You, and You are coming to

me? It's a fair question. Jesus had no sin to repent of. But Jesus says it is fitting "to fulfill all righteousness." He is stepping into the water alongside sinners, identifying with the very people He came to save. From the start, He puts Himself where we are.

As Jesus comes up out of the water, the heavens open. The Spirit of God descends like a dove and rests on Him. And a voice from heaven speaks. In one scene, you have the Father speaking, the Son being baptized, and the Spirit descending. Christians later used the word "Trinity" to describe this: one God in three persons. Matthew doesn't explain it here. He just shows it.

Notice what the Father says. Jesus hasn't preached a sermon or performed a single miracle yet. And the Father's verdict is already in.

KEY VERSE

This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.

Matthew 3:17 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. John told religious leaders that their background and family wouldn't save them. What "background" might people today rely on instead of actually following God?
2. Why do you think Jesus chose to be baptized when He had no sin to confess?
3. The Father says He's pleased with Jesus before Jesus has done any public ministry. What does that tell you about where identity comes from?

TRY THIS *Write down one area of your life where "turning around" would actually look like something specific this week.*

CHAPTER 4

Forty Days, Three Offers

Matthew 4:1–11

Right after the heavens open and the Father calls Jesus His beloved Son, the Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness "to be tempted by the devil." Not exactly the celebration you'd expect after a moment like that. But Matthew wants you to see something: being loved by God doesn't mean you'll never be tested. Sometimes it means you're about to be.

Jesus fasts for forty days and forty nights. If you know your Old Testament, forty should ring a bell. Israel wandered in the wilderness for forty years after leaving Egypt, and they failed test after test. They complained about food. They put God to the test. They worshiped a golden calf. Now Jesus, God's Son, enters the wilderness to face the same kinds of tests Israel failed.

And at the end of those forty days, Matthew says, with classic understatement, "he was hungry."

Test one: "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." Notice the "if." The devil is poking at the identity the Father just announced. Prove it. Use Your power for Yourself. Jesus answers by quoting Deuteronomy: "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God." Jesus

is starving, and He still won't take a shortcut around His Father's will.

Test two: the devil takes Him to the highest point of the temple in Jerusalem and says, go ahead, jump. Then the devil quotes Scripture himself, Psalm 91, about angels catching you so you won't strike your foot against a stone. That should get your attention. The devil knows the Bible. He can quote it accurately and twist its meaning completely. Knowing verses is not the same as knowing God. Jesus answers with Scripture used correctly: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." Trusting God is different from trying to force His hand.

Test three: the devil shows Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. "All this I will give you," he says, "if you will bow down and worship me." This is the big one. Jesus came to be King. Here's a way to get the crown without the cross. No suffering, no rejection, no nails. Just one small act of bowing to the wrong master.

Jesus refuses: "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'" And the devil leaves. Angels come and take care of Him.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Why Jesus Kept Quoting Deuteronomy**
>
> All three of Jesus' answers come from Deuteronomy 6 and 8, part of Moses' instructions to Israel as they were about to enter the Promised Land. These were passages about the very wilderness tests Israel failed. Jesus isn't just pulling random verses. He's showing that where Israel fell, He stands. Matthew's Jewish readers would have caught it.

Look at the shape of these temptations. Satisfy yourself. Prove yourself. Promote yourself. They're not ancient problems; they're the same three pressures you see on any feed today. Get what you

want right now. Make people see that you're special. Gain the world on terms that cost you your soul.

There are a few honest takeaways here. First, temptation is not sin. Jesus was tempted, and He never sinned. Feeling the pull is not the same as giving in. Second, Jesus fought back with Scripture He actually knew, understood, and believed. He didn't win by trying harder in the moment. He won because His mind was already full of God's words. Third, the devil's offers always sound reasonable. They usually come right when you're tired and hungry, and they always include a small "if."

And finally: Jesus passed the test we keep failing. That matters more than we can see yet. Matthew is setting up something huge. The King doesn't just give us an example; He stands in our place.

KEY VERSE

It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'

Matthew 4:4 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The devil quoted Scripture but twisted it. How can people today use the Bible to justify what they already wanted to do?
2. Which of the three temptations (satisfy yourself, prove yourself, promote yourself) feels most relevant to your generation? Why?
3. Jesus fought temptation with Scripture He already knew. If you were tempted tomorrow, what truth from God would you actually have ready?

TRY THIS *Pick one verse that speaks to a temptation you face and memorize it this week, word for word.*

CHAPTER 5

Fishermen, Not Scholars

Matthew 4:12–25

After John the Baptist is arrested, Jesus moves to Capernaum, a fishing town on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Matthew, of course, connects this to prophecy: Isaiah had said that the people of Galilee, the region of Zebulun and Naphtali, who sat in darkness, would see a great light.

That might not sound dramatic, but it was. Galilee was the north, far from Jerusalem and the temple, and many people in Jerusalem looked down on it. Jesus could have launched His ministry in the capital, among the influencers of His day. Instead He started in the place the important people overlooked.

His message picks up right where John's left off: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Galilee Under Rome**
>
> By Jesus' time, the land of Israel was under Roman control. After Herod the Great died, his kingdom was split among his sons; Herod Antipas ruled Galilee, and Judea was eventually governed directly by Roman officials. Taxes were heavy. Roman soldiers were a common sight. Many Jews hoped the Messiah would be a military leader who would drive Rome out. Keep that in mind; it explains a lot of confusion later in the story.

Then comes one of the most famous calls in history. Walking along the shore, Jesus sees two brothers, Simon (who will be called Peter) and Andrew, casting a net into the sea. They're professional fishermen. "Come, follow me," Jesus says, "and I will send you out to fish for people." And Matthew says that "at once they left their nets and followed him." A little farther along, He sees two more brothers, James and John, in a boat with their father, Zebedee, mending their nets. He calls them too, and they immediately leave the boat and their father and follow.

To feel the weight of this, it helps to know how teachers usually worked back then. A Jewish rabbi didn't usually go recruiting. Students applied. The brightest young men studied for years and tried to attach themselves to a famous teacher. These four were not that. They were working guys with fish on their hands. Jesus skipped the honors students and went to the docks.

That's not because education is bad. It's because the Kingdom doesn't start with your résumé. Jesus didn't ask them what they knew. He told them what He would do with them. "I will send you out" is a promise that the real transformation is His work, not theirs.

The call also cost something. Nets were their livelihood. Zebedee was their dad. Following Jesus wasn't added to their schedule; it reorganized their whole life. That's going to be a theme in Matthew. Jesus doesn't ask for an hour a week. He asks for everything, and promises something better than what you give up.

Next, Matthew gives us a summary of Jesus' early ministry. He travels throughout Galilee, teaching in synagogues, preaching the good news of the Kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and sickness among the people. News spreads all the way to Syria.

People bring everyone who is sick: those in severe pain, those oppressed by demons, people with seizures, people who are paralyzed. And He heals them.

Huge crowds start following Him from Galilee, from the Decapolis (a cluster of Greek-speaking cities), from Jerusalem, Judea, and beyond the Jordan. The fishermen who dropped their nets now find themselves at the center of the biggest movement in the region.

Here is a question to sit with: Why would four grown men walk away from their jobs for someone they'd just met? Matthew doesn't give us their inner thoughts. Maybe they had heard Jesus before; other Gospels suggest some of them had. Either way, Matthew's point is clear. When Jesus calls, the right response is not to negotiate. It's to follow.

It's also worth noticing who Jesus didn't call first: the scribes, the priests, the people with the best reputation for knowing God. Not because He didn't care about them, but because the ones who already think they're qualified usually don't feel any need to follow anyone.

KEY VERSE

"Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people."

Matthew 4:19 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Jesus didn't call the most educated or impressive people first. Why might that be good news for you?
2. Peter, Andrew, James, and John left their nets "immediately." What "nets" make it hard for people today to follow Jesus fully?
3. Jesus said, "I will send you out to fish for people." How does it change things to know that following Jesus is about what He does in you, not just what you do for Him?

CHAPTER 6

The Upside-Down Kingdom

Matthew 5:1–16

Matthew 5–7 is called the Sermon on the Mount, and it may be the most famous speech ever given. Even people who don't follow Jesus quote it. Jesus goes up on a mountain, sits down (the normal posture for a Jewish teacher), and begins to teach. If you know the Old Testament, the picture is deliberate: Moses went up a mountain to receive God's law. Now Jesus goes up a mountain and teaches with His own authority.

He starts with a series of statements we call the Beatitudes, from the Latin word for "blessed." And right away, He flips everything.

Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the gentle. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the pure in heart. Blessed are the peacemakers. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake.

Read that list again and compare it to the list the world would write. Blessed are the confident. Blessed are the popular. Blessed are the people who never let anyone see them sweat. Blessed are the ones who win the argument. Jesus' list sounds almost backwards.

"Poor in spirit" doesn't mean having low self-esteem. It means knowing you are spiritually bankrupt on your own; you have

nothing to bring to God that earns His approval. That's the doorway into the whole Kingdom. And notice it's the first one. The Kingdom of Heaven doesn't start with people who have it all together. It starts with people who know they don't.

That's a hard sell for anyone who thinks they have life figured out. It always has been. The people in Jesus' day who were most sure of their own righteousness were the ones who struggled most to receive Him. The ones who knew they were empty got filled.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **What "Blessed" Really Means**
>
> The Greek word is makarios. It doesn't mean "lucky" or "happy" in a shallow sense. It describes someone who is in a good place before God, whose life is ultimately well, even if their circumstances don't look like it yet. Each Beatitude includes a promise: they will be comforted, they will be filled, they will see God. The blessing is real, even when it isn't visible yet.

"Those who mourn" includes people grieving loss, but it also points to people who are honestly broken over sin and the brokenness of the world. "The meek" (sometimes translated "the gentle") are not weak. Meekness is strength under control: someone who could retaliate but doesn't. Jesus says those are the people who will inherit the earth. Not the loudest. Not the most aggressive.

The last Beatitude is the most surprising: blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for great is your reward in heaven. Jesus is not promising His followers an easy life. He is promising that if they suffer for Him, they're in good company: the prophets were treated the same way.

Then Jesus turns to identity. "You are the salt of the earth." In the ancient world, salt was precious. It preserved food from rotting and gave it flavor. Jesus' followers are meant to slow down decay and

bring something good to the world around them. But salt that loses its saltiness is good for nothing.

"You are the light of the world." A city on a hill can't be hidden, and nobody lights a lamp and puts it under a basket. Light exists to be seen. Then He adds the reason: let your light shine so people see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven. Not so they'll be impressed with you. So they'll be pointed to God.

Notice what Jesus does not say. He doesn't say "try to become salt" or "work hard to become light." He says you are. Identity comes first; behavior follows. Jesus is describing what His people are, and then calling them to live like it.

KEY VERSE

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew 5:3 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Which Beatitude seems most "upside down" compared to what our culture celebrates? Why?
2. Why might being "poor in spirit" be the starting point for everything else in the Kingdom?
3. Jesus says His followers are salt and light. What would it look like for your group of friends or your school to actually notice the difference?

TRY THIS *Rewrite the Beatitudes the way the world would write them. Then compare the two lists side by side.*

CHAPTER 7

Higher Than the Rules

Matthew 5:17–48

If you were listening to Jesus for the first time, you might start to wonder whether He was throwing out the Bible. So He addresses it directly: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them."

Then He says something that would have shocked the crowd: unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven. The Pharisees were the most careful rule-keepers anyone knew. If they weren't good enough, who was? Jesus is about to show that God's standard goes far deeper than the rules. It goes all the way to the heart.

He does this with six statements that follow a pattern: "You have heard that it was said… But I tell you…" That second part is astonishing. Rabbis usually quoted other rabbis. Jesus quotes no one. He speaks as if He has the authority to say what God's law really means. Because He does.

Anger. You've heard "You shall not murder." But I tell you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be in danger of judgment. Calling someone "Raca" (an Aramaic insult meaning something like "empty-head") or "You fool!" puts you in danger too. Jesus traces murder back to its root: contempt. Most people have

never killed anyone. Almost everyone has looked down on someone and written them off. Jesus says that's the same disease at an earlier stage. He even says that if you're about to worship and remember someone has something against you, leave your offering, go make it right, and then come back. Reconciliation is more urgent than religious activity.

Lust. You've heard "You shall not commit adultery." But I tell you that everyone who looks at a woman to lust after her has already committed adultery in his heart. In a world where explicit content is a click away, that may be one of the most countercultural sentences in the Bible. Jesus then says that if your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out; it's better to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. He is using hyperbole, deliberate exaggeration, not prescribing self-harm. His point is that sin is serious enough to take drastic action against. Delete the app. Change the habit. Walk away from the situation. Whatever it takes.

Marriage. Some teachers of the day allowed a man to divorce his wife for almost any reason. Jesus pushes back hard, treating marriage as a covenant that is not to be tossed aside casually. He'll come back to this in chapter 19.

Promises. People in Jesus' day had elaborate systems for oaths: swearing by heaven, by Jerusalem, by your own head, with loopholes for which oaths "counted." Jesus cuts through it: let your "yes" be yes and your "no" be no. Be the kind of person whose word doesn't need backup.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Second Mile**
>
> Under Roman occupation, a soldier could legally force a civilian to carry his gear for one mile. Imagine a Roman soldier ordering you to drop what you're doing and haul his pack. Jesus says: go with him two. It was a startling way to

> respond to the occupying enemy, refusing both hatred and helplessness by choosing to give more than was demanded.

Revenge. “Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth” was originally a law meant to keep courts from punishing too harshly. People had turned it into a personal license for payback. Jesus says don’t retaliate against an evildoer. If someone slaps your right cheek (in that culture, often a backhanded insult), turn the other also. If someone forces you to go a mile, go two.

Enemies. You’ve heard “Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” The Old Testament never actually commands hating your enemy, but some people had concluded it was allowed. Jesus says love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you. God sends sun and rain on good and evil people alike. Anyone can love people who love them back. Even tax collectors do that.

He ends with a line that should stop every know-it-all cold: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Not “pretty good.” Perfect. If you read this section honestly, it’s not a self-improvement plan. It’s a mirror. Nobody measures up, not the Pharisees, not you, not me. Which is exactly the point. We are going to need more than better rule-keeping. We are going to need a Savior.

KEY VERSE

But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,

Matthew 5:44 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Jesus traces murder back to anger and adultery back to lust. Why does He focus on the heart instead of just behavior?
2. Which of Jesus' "But I tell you" statements is hardest for you personally? Be honest.
3. If nobody can be "perfect" like the Father, why would Jesus say it? What does that reveal about our need for Him?

TRY THIS *Pray by name for someone who has treated you badly, every day this week. Ask God to bless them.*

CHAPTER 8

Performing for an Audience

Matthew 6

The English word “hypocrite” comes from a Greek word for a stage actor, someone who performed behind a mask. In Matthew 6, Jesus takes aim at religious people who treat their faith like a performance.

He starts with a warning: be careful not to do your good deeds in front of people in order to be seen by them. If you do, you have no reward from your Father in heaven. Then He gives three examples, the three big religious practices of His day: giving, praying, and fasting.

Giving. When you give to the needy, don’t “announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do”. Whether or not anyone literally blew a horn, the image is clear: they wanted everyone to notice. Jesus says those people “have received their reward.” They wanted applause, and they got it. That’s all they’ll get. Instead, give so quietly that your left hand doesn’t know what your right hand is doing.

If Jesus were teaching today, He might ask how many good deeds would still happen if nobody could post about them.

Prayer. The hypocrites love to pray standing in the synagogues and on street corners so people can see them. Jesus says to go into your

room, shut the door, and pray to your Father in secret. He also warns against babbling on and on, as if God is impressed by word count. Your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.

Then He gives His followers a model, what we call the Lord's Prayer. It begins with God, not us: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Only then does it move to our needs: daily bread, forgiveness, protection from temptation and the evil one. Notice the word "daily." Jesus teaches us to depend on God one day at a time, not to stockpile.

Right after the prayer, Jesus emphasizes one line: if you forgive others, your Father will forgive you; if you don't forgive others, neither will your Father forgive you. Forgiveness isn't a bonus feature. A heart that refuses to forgive is a heart that hasn't understood how much it has been forgiven.

Fasting. When you fast, don't put on a gloomy face to let everyone know how spiritual you are. Wash your face and look normal. God sees what's done in secret.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Pharisees: Not Cartoon Villains**
>
> It's easy to picture the Pharisees as mustache-twirling bad guys. They weren't. They were serious, disciplined, devoted people who memorized Scripture and tried hard to obey God in everyday life. Many ordinary Jews admired them. That's what makes Jesus' warnings so sobering: hypocrisy usually doesn't feel like hypocrisy from the inside. It feels like being a good person. Anyone who takes religion seriously, including church kids, is at risk of the same thing.

Then Jesus turns to money. Don't store up treasures on earth, where moths and rust destroy and thieves break in and steal. Store up treasures in heaven. "For where your treasure is, there your heart

will be also." Your spending, your attention, and your time are a map of what you actually love.

He says something even more pointed: "No one can serve two masters… You cannot serve both God and money." The word behind "money" is the Aramaic mammon, wealth or possessions. Jesus talks about money as if it's a rival god competing for your loyalty, because it is.

And then He addresses something every generation deals with: worry. Don't worry about what you'll eat, drink, or wear. Look at the birds; they don't plant or harvest, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Aren't you worth more than they are? Look at the wildflowers; even King Solomon in all his glory wasn't dressed like one of these. Then comes an honest question: Can any of you add one moment to your life by worrying?

Jesus isn't saying planning is wrong or that real problems aren't real. He's saying that anxiety assumes God isn't paying attention. He is. So He gives a different focus: "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." And He ends with a line that is almost funny in its realism: don't worry about tomorrow, because tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

KEY VERSE

But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Matthew 6:33 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. How does social media make it easier to "perform" our faith or our goodness? Is it ever possible to share something good without performing?
2. Jesus says your treasure reveals your heart. If someone looked at how you spend your money, time, and attention, what would they conclude you treasure?
3. What do people your age worry about most? What would "seek first his kingdom" look like in one of those areas?

TRY THIS *Do one genuinely good thing this week that no one will ever find out about. Don't tell anyone. Not even later.*

CHAPTER 9

Specks, Logs, and Sand

Matthew 7

The last chapter of the Sermon on the Mount opens with one of the most quoted and most misused verses in the Bible: “Do not judge, or you too will be judged.”

People often use that line to mean “nobody can ever say anything I do is wrong.” That’s not what Jesus means. A few verses later He tells His followers to watch out for false prophets and to recognize them by their fruit, which takes discernment. What Jesus is targeting is a condemning, self-righteous spirit: the person who loves pointing out everyone else’s faults while ignoring their own.

He makes the point with a picture that’s meant to be ridiculous. Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye but ignore the beam (a huge wooden plank) in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the beam out of your own eye, and then you’ll see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s.

Picture someone with a two-by-four sticking out of their face offering to help with your eyelash. That’s how we look when we’re harsh about other people’s sins and relaxed about our own. Notice, though, that Jesus doesn’t say “never help anyone with their speck.” He says deal with yourself first, and then you’ll be able to help with humility.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Rabbis and Their Authority**

When Jesus finishes this sermon, Matthew says the crowds were "amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law." Teachers of the law usually built their teaching on earlier authorities: "Rabbi so-and-so says..." Jesus kept saying "But I tell you." He didn't cite experts. He spoke like the One the Scriptures were about.

Then Jesus talks about prayer again. Ask, and it will be given you. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and it will be opened to you. If human parents, who are flawed, know how to give good gifts to their kids, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask Him? God is not reluctant. He's not looking for loopholes to avoid answering you.

Next comes what's often called the Golden Rule: whatever you want people to do to you, do the same to them. Plenty of ancient teachers had a negative version: don't do to others what you don't want done to you. Jesus' version is active. It's not just "don't hurt people." It's "go out of your way to do good."

Then the sermon takes a serious turn. Jesus describes two gates. The gate that leads to destruction is wide and the road is easy, and many go that way. The gate that leads to life is narrow, and few find it. Following Jesus isn't the path of least resistance. It never has been.

He warns about false prophets who come dressed like sheep but inside are hungry wolves. You'll know them by their fruit. A healthy tree produces good fruit; a diseased tree produces bad fruit. Charisma and big claims are not the test. Character is.

And then come some of the most frightening words Jesus ever spoke. "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father

who is in heaven." On that day many will say, Lord, Lord, didn't we prophesy in Your name, cast out demons, and do many mighty works? And Jesus will say, "I never knew you."

Read that slowly. These people had religious language, religious activity, and maybe even impressive results. What they didn't have was a real relationship with Jesus. They knew about Him. He didn't know them. It's possible to be around church your whole life, know all the answers, and still miss Jesus.

He closes with a story. Two men build houses. One builds on rock, the other on sand. From the street, they probably looked the same. Then the storm hits: rain, floods, wind. The house on the rock stands. The house on the sand collapses, "and it fell with a great crash." The difference wasn't what they heard. Both heard Jesus' words. The difference was that one of them did what Jesus said.

Knowing is not enough. The storm always reveals the foundation.

KEY VERSE

Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.

Matthew 7:24 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What's the difference between the judging Jesus condemns and the discernment He expects His followers to have?
2. Jesus warns that some people who said "Lord, Lord" never actually knew Him. What's the difference between knowing about Jesus and knowing Him?
3. Both builders heard the same words. What's one thing Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount that you know but aren't actually doing?

CHAPTER 10

Who Has This Kind of Authority?

Matthew 8–9

The Sermon on the Mount showed Jesus' authority in words. Chapters 8 and 9 show it in action. Matthew stacks story after story, and the question running through all of them is the one the disciples ask in the middle of a storm: "What kind of man is this?"

It starts with a man with leprosy, a skin disease that made people ritually unclean under the law. Lepers had to live separated from everyone else. This man may not have felt human contact in years. He kneels and says, Lord, if You want to, You can make me clean. Jesus reaches out and touches him. Normally touching a leper would make you unclean. With Jesus, it worked the other way. His touch made the leper clean.

Then a Roman centurion, an officer in the occupying army, asks Jesus to heal his servant. He tells Jesus not to bother coming to his house; just say the word, because he understands authority. Jesus is amazed. "Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith." Jesus then says that many will come from east and west to share the feast in the Kingdom, while some who assumed they belonged will be thrown out. A Roman soldier understood who Jesus was better than many religious insiders.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Tax Collectors: The Most Hated Job in Town**
> Rome collected taxes through local contractors. Tax collectors often charged extra and pocketed the difference, and they did it with Roman backing. To many Jews, a tax collector was both a thief and a traitor working for the enemy. Pharisees lumped them in with "sinners." Now remember: the man who wrote this Gospel was one of them.

Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law of a fever. Two would-be followers make big promises, and Jesus answers with blunt realism: "Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." Following Him isn't a comfortable upgrade.

Then the famous storm. Jesus is asleep in the boat while waves crash over it. The disciples wake Him, terrified. He rebukes them for their little faith, then rebukes the wind and the sea, and there's a great calm. In the Old Testament, only God commands the seas. The disciples are left staring at each other.

On the other side of the lake, two violently demon-possessed men come out of the tombs. The demons recognize Jesus instantly: what do we have to do with You, Son of God? Jesus sends them into a herd of pigs that rushes into the sea. The whole town comes out and asks Jesus to leave. They seem more upset about their pigs than amazed that two men are free.

Back home, friends bring a paralyzed man to Jesus. Jesus looks at him and says, your sins are forgiven. Some teachers of the law say to themselves, "This fellow is blaspheming!" They're right about one thing: only God can forgive sins. So Jesus proves He has that authority by telling the man to get up and walk. And he does.

Then Jesus walks past a tax booth and sees a man named Matthew. "Follow me." Matthew gets up and follows. That evening many tax collectors and sinners come and eat with Jesus. The Pharisees ask,

"Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" Jesus answers, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick." Then He quotes the prophet Hosea: God desires mercy, not sacrifice. He came not to call the righteous, but sinners.

Here's the sting. Everybody needs the doctor. The question is who's willing to admit they're sick. The Pharisees thought they were healthy. Matthew knew he wasn't.

More stories follow. A local ruler's daughter has died, and Jesus raises her. A woman who has suffered from bleeding for twelve years touches the edge of His cloak, and Jesus says her faith has made her well. Two blind men call Him "Son of David," a royal Messiah title, and He restores their sight. He casts a demon out of a man who couldn't speak. The crowds say nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel. The Pharisees have a different explanation: He does it by the prince of demons.

Same miracles. Opposite conclusions. The evidence was right in front of them. It wasn't a lack of information that kept the Pharisees from Jesus. It was their hearts.

Matthew ends the section with Jesus looking at the crowds with compassion, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few."

KEY VERSE

It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.

Matthew 9:12–13 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The Pharisees and the crowds saw the same miracles and reached opposite conclusions. Why doesn't more evidence always lead to more faith?
2. Matthew, a tax collector, wrote this Gospel. How does that change the way you read Jesus' words about calling sinners?
3. The town asked Jesus to leave after He freed two men. Why might people prefer to keep Jesus at a distance even after seeing what He can do?

CHAPTER 11

Sheep Among Wolves

Matthew 10

Up to now, the disciples have mostly watched. In chapter 10, Jesus sends them out. Matthew lists the twelve apostles by name, and it's a strange group. There are fishermen, including Peter, Andrew, James, and John. There's Matthew, labeled "the tax collector." There's Simon "the Zealot," a name usually understood to mean he was associated with fierce Jewish nationalism. And there's Judas Iscariot, "who betrayed him."

> BACKGROUND CHECK **A Tax Collector and a Zealot Walk Into a Room...**
>
> Zealots, broadly speaking, were people zealous for Israel's independence, and some later turned to violent revolt against Rome. Tax collectors worked for Rome. Putting Matthew and Simon the Zealot on the same team would be like putting bitter political enemies in the same group chat and telling them to love each other. Only Jesus could hold a group like that together.

Jesus gives them authority to heal the sick and cast out demons, and sends them first to "the lost sheep of Israel." They're to proclaim, "The kingdom of heaven has come near." Freely you have received, He says; freely give. No packing extra money or gear. Depend on God and on the hospitality of the people who welcome you.

Then Jesus gives them the most honest recruitment speech ever given. “I am sending you out like sheep among wolves.” Be wise as serpents and harmless as doves. People will hand you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues. You’ll stand before governors and kings because of Me. Families will turn against each other. You will be hated by everyone because of My name. But whoever endures to the end will be saved.

Most leaders trying to build a movement oversell the benefits and hide the costs. Jesus does the opposite. He tells them up front that following Him could cost them everything. History shows He wasn’t exaggerating. According to early Christian tradition, most of these men would eventually die for their faith.

Why would anyone sign up for that? Jesus gives them reasons not to be afraid. First, if they called the master of the house “Beelzebul,” they’ll do the same to His servants. Being mistreated for Jesus means you’re in His company. Second, the truth will come out. Everything hidden will be revealed. Third, and this is the big one: “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.” The worst people can do is limited. God’s authority is not.

And then, right after that sobering line, comes one of the most tender things Jesus ever said. Two sparrows sell for a tiny coin, yet not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father. Even the hairs on your head are all numbered. So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.

Fear God, and you don’t have to fear anything else. Know that God sees you down to the hair, and you can face a hostile world.

Then the cost gets personal. Jesus says that whoever acknowledges Him before others, He will acknowledge before His Father, and

whoever denies Him before others, He will deny before His Father. He says He didn't come to bring peace but a sword. He doesn't mean violence; He means that following Him will divide people, sometimes even families. Whoever loves father or mother, son or daughter, more than Jesus isn't worthy of Him. Whoever doesn't take up his cross and follow isn't worthy of Him.

In Roman-occupied Israel, everyone knew what it meant when a man was seen carrying a cross. He was on his way to die. Jesus uses that image long before His own crucifixion. Following Him means dying to your own plans and control.

But then He flips it again: whoever tries to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for Jesus' sake will find it. The life you try to protect at all costs is the one you'll lose. The life you hand over to Jesus is the one you'll actually get to keep.

He ends with a quiet promise. Even someone who gives one of His followers a cup of cold water won't lose their reward. Nothing done for Jesus is wasted.

KEY VERSE

Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.

Matthew 10:39 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Jesus put a tax collector and a Zealot on the same team. Who would be the hardest person for you to be "on the same team" with? What would it take?
2. Jesus was brutally honest about the cost of following Him. Why do you think He didn't hide it?
3. Jesus said, "Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it." What does that look like in normal life?

TRY THIS *Look up which countries today are hardest places to be a Christian. Pray for believers there by name this week.*

CHAPTER 12

Hidden from the Experts

Matthew 11–12

John the Baptist is in prison, and he's having doubts. He sends messengers to ask Jesus: "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" This is the same John who baptized Jesus and heard the voice from heaven. If you've ever had doubts, you're in good company.

Jesus doesn't scold him. He tells the messengers to report what they see: the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor hear good news. Those are echoes of Isaiah's prophecies about what would happen when God came to save. Jesus is saying: look at the evidence and connect it to the Scriptures. Then He turns to the crowd and praises John. Among those born of women, no one has risen greater.

Then He calls out the crowd itself. They're like kids in the marketplace complaining that nobody will play their game. John came fasting, and people said he had a demon. Jesus came eating and drinking, and they called Him "a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners." Some people will always find a reason to dismiss God's messengers. The problem isn't the messenger; it's that they don't want the message.

He warns towns like Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum, which saw many of His miracles and still didn't repent. Then He prays something remarkable: "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children."

Here's the thread of the whole book, said out loud. God isn't against intelligence. The "wise and learned" here are people who are wise in their own eyes, who think they've already got God figured out. The "little children" are the humble, the ones willing to receive. Truth about God isn't reserved for the experts. It's given to the teachable.

Then comes one of the most beautiful invitations in Scripture: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart. My yoke is easy, My burden is light.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **What's a Yoke?**
>
> A yoke was a wooden frame that joined animals together to pull a plow. Rabbis spoke of taking on "the yoke" of the law, the whole system of religious obligations. Many people felt crushed by the rules the religious leaders kept adding. Jesus offers a different yoke: still a real commitment, but one that fits, shared with Someone who carries the weight with you.

Chapter 12 shows exactly what kind of burdens Jesus meant. His disciples are hungry and pick some grain on the Sabbath, the day of rest. The Pharisees object that it's unlawful. Jesus points out that David ate holy bread when he was hungry, and priests work in the temple on the Sabbath. Then He says, "Something greater than the temple is here." And, "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."

Then He heals a man with a withered hand in a synagogue on the Sabbath. The Pharisees had been watching to catch Him. Jesus asks:

if your sheep fell into a pit on the Sabbath, wouldn't you pull it out? How much more valuable is a person? It is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.

Their response? The Pharisees go out and plot how to destroy Him. Think about that. A man's hand was just healed in front of them, and their reaction was to plan a murder.

Later, when Jesus heals a demon-oppressed man who was blind and mute, the Pharisees again claim He is working by Beelzebul, the prince of demons. Jesus shows how illogical that is: a kingdom divided against itself can't stand. Why would Satan fight Satan? Then He gives a serious warning about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, which in context means looking straight at the Spirit's work and deliberately calling it evil. Worried that you've committed it? That worry is itself a sign your heart is still soft toward God. These men were hardening themselves against the truth with their eyes wide open.

They then demand a sign. Jesus says the only sign they'll get is the sign of Jonah: just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the huge fish, the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. It's a preview of His death and resurrection. Even pagan Nineveh repented when Jonah preached, He says, and "something greater than Jonah is here."

KEY VERSE

I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children.

Matthew 11:25 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Jesus didn't rebuke John for doubting; He pointed him to evidence. How should Christians handle honest doubts?
2. What's the difference between being smart and being "wise in your own eyes"? Can a smart person also be humble?
3. The Pharisees saw a miracle and plotted murder. How can religious rules become more important to someone than people?

TRY THIS *Read Matthew 11:28-30 every morning this week before you look at your phone.*

CHAPTER 13

Stories with a Hidden Edge

Matthew 13

Jesus was a master storyteller. In Matthew 13, He teaches the crowds using parables, short stories drawn from everyday life like farming, fishing, baking, and business, that carry a deeper meaning about the Kingdom of Heaven.

The disciples ask Him a good question: why do You speak to them in parables? Jesus' answer is surprising. Parables reveal and conceal at the same time. To people who are hungry to understand, the stories open up the truth. To people who have already decided they don't want it, the stories stay closed. Jesus quotes Isaiah: they keep on hearing but never understand, because their hearts have grown dull. A parable is a test of the listener. Will you lean in and ask, or shrug and walk away?

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Why Farming Stories?**
>
> Most of Jesus' listeners were farmers, fishermen, or laborers. Ancient farmers often scattered seed by hand across the field, and some of it inevitably landed on paths, rocky patches, or among weeds. Everyone in the crowd had seen it a hundred times. Jesus took the most ordinary scenes in their lives and made them windows into eternal truth.

The first story is the Parable of the Sower. A farmer scatters seed. Some falls on the path, and birds eat it. Some falls on rocky ground,

sprouts quickly, but dies in the sun because it has no root. Some falls among thorns that choke it. Some falls on good soil and produces a huge crop, thirty, sixty, even a hundred times what was sown.

Jesus explains it. The seed is the message of the Kingdom. The path is someone who hears but doesn't understand, and the evil one snatches it away. The rocky ground is someone who receives the message with joy, but when trouble or persecution comes, they fall away. The thorns are someone in whom "the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word." The good soil is someone who hears, understands, and bears fruit.

Notice that the seed is the same in every case. The difference is the soil. Same sermon, same Bible, same youth group, and wildly different results. The question isn't whether you've heard the message. It's what kind of heart it landed in.

Next, the Parable of the Weeds. A farmer sows good seed, but an enemy sneaks in at night and sows weeds. The servants want to pull them out, but the master says no. You might uproot the wheat with them. Wait until the harvest, then sort them out. Jesus explains that at the end of the age, God will separate the righteous from the evildoers. In the meantime, good and evil grow side by side. That's a realistic picture. The Kingdom has come, but not yet in its fullness. God is patient, and judgment will come in His timing, not ours.

Then come a few quick snapshots. The Kingdom is like a mustard seed, among the smallest seeds people planted, that grows into a plant so big birds nest in its branches. It's like yeast that a woman works into a large batch of flour until all of it is leavened. The Kingdom starts small and quiet, and it grows until it fills everything.

Twelve ordinary followers in a corner of the Roman Empire grew into a faith that has spread throughout the world.

Two more parables make the same point from different angles. A man finds treasure hidden in a field, and in his joy he sells everything he has to buy that field. A merchant finds one pearl of great value and sells everything to get it. Notice: neither man is sad about what he gave up. They're thrilled. Following Jesus costs everything, but when you see what He's worth, it doesn't feel like a loss.

A final parable compares the Kingdom to a fishing net that catches everything, good and bad, and gets sorted at the end. Then Jesus asks His disciples, "Have you understood all these things?" They say yes. (Bold claim. They'll prove later that they hadn't quite.)

The chapter ends back in Jesus' hometown of Nazareth. The people are amazed at His teaching, but then they start asking: isn't this the carpenter's son? Don't we know His mother and brothers? "And they took offense at him." Jesus says, "A prophet is not without honor except in his own town and in his own home." And He did not do many miracles there "because of their lack of faith."

They thought they already knew all about Jesus. That familiarity kept them from seeing Him.

KEY VERSE

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.

Matthew 13:44 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. In the Parable of the Sower, which type of soil do you think is most common among people your age? Which one describes you honestly right now?
2. The people of Nazareth thought they already knew all about Jesus. How can growing up around Jesus make it harder to really see Him?
3. The man who found the treasure sold everything "in his joy." Why might following Jesus feel more like a loss than a treasure to some people?

CHAPTER 14

Bread in the Desert, Feet on the Water

Matthew 14

Chapter 14 opens with a flashback. Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great and ruler of Galilee, hears about Jesus and is terrified. He thinks Jesus is John the Baptist come back from the dead. Why would he think that? Because Herod had John killed.

Here's the backstory. John had publicly told Herod that it wasn't lawful for him to have Herodias, who had been his brother's wife. Herod arrested John, and he wanted to kill him, but he was afraid of the crowds, who considered John a prophet. Then, at Herod's birthday party, Herodias' daughter danced and pleased him so much that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked. Prompted by her mother, she asked for John's head on a platter.

Matthew says Herod was sorry, but because of his oath and his dinner guests, he ordered it done. John was beheaded in prison, and his head was brought out on a platter.

Think about why Herod did it. He didn't want to. He did it because he had made a reckless promise in front of important people and was too proud to back down. A man with all the power in Galilee

was controlled by what his guests would think. Peer pressure doesn't stop when you grow up. Sometimes it gets deadlier.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Herod Family Tree**
>
> Herod the Great (Matthew 2) tried to kill baby Jesus. His son Herod Antipas (Matthew 14) killed John the Baptist. Later, in the book of Acts, his grandson Herod Agrippa I executed the apostle James. Different Herods, same pattern: power that felt threatened by God's messengers.

When Jesus hears the news, He withdraws by boat to a remote place by Himself. Even Jesus needed space to grieve. But the crowds follow Him on foot. When He sees them, Matthew says, He had compassion on them and healed their sick. He set aside His own need to meet theirs.

As evening comes, the disciples suggest a practical solution: send the crowds away so they can buy food in the villages. Jesus says, "They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat." The disciples point out the obvious: they have only five loaves and two fish. Jesus says, bring them here to Me.

He has the people sit on the grass, takes the loaves and fish, looks up to heaven, gives thanks, breaks the bread, and gives it to the disciples to hand out. Everyone eats and is satisfied, and they pick up twelve baskets of leftovers. Matthew notes that about five thousand men ate, "besides women and children," so the actual number was likely much larger.

Jewish readers would have thought of Moses and the manna God provided in the wilderness. Here was someone feeding God's people in a deserted place again. Notice the method, too. Jesus didn't bypass the disciples. He took what little they had, blessed it, and put

it back in their hands to give away. That's still how He tends to work.

Right after this, Jesus sends the disciples ahead by boat and goes up a mountain alone to pray. During the night, the wind turns against the boat, and the disciples are struggling far from shore. Between three and six in the morning, Jesus comes to them, walking on the sea.

They panic and think He's a ghost. Jesus says, "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." Then Peter, being Peter, says: Lord, if it's You, command me to come to You on the water. Jesus says, "Come." And Peter steps out of the boat and actually walks on water toward Jesus.

Then he notices the wind. He gets scared, starts to sink, and cries out, "Lord, save me!" Immediately Jesus reaches out, grabs him, and says, "You of little faith… why did you doubt?"

Give Peter some credit. He was the only one who got out of the boat. His faith was real and also small, bold and also shaky. He took his eyes off Jesus and started looking at the storm. That's when he sank. But even his sinking ended in being rescued. When they climb into the boat, the wind stops, and the disciples worship Jesus: "Truly you are the Son of God."

KEY VERSE

Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him.
"You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?"

Matthew 14:31 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Herod killed John because he was too proud to back down in front of his guests. Where do you see that kind of pressure in your own life?
2. Jesus took five loaves and two fish, a ridiculously small amount, and fed thousands. What "small" thing could you offer Him?
3. Peter walked on water and then sank. Is he an example of great faith or little faith? Could he be both?

CHAPTER 15

Clean Hands, Dirty Hearts

Matthew 15

A delegation of Pharisees and scribes travels all the way from Jerusalem to Galilee to confront Jesus. Their complaint? His disciples don't wash their hands before they eat.

This wasn't about germs. Nobody knew about germs yet. It was about the "tradition of the elders," a large body of religious rules that had grown up around the law of Moses. Ceremonial handwashing was one of those traditions. The Pharisees treated these traditions as nearly equal to Scripture.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The "Fence Around the Law"**
>
> Many Jewish teachers wanted to protect people from accidentally breaking God's commands, so they added extra rules around them, like a fence around a cliff. The motive was often good. The problem was that over time, the fence started to matter more than the cliff, and human rules began to override God's actual commands.

Jesus answers their question with a question: "And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?" Then He gives an example. God said, "Honor your father and mother." But some people had found a loophole. They could declare their money "devoted to God," and then claim they couldn't use it to support

their aging parents. It sounded super spiritual. It was really a way to dodge responsibility while looking holy.

Jesus doesn't hold back. "You hypocrites!" Then He quotes Isaiah: these people honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. They worship Me in vain, teaching human rules as if they were doctrine.

Then He turns to the crowd and makes it simple: it's not what goes into your mouth that defiles you; it's what comes out of your mouth. The disciples, a little nervous, tell Jesus the Pharisees were offended. Jesus is not worried. "Leave them; they are blind guides. If the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit."

Peter asks Him to explain. Jesus does: food goes into your stomach and passes out of your body. But what comes out of your mouth comes from the heart. Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, and slander. Those are what make a person unclean, not eating with unwashed hands.

This might be the most important point in the chapter. The problem with people isn't on the outside. You can't fix a heart problem with a handwashing ritual, a dress code, or a list of rules. Rules can shape behavior, but they can't change hearts. Only God can do that.

Then Jesus goes north, into Gentile territory near Tyre and Sidon, and something happens that can be uncomfortable to read. A Canaanite woman comes to Him, crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly." Canaanites were ancient enemies of Israel. Notice what she calls Him: "Son of David," the royal Messiah title. She knows who He is.

At first Jesus doesn't answer her. The disciples want her sent away. Jesus says He was sent to the lost sheep of Israel. She kneels and says, "Lord, help me." Jesus says it isn't right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.

That sounds harsh. But watch the woman. She doesn't storm off. She answers with humble persistence and a quick mind: yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table. She isn't demanding a seat at the table. She just knows that even a crumb from Jesus is enough.

Jesus answers, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." Her daughter is healed that very hour.

Jesus seems to have been drawing out her faith and teaching His disciples something in the process. The religious leaders from Jerusalem, who had every advantage, came to criticize Him. A Gentile woman with no religious credentials came begging and walked away with Jesus praising her "great faith." The insiders missed it. The outsider got it.

The chapter ends with Jesus healing crowds by the Sea of Galilee: the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute. Then He feeds another huge crowd, four thousand men besides women and children, with seven loaves and a few small fish. Seven baskets of leftovers. Once again, Jesus has more than enough.

KEY VERSE

These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.

Matthew 15:8 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The Pharisees used religious loopholes to avoid caring for their parents. What are some modern ways people use religion to look good while avoiding what God actually asks?
2. Jesus says evil comes from the heart, not from outside. Do you agree that the main problem with people is internal? What does that mean for how they can be changed?
3. The Canaanite woman had no religious background but showed "great faith." What can we learn from her humility and persistence?

CHAPTER 16

The Question That Changes Everything

Matthew 16

The Pharisees and Sadducees, who usually couldn't stand each other, team up to test Jesus. They demand a sign from heaven. Jesus has just healed crowds and fed thousands. They want more.

Jesus points out the irony. You know how to read the sky: red sky at night means fair weather; red sky in the morning means a storm is coming. "You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times." They were experts on weather and Scripture, and somehow couldn't recognize the Messiah standing in front of them. The only sign they'll get, He says again, is the sign of Jonah.

Later, Jesus warns His disciples: beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees. The disciples look at each other and conclude He's upset because they forgot to bring bread. It's almost funny. Jesus has just fed two massive crowds with practically nothing, and they're worried about lunch. He reminds them of the miracles and explains that He means their teaching, which spreads through people like yeast through dough.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Caesarea Philippi**

Next Jesus takes His disciples to Caesarea Philippi, about 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee. The area had a famous shrine to the Greek god Pan, and the city had been rebuilt by Herod's son Philip and named in honor of Caesar. Pagan gods. Roman power. In that setting, Jesus asks the most important question in history.

He starts with a survey: "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" The disciples report the rumors. Some say John the Baptist. Others say Elijah. Others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets. Everybody had an opinion.

Then Jesus gets personal. "But what about you?" He asks. "Who do you say I am?"

It's still the question. Not what your parents think, not what your pastor thinks, not what the internet says. What do you say?

Simon Peter answers: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Jesus calls him blessed, and points out that "this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven." Peter didn't figure it out by being clever. God showed him.

Then Jesus says, "you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it." "Peter" means "rock." Christians have debated the details of this verse for centuries, but everyone agrees on the big picture: Jesus is going to build His church, His people, and death itself won't be able to stop it.

Jesus then tells the disciples not to tell anyone yet that He is the Messiah. Why? Because people had the wrong idea of what the Messiah would do. Most were expecting a political warrior king. And now Jesus reveals what kind of King He actually is.

He begins to explain that He must go to Jerusalem, suffer many things from the elders, chief priests, and scribes, be killed, and be raised on the third day.

Peter, fresh off the best answer of his life, decides he knows better. He takes Jesus aside and rebukes Him. "Never, Lord!" he says. "This shall never happen to you!"

Jesus turns around and says to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."

Five verses earlier, Peter received a revelation from the Father. Now he's echoing the devil's temptation from the wilderness: the crown without the cross. Within minutes, Peter goes from inspired to rebuked. Getting one thing right doesn't mean you understand everything. It's a lesson anyone who feels confident should take seriously.

Then Jesus spells out what following Him means for everyone: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Deny yourself means saying no to your own desire to be in charge. Take up your cross means being willing to die for Him. Follow means going where He goes.

Then the logic of the upside-down Kingdom: whoever tries to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for Jesus will find it. "What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?" You could have everything: followers, money, influence, the dream career. And if you lose your soul, you've made the worst trade imaginable.

KEY VERSE

"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Matthew 16:15–16 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Who do people at your school say Jesus is? How would you answer His question, "Who do you say I am?"
2. Peter went from giving the right answer to being called "Satan" in a few verses. What does that teach about spiritual pride?
3. Jesus asks, what good is it to gain the whole world and lose your soul? What are some ways people "trade their soul" for things that don't last?

CHAPTER 17

The Curtain Pulled Back

Matthew 17

Six days after Peter's confession, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up a high mountain by themselves. And there, in front of them, He is transfigured. His face shines like the sun, and His clothes become as white as light.

For a moment, the curtain is pulled back. The disciples had walked with Jesus for months, eating meals with Him, watching Him get tired and hungry. Now they see a glimpse of the glory that had been there all along. This is who Jesus really is.

Then two more figures appear: Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. Moses represents the Law; Elijah represents the Prophets. Together they stand for the entire Old Testament. Both of them had encountered God on a mountain. And here they are, talking with Jesus, as if to say: all of it was pointing to Him.

Peter, true to form, feels he has to say something. "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." Maybe he wanted to make the moment last. Maybe he didn't know what else to do. But his suggestion puts Jesus on the same level as Moses and Elijah: three great men, three equal tents.

Matthew says that "while he was still speaking," a bright cloud covers them and a voice comes from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"

God the Father interrupts Peter mid-sentence.

It's the same words the Father spoke at Jesus' baptism, with one addition: "Listen to him." Peter, stop talking. This isn't a moment for your plans. Moses and Elijah were great, but Jesus is in a category by Himself.

The disciples fall face down, terrified. Then Jesus comes, touches them, and says, get up, and don't be afraid. When they look up, they see no one except Jesus alone.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Why Elijah Matters**
>
> The last book of the Old Testament, Malachi, promised that God would send Elijah before the great day of the LORD. Jewish people still leave a place for Elijah at the Passover meal. On the way down the mountain, the disciples ask about this. Jesus explains that Elijah has already come, and they didn't recognize him; they did what they wanted to him. The disciples understand He's talking about John the Baptist.

At the bottom of the mountain, there's a mess waiting. A man kneels before Jesus and begs Him to have mercy on his son, who has seizures and suffers terribly, often falling into fire or water. He brought the boy to the disciples, but they couldn't heal him.

Jesus' response shows real frustration: "You unbelieving and perverse generation… how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?" Then He rebukes the demon, and the boy is healed instantly.

Afterward, the disciples ask privately, why couldn't we cast it out? Jesus says, because of your little faith. If you have faith as small as a

mustard seed, you could tell a mountain to move, and it would. Nothing would be impossible for you.

Notice the contrast. On the mountain, three disciples saw Jesus in glory. In the valley, the rest of them were failing at a task they'd done before. That's real life. Mountaintop moments are amazing, but most of life is lived in the valley, where faith gets tested. And Jesus' point isn't that you need huge faith. It's that even tiny faith in a huge God is enough.

As they gather in Galilee, Jesus tells them again that He will be betrayed, killed, and raised on the third day. This time Matthew says "the disciples were filled with grief." They're starting to hear the first part. The third-day part doesn't seem to be landing yet.

The chapter ends with an odd story. In Capernaum, collectors of the temple tax ask Peter if his teacher pays it. Jesus explains that, as the Son, He's actually exempt; kings don't tax their own children. But so as not to cause offense, He tells Peter to go fishing. The first fish he catches will have a coin in its mouth, enough to pay the tax for both of them. The Son of God, owner of the temple, pays the temple tax anyway, and provides Peter's too.

KEY VERSE

This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!

Matthew 17:5 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Peter wanted to put up three shelters, treating Jesus like one great man among others. How do people today put Jesus on the same level as other teachers or leaders?
2. God interrupted Peter with "Listen to him." What gets in the way of you actually listening to Jesus?
3. The mountaintop was glorious, but the valley was full of failure. How do you hold onto faith in the "valley" seasons of life?

TRY THIS *Spend ten minutes this week in total silence, no phone, no music, and read Matthew 17:1-8. Just listen.*

CHAPTER 18

Who's the Greatest? (Wrong Question)

Matthew 18

The disciples come to Jesus with a question that reveals exactly what they've been talking about: "Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

You can imagine the conversation leading up to it. Peter just walked on water. Peter, James, and John got the special mountaintop invite. Somebody had to be number one.

Jesus answers by calling over a little child and standing the child in the middle of them. "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

This isn't about being cute or innocent. In the ancient world, children had almost no status. They couldn't earn, couldn't vote, couldn't argue their case in court. They were dependent. They knew they needed help. Jesus says that's the posture of the Kingdom. The way in isn't by climbing; it's by kneeling.

Then He warns that anyone who causes "one of these little ones" who believe in Him to stumble would be better off thrown into the

sea with a huge millstone tied around his neck. Jesus takes it extremely seriously when people lead others, especially the vulnerable, into sin or away from faith.

He repeats His earlier warning, in dramatic exaggeration: if your hand or foot or eye causes you to sin, get rid of it. Sin is not something to manage casually. It's something to fight.

Next comes the Parable of the Lost Sheep. If a man has a hundred sheep and one wanders off, won't he leave the ninety-nine and go looking for the one? And when he finds it, he rejoices over it more than the ninety-nine that never wandered. It is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Shepherds in the Ancient World**
>
> Shepherds were not glamorous. The work was dirty, dangerous, and lonely. But the Old Testament repeatedly pictures God as the shepherd of His people, and in Ezekiel 34, God condemns Israel's leaders as bad shepherds who don't look for the lost, and promises to search for His sheep Himself. When Jesus describes a shepherd who goes after the one, His Jewish listeners would have recognized God's own promise.

Then Jesus addresses something every friend group and church eventually faces: conflict. If someone sins against you, go and talk to them privately. Don't post about it. Don't vent to everyone else first. Go to the person. If they listen, you've won them back. If not, take one or two others along. If they still refuse, bring it to the church. The goal at every step is restoration, not winning.

Peter, wanting to show he's been paying attention, asks a question: "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" Some rabbis taught that forgiving someone three times was enough. Peter more than doubles it. He probably expected praise.

Jesus says: “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.” (Some translations read “seventy times seven.”) He isn’t giving Peter a number to track. He’s saying stop counting.

Then He tells a story to explain why. A king wants to settle accounts with his servants. One servant owes him ten thousand talents. A talent was an enormous amount of money, worth something like fifteen to twenty years of a laborer’s wages. Ten thousand talents was a deliberately absurd number, a debt the servant could never repay in a thousand lifetimes. The servant begs for patience, and the king does something shocking: he cancels the entire debt.

That same servant then goes out, finds a fellow servant who owes him a hundred denarii, roughly a hundred days’ wages, and starts choking him, demanding payment. The fellow servant begs for patience, using almost the same words. But the forgiven servant has him thrown into prison.

When the king hears about it, he is furious. “Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?” And he hands the man over to be punished.

Jesus’ point is clear. Every one of us owes God a debt we could never pay. If God has forgiven us that, how can we refuse to forgive others for the much smaller debts they owe us? Forgiveness doesn’t mean pretending something didn’t hurt, and it doesn’t always mean trusting someone right away. But it does mean releasing your right to get even.

KEY VERSE

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

Matthew 18:21–22 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Jesus used a child to answer the question "Who, then, is the greatest?"
2. Jesus says to go to someone privately when they sin against you. Why is that so rare today? What usually happens instead?
3. In the parable, why is the forgiven servant's behavior so outrageous? Is there anyone you're holding a "debt" against right now?

TRY THIS *If there's someone you need to forgive or have a hard conversation with, take the first step this week, privately and in person if you can.*

CHAPTER 19

The Guy Who Had It All Covered

Matthew 19–20

Some Pharisees try to trap Jesus with a hot-button issue: divorce. Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason? Jesus takes them back to the beginning, to Genesis: God made them male and female, and the two become one flesh. "Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." Moses allowed divorce because of hardened hearts, He says, but it wasn't that way from the beginning. Marriage, in Jesus' view, is not a contract you cancel when it gets inconvenient. It's a covenant.

Then people bring little children to Jesus so He can lay His hands on them and pray. The disciples scold them. Jesus says, let the little children come to Me, and don't stop them, for the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to ones like these. Again: the Kingdom belongs to people who know they're small.

And then, right on cue, a young man arrives who doesn't think he's small at all.

He comes to Jesus with a question: "Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?" Notice the framing. What can I do? What's the checklist? Jesus tells him to keep the commandments. The young man asks, which ones? Jesus lists several: don't murder, don't

commit adultery, don't steal, don't lie, honor your father and mother, love your neighbor as yourself.

The young man's response is the moment the whole chapter turns on: "All these I have kept... What do I still lack?"

He's young, rich, moral, and confident. He has kept the rules. He has it covered. And yet something in him knows it's not enough, or he wouldn't be asking.

Jesus puts His finger right on it. "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow Me."

Jesus doesn't ask everyone to sell everything. But He knew exactly what this young man loved most. The man had obeyed the commandments about how to treat other people, but he had never obeyed the first commandment: to have no other gods. His wealth was his god. Jesus wasn't adding one more item to his checklist. He was asking for the one thing the checklist had never touched: his heart.

"When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth."

He's one of the very few people in the Gospels who hear Jesus personally say "follow Me" and walk away. Not angry. Just sad. He wanted eternal life, but not more than he wanted his stuff.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Camel and the Needle**
>
> Jesus says it's easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye than for a rich man to enter God's Kingdom. You may hear claims that there was a small gate in Jerusalem called "the Eye of the Needle." There's no solid evidence for that. Jesus was using deliberate, almost comical exaggeration: the largest

> animal in the region and the smallest opening imaginable. The point: it's not just hard. It's impossible, humanly speaking.

The disciples are stunned. In their world, wealth was often seen as a sign of God's blessing. If a rich, law-keeping man can't make it, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus looks at them and says, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

That's the key to the whole passage. Nobody, not rich or poor, can earn eternal life with a checklist. Salvation isn't something you achieve. It's something God does.

Peter then reminds Jesus that the disciples have left everything. What will they get? Jesus promises that everyone who has left homes or family or fields for His sake will receive a hundred times as much and inherit eternal life. "But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first."

He illustrates with a parable. A vineyard owner hires workers at dawn for a denarius, a day's wage. He hires more at nine, noon, three, and even five in the afternoon. At the end of the day, he pays everyone the same. The all-day workers are furious: "you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day." The owner answers: I didn't cheat you. "Or are you envious because I am generous?" Grace isn't fair. It's better than fair. And the people who feel most entitled tend to resent it the most.

Jesus then predicts His death for the third time, adding that He'll be handed over to the Gentiles to be mocked, flogged, and crucified, and raised on the third day. Right after this, the mother of James and John asks Jesus to give her sons the top two seats in His Kingdom. Jesus asks the brothers if they can drink the cup He is

about to drink. “We can,” they answer, with zero idea what they’re signing up for. The other ten are angry, probably because they wanted those seats too.

So Jesus gathers them and explains true greatness. The rulers of the nations lord it over people. “Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant.” Then He says it all: “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.”

KEY VERSE

Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”

Matthew 19:26 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The rich young man had kept the rules but still asked, “What do I still lack?” Why do you think rule-keeping didn’t satisfy him?
2. If Jesus asked you to give up the one thing you love most besides Him, what would it be? Is that a sign of anything?
3. In the vineyard parable, why do the all-day workers feel cheated? When have you felt like God’s grace to someone else was “unfair”?

CHAPTER 20

The King Rides In

Matthew 21

Jesus and His disciples approach Jerusalem as the Passover festival nears. The city is packed with pilgrims. Jesus sends two disciples to a nearby village to bring a donkey and her colt. Matthew explains why: this fulfills the prophet Zechariah, who wrote that Zion's King would come to her "gentle and riding on a donkey."

Kings and generals usually entered cities on war horses. A donkey made a different statement. This King comes in peace. He's royal, but humble.

The crowds spread their cloaks and palm branches on the road, like rolling out a red carpet. They shout, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Hosanna in the highest heaven!" "Hosanna" originally meant "save us, please," a cry from Psalm 118, and became a shout of praise. They're openly welcoming Jesus as the royal Messiah.

The whole city is stirred up, asking, "Who is this?" The crowds answer that it's the prophet Jesus from Nazareth of Galilee.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Passover in Jerusalem**
>
> Passover celebrated God rescuing Israel from slavery in Egypt, when the blood of a lamb on the doorposts caused judgment to "pass over" their homes. Every year, large numbers of pilgrims crowded into Jerusalem.

> Roman authorities were on high alert during the festival because a celebration of freedom from a foreign oppressor could easily turn into a revolt. Into that tense atmosphere rides a man being hailed as King.

Then Jesus goes into the temple and does something shocking. He drives out everyone buying and selling there. He overturns the money changers' tables and the seats of the people selling doves. "It is written," He says, "'My house will be called a house of prayer,' but you are making it 'a den of robbers.'"

Pilgrims needed animals for sacrifice and had to exchange their money into temple currency. A huge business had grown up in the temple courts, likely in the outer court where Gentiles could come to pray. The place meant to bring people to God had become a marketplace. Jesus acts with the authority of the owner of the house.

Then the blind and the lame come to Him in the temple, and He heals them. Children are running around shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" The chief priests and teachers of the law are indignant. "Do you hear what these children are saying?" they ask. Jesus answers, "Yes… have you never read, 'From the lips of children and infants you, Lord, have called forth your praise'?"

That's the thread again. The most educated religious leaders in the nation were scandalized. Kids got it right.

The next morning, Jesus curses a fig tree that has leaves but no fruit, and it withers. It's a living parable: lots of leaves, the appearance of life, but no fruit. That was the temple system. It looked impressive from a distance. Up close, there was no fruit for God.

When Jesus returns to the temple, the chief priests and elders confront Him: by what authority are You doing these things? He answers with a question of His own. Was John's baptism from heaven, or of human origin? They huddle up and realize they're trapped. If they say "from heaven," He'll ask why they didn't believe John. If they say "of human origin," the crowd will turn on them, since everyone believed John was a prophet. So they say, "We don't know."

The religious experts, the people whose whole job was to know, publicly claim ignorance to protect themselves. Jesus says, then I won't tell you by what authority I do these things.

He then tells three stories. In the first, a father tells two sons to work in his vineyard. One says no but later changes his mind and goes. The other says yes but never goes. Which one did his father's will? Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you." People who said no to God and then repented are ahead of religious people who said yes and never meant it.

In the second, tenants in a vineyard beat and kill the owner's servants, and finally kill his son, thinking they'll take the inheritance. Jesus quotes Psalm 118: "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone." The leaders rejected Jesus, but God would make Him the cornerstone of everything.

Matthew adds, "When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they knew he was talking about them." They understood exactly what He meant. They wanted to arrest Him, but they feared the crowds.

KEY VERSE

Have you never read in the Scriptures: 'The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes'?

Matthew 21:42 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Jesus rode in on a donkey instead of a war horse. What does that tell you about the kind of King He is?
2. The children praised Jesus while the experts were indignant. Why do you think humble people often recognize truth faster than proud people?
3. In the story of the two sons, which son are you more like? What would it look like to actually go into the vineyard?

CHAPTER 21

Trick Questions

Matthew 22

Jesus' enemies are done arguing in public and losing. Now they try to trap Him with carefully designed questions. Each group sends its best.

First, Jesus tells one more parable, about a king who throws a wedding banquet for his son. The invited guests refuse to come; some even kill his servants. So the king sends his servants out to the streets to invite everyone they can find, good and bad, until the hall is full. The insiders refused the invitation. The outsiders filled the room. It's Matthew's thread in story form.

Then the Pharisees plot to trap Him. They send some of their followers along with Herodians, supporters of Herod's family, who cooperated with Rome. These groups normally didn't get along, but they had a common enemy. They begin with flattery: Teacher, we know You are honest and You don't care what anyone thinks. Then they spring the trap: "Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?"

> BACKGROUND CHECK **The Coin Trap**
>
> Paying taxes to Rome was a deeply painful issue. If Jesus said "Yes, pay," He'd look like a Roman collaborator, and the crowds hoping for freedom would turn on Him. If He said "No," the Herodians could report Him to Rome as a rebel. The tax coin, a denarius, carried the image of the emperor and an

> inscription calling him divine. Many devout Jews found the coin itself offensive.

Jesus sees right through it. “You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me?” He asks them to show Him the coin used for the tax. Notice: they have one on them. He asks, whose image and inscription is this? “Caesar’s.” Then He says, “So give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.”

They’re amazed and walk away. But there’s a deeper layer. The coin had Caesar’s image on it, so give it back to him. But what has God’s image on it? According to Genesis, you do. Humans are made in the image of God. Give Caesar his coin. Give God yourself.

Next, the Sadducees try. Remember, the Sadducees didn’t believe in the resurrection of the dead. They pose a hypothetical: a woman marries seven brothers in a row, each of whom dies. In the resurrection, whose wife will she be? It’s meant to make the resurrection look ridiculous.

Jesus’ answer is one of the most direct put-downs in the Gospels: “You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God.”

These were the priestly aristocracy, the guardians of the temple. And Jesus tells them they don’t know the Bible or God. He explains that in the resurrection, people won’t marry; they will be like the angels. Then He goes to the books the Sadducees themselves accepted, the books of Moses, and quotes God speaking to Moses at the burning bush: “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” God is not the God of the dead, but of the living. Notice the present tense: not “I was,” but “I am.” Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are alive to God. The crowd is astonished.

Then the Pharisees try again. An expert in the law asks: Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law? The rabbis counted 613 commandments in the Torah, and people debated which ones were weightiest.

Jesus answers by quoting Deuteronomy 6, a passage devout Jews prayed daily: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." That's the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself," from Leviticus 19. The whole Law and the Prophets hang on these two.

Every rule in Scripture, Jesus says, is ultimately about love: love for God that takes all of you, and love for others that's as real as your concern for yourself. Of course, nobody loves God with all their heart, soul, and mind all the time. Once again, the standard drives us to Jesus.

Then Jesus turns the tables and asks the Pharisees a question. "What do you think about the Messiah? Whose son is he?" They answer correctly: "Of David." Then Jesus quotes Psalm 110, where David calls the Messiah "my Lord." If David calls Him Lord, how can He be just his son? The answer, which Matthew has been showing since chapter one, is that the Messiah is more than David's descendant. He is the Son of God.

"No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions."

The people who thought they knew it all just got schooled, by someone who knew their own Scriptures better than they did.

KEY VERSE

'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'

Matthew 22:37–39 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Jesus said give Caesar what's Caesar's and God what's God's. If you are made in God's image, what does it mean to "give yourself" to God?
2. Jesus told the Sadducees they didn't know the Scriptures or the power of God. Is it possible to know a lot about the Bible but not really know it? How?
3. Why do you think Jesus summarized all of God's law as love? What would change in your life this week if you took that seriously?

CHAPTER 22

Seven Woes

Matthew 23

If you've ever thought of Jesus as only soft-spoken and gentle, Matthew 23 will surprise you. This is Jesus at His most confrontational. He speaks to the crowds and His disciples about the scribes and Pharisees, and then directly to the religious leaders themselves. It's not a polite debate. It's a prophet's warning.

He begins in a way you might not expect: "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat." In other words, they teach the law of Moses, so do what they tell you from it. "But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach."

That's the core problem. They talked a good game. They tied heavy burdens on people's shoulders, piling up rules, but wouldn't lift a finger to help anyone carry them. "Everything they do is done for people to see." They wore extra-wide phylacteries, small boxes containing Scripture verses strapped to the forehead and arm, and made the tassels on their robes extra long. They loved the best seats at banquets and in synagogues, being greeted with respect in public, and being called "Rabbi."

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Status Symbols, Then and Now**
>
> Phylacteries and tassels came from real commands in the law; there was nothing wrong with them. The problem was turning them into a way to

> display how holy you were. Every culture has its version. Jesus' warning applies to anything we use to make ourselves look spiritual or important.

Jesus tells His followers not to chase titles and status. You have one Teacher, and you are all brothers. "The greatest among you will be your servant. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

Then He turns directly to the religious leaders and pronounces a series of "woes." "Woe" is a prophet's word, like a funeral cry. It means: you're heading for disaster. Each one begins the same way: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites!"

Woe, because you shut the door of the Kingdom in people's faces. You won't go in yourselves, and you block those who are trying to.

Woe, because you travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and then make him twice as fit for hell as you are.

Woe, you blind guides, because you've invented elaborate rules about which oaths count and which don't. Swear by the temple, it means nothing; swear by the gold of the temple, you're bound. Jesus calls it foolishness. You've missed the point that everything belongs to God.

Woe, because you tithe your mint, dill, and cumin (tiny garden herbs, giving God a precise tenth of your spice rack) "But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness." Then one of Jesus' most vivid images: "You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel." Some people strained their drinks through cloth so they wouldn't accidentally swallow an unclean insect. Picture someone carefully filtering out a gnat and then gulping down a camel, hump and all.

Woe, because you clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you're full of greed and self-indulgence. Clean the inside first.

Woe, because "You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean." Touching a grave made a person ritually unclean, so tombs were often whitewashed to make them easy to spot and avoid, especially when pilgrims crowded into Jerusalem for the festivals. They looked bright and clean. Inside, they were full of death.

Woe, because you build monuments to the prophets and say, if we had lived back then, we never would have killed them. But you're the descendants of those who did, and you're about to finish what they started.

Then come the hardest words: "You snakes! You brood of vipers!" It's the same phrase John the Baptist used back in chapter 3.

Why is Jesus so harsh? Because these were the people responsible for leading others to God, and they were leading them away. Their hypocrisy wasn't just a private flaw; it was blocking the door for everyone else. Jesus is fiercest with religious people who misuse their position, not with the sinners who knew they needed help.

But don't miss how the chapter ends. Jesus' anger turns into grief. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing."

Those aren't the words of someone who enjoys condemning people. They're the words of someone heartbroken that people He loved

refused to come to Him. Behind every woe is an invitation that was turned down.

It's easy to read this chapter and think, "Yeah, those Pharisees were terrible." But that thought, being proud that you're not like the proud people, is exactly how hypocrisy starts. The safer question is: where is this me?

KEY VERSE

For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

Matthew 23:12 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Jesus says the Pharisees "do not practice what they preach." Where is the gap between what you say you believe and how you actually live?
2. "You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel." What are some small things Christians sometimes obsess over while ignoring justice, mercy, and faithfulness?
3. Jesus ends with grief, not just anger. What does that tell you about how He feels toward people who reject Him?

TRY THIS *Ask someone who knows you well: "Where do you see a gap between what I say and what I do?" Then just listen.*

CHAPTER 23

Ready or Not

Matthew 24–25

As Jesus and His disciples leave the temple, the disciples point out how impressive the buildings are. And they were. Herod the Great's renovation of the temple was one of the most spectacular building projects in the ancient world, with massive white stones and gold decorations that gleamed in the sun.

Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down."

That would have sounded unthinkable. But in AD 70, about forty years later, after a Jewish revolt against Rome, Roman armies under the general Titus besieged Jerusalem and destroyed the temple. It has never been rebuilt.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Two Horizons**
>
> Jesus' words in chapters 24 and 25 are known as the Olivet Discourse because He gave them on the Mount of Olives. They weave together two events: the destruction of Jerusalem, which happened in AD 70, and His own return at the end of history, which is still to come. Bible-believing Christians have discussed exactly how these two fit together for centuries. Jesus' main point isn't to give us a timeline to argue about. It's to make us ready.

The disciples ask: when will this happen, and what will be the sign of Your coming and of the end of the age? Jesus' first words are

telling: “Watch out that no one deceives you.” Many will come claiming to be the Christ and deceive many. There will be wars and rumors of wars, famines and earthquakes. But don’t panic. These are only the beginning of birth pains.

He warns that His followers will be persecuted and hated by all nations because of His name. Many will fall away and betray one another. False prophets will deceive many. Because lawlessness will increase, the love of many will grow cold. “But the one who stands firm to the end will be saved.” And “this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.”

He describes a time of great distress, and warns again about false messiahs. If someone says the Christ is out in the wilderness or in a secret room, don’t believe it. When Jesus returns, it won’t be a secret; it will be like lightning flashing from east to west. Everyone will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds with power and great glory.

Then, after all of that detail, He says something every prediction-maker should read twice: “But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” So if anyone claims to have the date figured out, Jesus has already told you: they don’t.

It will be like the days of Noah, He says. People were eating, drinking, marrying, living normal lives, until the flood came and swept them all away. Life will feel normal right up until it isn’t. So: “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.”

In chapter 25, Jesus tells three stories about what "being ready" looks like.

The ten virgins. Ten bridesmaids wait for the bridegroom at night. Five bring extra oil for their lamps; five don't. The groom is delayed, and they all fall asleep. At midnight, the shout goes up: he's here! The five without oil rush off to buy more, and while they're gone, the door is shut. When they come back and beg to be let in, the groom says, I don't know you. Readiness can't be borrowed from someone else at the last minute. Nobody can believe for you.

The talents. A man going on a journey entrusts his servants with his money: five talents to one, two to another, one to a third, each according to his ability. The first two invest and double it. The third buries his in the ground. When the master returns, he tells the first two, "Well done, good and faithful servant." The third explains himself: "Master… I knew that you are a hard man… So I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground."

Notice his words: "I knew that you are a hard man." He was sure he knew what the master was like, and he was wrong. His false picture of the master led to fear, and fear led to doing nothing. The master calls him wicked and lazy. What God has given you, time, abilities, opportunities, is meant to be used for Him, not buried.

The sheep and the goats. When the Son of Man comes in glory, He will sit on His throne, and all nations will be gathered before Him. He'll separate people as a shepherd separates sheep from goats. To those on His right He says: come, inherit the Kingdom, for I was hungry and you fed Me, thirsty and you gave Me drink, a stranger and you welcomed Me, naked and you clothed Me, sick and you visited Me, in prison and you came to Me.

They're confused: when did we do that? And the King answers: whenever you did it for one of the least of these My brothers, you did it for Me. Those on His left, who ignored people in need, are just as surprised to learn they ignored Jesus Himself.

This isn't salvation by good deeds; the whole Gospel has made clear that's impossible. It's a picture of what real faith looks like. People who truly belong to the King start to love like the King, often without even noticing they're doing it.

KEY VERSE

The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'

Matthew 25:40 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Jesus said no one knows the day or hour of His return. Why do you think people keep trying to predict it anyway?
2. The servant with one talent said, "I knew that you are a hard man," but he had the master all wrong. How can a wrong picture of God keep people from serving Him?
3. Who are "the least of these" in your school or community? What would it look like to treat them as if they were Jesus?

TRY THIS *This week, do something concrete for someone who can't pay you back: a lonely classmate, a homeless shelter, a sick neighbor.*

CHAPTER 24

The Last Supper

Matthew 26:1–35

Jesus tells His disciples plainly: in two days it will be Passover, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified. Meanwhile, the chief priests and elders meet in the palace of the high priest, Caiaphas. They plot to arrest Jesus secretly and kill Him, but "not during the festival," they agree, or the people might riot.

In the nearby village of Bethany, Jesus is at dinner when a woman comes to Him with an alabaster jar of very expensive ointment and pours it over His head. The disciples are indignant. "Why this waste?" That could have been sold for a lot of money and given to the poor.

Jesus defends her. She has done a beautiful thing for Me, He says. You will always have the poor with you, but you won't always have Me. In pouring this on My body, she has prepared Me for burial. And He adds that wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what she did will be told in memory of her.

The disciples saw waste. Jesus saw worship. She seems to have grasped what they still couldn't: He was about to die.

Right after this, Matthew tells us, Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve, goes to the chief priests and asks, "What are you willing to give me if I deliver him over to you?" They pay him thirty pieces of silver. In

the law of Moses, thirty shekels of silver was the compensation for a slave who was killed, and the prophet Zechariah describes a shepherd being valued at the same insulting price. From then on, Judas looks for an opportunity to betray Him.

Matthew doesn't give us a full explanation of Judas' motives. Some have suggested disappointment that Jesus wasn't the political Messiah he wanted; Matthew mostly lets the facts speak. What's chilling is that Judas had been there for everything. He'd heard the Sermon on the Mount, seen the miracles, been sent out with the others. Being close to Jesus is not the same as belonging to Him.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **What Was Passover?**
>
> Passover remembered the night God rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt. God told each family to sacrifice a lamb and put its blood on their doorposts. That night, judgment fell on Egypt, but it "passed over" every house marked by the blood. Each year, Jewish families ate a meal with lamb, unleavened bread, bitter herbs, and cups of wine, retelling the story. Jesus chose this meal, of all meals, to explain His death.

On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the disciples prepare the Passover meal. That evening, as they eat, Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me." The disciples are deeply upset. One by one, they ask, "Surely you don't mean me, Lord?" Then Judas asks, "Surely you don't mean me, Rabbi?" Jesus answers, "You have said so."

Notice the difference. The others call Him "Lord." Judas calls Him "Rabbi," teacher. A small word, but a revealing one.

Then, during the meal, Jesus takes bread, gives thanks, breaks it, and gives it to the disciples: "Take and eat; this is my body." Then He takes the cup, gives thanks, and says, "Drink from it, all of you.

This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

For centuries, the Passover lamb had pointed back to rescue from Egypt. Now Jesus says the meal is about Him. He is the Lamb. His blood would mark people for rescue, not from Pharaoh, but from sin and judgment. The prophet Jeremiah had promised a "new covenant" in which God would write His law on people's hearts and forgive their sins. Jesus says: it's happening, and it will be sealed with My blood. Christians still share this meal, called Communion or the Lord's Supper, because He told them to.

After singing a hymn, they go out to the Mount of Olives. On the way, Jesus quotes Zechariah: "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered." He tells them all of them will fall away that night.

And here comes Peter. "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will."

Read that slowly. Peter isn't just saying he'll be faithful. He's saying he's more faithful than everyone else in the room. Even if they all fail, not me.

Jesus tells him: tonight, before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times.

Peter doubles down. "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." And Matthew adds a detail that's easy to miss: "And all the other disciples said the same."

Every one of them was certain. Every one of them was sincere. And every one of them was wrong. Confidence in yourself is not the same as faithfulness. Sometimes the people who are most sure they'll never fall are the ones standing closest to the edge.

KEY VERSE

This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

Matthew 26:28 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The disciples called the woman's gift a "waste." What might people today consider "wasted" on Jesus? Why did Jesus see it so differently?
2. Judas was with Jesus for years but still betrayed Him. What does that say about the difference between being around Jesus and truly following Him?
3. Peter said, "Even if all... I will never." What's the danger in being overconfident about your own faithfulness?

CHAPTER 25

The Garden, the Kiss, and the Rooster

Matthew 26:36–75

Jesus brings His disciples to an olive grove called Gethsemane. The name likely means "oil press," a place where olives were crushed. He tells most of them to sit while He goes ahead to pray, and takes Peter, James, and John further with Him.

Then Matthew lets us see something staggering. Jesus "began to be sorrowful and troubled." He tells His three closest friends, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me."

This is the same Jesus who calmed storms and raised the dead. Now He's overwhelmed with grief, and He asks His friends to stay close. Jesus was fully God, but He was also fully human. He felt dread. He wanted company.

He goes a little further, falls on His face, and prays: "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."

> BACKGROUND CHECK **What Was "the Cup"?**
>
> In the Old Testament, the "cup" often stood for God's judgment against sin, the cup of His wrath. Jesus wasn't just dreading physical pain, although

> crucifixion was horrific. He was facing the weight of the world's sin and the judgment it deserved. That is what made Gethsemane so agonizing.

He comes back and finds the disciples asleep. "Couldn't you men keep watch with me for one hour?" Then the line that applies to every one of us: "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."

Peter had just sworn he'd die for Jesus. He couldn't stay awake for Him.

Jesus prays a second time, and you can hear His acceptance growing: "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done." Again He finds them sleeping. He prays a third time, saying the same words. Then He wakes them: the hour has come. The Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up. Here comes My betrayer.

While He's still speaking, Judas arrives with a large crowd carrying swords and clubs, sent by the chief priests and elders. Judas had arranged a signal: the one I kiss is the man. He walks up to Jesus, says, "Greetings, Rabbi!" and kisses Him. A kiss was a normal greeting between a student and his teacher, a sign of respect and affection. Judas turned it into a weapon.

Jesus' response is almost unbearable: "Do what you came for, friend." Even now, He calls him friend.

They seize Jesus. One of the men with Jesus draws a sword and cuts off the ear of the high priest's servant. Jesus tells him to put it away: "For all who draw the sword will die by the sword." Don't you think I could ask My Father, and He'd send more than twelve legions of angels? (A Roman legion was several thousand soldiers.) But then how would the Scriptures be fulfilled?

Jesus isn't arrested because He's powerless. He's arrested because He's choosing to go.

Then Matthew writes one of the saddest sentences in the Bible: "Then all the disciples deserted him and fled."

All of them. The ones who said "We can." The ones who said they would die with Him.

Jesus is taken to Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and elders have gathered. It was a nighttime hearing, which many historians consider highly irregular for a capital case. They look for false testimony to justify putting Him to death, but even with many false witnesses, they can't make anything stick. Finally two witnesses twist something Jesus had said about destroying the temple and rebuilding it in three days.

Jesus stays silent. Finally the high priest says, "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God."

Jesus replies, "You have said so… But I say to all of you: From now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven." He's combining Psalm 110 and Daniel 7, two passages about a divine King who rules at God's right hand. There's no mistaking the claim. The high priest tears his robes and declares it blasphemy. The council answers: "He is worthy of death!" Then they spit in His face, hit Him with their fists, and slap Him, mocking, "Prophesy to us, Messiah. Who hit you?"

Meanwhile, Peter has followed at a distance and is sitting in the high priest's courtyard with the guards, waiting to see how it ends. A servant girl says, "You also were with Jesus of Galilee." Peter denies

it in front of everyone: "I don't know what you're talking about." He moves to the gateway. Another girl says he was with Jesus of Nazareth. This time he denies it with an oath: "I don't know the man." A little later, bystanders press him: you're one of them; your accent gives you away. Peter's Galilean accent was a dead giveaway in Jerusalem. He begins to curse and swear: "I don't know the man!"

Immediately the rooster crows.

Peter remembers what Jesus said. "And he went outside and wept bitterly."

Before you judge Peter, remember: he was the only one who followed Jesus as far as the courtyard. The others had already run. Peter's failure is a mirror for anyone who has ever been sure they'd never fail. But this is not the end of Peter's story. Not even close.

KEY VERSE

My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.

Matthew 26:39 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Jesus prayed, "Yet not as I will, but as you will." Have you ever had to pray that? What made it hard?
2. Peter promised to die for Jesus and then denied knowing Him to a servant girl. Why do you think it was so easy to deny Jesus in that moment?
3. Jesus said, "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." What practical things help you stay strong when it actually matters?

CHAPTER 26

The Innocent One Condemned

Matthew 27:1–31

Early in the morning, the chief priests and elders formally decide to put Jesus to death. They tie Him up and hand Him over to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Why Pilate?**
>
> Under Roman rule, the Jewish council could handle religious matters, but it generally did not have authority to carry out executions; that power belonged to the Roman governor. So the religious leaders needed Pilate. Pilate governed Judea from about AD 26 to 36. Ancient sources describe him as harsh and willing to use violence against crowds. He wasn't a gentle judge who got pushed around. But he was a politician who didn't want trouble.

Meanwhile, Judas sees that Jesus has been condemned, and he "was seized with remorse." He brings the thirty pieces of silver back to the chief priests and elders: "I have sinned… for I have betrayed innocent blood." Their answer is ice cold: "What is that to us?… That's your responsibility."

That's what the people who used Judas thought of him once he wasn't useful anymore. Judas throws the silver into the temple and goes out and hangs himself.

The chief priests pick up the money and, with careful religious precision, decide they can't put it in the temple treasury because it's

"blood money." Notice the irony: they're scrupulous about where to deposit blood money, but not about having paid it. They use it to buy a potter's field as a burial place for foreigners. Matthew connects this to the prophets, as he has done all along.

Here it's worth comparing Judas and Peter. Both failed Jesus terribly on the same night. Both felt deep regret. But Judas took his regret to the priests, and then to despair. Peter, as we'll see, would be restored to Jesus. The difference wasn't the size of their sin. It was where they went with it. If you've done something you think is unforgivable, the story of Judas is not God's verdict on you. Run to Jesus, not away from Him.

Jesus stands before Pilate. Pilate asks, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus answers, "You have said so." When the chief priests and elders accuse Him, He says nothing. Pilate is amazed at His silence. Isaiah had written about the Suffering Servant who would be like a lamb before its shearers, silent, not opening His mouth.

At the festival, the governor had a custom of releasing one prisoner the crowd chose. There was a notorious prisoner named Barabbas. Pilate asks the crowd: "Which one do you want me to release to you: Jesus Barabbas, or Jesus who is called the Messiah?" Matthew says Pilate knew that the leaders had handed Jesus over out of envy.

While Pilate is on the judgment seat, his wife sends him a message: "Don't have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him."

But the chief priests and elders persuade the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus destroyed. Pilate asks again, which one? "Barabbas!" Then Pilate asks the question every person eventually

has to answer: “What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called the Messiah?” They all shout, “Crucify him!”

“Why? What crime has he committed?” Pilate asks. They shout louder. “Crucify him!”

Pilate sees that a riot is starting. So he takes water and washes his hands in front of the crowd. “I am innocent of this man’s blood… It is your responsibility!” The people answer, “His blood is on us and on our children!”

That verse deserves an honest word. Tragically, over the centuries, some people who called themselves Christians used it as an excuse to hate and persecute Jewish people. That is a terrible evil and a complete betrayal of Jesus, who was Himself Jewish, as were Matthew and all the apostles. The New Testament teaches that Jesus died because of the sins of all humanity. Pilate was a Roman. The soldiers were Gentiles. The leaders who pushed for it were Jewish. Every kind of person was represented. In a real sense, all of us put Him there. And He went willingly, for all of us.

Pilate releases Barabbas. Think about that exchange: a guilty man walks free, and an innocent man takes His place. That is the gospel in one scene.

Then Pilate has Jesus flogged. Roman flogging used whips with pieces of bone or metal and could tear flesh to the bone. Then the soldiers take Him into the governor’s headquarters and gather the whole battalion. They strip Him, put a scarlet robe on Him, twist together a crown of thorns and press it onto His head, and put a reed in His right hand as a fake scepter. They kneel in front of Him and mock, “Hail, King of the Jews!” They spit on Him and beat Him on the head with the reed.

The soldiers thought they were staging a parody of a coronation. They had no idea that the man they were mocking really was the King.

KEY VERSE

"What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called the Messiah?" Pilate asked. They all answered, "Crucify him!"

Matthew 27:22 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Peter and Judas both failed Jesus on the same night. What made the difference in how their stories ended?
2. Pilate knew Jesus was innocent but gave in to the crowd. Where do you see the pressure to go along with the crowd even when you know it's wrong?
3. Barabbas, a guilty man, went free while Jesus, an innocent man, was condemned. How is that a picture of what Jesus does for us?

CHAPTER 27

The Cross

Matthew 27:32–66

The Roman writer Cicero described crucifixion as the most cruel and disgusting of punishments. Rome reserved it mainly for slaves, rebels, and the worst criminals. It was designed not just to kill, but to humiliate, publicly and slowly. Victims were stripped and displayed along busy roads as a warning: this is what happens to those who defy Rome. Roman citizens generally could not be crucified. It was considered too shameful.

That's the death Jesus walked toward.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **How Crucifixion Worked**
>
> The victim was usually forced to carry the crossbeam to the execution site. He was nailed or tied to it, raised up, and left to hang. Breathing became harder and harder, and victims could suffer for hours or even days, dying from exhaustion, blood loss, and suffocation. A sign listing the charge was often posted above the victim's head.

As they leave the city, the soldiers force a man from Cyrene named Simon to carry Jesus' cross. Jesus, after the flogging, apparently couldn't carry it Himself. They come to Golgotha, which means "the place of the skull." They offer Him wine mixed with gall, a bitter mixture, but after tasting it, He refuses to drink.

They crucify Him. Matthew describes it in a few words. He doesn't linger on the gruesome details, perhaps because his first readers knew them all too well. Then the soldiers divide His clothes by casting lots, a detail that echoes Psalm 22, written by David a thousand years earlier.

Over His head they post the charge against Him: "THIS IS JESUS, THE KING OF THE JEWS." It was meant as mockery. It was the truth. Matthew opened his Gospel with the magi asking, where is the one born King of the Jews? Here is the answer, nailed above a cross.

Two robbers are crucified with Him, one on His right and one on His left. Remember when James and John asked for the seats on Jesus' right and left in His Kingdom? Jesus told them they didn't know what they were asking. This is what the right and left of His throne looked like on this day.

Then the mocking starts. People passing by shake their heads and insult Him: "You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!" Notice that "if." It's the devil's line from the wilderness.

The chief priests, scribes, and elders join in: "He saved others… but he can't save himself! He's the king of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him." Even the robbers insult Him.

They thought they knew exactly what a Messiah should do: come down and prove Himself. They had it backwards. He could have come down. He stayed because He was saving others. He couldn't save Himself and save us at the same time. He chose us.

From noon until three in the afternoon, darkness covers the whole land. Then, at about three o'clock, Jesus cries out with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" That is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

These are the opening words of Psalm 22, a psalm that begins in anguish and ends in victory. On the cross, Jesus experienced the full weight of separation from God that sin deserves. The Son, who had known the Father's love forever, took the place of sinners. The Bible later explains it this way: God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us. That's the heart of what happened at the cross.

Some bystanders think He's calling for Elijah. Someone runs and offers Him sour wine on a sponge. The others say wait, let's see if Elijah comes to save Him. Then Jesus cries out again with a loud voice and gives up His spirit. Notice how Matthew phrases it: He yielded up His spirit. Even in death, Jesus is not a victim of circumstances.

At that moment, the curtain of the temple is torn in two, from top to bottom. That curtain separated the Most Holy Place, God's special presence, from everyone else. Only the high priest could enter, once a year, with sacrificial blood. Now it's torn open, from the top down, as if by God's own hand. The way to God is open.

The earth shakes, rocks split, and tombs open. Matthew records that many holy people who had died were raised and, after Jesus' resurrection, went into the holy city and appeared to many. It's a mysterious detail, and Matthew reports it without explanation: death itself was starting to lose its grip.

A Roman centurion and the soldiers guarding Jesus see the earthquake and everything that happened, and they're terrified.

They say, “Surely he was the Son of God!” A Gentile soldier, one of the executioners, sees what the religious leaders refused to see.

Many women who had followed Jesus from Galilee are watching from a distance, including Mary Magdalene. The male disciples are nowhere to be found. That evening, a rich man named Joseph of Arimathea, a disciple of Jesus, asks Pilate for the body. He wraps it in clean linen and places it in his own new tomb cut in the rock, and rolls a large stone across the entrance.

The next day, the chief priests and Pharisees go to Pilate. They remember that “that deceiver” said He would rise after three days. They ask for the tomb to be secured so the disciples can’t steal the body. Pilate gives them a guard. They seal the stone and post soldiers.

The people who refused to believe Him remembered His promise to rise better than His own disciples did.

KEY VERSE

When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, "Surely he was the Son of God!"

Matthew 27:54 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The leaders said, "Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him." Why didn't Jesus come down? What would we have lost if He had?
2. Jesus cried, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" What does that tell you about what He experienced on the cross for us?
3. The temple curtain was torn from top to bottom. What does that mean for how people can approach God now?

TRY THIS *Read Psalm 22 in one sitting. Note every line that sounds like Matthew 27.*

CHAPTER 28

He Is Not Here

Matthew 28

Early on Sunday morning, after the Sabbath, as the first day of the week is dawning, Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary" go to see the tomb. They're expecting a dead body.

Suddenly there's a great earthquake. An angel of the Lord comes down from heaven, rolls back the stone, and sits on it. His appearance is like lightning, and his clothes are white as snow. The guards are so terrified that they shake and become like dead men. The soldiers posted to keep a dead man in the tomb are the ones who end up looking dead.

The angel speaks to the women: "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay."

Just like He said. Jesus had told them, again and again, that He would be killed and raised on the third day. They hadn't understood. Now here it is.

The stone wasn't rolled away to let Jesus out. It was rolled away to let the witnesses in.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Why the Women Matter**
>
> In that culture, a woman's testimony was often given less weight than a man's, and in many settings it wasn't accepted in court. If someone in the first

> century were making up a resurrection story, the women would be the last people they'd choose as the first witnesses. All four Gospels name women as the first to find the empty tomb. Historians who study these texts often point out that it's exactly the kind of detail people wouldn't invent.

The angel tells them to go quickly and tell the disciples that Jesus has risen and is going ahead of them to Galilee. They run from the tomb "afraid yet filled with joy." And on the way, Jesus Himself meets them. "Rejoice!" He says. They take hold of His feet and worship Him. A ghost doesn't have feet you can grab. Jesus says, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

Notice what He calls the disciples: "my brothers." The same men who ran, who slept, who denied Him. Not "those traitors." Brothers. That's grace.

Meanwhile, some of the guards go into the city and report everything to the chief priests. The religious leaders meet with the elders and come up with a plan. They pay the soldiers a large amount of money and tell them, "You are to say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.'" If the governor hears about it, they promise to keep the soldiers out of trouble.

Think about how strange that story is. If the soldiers were asleep, how would they know who took the body? And sleeping on duty could get a Roman soldier severely punished. Matthew adds that this story was still being told among some people in his own day. Even the official cover-up admitted the most important fact: the tomb was empty.

So here's where the religious experts end up. They knew the Scriptures. They had Jesus' promise memorized well enough to post guards. They received an eyewitness report from their own soldiers. And they chose to pay for a lie rather than face the truth. Knowing everything doesn't help if you refuse to believe what you know.

Then the eleven disciples go to the mountain in Galilee where Jesus told them to go. When they see Him, they worship Him. And Matthew includes one of the most honest lines in the Bible: "but some doubted."

He could have left that out. He didn't. The resurrection wasn't something the disciples were primed to believe. They had to be convinced. And notice that Jesus doesn't send the doubters away. He comes closer.

Then Jesus speaks the words that close Matthew's Gospel, known as the Great Commission. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Think about where the story began. A family tree proving Jesus was the son of Abraham, through whom God promised to bless all nations. Foreign magi coming to worship. A Roman centurion praised for his faith. A Canaanite woman commended. A Roman soldier at the cross confessing Him as the Son of God. Now Jesus sends His followers to all nations. The King of the Jews is King of the whole world.

And the book that began with Immanuel, "God with us," ends with Jesus promising, "I am with you always."

Here's the last thing to notice. Jesus didn't hand His mission to scholars or experts or people who had it all together. He gave it to eleven ordinary men, including a denier, a former tax collector, and some doubters. He still does. The question isn't whether you're qualified. The question is whether you'll go.

KEY VERSE

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

Matthew 28:18–20 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The religious leaders paid the soldiers to spread a lie. Why do you think some people refuse to believe even when the evidence is strong?
2. Matthew admits that "some doubted," even after seeing Jesus. Why is it encouraging that he included that?
3. Jesus sent ordinary, flawed people to make disciples of all nations. What would it look like for you to take part in that mission, starting where you are?

TRY THIS *Tell one person this week, in your own words, why the resurrection matters to you.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Now What? The Bottom Line

You've just walked through the whole Gospel of Matthew. You've seen Jesus born as a refugee King, teach like nobody else, take on the experts, heal the outcasts, die on a Roman cross, and walk out of a sealed tomb. Now the question Jesus asked His disciples is the question He asks you: "Who do you say I am?"

Here's what the Bible says, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and God is King.

You weren't an accident. God created you to know Him, love Him, and live under His good rule. That's what the "Kingdom of Heaven" is about.

2 We've all rebelled.

Remember the Sermon on the Mount? Anger is murder at the heart level. Lust is adultery at the heart level. "Be perfect." Nobody passes that test. Not the Pharisees, not the disciples, not you or me. The Bible calls it sin, and it separates us from God.

> *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,* **Romans 3:23 (NIV)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. The Bible says the result of sin is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (NIV)**

4 Jesus paid it.

On the cross, Jesus, the only person who ever lived a perfect life, took our place. Like Barabbas, the guilty go free because the innocent one is condemned. Jesus said He came "to give his life as a ransom for many." Then He rose from the dead, proving His payment was accepted and death was beaten.

> *But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.* **Romans 5:8 (NIV)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

Remember the rich young man who asked, "What good thing must I do to get eternal life?" Salvation isn't a checklist you complete. It's a gift you receive by trusting Jesus. "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

> *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.* **Ephesians 2:8–9 (NIV)**

6 Following Jesus means turning around.

John and Jesus both preached, "Repent." That means turning from running your own life and turning to Jesus as your Savior and King. It doesn't mean you'll never fail again. Peter failed spectacularly, and Jesus restored Him. It means you belong to Him now.

> *If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* **Romans 10:9 (NIV)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. Jesus isn't impressed by fancy prayers; remember the Pharisees. You can

talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

> *God, I've been running my own life, and I've sinned against You. I can't fix that myself. I believe Jesus is Your Son, the King, that He died on the cross for my sins, and that You raised Him from the dead. I'm turning to You. Forgive me. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want to follow Him as my King. Change me from the inside out. Thank You that You are with me always. In Jesus' name, amen.*

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Following Jesus was never meant to be a solo project.

Read the real thing. Go back and read Matthew straight through in a Bible. Then keep going.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Ask about being baptized; it's the first step Jesus gave His followers in the Great Commission.

Talk to God every day. Use the Lord's Prayer from Matthew 6 as a guide. Be honest. He can handle it.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Matthew himself admits that even on the mountain with the risen Jesus, "some doubted." Jesus didn't send them away. Keep asking. Keep reading. Talk to someone you trust. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because the people in Matthew who thought they knew it all missed Him. Don't be one of them.

And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

Jesus, Matthew 28:20 (NIV)

THE GOSPEL OF MARK

The King in a Hurry

Mark, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

The King in a Hurry: The Gospel of Mark, Unfiltered

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All Scripture quotations in this book are from the NIV. Some are abridged, with omissions marked by ellipses; paraphrases are not placed in quotation marks.

Pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence in the author's own words. Inside Scripture quotations, capitalization and wording follow the 2011 NIV exactly.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

You've probably heard the saying: "If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all." If you read the Matthew book in this series, you've heard it from me already. Sorry. It's still funny, and it's still a little bit true.

Here's the good half of it. You can get things done. You're quick, you notice things adults miss, and you have very little patience for anything that wastes your time. So you might actually like Mark.

Mark is the shortest of the four Gospels. You can read the whole thing in about an hour and a half. It's also the fastest. Mark skips the birth stories, skips most of the long sermons, and jumps straight into the action. One of his favorite words is "immediately." Jesus is always on the move: healing, teaching, crossing the lake, confronting demons, heading for Jerusalem.

There's another reason Mark might hit home. Early Christian writers tell us Mark wrote down the eyewitness preaching of Peter, the disciple who always had something to say and was usually the first to say it. Peter was sure he understood Jesus. Peter was sure he would never fail Him. Peter was wrong, more than once, and he let Mark put every embarrassing moment on the record.

And Mark himself? He was probably John Mark, a young man from Jerusalem who started out on a missionary trip with Paul and quit partway through. Paul was so frustrated that he refused to take him on the next trip. Years later, Paul wrote that Mark was "helpful" to him. Mark failed, and he was restored. So did Peter. Mark's Gospel

is the story of Jesus told by people who knew what it was like to get it wrong.

That's the challenge of this book. In Mark, the people who were sure they had Jesus figured out kept missing Him. Religious experts. His own hometown. Even His closest friends. The ones who saw clearly were often the ones nobody expected: a blind beggar, a foreign mother, a Roman soldier. So bring your brain. Bring your questions. Just keep your eyes open, and don't assume you already know how the story goes.

How This Book Works

This book walks through all 16 chapters of Mark, in order, in 20 short chapters. Each one tells what happened, adds background about the world Jesus lived in (Roman rule, Herod's family, Pharisees and Sadducees, Passover, crucifixion), and points out what Mark wants you to notice.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the New International Version (NIV), the same translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (pronouns for God are capitalized in the author's own words out of reverence; inside Scripture quotations, capitalization follows the NIV exactly); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and sometimes a Try This challenge.

One more thing: this book is a guide, not a replacement. Keep a Bible open next to it. Mark is short enough to read in one sitting, so read the real thing. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. Like the first book in this series, on Matthew, it's written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

This book follows the whole Gospel of Mark, all 16 chapters, in order. I have worked to stay faithful to the text: no invented events, no rewritten dialogue that changes the meaning. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the New International Version (NIV); elsewhere I paraphrase and explain. Historical background is included where it helps the story make sense, and I've tried to stay with what's well established rather than speculation.

Mark has features that make it especially good for this age group: it's fast, vivid, and brutally honest about the disciples' failures. It also shows the emotions of Jesus more than any other Gospel: His compassion, His anger at hard hearts, His sighs, His distress in Gethsemane. I've leaned into those things. The hard parts are here too, including John the Baptist's execution and the crucifixion, told truthfully but without graphic excess.

The book also deals plainly with the ending of Mark. The earliest manuscripts end at 16:8, and most Bibles note that verses 9–20 were

likely added later. I've explained that briefly and respectfully, and covered the longer ending as well, so that students aren't surprised when they see the note in their own Bibles.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will move from knowing about Jesus to following Jesus, the King who came not to be served, but to serve.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

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CHAPTER 1

No Time for a Warm-Up

Mark 1:1–13

Matthew opens with a family tree. Luke opens with careful research and a birth story. John opens before the universe existed. Mark opens like someone kicking in a door.

"The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God…"

That's it. No manger, no shepherds, no wise men. In the space of one sentence, Mark tells you who Jesus is and what his whole book is about. Then he sprints. Mark is the shortest of the four Gospels, and it reads like it was written by someone out of breath. One of his favorite words is the Greek euthys, "immediately." He uses it more than forty times (the NIV translates it several ways, including "immediately," "at once," and "without delay"): Jesus does this, and immediately that happens, and immediately something else. If Matthew is a carefully argued case, Mark is a highlight reel.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Who Was Mark?**
>
> Early church writers say this Gospel was written by John Mark, a young man from Jerusalem whose mother's house was a meeting place for the first Christians (Acts 12). They also say Mark wrote down the preaching of the apostle Peter. That would explain a lot: the vivid details, the little eyewitness touches, and how honestly the book shows Peter's mistakes. Many scholars

> think Mark was the first Gospel written, probably for Christians in Rome who were facing persecution.

Mark starts with a prophecy, quoting Isaiah and Malachi: God would send a messenger ahead to prepare the way for the Lord. Then that messenger shows up. John the Baptist is out in the wilderness, dressed in camel's hair with a leather belt, eating locusts and wild honey, and calling people to be baptized as a sign that they were turning from their sins to receive God's forgiveness. People from all over Judea and Jerusalem come out to confess their sins and be baptized in the Jordan River.

John is popular, and he could have made it about himself. Instead, his whole message points away from himself. "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie." Untying sandals was a job for the lowest servant in the house. John says he isn't even qualified for that. The most famous preacher in the country thought of himself as unworthy to do Jesus' least pleasant chore.

Then Jesus arrives, from Nazareth, a nowhere village in Galilee, and is baptized by John. Mark says that as Jesus came up out of the water, He saw heaven "being torn open." It's a violent word, and Mark uses it only one other time, at the very end of the book, when the temple curtain is torn in two at the moment Jesus dies. Keep that in mind. The whole story happens between those two tearings.

The Spirit descends on Jesus like a dove, and a voice comes from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." Notice the wording. In Mark, the Father speaks directly to Jesus. Before Jesus has preached a sermon or healed anyone, the Father announces where He stands with Him.

And then, “at once,” the Spirit “sent him out into the wilderness.” The Greek verb is even stronger than that: it’s the same word Mark uses for Jesus driving out demons. Not a gentle nudge. Mark’s language is always in motion. Jesus spends forty days there, tempted by Satan. Mark doesn’t give us the details of the temptations like Matthew does. Instead he adds a detail no other Gospel mentions: “He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.”

That’s Mark in a nutshell: short, sharp, a little unsettling, and loaded with meaning if you slow down long enough to notice. The wilderness was dangerous. The animals were real. Jesus was not on a spiritual retreat. He was facing the enemy head-on, alone, and God’s angels were caring for Him through it.

Here’s something worth noticing at the start. Mark tells his readers in verse 1 exactly who Jesus is: the Christ, the Son of God. The people inside the story will spend most of the book confused about that. Demons will know it. Religious experts will deny it. The disciples will half-get it and then lose it again. You, the reader, have the answer from page one. The question Mark keeps pressing is whether you’ll actually believe it.

KEY VERSE

The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah,
the Son of God,

Mark 1:1 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Mark skips the Christmas story and starts with Jesus as an adult. Why do you think he jumped straight to the action?
2. John the Baptist was famous but kept pointing away from himself. Why is that so rare, and so hard?
3. Mark tells you who Jesus is in the first verse. If you already "know the answer," what keeps people from actually believing it?

TRY THIS *Read the whole Gospel of Mark in one sitting this week. It takes about ninety minutes. That's shorter than most movies.*

CHAPTER 2

Immediately

Mark 1:14–45

After John is arrested, Jesus comes into Galilee preaching a message Mark sums up in one sentence: “The time has come,” He says. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” The wait is over. God’s rule is breaking in. Turn around and trust it.

Then the action starts, and it doesn’t stop. Walking by the Sea of Galilee, Jesus sees two fishermen, Simon and Andrew, throwing their net. “Come, follow me,” Jesus says, “and I will send you out to fish for people.” “At once they left their nets.” A little farther on, He sees James and John mending nets in their father’s boat. He calls them, and they leave their father, Zebedee, “in the boat with the hired men.” That last detail sounds like an eyewitness remembering exactly how it looked. It also tells us the family business had employees. These weren’t drifters with nothing to lose.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Capernaum**
>
> Jesus made the lakeside town of Capernaum His base in Galilee. It was a fishing village of maybe a thousand to fifteen hundred people. Archaeologists have uncovered the remains of a later synagogue there, built on what appear to be the foundations of an earlier one, and a house nearby that early Christians seem to have honored as Peter’s home. When Mark talks about Simon and Andrew’s home, he may be describing a place you can still visit.

On the Sabbath, Jesus teaches in the synagogue in Capernaum, and people are stunned. “he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law.” The teachers of the law (often called scribes) were the Bible experts. They taught by quoting other experts. Jesus just spoke, and people could tell the difference.

Then, in the middle of the service, a man with an impure spirit starts shouting at Jesus, asking if He has come to destroy them: “I know who you are—the Holy One of God!” Notice the irony. The religious experts in the room didn’t know who Jesus was. The demon did. Jesus doesn’t accept the endorsement. “Be quiet!” He says sternly. “Come out of him!” And it does.

That’s the first example of something Mark keeps showing: Jesus repeatedly tells people, and demons, not to spread the word about who He is. Scholars call it the “Messianic secret.” Why would Jesus do that? One reason is that people had the wrong idea of what the Messiah would be. Many expected a political warrior who would overthrow Rome. If word spread that the Messiah had arrived, crowds might try to make Him that kind of king. Jesus would reveal who He was on His terms, and the full picture wouldn’t make sense until the cross.

That evening the whole town crowds around the door of Simon’s house. Jesus heals Simon’s mother-in-law, then many others who are sick or troubled by demons. It’s a huge success. By any normal measure, it’s the start of a movement.

And then Mark gives us a quiet sentence that is easy to miss. “Very early in the morning, while it was still dark,” Jesus slips out of the house to a solitary place to pray.

Simon and the others hunt Him down and tell Him everyone is looking for Him. Translation: You're trending. Get back out there. Jesus says, let's go to the next towns, so I can preach there also. That's what He came to do. He doesn't let the crowd set His agenda. He gets His direction from time alone with the Father.

Then a man with leprosy kneels in front of Him: "If you are willing, you can make me clean." Then comes a surprise. The NIV says, "Jesus was indignant." (Some ancient manuscripts say He was filled with compassion instead; either way, Jesus is not neutral about this man's suffering.) He reaches out and touches the man, which no one did to lepers, and says, "I am willing… Be clean!" The leprosy leaves immediately.

Jesus strictly warns him to tell no one and to go show himself to the priest as the law required. Instead, the man tells everyone. The result? Jesus can't openly enter a town anymore; He has to stay out in deserted places. The healed man traded places with Jesus. He was the outsider who couldn't go into town. Now Jesus is.

Mark is already giving you a picture of how salvation works.

KEY VERSE

"The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"

Mark 1:15 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The religious experts didn't recognize Jesus, but the demon did. Is knowing who Jesus is the same as following Him? Why not?
2. After a huge night of success, Jesus went off alone to pray and then left town. What does that say about how He handled popularity?
3. Jesus touched the leper before healing him. Why do you think the touch mattered?

TRY THIS *Set your alarm fifteen minutes early one morning this week. Spend that time alone with God before your phone gets a chance to set your agenda.*

CHAPTER 3

Through the Roof

Mark 2:1–3:6

Word gets out that Jesus is back home in Capernaum, and the house is so packed that nobody else can even get near the door. Then four men show up carrying a paralyzed friend on a mat.

They can't get in. So they climb onto the roof, dig through it, and lower their friend down right in front of Jesus.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Ancient Roofs**
>
> Most houses in Galilee had flat roofs, reached by an outside staircase. The roof was typically made of wooden beams covered with branches and packed mud or clay. You could dig through it, though the homeowner probably wasn't thrilled. Mark says they dug through the roof right above Jesus and made an opening. Picture dust and dirt raining down on the crowd in the middle of Jesus' teaching.

Mark says Jesus saw "their faith." Not just the paralyzed man's, but the faith of the friends who wouldn't let a crowd stop them. Then Jesus says something nobody expected: "Son, your sins are forgiven."

The teachers of the law sitting there are thinking that this is blasphemy, because only God can forgive sins. They're right about the theology. Only God can forgive sins. That's exactly the point. Jesus knows what they're thinking and asks which is easier: to tell

the man his sins are forgiven, or to tell him to get up and walk? Anyone can claim the first; nobody can check it. So to prove He has authority to forgive sins, He tells the man to get up, take his mat, and go home. And the man does, in front of everybody. The crowd says they have never seen anything like it.

Next Jesus calls Levi, a tax collector, to follow Him. (Levi is the same man Matthew's Gospel calls Matthew.) Then Jesus goes to a dinner at Levi's house packed with tax collectors and "sinners." The scribes of the Pharisees are scandalized. Jesus answers, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Then comes a run of conflicts. Why don't Your disciples fast? Jesus says you don't fast at a wedding while the groom is still there. You don't sew new cloth onto an old garment or pour new wine into old, brittle wineskins. What Jesus brings won't fit into the old religious containers.

Why are Your disciples picking grain on the Sabbath? Jesus points out that David once ate the sacred bread when he and his men were hungry. Then He says something that cuts to the heart of the issue: "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath." God gave the day of rest as a gift. The religious leaders had turned it into a burden.

Then, in a synagogue on the Sabbath, there's a man with a withered hand. Mark says the Pharisees "watched him." They weren't hoping for a miracle. They were hoping to catch Him breaking a rule so they could accuse Him.

Jesus calls the man to stand up in front of everyone and asks the room: is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or evil, to save life or to kill? Silence.

Then Mark gives us one of his most striking details: Jesus "looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts," healed the man anyway. Mark doesn't hide Jesus' emotions. Jesus felt anger. But notice what made Him angry: people who cared more about their rules than about a suffering man. And notice that His anger is mixed with grief.

He tells the man to stretch out his hand, and it's completely restored. The Pharisees' response? They go out and immediately start plotting with the Herodians, supporters of Herod's dynasty and normally their political opposites, about how to destroy Him.

We're only in chapter 3, and they already want Him dead. A man just got his hand back, and their reaction was to plan a murder. Being religious doesn't automatically make you right with God. Sometimes it makes you blind.

KEY VERSE

It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.

Mark 2:17 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The four friends tore open a roof to get their friend to Jesus. Who in your life needs that kind of friend? Could you be one?
2. Jesus was angry and grieved at the Pharisees' hard hearts. Is anger ever right? What made Jesus' anger different from most of ours?
3. "The Sabbath was made for man." What are some ways people turn good things God gave into burdens?

CHAPTER 4

Out of His Mind?

Mark 3:7–35

By now, the crowds are enormous. People come not just from Galilee but from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea in the far south, east of the Jordan, and the coastal cities of Tyre and Sidon. It's so crushing that Jesus has a small boat kept ready so the crowd won't press Him into the lake. Sick people push forward just to touch Him. Unclean spirits fall down before Him shouting, "You are the Son of God!" And again He sternly warns them not to make Him known.

Then Jesus goes up on a mountain and calls the ones He wanted. He appoints twelve. Mark gives their purpose in a simple phrase: "that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach." Before they were sent anywhere, they were simply called to be with Jesus. Doing for Jesus starts with being with Jesus.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **The Sons of Thunder**
>
> Mark is the only Gospel that tells us Jesus gave James and John a nickname: "Boanerges, which means 'sons of thunder.'" We don't know exactly why, but elsewhere in the Gospels these brothers want to call down fire on a village that rejected Jesus (Luke 9) and ask for the top seats in His Kingdom (Mark 10). Apparently they had some temper and some ambition. Jesus called them anyway, and John would later become known for writing about love.

The list of the Twelve ends with a sobering line: Judas Iscariot, the one who would betray Him. Jesus chose him too, knowing.

Then something happens that only Mark records, and it's surprising. Jesus goes home, and the crowd is so big that He and His disciples can't even eat. "When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, 'He is out of his mind.'" A few verses later, His mother and brothers show up outside.

Let that sink in. The people who knew Jesus best growing up thought He had lost His mind. This was His own family. Later we find out that His brothers didn't believe in Him during His ministry (John 7:5). If you've ever felt misunderstood by the people closest to you because of your faith, Jesus has been there.

Meanwhile, teachers of the law come down from Jerusalem, the headquarters team of experts, with a different explanation: He is possessed by Beelzebul, they say, and He drives out demons by the power of the prince of demons. They can't deny the miracles, so they attack the source.

Jesus answers with simple logic. How can Satan drive out Satan? A kingdom divided against itself can't stand. A house divided against itself can't stand. Then He gives a picture: nobody can break into a strong man's house and carry off his stuff unless he first ties up the strong man. Jesus is saying He is the stronger one, and He is in the process of tying up Satan and taking back what Satan stole.

Then comes a serious warning. Every sin and blasphemy can be forgiven, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness. Mark explains why Jesus said it: they were claiming that His power came from an impure spirit. In context, this is the sin of looking straight at the work of God's Spirit and deliberately calling it evil, a heart so hardened it rejects the only source of forgiveness. If you're worried you've done it, that worry itself is

evidence you haven't. People who have truly hardened themselves don't lose sleep over it.

Then His mother and brothers arrive and send someone in to call Him. The crowd tells Him His mother and brothers are outside looking for Him. He asks who His mother and brothers really are. Then He looks at the people seated in a circle around Him and says, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."

This isn't Jesus disrespecting His family. Elsewhere He clearly honors His mother, even providing for her while He's dying on the cross (John 19). He's saying that following God creates a new family, one that is just as real as blood. Anyone can belong. And here's the hopeful part: by the book of Acts, Jesus' mother and brothers are among the believers, praying with the disciples (Acts 1:14). The family that once thought He was crazy came to worship Him.

KEY VERSE

Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother.

Mark 3:35 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Jesus' own family thought He was out of His mind. Why do you think the people closest to Jesus had such a hard time seeing who He was?
2. The Twelve were called first "that they might be with him." Why does being with Jesus have to come before doing things for Him?
3. Jesus said anyone who does God's will is His family. What would it look like for your church or youth group to actually act like family?

CHAPTER 5

A Pillow in the Storm

Mark 4

Jesus teaches by the lake again, and the crowd is so big He gets into a boat and teaches from the water while everyone sits on the shore. This time He teaches in parables.

The first is the parable of the sower. A farmer scatters seed. Some falls on the path, and birds eat it. Some falls on rocky ground and springs up fast but withers in the sun. Some falls among thorns and gets choked. Some falls on good soil and produces a crop of thirty, sixty, and a hundred times. Then Jesus tells everyone who has ears to hear to listen.

Later, alone with the Twelve and some others, the disciples ask about the parables. Jesus answers with a question: if they don't understand this parable, how will they understand any of them? It's the first of many times in Mark that the disciples just don't get it. Then Jesus explains: the seed is the word. Some people hear it and Satan snatches it away. Some receive it with joy, but have no root, and fall away when trouble comes. Some let worries, the lie that money will satisfy, and the desire for other things choke it out. Some hear it, accept it, and bear fruit.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Why Parables?**

Parables were short stories from everyday life with a hidden punch. Jesus said that for those "outside," everything comes in parables, and He quoted Isaiah about people who see but don't perceive. Parables sorted the audience. People who were curious leaned in and asked questions. People who had already decided against Him walked away with a nice story and nothing else. A parable is a door that only opens if you push on it.

Then come more quick images. Nobody lights a lamp and hides it under a basket. The measure you use will be measured back to you. The Kingdom is like seed a farmer scatters; he sleeps and wakes, and the seed sprouts and grows, even though he has no idea how. The Kingdom is like a mustard seed, tiny when planted, that grows into a plant with branches big enough for birds to nest in. God's work often starts small and grows in ways we can't see or control.

Then, that evening, Jesus tells them to cross to the other side. They set out in the boat, and a huge windstorm hits. The Sea of Galilee sits in a basin about 700 feet below sea level, surrounded by hills, and sudden violent storms are still common there. Waves crash over the boat until it's filling with water. Several of these men were professional fishermen, and they're terrified.

And Jesus? Mark gives a detail only an eyewitness would bother to include: "Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion." Not just asleep. Asleep on a pillow. Fully human, completely exhausted, and completely at peace.

They wake Him up with a question that sounds a lot like an accusation: "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?"

Ever prayed like that? God, don't You care? Mark doesn't edit it out. He lets the disciples' raw fear stand on the page.

Jesus gets up, rebukes the wind, and speaks to the sea: “Quiet! Be still!” The wind dies down, and it is “completely calm.” Then He turns to them: “Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?”

And here’s the twist. Mark says that after the storm stopped, the disciples were even more afraid than before. “They were terrified and asked each other, ‘Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!’”

They had been afraid of the storm. Now they’re afraid of the person in the boat with them. In the Old Testament, only God controls the sea (Psalm 107 describes God stilling a storm for terrified sailors). The disciples are starting to realize that the man asleep on the pillow is far more than a great teacher.

Notice something: Jesus never promised there wouldn’t be a storm. He’s the one who told them to cross the lake. Being in the boat with Jesus doesn’t mean calm water. It means you’re with the One the water obeys.

KEY VERSE

They were terrified and asked each other, "Who is this?
Even the wind and the waves obey him!"

Mark 4:41 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. In the parable of the sower, what are the "thorns" that most often choke out faith for people your age?
2. The disciples asked, "Don't you care if we drown?" Is it okay to be that honest with God? Why or why not?
3. The disciples were more afraid after the storm than during it. Why would seeing Jesus' power make them afraid?

CHAPTER 6

Three Untouchables

Mark 5

Mark 5 is one long chapter about three people nobody wanted to touch. A man who lived among the dead. A woman who had been bleeding for twelve years. A little girl who had just died. Under the religious rules of the day, contact with any of them would make you ceremonially unclean. Jesus touches all three, and instead of their uncleanness spreading to Him, His life spreads to them.

The boat lands on the east side of the lake, in the region of the Gerasenes. This was mostly Gentile territory. Before Jesus can even get settled, a man comes running out of the tombs to meet Him.

Mark describes him with painful detail. He lived among the graves. People had tried to restrain him with chains, but he ripped them apart. Then comes the saddest line: "Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones." Matthew mentions this story briefly. Mark slows down and makes you look at the man. This isn't a monster. It's a human being in torment, alone, hurting himself, with no one able to help.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Why the Pigs?**
>
> Jews didn't raise pigs; under the law of Moses, pigs were unclean animals. A herd of two thousand on this hillside tells you that you're in Gentile country, part of the Decapolis, a region of ten Greek-style cities. The tombs, the impure

> spirits, and the pigs would all have registered with Mark's first readers as about as unclean as a place could get. That's exactly where Jesus chose to go.

The man falls on his knees and shouts, "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? In God's name don't torture me!" Jesus asks, "What is your name?" The answer: "My name is Legion… for we are many." A Roman legion was a unit of several thousand soldiers. Whatever had taken over this man, it was not small.

The demons beg to be sent into a nearby herd of pigs. Jesus permits it, and the whole herd, about two thousand pigs, stampedes down the steep bank into the lake and drowns. Mark is the one who gives us the number. Two thousand pigs is a huge economic loss. Notice what it says about the value Jesus places on one tormented man.

Then comes the most surprising reaction in the story. The townspeople come out and see the man "sitting there, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid." They aren't afraid of the man anymore. They're afraid of Jesus. And they beg Jesus to leave. They would rather have their pigs than the Person who could do this.

The healed man begs to come along. Jesus says no, which is unusual. Instead He sends him home to tell his own people how much the Lord has done for him (the Key Verse for this chapter). For once, Jesus doesn't tell someone to keep quiet. In Gentile territory, there was less danger of a political Messiah frenzy, and this man became the first missionary to the Decapolis.

Back across the lake, a synagogue leader named Jairus falls at Jesus' feet. His little daughter is dying. Jesus goes with him, but on the way, the crowd presses in, and a woman who has been bleeding for twelve years slips up behind Him. Mark adds a detail that sounds

like it comes from someone who had dealt with doctors: she had spent everything she had on many doctors, and "instead of getting better she grew worse."

Her condition made her ritually unclean, which meant twelve years of isolation. She touches His cloak, and "immediately her bleeding stopped." Jesus stops and asks who touched His clothes. The disciples think it's a ridiculous question in a crowd like this. But Jesus keeps looking until she comes forward, shaking with fear, and tells Him everything. He doesn't scold her. He calls her "Daughter," the only time in the Gospels Jesus calls anyone that. "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering." He didn't just want her body healed. He wanted her restored in public, so everyone would know she was clean.

Meanwhile, the worst news arrives. The girl has died. Why bother the teacher anymore? Jesus turns to Jairus: "Don't be afraid; just believe." At the house, the mourners laugh at Him when He says the child is asleep. He puts them out, takes her hand, and says in Aramaic, "Talitha koum!" Mark preserves the exact words, then translates: "Little girl, I say to you, get up!" She gets up and walks around. Then Jesus tells them to give her something to eat. The Lord of life, thinking about a hungry twelve-year-old.

KEY VERSE

Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.

Mark 5:19 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The townspeople were more upset about the pigs than glad about the man. What are some "pigs" people value more than other people today?
2. Jesus could have let the woman slip away healed. Why do you think He insisted on talking to her face to face?
3. Jesus told the healed man to start with his own people. Who are "your own people," and what would it look like to tell them what God has done for you?

TRY THIS *Look up the two Aramaic phrases Mark preserves in this book (5:41 and 7:34). Ask yourself why an eyewitness would remember the exact sound of Jesus' voice.*

CHAPTER 7

Hard Hearts

Mark 6

Jesus goes back to His hometown of Nazareth, and it doesn't go well. The people who watched Him grow up hear Him teach in the synagogue and are amazed, but not in a good way. Where did He get all this? "Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son…?" And "they took offense at him."

Notice that Mark calls Jesus "the carpenter." Matthew says "the carpenter's son." The word can also mean a builder who worked with wood or stone. Jesus wasn't a celebrity growing up. He was a tradesman with calloused hands, and that was exactly the problem. They thought they knew Him. Familiarity made them blind.

Then Mark writes a sentence that might surprise you: He "could not do any miracles there," except heal a few sick people. "He was amazed at their lack of faith." It's the only time Mark says Jesus was amazed at anything, and what amazed Him was unbelief. Jesus didn't lose His power in Nazareth. But He doesn't force Himself on people who have already decided He's nothing special.

Next Jesus sends out the Twelve, two by two, with authority over impure spirits. The packing list is short: a walking staff and sandals. No bread, no bag, no money. They were to depend on God and on the hospitality of the people they met. And it works. They preach

repentance, drive out demons, anoint the sick with oil, and heal them.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Herod Antipas**
>
> The King Herod in this chapter isn't the Herod who tried to kill baby Jesus. That was Herod the Great. This is his son, Herod Antipas, who ruled Galilee under Rome. He wasn't technically a king; Rome gave him a lesser title. He had divorced his wife to marry Herodias, who was married to his half-brother. The Jewish historian Josephus also records that Herod Antipas imprisoned and executed John the Baptist, at a fortress east of the Dead Sea.

While the disciples are out, Mark flashes back to tell how John the Baptist died. John had told Herod to his face that it was not lawful for him to marry his brother's wife. Herodias hated him for it. But Herod was strangely drawn to John. Mark says Herod feared John and protected him, because he knew John was "a righteous and holy man." John's preaching left Herod "greatly puzzled; yet he liked to listen to him."

That's a dangerous place to be: interested in the truth, but not willing to obey it. At his birthday banquet, Herod is so pleased with a dance by Herodias' daughter that he makes a reckless public oath to give her anything she asks, up to half his kingdom. On her mother's advice, she asks for John's head on a platter. The king is greatly distressed, but because of his oath and his dinner guests, he won't refuse her. Herod was more afraid of looking weak in front of his guests than of killing an innocent man. Peer pressure is not just a teenage problem. It got a prophet killed.

The apostles come back excited, and Jesus invites them to come away with Him to a quiet place and rest. But the crowds run ahead and are waiting when the boat lands. Jesus could have been

annoyed. Instead, “he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.”

As evening comes, the disciples suggest sending everyone away to buy food. Jesus says, “You give them something to eat.” They do the math: that would cost more than half a year’s wages. Jesus tells them to go and see how many loaves they have. Five loaves and two fish. He has the people sit “in groups on the green grass” (another eyewitness touch: it must have been spring), gives thanks, breaks the bread, and keeps handing it to the disciples. Five thousand men eat, and there are twelve basketfuls of leftovers.

That night the disciples are rowing against the wind, and Jesus comes to them walking on the lake. Mark adds a strange detail: “He was about to pass by them.” In the Old Testament, God “passing by” is how He revealed His glory to Moses and Elijah. They think He’s a ghost and scream. “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.” He climbs in, and the wind dies down.

Then Mark ends with one of the most honest lines in the book: “They were completely amazed, for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened.” Not the Pharisees’ hearts. The disciples’. They had just handed out bread to five thousand people with their own hands, and they still didn’t get who Jesus was. Seeing a miracle doesn’t automatically change a heart.

KEY VERSE

When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.

Mark 6:34 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The people of Nazareth thought they already knew Jesus. How can growing up around church make it harder to really see Him?
2. Herod liked listening to John but wouldn't change. What's the difference between being interested in Jesus and following Him?
3. The disciples saw the loaves multiply and still had "hardened" hearts. Why doesn't seeing something amazing automatically produce faith?

CHAPTER 8

Inside Out

Mark 7

Some Pharisees and teachers of the law come all the way from Jerusalem and notice that Jesus' disciples are eating with unwashed hands. Mark stops to explain the custom for his non-Jewish readers: devout Jews wouldn't eat without a "ceremonial washing," following "the tradition of the elders." This wasn't about germs. Nobody knew about germs. It was a ritual of religious purity, added on top of the law of Moses over generations.

They ask Jesus why His disciples don't follow "the tradition of the elders." Jesus answers with Isaiah: "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." Then He goes straight to the core problem: they have let go of God's commands and are holding on to human traditions.

He gives an example. God's law says to honor your father and mother. But they had invented a loophole called "Corban," a word Mark translates for us: it means devoted to God. If you declared your money Corban, you could claim it was set apart for God, and then you were excused from using it to support your aging parents. Jesus says that by doing this, they cancel out the word of God for the sake of their tradition, and that's just one example among many.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Clean and Unclean**

The law of Moses set apart certain foods and conditions as "unclean." These laws marked Israel as a distinct people and taught that God is holy. Over time, many teachers added layers of rules about washing, dishes, and contact with outsiders. Mark notes that by teaching what He did next, "Jesus declared all foods clean." That mattered enormously to Mark's readers, many of whom were Gentile Christians in Rome wondering whether they had to keep Jewish food laws to follow Jesus.

Then Jesus calls the crowd over and says something that would have sounded radical: "Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them."

Even the disciples are confused, and Jesus is blunt about how slow they are. Then He explains. Food goes into your stomach, not your heart. But the heart is where the real trouble starts, and Jesus gives a list (it's the Key Verse below): sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance, and folly. That list is uncomfortable because it's so ordinary. Envy. Arrogance. Folly. Jesus is saying the problem isn't out there. It's in here.

That's bad news for anyone who thinks being good is about following the right external rules. You can wash your hands perfectly and still have a filthy heart. But it's also honest, and honesty is where healing starts.

Right after teaching that what makes people unclean is the heart, not food or ethnicity, Jesus walks straight into Gentile territory, near Tyre. A Greek woman, born in Syrian Phoenicia, begs Him to drive a demon out of her daughter. Jesus' answer sounds harsh: it

isn't right "to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs." The "children" are Israel; His mission was to them first.

She doesn't get offended. She gets clever. "Lord… even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." She isn't asking for the whole meal. Just a crumb. And she's sure that even a crumb from Jesus is enough. Jesus loves it. Because of her answer, He tells her, she can go home. The demon has left her daughter. She goes home and finds her daughter lying on the bed, free.

The Pharisees, the experts, rejected Jesus. A Gentile mother with no religious credentials argued her way into a blessing with humble, stubborn faith.

Then, in the Decapolis, people bring Jesus a man who is deaf and can hardly talk. Jesus takes him aside, away from the crowd, and does something very physical. He puts His fingers in the man's ears, spits, and touches his tongue. "He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, 'Ephphatha!' (which means 'Be opened!')." That sigh is another of Mark's windows into the emotions of Jesus. He felt the weight of human brokenness. The man's ears open, his tongue is loosened, and he begins to speak plainly.

Once again Jesus tells them not to tell anyone. Once again, they tell everyone. And the people say, "He has done everything well."

KEY VERSE

For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person.

Mark 7:21–23 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What are some modern "traditions" (in church or outside it) that can make people look good on the outside while ignoring the heart?
2. Jesus' list includes "envy" and "arrogance" right next to "murder." Why do you think He put them together?
3. The Syrophoenician woman asked for crumbs. What does her answer teach about humility and faith?

TRY THIS *Read Jesus' list in 7:21–22 slowly. Pick the one that shows up most in your own heart this week, and talk to God honestly about it.*

CHAPTER 9

Do You Still Not Understand?

Mark 8:1–26

Here we go again. A huge crowd, a remote place, nothing to eat. This time about four thousand people have been with Jesus for three days. “I have compassion for these people,” He says. They’ve been with Him three days, and they have nothing left to eat.

You’d think the disciples would remember what happened last time. Instead they ask where anyone could find enough bread out here. It’s almost funny. It’s also completely human. We forget what God has already done the moment a new problem shows up.

Jesus asks how many loaves they have. Seven. He gives thanks, breaks them, and feeds everyone, and they collect seven basketfuls of leftovers. This feeding happens in or near the Decapolis, Gentile territory. The first feeding was mainly for Jewish crowds in Galilee. The second seems to be for Gentiles. Jesus’ table keeps getting bigger.

Then the Pharisees show up and demand a sign from heaven. This is right after He fed thousands with seven loaves. Mark says Jesus “sighed deeply.” Here is more emotion only Mark records. They weren’t asking because they needed evidence. They were asking to test Him. He refuses. No sign will be given to this generation.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Bethsaida**

Bethsaida was a fishing town on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. John's Gospel says it was the hometown of Peter, Andrew, and Philip. Jesus had done many miracles there, and in Matthew and Luke He grieves that the town didn't repent. Archaeologists still debate the exact location; several sites near the lake's northern edge have been proposed.

In the boat, the disciples realize they forgot to bring bread. They have exactly one loaf. Jesus warns them to watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and of Herod. Yeast is a small thing that spreads through the whole batch of dough. He's talking about the attitude of the Pharisees and Herod: unbelief that refuses to see God even when He's right in front of you.

The disciples think He's upset that they forgot lunch.

What follows is one of the most intense moments of Jesus questioning His own followers. The questions come in rapid fire (they're this chapter's Key Verse): Don't you see? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes and ears that don't work? Don't you remember? Then He walks them through the numbers. Five loaves for five thousand: how many baskets left over? Twelve. Seven loaves for four thousand? Seven. "Do you still not understand?"

Mark doesn't record their answer. Maybe there wasn't one. This is a big theme of Mark's Gospel: the people closest to Jesus kept missing it. If you've ever felt slow to understand spiritual things, it's oddly encouraging. Jesus didn't give up on them.

Then, as if to act out what's happening with the disciples, Jesus heals a blind man in Bethsaida in a way He never does anywhere else: in two stages. He leads the man outside the village, spits on his eyes, puts His hands on him, and asks if he can see anything. The man looks up and says, "I see people; they look like trees walking

around." Partial sight. Blurry shapes. So Jesus puts His hands on his eyes again, and "his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly."

Why two stages? Jesus had no trouble healing instantly. Most readers think the healing is a living parable about the disciples. They can see something about Jesus, but it's blurry. In the very next scene, Peter will declare that Jesus is the Messiah: real sight. But then he'll immediately show that he doesn't understand what kind of Messiah Jesus is: still blurry. Full clarity would only come after the cross and resurrection.

That's how it works for a lot of us. We don't always go from blind to seeing in one moment. Sometimes Jesus works in stages, and the important thing is to stay close enough to let Him finish the job.

KEY VERSE

Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? And don't you remember?

Mark 8:17–18 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The disciples kept forgetting what Jesus had already done. What has God done in your life, or in the lives of people you know, that's easy to forget when new problems come?
2. The blind man first saw "people... like trees walking around." In what ways might your view of Jesus still be a little blurry?
3. The Pharisees asked for a sign right after a miracle. Is there a kind of asking for evidence that's really a way of avoiding faith?

CHAPTER 10

The Hinge

Mark 8:27–9:1

Every story has a turning point, and this is Mark's. Up to now, the question has been, "Who is this?" From here on, the question will be, "What kind of Messiah is He, and what does it mean to follow Him?" The road turns toward Jerusalem, and toward the cross.

Jesus takes His disciples north to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way He asks them, "Who do people say I am?" They report the rumors: "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." Everybody had an opinion. Nobody had the answer.

Then He makes it personal. "But what about you?... Who do you say I am?" Peter answers in four words: "You are the Messiah."

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Caesarea Philippi**
>
> This city sat at the foot of Mount Hermon, about twenty-five miles north of the Sea of Galilee, near one of the main sources of the Jordan River. It was thoroughly pagan. There was a cave and a shrine there for the Greek god Pan, and Herod the Great had built a temple honoring Caesar Augustus nearby. Herod's son Philip renamed the city to honor Caesar and himself. In other words, it was a place surrounded by claims about gods and lords. That's where Jesus asked who He really was.

After eight chapters of people asking, "Who is this?", Peter finally says it out loud. It's a breakthrough. Sight, at last. And Jesus' first response is… to tell them not to tell anyone. "Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him." The Messianic secret again. Why? Because what comes next shows that Peter has the right title but the wrong picture.

He begins to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer, be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and teachers of the law, be killed, and after three days rise again. Mark adds, "He spoke plainly about this." No parables. No hints. Straight talk.

For a first-century Jew, the words "Messiah" and "killed" didn't belong in the same sentence. The Messiah was supposed to win, not die. So Peter, fresh off the best answer of his life, does something bold. He "took him aside and began to rebuke him." Picture it. The student pulls the teacher aside to correct His theology.

Jesus turns, looks at the rest of the disciples (so they'll all hear it), and rebukes Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!… You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."

That's a shocking thing to call your friend. But it's the same temptation Jesus faced in the wilderness: the crown without the cross. Peter meant well. He loved Jesus. But a well-meaning friend can still offer the devil's shortcut. Peter knew the right answer and still got it wrong. If you've ever been confident you understood God's plan better than God did, Peter is your patron saint.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Why the Cross Mattered to Mark's Readers**

Many scholars think Mark wrote for Christians in Rome around the time Emperor Nero began persecuting them in the AD 60s. The Roman historian Tacitus describes Christians being crucified and burned. For those readers,

> Jesus' words about taking up a cross were not a metaphor about minor inconveniences. They were the real cost of following Him.

Then Jesus calls the crowd together with His disciples and lays out the terms. Not just for the Twelve. For anyone. "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

People today sometimes say "that's my cross to bear" about a sore knee or an annoying sibling. That's not what Jesus meant. In the Roman world, a person carrying a cross was a condemned man walking to his execution. Following Jesus means letting the old self-centered life die and putting Him in charge. It's total.

Then come the paradoxes. Try to save your life, and you'll lose it. Lose it for Jesus and the gospel, and you'll save it. And what good is it to "gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?"

Imagine winning everything: money, followers, fame, the perfect life. And losing yourself in the process. Jesus says that's the worst trade in the universe. The life you try to grip tightly slips away. The life you hand over to Him is the one you get to keep.

He also warns that whoever is ashamed of Him "in this adulterous and sinful generation" will find the Son of Man ashamed of them when He comes in glory. Being a quiet, embarrassed follower isn't a neutral option.

KEY VERSE

Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.

Mark 8:34–35 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Peter had the right answer but the wrong idea about what it meant. Can a person know all the right answers about Jesus and still be wrong about Him?
2. What would "deny themselves and take up their cross" look like for someone your age, in real, everyday terms?
3. Jesus warns against being ashamed of Him. Where are you most tempted to stay quiet about your faith? Why?

CHAPTER 11

Help My Unbelief

Mark 9:2–50

Six days later, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up a high mountain, and for a moment the curtain is pulled back. “There he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them.” That last phrase is pure Mark: practical, almost like a laundry comparison. Somebody remembered how white it was.

Elijah and Moses appear and talk with Jesus. Peter, true to form, offers to put up three shelters, one each for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Then Mark adds a line that feels like Peter himself telling the story with a little embarrassment: “He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.”

A cloud covers them, and a voice says, “This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!” At Jesus’ baptism, the Father spoke to Jesus. Now He speaks to the disciples. And the instruction is simple: listen to Him. Not to Moses and Elijah, as great as they were. To Jesus. Then suddenly they look around, and they see “no longer… anyone with them except Jesus.”

Coming down the mountain, Jesus tells them not to say anything until the Son of Man has risen from the dead. They keep quiet, but they spend the walk arguing about what “rising from the dead”

could possibly mean. Three chapters of predictions, and they still don't get it.

At the bottom of the mountain, chaos. The other disciples have failed to help a boy possessed by a spirit that throws him into convulsions. A crowd has gathered, and the teachers of the law are arguing with the disciples. The boy's father explains that he asked the disciples to drive out the spirit, and they couldn't.

Jesus' frustration is real: "You unbelieving generation… how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me." Mark lets us see that Jesus' patience was not effortless. He felt the weight of their unbelief.

Then comes one of the most honest conversations in the Bible. Jesus asks how long this has been going on. Since childhood, the father says. The spirit has often thrown the boy into fire or water, trying to kill him. Then: "But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us."

Jesus picks up on one word. "'If you can'?… Everything is possible for one who believes."

And the father blurts out a prayer that people have been praying for two thousand years: "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Faith That Doubts**
>
> Notice that Jesus doesn't send the father away for having mixed faith. He heals the boy. Faith in the Bible isn't the absence of every doubt. It's turning toward Jesus with what you have, even if what you have is shaky. The father was honest about both his faith and his doubt, and he brought both to Jesus. That's not failure. That's prayer.

Jesus commands the spirit to leave. The boy convulses and lies still, so still that people think he's dead. But Jesus takes him by the hand

and lifts him to his feet. Later the disciples ask why they couldn't do it. Jesus says this kind comes out only by prayer. Maybe they had started thinking the power was theirs.

On the road again, Jesus predicts His death a second time. Mark says they didn't understand, and they were afraid to ask Him about it. Ever been too embarrassed to ask a question in class because you were supposed to know the answer already? The disciples were. And it kept them stuck.

When they reach Capernaum, Jesus asks what they were arguing about on the road. Silence. On the way, they had been arguing about which of them was the greatest. Right after Jesus talked about dying, they were debating rankings.

Jesus sits down, which is what a rabbi did when he was about to teach something important. "Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all." Then He takes a little child into His arms. In that culture, children had almost no status. Welcoming a child, He says, is welcoming Him, and welcoming Him is welcoming the Father.

John then reports that they stopped a man who was driving out demons in Jesus' name, because he wasn't part of their group. Jesus says, "Do not stop him… for whoever is not against us is for us." Then He uses extreme language to describe how seriously to take sin: if your hand, foot, or eye causes you to stumble, cut it off. It's deliberate exaggeration, but the point is deadly serious. Deal ruthlessly with whatever pulls you away from God.

KEY VERSE

"'If you can'?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for one who believes." Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

Mark 9:23–24 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The father said, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" Have you ever felt both of those at the same time? What did you do with it?
2. The disciples were afraid to ask Jesus questions. What questions about faith are you afraid to ask, and who could you ask?
3. The disciples argued about who was greatest right after Jesus talked about His death. Where do you see that kind of competition in your friend group, team, or church?

TRY THIS *Pray the father's prayer this week, word for word, about something you're struggling to trust God with.*

CHAPTER 12

The Man Jesus Loved

Mark 10:1–31

Jesus leaves Galilee for the last time and heads south toward Judea. The crowds come again, and the Pharisees come again, this time with a trap: is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife? Divorce was a heated debate among rabbis. Some allowed it for almost any reason. Others only for serious offenses. Any answer would make someone angry.

Jesus asks what Moses commanded. They answer that Moses permitted a certificate of divorce. Jesus says Moses wrote that law because their hearts were hard. Then He goes back before Moses, to creation itself: God "made them male and female," and the two become one flesh. "Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." Jesus raises the standard rather than lowering it. Marriage is not a contract to cancel when it gets inconvenient. It's a union God Himself creates.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Children in the Ancient World**

In the Greco-Roman world, children were often treated as property, not persons. Unwanted infants could be abandoned. A child had no legal rights and no social standing. Jewish culture valued children more highly, but they were still at the bottom of the social ladder. So when Jesus made time for children, it wasn't sentimental. It was radical.

People start bringing little children to Jesus so He can bless them, and the disciples, acting as bouncers, rebuke them. Then Mark records an emotion that only he mentions: "When Jesus saw this, he was indignant." He was angry, not at the children, but at the disciples who thought kids weren't worth His time. "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these." He takes them in His arms and blesses them.

Then a man runs up and falls on his knees. Matthew tells us he was young; Luke tells us he was a ruler. Mark tells us he ran. He's eager. He's sincere. "Good teacher… what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus pushes back on the word "good." "Why do you call me good?… No one is good—except God alone." He isn't denying He's good. He's asking the man if he understands what he's saying. Then He lists commandments about how we treat other people: don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't steal, don't lie, don't cheat, honor your parents.

The man answers confidently that he has kept them all since he was a boy. He probably meant it. By the outward standard, he was a model citizen.

Now comes the detail that only Mark includes, and it changes everything: "Jesus looked at him and loved him."

Hold on to that. What Jesus says next is going to sound hard, but He says it in love. "One thing you lack." Sell everything, give it to the poor, and you'll have treasure in heaven. "Then come, follow me."

Jesus doesn't ask everyone to sell everything. He asked this man because He could see what was really on the throne of his heart. He had kept all the commandments about loving people, but he had a

god he didn't know he had. Notice the commandment Jesus didn't list: the very first one, about having no other gods. His money was his god.

"At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth."

He walked away from the one Person who loved him enough to tell him the truth. He thought he had it all covered. He was missing the only thing that mattered.

Jesus turns to His disciples and says how hard it is for the rich to enter God's kingdom. Then the famous image: a camel squeezing through the eye of a needle would be easier than a rich person entering God's kingdom. The largest animal in the region and the smallest opening anyone could imagine. It's not just hard. It's impossible.

The disciples are stunned. Then who can be saved? Jesus answers: "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God."

That's the gospel in one sentence. Nobody earns their way in, rich or poor. Salvation is something only God can do.

Peter points out that they've left everything. Jesus promises that no one who gives up something for Him will lose out. They'll receive "a hundred times as much in this present age… along with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life." Notice that Jesus slips in "persecutions." He never sells a fake version of following Him.

KEY VERSE

Jesus looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack," he said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

Mark 10:21 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Jesus loved the man and then told him something hard. How can telling someone a hard truth be an act of love?
2. The rich man didn't realize his money was his god. What are some "gods" people your age might not realize they have?
3. The disciples were trying to keep children away from Jesus. Who are the people today that others assume Jesus wouldn't have time for?

CHAPTER 13

Not to Be Served

Mark 10:32–52

Mark paints a vivid picture: they are on the road up to Jerusalem, Jesus is walking out in front, the disciples are astonished, and the people following are afraid. Jesus is walking out in front, setting the pace, heading straight for the city where He knows He'll be killed. The disciples can sense something is different. They're nervous.

He takes the Twelve aside and predicts His death for the third time. This time it's the most detailed of all. He'll be handed over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law, condemned to death, and handed over to the Gentiles, "who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise."

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Three Predictions, Three Misses**
>
> Mark structures this part of his book like a pattern repeated three times. In chapters 8, 9, and 10, Jesus predicts His death. Each time, the disciples respond badly: Peter rebukes Him (8:32), they argue about who's greatest (9:34), and James and John ask for power (10:37). And each time, Jesus responds by teaching about humility and servanthood. Mark wants us to see how hard it is for the human heart to accept a crucified King.

Right after the most detailed prediction yet, James and John come up to Jesus with a request: "Teacher… we want you to do for us whatever we ask." Never a good way to start a conversation. "What

do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asks. They want the top two seats in His glory, one on His right and one on His left.

Jesus says, "You don't know what you are asking." Then He asks if they can drink His cup and be baptized with His baptism. These are images of suffering. "We can," they answer confidently. Jesus says they will drink His cup. (James would become the first of the Twelve to be martyred, in Acts 12.) But the seats are not His to hand out.

The other ten get angry with James and John, probably because they wanted those seats too. So Jesus gathers them all and contrasts two kinds of greatness. The rulers of the Gentiles "lord it over them." Power means being on top and making others serve you. "Not so with you." Among His followers, the one who wants to be great must be the servant, and the one who wants to be first must be the slave of all.

Then Jesus says the sentence that many think is the key to the whole book of Mark, the Key Verse at the end of this chapter: He did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom.

A ransom was a price paid to set someone free: a prisoner of war, a slave, a hostage. Jesus says He came to pay that price with His own life. That's what kind of King He is. Not one who climbs over people to get to the top, but One who goes to the bottom to lift people up.

Then the scene shifts to Jericho, the last stop before Jerusalem. A blind beggar sits by the roadside. Mark gives us his name: "Bartimaeus (which means 'son of Timaeus')." Mark doesn't usually name the people Jesus heals. Maybe Bartimaeus became well known in the early church, and Mark's readers knew him.

When he hears that Jesus of Nazareth is passing, he starts shouting, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" "Son of David" is a royal,

messianic title. He's the first person in Mark to call Jesus that out loud. The crowd tells him to be quiet. He shouts even louder.

Jesus stops. "Call him." And the people who were shushing him a second ago suddenly say, "Cheer up! On your feet! He's calling you."

Mark adds a detail: "Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus." For a blind beggar, a cloak was probably his most valuable possession. It kept him warm and was where people tossed coins. He leaves it behind without hesitation.

Then Jesus asks him the exact same question He asked James and John: "What do you want me to do for you?" James and John asked for power. Bartimaeus asks for mercy. "Rabbi, I want to see."

"Go," said Jesus, "your faith has healed you." Immediately he can see, and he "followed Jesus along the road." The road to Jerusalem. The road to the cross.

Here's the irony Mark wants us to catch. The disciples have eyes but can't see what kind of King Jesus is. The blind man sees clearly and follows.

KEY VERSE

For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Mark 10:45 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Jesus asked James and John and Bartimaeus the same question: "What do you want me to do for you?" If Jesus asked you that today, what would you say?
2. Jesus said greatness means serving. Who is someone you know who is "great" in that way?
3. Bartimaeus threw his cloak aside. What might you need to leave behind to follow Jesus more closely?

TRY THIS *Do one thing this week to serve someone who can't pay you back or give you any status for it.*

CHAPTER 14

Leaves and No Fruit

Mark 11

Jesus finally arrives at Jerusalem. As they approach Bethphage and Bethany on the Mount of Olives, He sends two disciples ahead to a village with oddly specific instructions. They'll find a colt tied up that no one has ever ridden; they should untie it and bring it. If anyone asks, they're to say the Lord needs it and will send it right back. It happens exactly as He said.

For three years, Jesus has told people to keep quiet about who He is. Now He does something that shouts it from the rooftops. Riding into Jerusalem on a colt was a deliberate act. The prophet Zechariah had written that Israel's King would come to Jerusalem humble, riding on a donkey (Zechariah 9:9). Everyone who knew the Scriptures would get the message. The secret is over.

The crowds spread their cloaks and branches on the road and shout, "Hosanna!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!" They think the Messiah has come to throw out the Romans and bring back David's kingdom. They're half right. He is the King. But He has not come to conquer Rome. He has come to die.

Then Mark records something that only he includes. Jesus goes into the temple courts and "looked around at everything." Then, since

it's late, He goes back out to Bethany with the Twelve. No speech. No miracle. He just looks around. It's like an inspector walking through a building before he writes up his report. Tomorrow He'll act.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Mark's Sandwiches**

Mark has a storytelling habit scholars call a "sandwich." He starts one story, interrupts it with another, then finishes the first. Each story helps explain the other. You saw it in Mark 5 (Jairus' daughter, the bleeding woman, Jairus' daughter) and in Mark 3 (Jesus' family, the Beelzebul accusation, Jesus' family). Here it's the fig tree, the temple, and the fig tree again. When you see the pattern, ask: what do these two stories have in common?

The next morning, Jesus is hungry and sees a fig tree in leaf. He goes to it and finds "nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs." Jesus says, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again."

At first this looks unfair. Why curse a tree for not having fruit out of season? But fig trees in leaf were known to produce small early buds, and a tree full of leaves with nothing on it was a picture of a promise without delivery. And Jesus is not having a bad day. He's acting out a parable. In the Old Testament, prophets sometimes compared Israel to a fig tree. All leaves, no fruit. Looks alive. Isn't.

Then the middle of the sandwich. Jesus enters the temple courts and starts driving out the buyers and sellers, overturning the money changers' tables and the benches of the dove sellers. Mark adds that He wouldn't let anyone carry merchandise through the temple courts. People were using it as a shortcut.

Then He quotes the prophets: God's house was meant to be "a house of prayer for all nations," but they have made it "a den of robbers." Only Mark includes the words "for all nations." The buying and

selling was taking place in the outer court, the Court of the Gentiles, the one space where non-Jews could come to pray. The leaders had turned the place for the nations to meet God into a noisy marketplace. Lots of leaves. No fruit.

The chief priests and teachers of the law respond the way you'd expect. They start looking for a way to kill Him.

The next morning, the disciples pass the fig tree and see that it has withered from the roots. Peter points it out, and Jesus turns it into a lesson about faith: "Have faith in God." Even a mountain could be thrown into the sea if they trusted God without doubting. Then Jesus adds something about prayer that's easy to skip: when you pray, forgive anyone you're holding something against, so that your Father in heaven will forgive you. Powerful faith and an unforgiving heart don't go together.

Back in the temple, the leaders confront Him and demand to know by what authority He is doing these things. Jesus answers with a question: was John's baptism from heaven, or of human origin? They huddle and realize they're stuck either way. So they say, "We don't know." Then Jesus says He won't tell them either. They weren't really looking for an answer. They were looking for a trap. And Jesus doesn't play.

KEY VERSE

Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it 'a den of robbers.'

Mark 11:17 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The fig tree looked healthy but had no fruit. What does a life that looks good on the outside but has no real fruit look like?
2. Jesus was angry that the space meant for the nations to pray had been taken over. Who gets crowded out of church spaces today, and how could that change?
3. Jesus connected prayer with forgiveness. Why do you think holding a grudge would get in the way of praying?

CHAPTER 15

Two Small Coins

Mark 12

The religious leaders have just been embarrassed, and Jesus isn't done. He tells them a parable about a man who plants a vineyard, rents it to farmers, and goes away. At harvest he sends servants to collect his share. The tenants beat one, wound another, kill another. Finally, the owner has "one left to send, a son, whom he loved." Surely they'll respect his son. But the tenants decide to kill the heir and take the inheritance for themselves.

The story is not subtle. Israel was often pictured as God's vineyard. The servants are the prophets. The beloved Son is Jesus. And Mark says the leaders knew the parable was about them.

Then come the trick questions, one after another.

First, the Pharisees and Herodians. Normally these two groups didn't get along. The Pharisees resented Rome; the Herodians supported Herod's family, who ruled with Rome's blessing. But they team up against Jesus. They start with flattery, then spring the trap: is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not? If He says yes, the crowds will see Him as a collaborator. If He says no, He's a rebel.

Jesus asks for a denarius. "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?" "Caesar's," they reply. "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." The coin bears Caesar's image,

so give it back to him. But you bear God's image. Give yourself back to Him.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herodians**
> The Pharisees were a popular lay movement devoted to strict keeping of the law and the traditions around it. They believed in angels and the resurrection. The Sadducees were mostly wealthy, priestly aristocrats connected to the temple. They accepted only the first five books of the Old Testament as fully authoritative and denied the resurrection. The Herodians were supporters of Herod's dynasty. In this chapter, all three groups take their shot at Jesus. All three miss.

Next come the Sadducees, who deny that there is any resurrection. They make up an extreme scenario: a woman marries seven brothers in a row, each dying childless. At the resurrection, whose wife will she be? It's meant to make the idea of resurrection look ridiculous.

Jesus doesn't flinch. "Are you not in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God?" The resurrection life won't simply be a replay of this one. Then He goes to the part of Scripture they accepted: God told Moses at the burning bush, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Not "I was." Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are alive to God. "He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken!"

Here are the experts again, sure they'd found the flaw in Jesus' thinking, and Jesus tells them they don't know their own Bible.

Then a teacher of the law who has been listening asks a real question, not a trick: which commandment is the most important of all? Jesus answers with the Shema, the prayer devout Jews prayed every day: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one." Love God with everything you are: heart, soul, mind, and strength. And

then He adds a second, which you'll find with the first in the Key Verse below.

The man agrees and says that loving God and neighbor matters more than all the burnt offerings and sacrifices. Jesus sees that he answered wisely and tells him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." It's one of the only times in Mark that a religious expert gets close. Not far. But not in yet.

Jesus then warns the crowd about the teachers of the law who love flowing robes, respectful greetings, and the best seats, and who swallow up widows' houses while making long prayers for show. Hold that phrase about widows. Mark is about to show us one.

Jesus sits down opposite the temple treasury and watches people put in their offerings. The rich throw in large amounts. Then a poor widow comes and puts in "two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents." Jesus calls His disciples over. "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others." The others gave out of their surplus. She gave "all she had to live on."

Everyone else in this chapter is trying to look impressive. The widow isn't trying to look like anything. Nobody else noticed her. Jesus did. God doesn't measure giving by the amount. He measures it by what it costs and what it reveals about your trust. She gave everything because she trusted God with everything.

KEY VERSE

'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these.

Mark 12:30–31 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The coin had Caesar's image. You have God's image. What would it look like this week to "give back... to God what is God's"?
2. Jesus told the teacher of the law he was "not far from the kingdom of God." What's the difference between being close and being in?
3. Nobody noticed the widow, but Jesus did. Who do you tend not to notice? How might Jesus see them differently?

TRY THIS *Give something this week that actually costs you something: time, money, or attention. Don't tell anyone.*

CHAPTER 16

Not One Stone

Mark 13

As Jesus leaves the temple, one of His disciples is gawking like a tourist at the massive stones and magnificent buildings. He had a point. Herod the Great had rebuilt the temple into one of the most impressive structures in the Roman world. Some of its stones were enormous, and the whole complex gleamed with white stone and gold.

Jesus answers, "Do you see all these great buildings?... Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down."

That would have sounded unthinkable. The temple was the center of Jewish life, the place where God's presence was believed to dwell. But about forty years later, in AD 70, Roman armies under the general Titus destroyed Jerusalem and burned the temple. It has never been rebuilt.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **The Fall of Jerusalem**
>
> In AD 66, Jewish rebels revolted against Rome. Four years later, after a brutal siege, the Romans broke into Jerusalem. The historian Josephus, who was there, describes famine, fire, and massive loss of life. The temple was destroyed. In Rome, the Arch of Titus still stands, carved with images of soldiers carrying away the temple's golden lampstand. Jesus had predicted it a generation earlier.

Later, sitting on the Mount of Olives, looking across at the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew ask Him privately when all this will happen, and what the sign will be. Jesus' answer, which fills this chapter, is sometimes called the "Little Apocalypse." It looks ahead to the destruction of the temple and beyond it to His own return at the end of history. The two events overlap in His teaching like two mountain peaks seen from a distance.

You might expect Jesus to start with a timeline. He starts with a warning: "Watch out that no one deceives you." Many will come claiming His name. There will be wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes and famines. But "do not be alarmed… These are the beginning of birth pains." Birth pains are painful, but they're not meaningless. They mean something new is coming.

Then He gets personal. His followers will be handed over to councils, flogged in synagogues, and put on trial before governors and kings. Families will turn against each other. Everyone will hate them because of Him. But "the one who stands firm to the end will be saved." For Mark's first readers in Rome, this wasn't theory. It was happening.

But in the middle of the warning, Jesus gives them two promises. First, "the gospel must first be preached to all nations." The persecution won't stop the message. Second, when they're on trial, they don't need to panic about what to say: "it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit."

He speaks of "the abomination that causes desolation," a phrase from Daniel, and tells those in Judea to flee to the mountains when they see it. Mark inserts a little aside: "let the reader understand." It's like a footnote to his readers: pay attention to this one.

Then Jesus looks past the fall of Jerusalem to the end: the sun darkened, the stars falling, and "people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory." He will gather His people "from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens."

And when will it happen? Here is one of the most honest sentences in the Gospels: "But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." In His human life, Jesus chose to live within limits. If even He didn't claim to know the date, then anyone who sets a date for the end of the world is claiming more than Jesus did.

So what are we supposed to do? Not calculate. Watch. He tells a short parable about a man who leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, "each with their assigned task." Then He ends the chapter with a single word, aimed at everyone, including you: "What I say to you, I say to everyone: 'Watch!'"

Watching isn't staring at the sky. It's living faithfully, doing your assigned task, ready at any moment to see your Master's face.

KEY VERSE

Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

Mark 13:31 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The disciple was impressed by the temple's massive stones. What impressive things in our world seem permanent but won't last?
2. Jesus said even He didn't claim to know the day or hour. Why do you think people are still so eager to predict the end?
3. What would it look like for you to "watch" in a normal week: at school, at home, with friends?

CHAPTER 17

A Beautiful Waste

Mark 14:1–31

It's two days before Passover, and the chief priests and teachers of the law are scheming to arrest Jesus secretly and kill Him. Their only concern is timing: not during the festival, or the people might riot. They're worried about crowd control, not about whether killing Him is right.

Meanwhile, in Bethany, Jesus is eating at the home of a man Mark calls "Simon the Leper." (Presumably a man Jesus had healed; a leper still in quarantine wouldn't be hosting dinner.) A woman comes in with "an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard." She doesn't pour out a few drops. "She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head."

Nard was imported from as far away as India. Some of the people at the table do the math instantly: "Why this waste of perfume?" It could have been sold for more than a year's wages and given to the poor. Mark says they scolded her harshly.

Think about that number. A year's wages, gone in a moment. It would be like someone pouring out a year's paycheck as a gift.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Anointing**
>
> In Israel, kings were anointed with oil when they were crowned. The word "Messiah" literally means "Anointed One." Bodies were also anointed with

> spices and perfume when they were prepared for burial. When this woman anoints Jesus' head, she's honoring Him as King. Jesus says she's also preparing Him for burial. In Mark's story, both are true at once: Jesus is the King who reigns by dying.

Jesus defends her: "Leave her alone… Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me." Then He tells them they will always have the poor with them and can help them any time, "But you will not always have me." He isn't saying the poor don't matter. He's quoting a passage in Deuteronomy that commands generosity to the poor precisely because poverty will always exist. His point is that this moment is unique.

Then He says something stunning. "She did what she could." She had anointed His body ahead of time for burial. And wherever the gospel is preached, her story will be told (that's the Key Verse for this chapter). And here you are, reading about her two thousand years later. Promise kept.

The disciples saw waste. Jesus saw worship. The critics measured her gift in money. Jesus measured it in love.

And right after this scene of extravagant love, Mark tells us that "Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, went to the chief priests to betray Jesus to them." The contrast is deliberate. One person gives up a fortune for Jesus. Another gives up Jesus for money.

On the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread, Jesus sends two disciples into the city with another oddly specific instruction: a man carrying a jar of water will meet them, and they should follow him. Carrying water was normally women's work, so a man doing it would stand out. They find a large upstairs room, furnished and ready, and prepare the Passover.

That evening, while they're eating, Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me—one who is eating with me." Sharing a meal was a sign of friendship and trust. Betraying someone you had eaten with was considered a special kind of treachery. One by one, they ask, "Surely you don't mean me?" Nobody points at Judas. Everyone wonders about himself.

Then Jesus takes bread, gives thanks, breaks it, and gives it to them: "Take it; this is my body." Then the cup: "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many."

At Passover, Jews remembered how God rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt, and how the blood of a lamb on their doorposts protected them from judgment. Now Jesus takes that meal and says it's about Him. His body would be broken. His blood would be poured out. The Lamb was sitting at the table.

After singing a hymn (traditionally the Passover meal ended with Psalms 115 to 118), they walk out to the Mount of Olives. Jesus tells them that all of them will fall away. He quotes Zechariah: the shepherd will be struck, and the sheep scattered. But He also promises, "after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee." Even before they fail, He's already planning the reunion.

Peter can't let that stand. "Even if all fall away, I will not." Jesus gives him a precise prediction: "today—yes, tonight—before the rooster crows twice you yourself will disown me three times." Only Mark mentions the rooster crowing twice. That's the kind of detail you'd remember if it were your own worst night.

Peter insists "emphatically," Mark says: "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." Then comes the line that should

humble every one of us: "And all the others said the same." Every single one of them was sure.

KEY VERSE

Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.

Mark 14:9 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The disciples called the woman's gift a "waste." What might Jesus call "beautiful" that other people would call a waste?
2. All twelve said they'd never fall away. Why is overconfidence about our own faithfulness dangerous?
3. Jesus promised to meet them in Galilee before they even failed. What does that tell you about how He sees our failures?

CHAPTER 18

The Garden and the Runaway

Mark 14:32–72

They come to an olive grove called Gethsemane, which means "oil press." Jesus takes Peter, James, and John a little farther, and then Mark shows us something he refuses to soften. Jesus "began to be deeply distressed and troubled." He tells them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death… Stay here and keep watch."

This isn't a calm, detached Jesus floating above the pain. This is a man who knows exactly what is coming, and it is crushing Him.

He falls to the ground and prays, "Abba, Father… everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."

"Abba" is the Aramaic word a child used for his father. Mark preserves it, just like he preserved "Talitha koum" and "Ephphatha." It's intimate and trusting. And the "cup" is an Old Testament picture of God's judgment against sin. Jesus is about to drink it on our behalf. He asks if there's any other way. Then He surrenders: not My will, but Yours.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Did Jesus Want to Die?**
>
> Some people imagine Jesus going to the cross easily, almost eagerly, because He knew He'd rise again. Mark won't let us think that. Jesus was fully human.

> He felt dread. He asked His Father to take the cup away. Courage isn't the absence of fear. It's choosing to obey when you're afraid. Jesus didn't go to the cross because it was easy. He went because He loved the Father and He loved us.

He comes back and finds the disciples asleep. "Simon… are you asleep? Couldn't you keep watch for one hour?" Notice He calls him Simon, his old name, not Peter, "the rock." Then: "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." Three times He prays. Three times they sleep. Mark adds, "They did not know what to say to him." Peter, the guy who always had something to say, had nothing.

Then: "Enough! The hour has come… Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!"

Judas arrives with a crowd armed with swords and clubs. He had arranged a signal: the one he kisses is the man to arrest. He walks up and says, "Rabbi!" and kisses Him. A sign of respect and friendship, used as a weapon.

Someone draws a sword and cuts off the ear of the high priest's servant. Jesus asks why they came for Him with weapons as if He were leading a rebellion when He had taught openly in the temple every day. Then Mark writes one of the saddest sentences in the book: "Then everyone deserted him and fled."

Everyone. Including Peter. Including all the ones who said they would die with Him.

Then comes the strangest detail in the whole Gospel, and only Mark includes it. A young man wearing nothing but a linen garment is following Jesus. When they grab him, "he fled naked, leaving his garment behind."

Who was he? Mark doesn't say. Many readers, ancient and modern, have wondered if this is Mark himself, signing his work. Remember, Mark was a young man from Jerusalem, and his family's house was a gathering place for Jesus' followers. Whether or not it was Mark, the picture is unforgettable. Following Jesus in a crisis can cost you more than you're ready to lose, and the young man ran. If it was Mark, he's telling on himself. The same John Mark who would later abandon Paul and Barnabas on a missionary trip, and who would later be restored and called "helpful" by Paul.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Peter's Story**
>
> Early Christian writers said that Mark's Gospel preserves Peter's preaching. If that's true, then this chapter is Peter telling the world about the worst night of his life. He didn't hide it. He put it on record. The rock who cracked became the leader of the early church, not because he never failed, but because Jesus restored him.

Jesus is taken to the high priest. The Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council, looks for testimony to justify a death sentence, but the witnesses contradict each other. Jesus stays silent. Finally the high priest asks Him directly: "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?"

All through Mark, Jesus has kept His identity quiet. Now, standing before the highest authority in Israel, with His life on the line, He breaks the secret wide open. "I am," He says, and then He tells them they will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven. The high priest tears his clothes and calls it blasphemy. They condemn Him and begin to spit at Him, blindfold Him, punch Him, and taunt, "Prophesy!"

The irony: at that very moment, outside, one of His prophecies is coming true.

Peter has followed at a distance, right into the high priest's courtyard, and is warming himself by the fire. A servant girl looks closely at him. "You also were with that Nazarene, Jesus." Peter: "I don't know or understand what you're talking about." She tells the people standing around that he's one of them. He denies it again. Then the bystanders say, "Surely you are one of them, for you are a Galilean." His accent gave him away. Peter "began to call down curses, and he swore to them, 'I don't know this man you're talking about.'"

"Immediately the rooster crowed the second time." Peter remembers. "And he broke down and wept."

Not a soldier. Not a high priest. A servant girl. Peter promised to die for Jesus and couldn't stand up to a teenager's question by a fire. Know-it-alls, take note. The person who says, "I would never," is often the one who does.

KEY VERSE

"Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."

Mark 14:36 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Jesus was honest with the Father about what He didn't want, and then surrendered. What does that teach about how to pray when you're afraid?
2. Why do you think Mark included the young man who ran away naked? What does that detail say about the cost of following Jesus?
3. Peter folded under pressure from a servant girl. Where do you feel the most pressure to pretend you don't know Jesus?

TRY THIS *Read Mark 14:72 and then John 21:15–19. Notice how Jesus restores Peter three times, one for each denial.*

CHAPTER 19

The Curtain Torn

Mark 15

"Very early in the morning," the Sanhedrin finishes its plans, binds Jesus, and hands Him over to Pilate, the Roman governor. The Jewish council could condemn, but under Roman rule it generally couldn't carry out executions. They needed Rome to do it.

Pilate asks, "Are you the king of the Jews?" To a Roman, that's a political question. A "king" who wasn't approved by Caesar was a rebel. Jesus answers, "You have said so." Then the chief priests pile on accusation after accusation, and Jesus says nothing. "But Jesus still made no reply, and Pilate was amazed." Isaiah had described the Servant of the Lord as silent before his accusers, like a lamb led to slaughter. Mark lets the silence speak.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Pontius Pilate**
>
> Pilate governed Judea for Rome from about AD 26 to 36. Ancient historians describe him as harsh and willing to use violence against crowds. In 1961, archaeologists at Caesarea Maritima found a stone inscription bearing his name and title. He usually lived on the coast but came to Jerusalem during major festivals like Passover, when the city was packed with pilgrims and the risk of riots was high.

Pilate has a custom of releasing one prisoner at the festival. In custody is a man called Barabbas, locked up with rebels who had committed murder in an uprising. A violent rebel. Pilate offers to

release “the king of the Jews,” because he can see the chief priests have handed Jesus over out of self-interest, which is a polite way of saying jealousy.

But the chief priests stir up the crowd to ask for Barabbas. Pilate asks, “What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?” “Crucify him!” “Why? What crime has he committed?” But they shout all the louder, “Crucify him!”

Then Mark gives the real reason for the verdict: “Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them.” Pilate wasn’t convinced Jesus was guilty. He just wanted the noise to stop. Like Herod with John the Baptist, a powerful man did something terrible because he was afraid of what people would think.

And Barabbas walks free. A guilty man released because an innocent one takes his place. If you want a picture of what the cross means, it’s right there.

The soldiers take Jesus into the palace and call the whole company together. They dress Him in purple, twist a crown of thorns onto His head, and mock Him, saluting Him as king of the Jews. They hit Him with a staff, spit on Him, and kneel in fake worship. They thought they were mocking a fraud. They were actually kneeling before the King of the universe.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Crucifixion**
>
> Rome used crucifixion for slaves, rebels, and the lowest criminals. It was designed to be slow, public, and humiliating, a warning to anyone watching. Victims were usually flogged first, which could cause massive blood loss. Roman citizens were generally exempt. The cross was so shameful that polite Romans avoided even talking about it. That makes it astonishing that the first Christians made a cross the center of their message.

On the way out, the soldiers force a passerby to carry the cross: "A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus." Why mention his sons? Probably because Mark's readers knew them. Paul greets a man named Rufus in his letter to the Romans. Simon was just coming in from the country. He ended up carrying the cross of Jesus, and it seems his family became followers.

They bring Jesus to Golgotha, "the place of the skull." They offer Him wine mixed with myrrh, a kind of painkiller, but He refuses it. He would face this fully awake. "And they crucified him." Mark doesn't describe the nails. He doesn't need to. His readers knew.

The soldiers divide His clothes. The charge is posted above Him: THE KING OF THE JEWS. They meant it as a joke. It was the truest sign ever written.

Everyone mocks Him. People passing by: "come down from the cross and save yourself!" The chief priests: "He saved others… but he can't save himself!" Without meaning to, they said the gospel. He couldn't save others and Himself at the same time. He chose others. "Let this Messiah, this king of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe." Even the men crucified next to Him insult Him.

At noon, darkness covers the land for three hours. Then Jesus cries out in Aramaic, and Mark preserves the words: "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" (which means "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?").

These are the first words of Psalm 22, a psalm of terrible suffering that ends in trust and victory. But the cry is real. On the cross, Jesus was bearing the full weight of human sin, and He experienced the

separation from God that sin deserves. He was forsaken so that we would never have to be.

"With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last." And immediately, "The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom." Remember the first chapter? At Jesus' baptism, heaven was "torn open." Now the temple curtain, which separated the Most Holy Place from everyone else, is torn. From top to bottom: this was God's doing. The way into God's presence was open.

And who sees it first? Not a priest. Not a disciple. A Roman soldier. The centurion standing in front of the cross sees how Jesus dies, and he says what no one else in Mark has said (it's the Key Verse below).

This is the climax of Mark's Gospel. Remember the first verse: "the Son of God." Demons had said it, and Jesus silenced them. The Father had said it, from heaven. But the first human being in Mark to say it out loud is a Gentile executioner, and he says it not after a miracle, but after watching Jesus die. The secret is out, and it's revealed at the cross.

Meanwhile, the women are watching from a distance. Mary Magdalene, another Mary, Salome, and many others. The men have run. The women stayed. A respected council member named Joseph of Arimathea "went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body." He wraps it in linen and lays it in a tomb cut out of rock, then rolls a stone across the entrance. And two of the women see exactly where He was laid.

KEY VERSE

And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, he said, "Surely this man was the Son of God!"

Mark 15:39 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Pilate knew Jesus was innocent but gave in to the crowd. What does it look like to do the right thing when everyone around you is shouting the opposite?
2. The chief priests said, "He saved others... but he can't save himself!" How is that mockery actually the truth about the cross?
3. Why do you think the first person in Mark to call Jesus "the Son of God" out loud is a Roman soldier at the cross?

CHAPTER 20

Trembling and Bewildered

Mark 16

Early Sunday morning, just after sunrise, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome walk to the tomb with spices to anoint Jesus' body. They're not expecting a resurrection. They're expecting a corpse. On the way they're worried about a practical problem: who is going to roll the stone away from the entrance?

When they look up, the stone, "which was very large," has already been rolled away.

Inside, they see a young man in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they're alarmed. He tells them not to be alarmed. They're looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. "He has risen! He is not here."

Notice how plain it is. No fireworks. Just an empty shelf of stone where a body should have been. He has risen.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Why Women Witnesses Matter**

In the first-century world, the testimony of women was often treated as less reliable than a man's, and in many settings it wasn't accepted in court. If you were inventing a resurrection story to convince people, you would not make women your first witnesses. Yet all four Gospels say women discovered the empty tomb. That's the kind of awkward detail that suggests the writers were reporting what happened, not what would sound most convincing.

Then the young man says something that should make you stop: "But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'"

"And Peter." Out of all the disciples, Peter is named. The one who swore he would never deny Jesus, and then did it three times. The one who broke down and wept by the fire. Jesus made sure he got a personal invitation. If this Gospel really is based on Peter's preaching, imagine him telling crowds about this moment. "And Peter." That was me. He still wanted me.

Then comes the most surprising ending of any Gospel: "Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid."

That's where the earliest manuscripts of Mark end. With fear. With silence. With the women running.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Endings of Mark**
>
> The oldest and most reliable manuscripts we have of Mark end at 16:8. Some later manuscripts add a longer ending (16:9–20), and a few have a short alternative ending. Most scholars, including many committed evangelical scholars, think verses 9–20 were added by early Christians who summarized resurrection appearances also found in the other Gospels and Acts. Your Bible likely includes them with a note, and the NIV itself notes that the earliest manuscripts do not have them. Nothing central to the Christian faith depends on these verses alone: the resurrection, the appearances, and the Great Commission are all taught clearly elsewhere in Scripture.

Why would Mark end with fear? Some think the original ending was lost. Others think Mark ended there on purpose, and that's worth thinking about. All through this book, people have responded to Jesus with amazement, fear, and confusion. The disciples kept missing it. And now the story stops with the message unfinished,

like a door left open. Mark knew his readers already knew the women eventually spoke, because otherwise no one would have heard about the empty tomb. The question at the end isn't really about them. It's about you. You've heard the news. Jesus is risen. What will you do with it?

The longer ending, as many Bibles print it, summarizes what happened next. Jesus appears first to Mary Magdalene, "out of whom he had driven seven demons." She tells the mourning disciples, but they don't believe her. He appears to two disciples walking in the country; again, the others don't believe. Finally He appears to the Eleven and rebukes them for their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe the people who had seen Him. Even after the resurrection, the theme continues: the people closest to Jesus were slow to believe.

Then He sends them: "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation." He is taken up into heaven, and "he sat at the right hand of God." And the last line shows the result: "Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them."

The same scared, slow, doubting, runaway disciples become the ones who carry the message to the world. Including Peter. Including, if the early church was right, the young man who ran away in the dark and later wrote this book.

So here's the real ending of Mark. It's an invitation. The tomb is empty. Jesus has gone ahead. He wants His disciples, and Peter, and you.

KEY VERSE

"Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him."

Mark 16:6 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Out of all the disciples, the messenger named Peter. What does that tell you about how Jesus treats people who have failed Him?
2. The earliest manuscripts end with the women afraid and silent. Why might Mark end the story that way? What would you do with the news?
3. The disciples who ran away became the ones who told the world. How does their story give you hope about your own weaknesses?

TRY THIS *Read the whole Gospel of Mark in one sitting. It takes about an hour and a half. Watch for every time someone asks, "Who is this?"*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Now What? The Bottom Line

You've just raced through the whole Gospel of Mark. You've seen Jesus heal the untouchable, silence storms and demons, confront the experts, welcome children and beggars, pray in anguish in a garden, die on a Roman cross, and leave an empty tomb behind. Now the question Jesus asked His disciples is the question He asks you: "But what about you?... Who do you say I am?"

Here's what the Bible says, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and God is King.

You weren't an accident. God created you to know Him, love Him, and live under His good rule. That's what Jesus meant when He announced, "The kingdom of God has come near."

2 We've all rebelled.

Remember Jesus' list of what comes out of the human heart: envy, arrogance, deceit, and the rest? Nobody is clean on the inside. Not the Pharisees, not the disciples, not you or me. The Bible calls it sin, and it separates us from God.

> *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,* **Romans 3:23 (NIV)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. The Bible says the result of sin is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (NIV)**

4 Jesus paid it.

On the cross, Jesus, the only person who ever lived a perfect life, took our place. Like Barabbas, the guilty go free because the innocent One is condemned. Jesus said He came "to give his life as a ransom for many." Then He rose from the dead, proving His payment was accepted and death was beaten.

> *But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.* **Romans 5:8 (NIV)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

Remember the rich man who asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Salvation isn't a checklist you complete. It's a gift you receive by trusting Jesus. "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God."

> *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.* **Ephesians 2:8–9 (NIV)**

6 Following Jesus means turning around.

Jesus' first message in Mark was, "Repent and believe the good news!" That means turning from running your own life and turning to Jesus as your Savior and King. It doesn't mean you'll never fail again. Peter failed spectacularly, and the angel at the tomb still said, "tell his disciples and Peter." It means you belong to Him now.

> *If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* **Romans 10:9 (NIV)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. Remember the father who said, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" Jesus answered that prayer. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

> *God, I've been running my own life, and I've sinned against You. I can't fix that myself. I believe Jesus is Your Son, the King, that He gave His life as a ransom for me, and that You raised Him from the dead. I'm turning to You. Forgive me. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want to follow Him as my King. Where I believe, make my faith stronger; where I doubt, help my unbelief. In Jesus' name, amen.*

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. The healed man in Mark 5 was told to go home and tell his own people. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read Mark straight through in a Bible. It takes about an hour and a half. Then keep going with another Gospel.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Ask about being baptized; Jesus Himself was baptized at the very start of Mark.

Talk to God every day. Jesus got up while it was still dark to pray. You don't have to start that early, but start. Be honest. He can handle it.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Mark doesn't hide how slow the disciples were to believe. Even after the resurrection, some of them refused to believe at first. Jesus didn't give up on them. Keep asking. Keep reading. Talk to someone you trust. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because in Mark, the people who thought they had Jesus figured out missed Him. Don't be one of them.

For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Jesus, Mark 10:45 (NIV)

THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

The King Who Came Looking

Luke, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

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The King Who Came Looking: The Gospel of Luke, Unfiltered

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Pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence in the author's own words. Inside Scripture quotations, capitalization and wording follow the 2011 NIV exactly.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

If you've read the other books in this series, you know the saying I keep coming back to: "If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all." I'm not going to apologize for it this time. It has become a tradition.

Here's why it fits Luke especially well. Luke was not someone who assumed he knew it all. He was a careful researcher. Before he wrote a single story, he tracked down eyewitnesses, checked what had been handed down, and then put it in order. He tells you that in his very first sentence. Luke is the Gospel for anyone who has ever said, "Prove it."

Luke was probably a doctor. Paul calls him "the doctor" in one of his letters, and Luke traveled with Paul for years. He also wrote a second volume, the book of Acts, which picks up right where his Gospel leaves off. Together, Luke and Acts make up more than a quarter of the New Testament. That's a lot of pages from one careful writer.

Luke was also most likely not Jewish. If so, he may be the only non-Jewish author in the whole Bible. Maybe that's why his Gospel keeps noticing people who stood outside the circle: Samaritans, tax collectors, lepers, widows, shepherds, a criminal on a cross, a short man up a tree. More than any other Gospel, Luke shows Jesus with women, with the poor, and with people everyone else had written off.

Some of the most famous stories Jesus ever told are found only in Luke: the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, the Rich Man and Lazarus, the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. Without Luke, we wouldn't have the shepherds at the manger, Zacchaeus, or the two travelers on the road to Emmaus. Luke also shows Jesus praying again and again, and he keeps pointing to the Holy Spirit at work.

So here's the challenge. Luke wrote so that his reader would "know the certainty" of what he had been taught. Not just feel it. Know it. Bring your questions. Bring your doubts. Luke can handle them. But be ready: the Jesus you'll meet in this book goes looking for people who are lost. That might include you.

How This Book Works

This book walks through all 24 chapters of Luke, in order, one chapter of this book for each chapter of Luke. Each one tells what happened, adds background about the world Jesus lived in (Roman rule, Herod's family, Samaritans, Pharisees and tax collectors, Passover, crucifixion), and points out what Luke wants you to notice.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the New International Version (NIV), the same translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (pronouns for God are capitalized in the author's own words out of reverence; inside Scripture quotations, capitalization follows the NIV exactly); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and sometimes a Try This challenge.

One more thing: this book is a guide, not a replacement. Keep a Bible open next to it and read each chapter of Luke for yourself.

Luke wanted his reader to check the facts. So do I. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. Like the earlier books in this series, on Matthew and Mark, it's written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

This book follows the whole Gospel of Luke, all 24 chapters, in order. I have worked to stay faithful to the text: no invented events, no rewritten dialogue that changes the meaning. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the New International Version (NIV); elsewhere I paraphrase and explain. Historical background is included where it helps the story make sense, and I've tried to stay with what's well established rather than speculation.

Luke has features that make it especially good for this age group. It begins with a historian's promise to check the facts, which invites honest questions. And it is full of people on the outside: the poor, women, foreigners, the sick, and the notoriously sinful. Teenagers know what it feels like to be on the outside. I've leaned into the parables found only in Luke, Luke's emphasis on prayer and the Holy Spirit, and Jesus' care for those everyone else overlooked. The hard parts are here too, including the crucifixion, told truthfully but without graphic excess.

Where the NIV notes that some early manuscripts lack a passage (for example, the angel and the sweat like drops of blood in Luke 22:43–44), I've said so briefly and respectfully, so that students aren't surprised when they see those notes in their own Bibles.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will discover what Zacchaeus discovered: that Jesus came looking for him, by name, and that being found by Jesus changes everything.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

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CHAPTER 1

Check the Facts

Luke 1

Most books about Jesus start with Jesus. Luke starts with a research report.

In his first four verses, Luke tells you exactly what he did and why. Many people had already written accounts of Jesus' life. Those accounts were based on what had been handed down by people who were there from the beginning, eyewitnesses. Luke says he had "carefully investigated everything from the beginning," and then decided to write it all down in order for a man named Theophilus. His goal? So that Theophilus could "know the certainty" of what he had been taught.

That's not how people write fairy tales. "Once upon a time" doesn't come with sources. Luke writes like a historian, and he anchors his story in real time: "In the time of Herod king of Judea." He names rulers, priests, places, and dates. He's basically saying, Go check.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Who Was Luke?**
>
> Luke is never named in his own Gospel, but early Christian writers agree that he wrote it. Paul mentions him three times in his letters and calls him a doctor. Luke traveled with Paul for years; in the book of Acts, which Luke also wrote, the story suddenly switches to "we" when Luke joins the trip. Most scholars think he was a non-Jewish believer, mainly because Paul lists him separately from his Jewish co-workers in Colossians 4. If so, he may be the

> only Gentile author in the Bible, though not everyone agrees. Theophilus, the man he wrote to, may have been a Roman official or a wealthy new believer. His name means “friend of God.”

The story itself opens in the temple in Jerusalem. An elderly priest named Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, are good people who have lived faithfully for decades. But they have no children, and they’re too old to have any. In that culture, being childless often brought shame, as if God must be displeased with you. Luke makes it clear that wasn’t the case. They were “righteous in the sight of God.”

Zechariah gets the honor of a lifetime: he’s chosen by lot to go into the temple and burn incense. Some priests never got that chance. While he’s inside, an angel appears beside the altar. Zechariah is terrified. The angel, Gabriel, tells him that his prayer has been heard. Elizabeth will have a son, and they are to name him John. This boy will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born, and he will prepare people for the Lord.

Zechariah’s response is very human: How can I be sure of this? I’m an old man. Gabriel answers that he stands in God’s presence, and because Zechariah didn’t believe, he won’t be able to speak until it happens. Zechariah walks out of the temple unable to say a word to the waiting crowd.

Six months later, Gabriel makes another visit. This time it’s not to a priest in the temple. It’s to a young woman in Nazareth, a small village nobody thought much of. Her name is Mary. She is engaged to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David. She is probably a teenager.

Gabriel tells her she will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and she is to name Him Jesus. “He will be great and will be called

the Son of the Most High." He will reign on David's throne forever. Mary asks how this can happen, since she is a virgin. Notice that her question is different from Zechariah's. He asked for proof. She asks how. Gabriel explains that the Holy Spirit will come on her, and the child will be called the Son of God. Then he tells her that Elizabeth, the relative everyone said couldn't have children, is six months pregnant. "For no word from God will ever fail."

Mary's answer is one of the bravest sentences in the Bible: "I am the Lord's servant." She knew what this would cost. An unmarried pregnant girl in a small village would face gossip, suspicion, maybe worse. She said yes anyway.

Mary hurries to visit Elizabeth. When Elizabeth hears Mary's greeting, the baby in her womb leaps, and Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit. She calls Mary blessed for believing what the Lord told her. Then Mary breaks into a song, sometimes called the Magnificat from its first word in Latin. It's not a soft lullaby. It's a revolution. God has scattered the proud, brought down rulers, lifted up the humble, filled the hungry, and sent the rich away empty. Before Jesus is even born, Luke sets the theme: God turns the world upside down.

When Elizabeth's baby is born, the neighbors assume he'll be named after his father. Elizabeth says no, his name is John. The relatives turn to Zechariah, who writes on a tablet, "His name is John." Immediately he can speak again, and the first thing he does is praise God. Filled with the Holy Spirit, he prophesies that God is keeping His ancient promises, and that his little son will go ahead of the Lord to prepare His way.

Count how many times the Holy Spirit shows up in this one chapter: John filled with the Spirit, the Spirit coming on Mary, Elizabeth

filled with the Spirit, Zechariah filled with the Spirit. Luke wants you to notice. The Spirit is moving, and something huge is about to happen.

KEY VERSE

For no word from God will ever fail.

Luke 1:37 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Luke tells us up front that he investigated the facts. Does it matter to you that the Gospels are based on eyewitness accounts? Why or why not?
2. Zechariah and Mary both asked Gabriel a question. Why do you think one was disciplined and the other wasn't?
3. Mary said yes to God, knowing it would cost her. What's something God might be asking you to say yes to?

TRY THIS *Read Luke 1:1–4 and write down three questions you'd want to ask an eyewitness of Jesus. Keep them handy as you read this book.*

CHAPTER 2

No Room, Wrong Guests

Luke 2

Luke opens this chapter with the most powerful man in the world. Caesar Augustus, emperor of Rome, orders a census of the entire Roman world. He wants to count everyone, mostly so he can tax them. Augustus called himself a bringer of peace. Some of his subjects even called him a savior.

Because of the emperor's paperwork, Joseph has to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem, his family's hometown, with Mary, who is very pregnant. It's a trip of about ninety miles, mostly on foot. While they are there, the baby comes. Mary wraps Him in cloths and lays Him in a manger, a feeding trough for animals, "because there was no guest room available for them."

> BACKGROUND CHECK **No Room at the Inn?**
>
> Many people picture a heartless innkeeper slamming the door. But the Greek word Luke uses usually means a guest room in a private home, not a hotel. Most village homes had a family living space and a lower area where animals were brought in at night. If the guest room was already full of relatives, Mary and Joseph may have ended up in the part of the house where the animals stayed. Either way, the point is the same: the King of the universe was born in the most ordinary, humble place imaginable.

Now here's the twist. The emperor in Rome doesn't hear about this birth. Neither do the religious leaders in Jerusalem. The first people

to get the announcement are shepherds working the night shift in the fields.

Shepherds were not respected. Their work kept them outdoors and often away from religious life, and some people considered them unreliable. In some settings, their testimony wasn't even trusted in court. And they're the ones God chooses as the first witnesses.

An angel appears, the glory of the Lord shines around them, and they are terrified. The angel says not to be afraid. He brings good news of great joy for all the people: a Savior has been born, "he is the Messiah, the Lord." Then the sky fills with angels praising God and announcing peace on earth.

Do you see what Luke is doing? Caesar claimed to be a savior who brought peace. The angels say the real Savior has just been born, and He's lying in a feeding trough in Bethlehem.

The shepherds hurry to find the baby, exactly as the angel said. Then they tell everyone. "But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart." Luke may have heard some of these details from Mary herself. Who else would know what she was thinking?

Forty days after the birth, Mary and Joseph take Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem, as the law required. They offer a pair of doves or pigeons. That detail tells you something: the law allowed families who couldn't afford a lamb to bring birds instead. Jesus grew up in a poor family.

In the temple, two elderly people are waiting. Simeon, a righteous man, had been told by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he saw the Lord's Messiah. He takes the baby in his arms and praises God. Now he can die in peace, because he has seen God's

salvation, a light for the Gentiles and glory for Israel. Then he tells Mary something hard: this child will cause many to fall and rise, and a sword will pierce her own soul too.

Then there's Anna, a prophet who had been a widow for decades and was now about eighty-four. She never left the temple, worshiping night and day with fasting and prayer. She comes up at that moment, thanks God, and talks about the child to everyone waiting for redemption. An old man and an old widow. Luke loves to pair a man and a woman, and he loves to show God honoring people others overlooked.

The chapter ends with the only story in the Bible about Jesus as a boy. When He's twelve, His family goes to Jerusalem for Passover. On the way home, Mary and Joseph realize He isn't with their group. Large families traveled together in caravans, so it took them a full day to notice. They rush back and spend three days searching. Any parent can imagine the panic.

They find Him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening and asking questions. Everyone is amazed at His understanding. Mary says what any mom would say: Why have You treated us like this? We've been looking everywhere for You! Jesus answers, "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" They don't understand. But He goes home with them and obeys them.

Here's something to notice: at twelve, Jesus already knew who His real Father was. And He still went home and lived in obedience to His earthly parents. "And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man." The Son of God went through puberty. He grew up. He learned. He knows what your age feels like.

KEY VERSE

Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.

Luke 2:11 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. God announced the birth of Jesus to shepherds instead of to kings or priests. What does that tell you about the kind of people Jesus came for?
2. Mary "pondered" everything in her heart. What would it look like for you to slow down and think about what God is doing in your life?
3. Jesus grew "in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man." Which of those four areas do you most want to grow in this year?

CHAPTER 3

Ax at the Roots

Luke 3

Luke sets the scene like a historian again. He lists the emperor, Tiberius Caesar, in his fifteenth year; the governor, Pontius Pilate; three rulers of nearby regions, including Herod; and the high priests, Annas and Caiaphas. That's roughly AD 28 or 29. Then, after all those powerful names, Luke says the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

Not to the emperor. Not to the high priest. To a man in the desert.

John preaches a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Luke quotes Isaiah: every valley will be filled in, every mountain made low, the crooked roads made straight, "And all people will see God's salvation." Only Luke continues the quotation that far. All people. Not just Israel.

John is not a gentle speaker. When crowds come out to be baptized, he calls them a "brood of vipers." He tells them not to rely on their ancestry: don't say, We have Abraham as our father. God could raise up children for Abraham from these stones. "The ax is already at the root of the trees." Any tree that doesn't produce good fruit will be cut down.

So the crowds ask a fair question: "What should we do then?" And John's answers are surprisingly practical. If you have two shirts,

share with someone who has none. Same with food. Tax collectors ask what they should do: don't collect any more than you're required to. Soldiers ask too: don't extort money, don't accuse people falsely, and be content with your pay.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Tax Collectors and Soldiers**

Tax collectors in Judea worked for Rome, or for rulers backed by Rome. They bid for the right to collect taxes and could keep whatever extra they squeezed out of people. Most people saw them as traitors and thieves. The soldiers who came to John were probably not Roman legionaries but local troops serving Herod or guarding the tax collectors. Both groups were hated, and both came to John asking how to change. Luke wants you to notice that.

Notice what John didn't say. He didn't tell the tax collectors to quit or the soldiers to desert. He told them to be honest and fair right where they were. Real repentance shows up in how you treat people, how you handle money, and whether you're content with what you have.

People start wondering if John might be the Messiah. He shuts that down fast. Someone more powerful is coming, he says. I'm not even worthy to untie His sandals. "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." Later, John's honesty costs him. He confronts Herod for marrying his brother's wife and for other evil things, and Herod locks him in prison.

Then comes the baptism of Jesus. Luke tells it in just two verses, but he includes a detail the others don't: Jesus was praying. "And as he was praying, heaven was opened." Watch for that. In Luke, Jesus prays before almost every major moment in His life. The Holy Spirit descends on Him in bodily form like a dove, and the Father speaks: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

Then Luke does something that might feel like a speed bump: he gives a family tree. Matthew has one too, but Matthew starts with Abraham and works forward. Luke starts with Jesus and works backward, past David, past Abraham, all the way to Adam, "the son of God."

Why go all the way back to Adam? Because Luke's point is that Jesus isn't just the Savior of one nation. He's connected to the whole human race. Every person on earth descends from Adam. Jesus came for all of them. That includes the tax collector, the soldier, the Gentile doctor who wrote this book, and you.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Two Family Trees?**
>
> Matthew's and Luke's genealogies differ in the generations between David and Joseph. Christians have suggested several explanations. One is that Luke traces Mary's line while Matthew traces Joseph's. Another is that one list follows legal descent while the other follows biological descent, since ancient families sometimes passed on names and inheritance through adoption or the custom of a brother marrying a widow. Ancient readers didn't see two lists as a contradiction. Each writer had his own purpose.

Jesus was about thirty years old when He began His ministry. That's not young in that culture. He waited. He spent years in a small town working with His hands before anyone heard Him preach. God isn't in a hurry the way we are.

KEY VERSE

And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

Luke 3:22 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. John told people that repentance shows up in practical ways like sharing, honesty, and contentment. What would "fruit" look like in your own life right now?
2. The Father said He was pleased with Jesus before Jesus had done any public ministry. What does that suggest about where your worth comes from?
3. Luke traces Jesus' family tree all the way back to Adam. Why does it matter that Jesus is connected to the whole human race?

CHAPTER 4

The Hometown Riot

Luke 4

Full of the Holy Spirit, Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where He is tempted by the devil for forty days. He eats nothing, and at the end He is hungry. That's when the devil makes his move.

First: You're the Son of God? Tell this stone to become bread. Jesus answers from Deuteronomy: people do not live on bread alone. Second, the devil shows Him all the kingdoms of the world in an instant and offers Him all of it, if Jesus will worship him. Jesus answers: worship the Lord your God and serve Him only. Third, the devil takes Him to the highest point of the temple in Jerusalem and dares Him to jump, quoting a psalm that promises angels will catch Him. Jesus answers: do not put the Lord your God to the test.

Every time, Jesus answers with Scripture. Every time, the temptation is the same at the root: prove yourself, take a shortcut, do it your way instead of the Father's way. Luke adds a chilling line at the end. The devil left Him "until an opportune time." He'd be back.

Jesus returns to Galilee "in the power of the Spirit," and word about Him spreads. Then He goes home to Nazareth. On the Sabbath, He stands up in the synagogue to read. The attendant hands Him the scroll of Isaiah, and He finds the place where it says the Spirit of the

Lord is on Him, anointing Him to bring good news to the poor, freedom for prisoners, sight for the blind, and release for the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

He rolls up the scroll, hands it back, and sits down. Every eye in the room is on Him. Then He says, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Synagogue**
>
> A synagogue was a local gathering place for prayer, Scripture reading, and teaching. The temple was in Jerusalem, but nearly every town had a synagogue. On the Sabbath, men from the community could be invited to read from the Scriptures and comment on them. Teachers usually sat down to teach, so when Jesus sat down, everyone knew He was about to explain what He'd just read.

This is basically Jesus' mission statement in Luke. Look at the list: the poor, prisoners, the blind, the oppressed. The rest of the book will show Him doing exactly that.

At first the crowd is impressed. Then someone says, "Isn't this Joseph's son?" We know this guy. He grew up down the street. Jesus knows what they're thinking: Do here the miracles we heard You did in Capernaum. He says no prophet is accepted in his hometown.

Then He reminds them of two stories from their own Scriptures. During a famine, there were many widows in Israel, but the prophet Elijah was sent to a widow in Sidon, a foreign town. And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha, but the one who was healed was Naaman, a Syrian army commander. Both were outsiders. Both were Gentiles.

That's when the room explodes. The people are furious. They drive Him out of town to the edge of the cliff the town was built on, ready

to throw Him off. “But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.”

Think about that. Jesus’ first sermon in Luke ends with an attempted murder. Why? Because He told His own people that God’s grace was for outsiders too. People will often accept a Jesus who blesses them. They get angry at a Jesus who blesses the people they look down on.

Jesus moves on to Capernaum. There, in the synagogue, a man possessed by a demon screams at Him, and the demon knows exactly who He is: “the Holy One of God.” Jesus orders it to be quiet and come out, and it does. The people are amazed: His words have authority.

He goes to Simon Peter’s house, where Simon’s mother-in-law has a high fever. Luke the doctor notices that detail; the other Gospels just say fever. Jesus bends over her and rebukes the fever, and she gets up and starts serving them. That evening, people bring everyone who is sick, and Jesus lays His hands on each one. Not a mass healing from a stage. Each one.

At daybreak He goes to a solitary place. The crowds find Him and try to keep Him from leaving. He says He must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why He was sent.

KEY VERSE

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.

Luke 4:18 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Each of the devil's temptations offered Jesus a shortcut. What shortcuts are you most tempted to take?
2. The people of Nazareth got angry when Jesus talked about God blessing outsiders. Why do you think that made them so mad?
3. Jesus laid His hands on each sick person one at a time. What does that tell you about how He sees individuals?

CHAPTER 5

Into the Deep Water

Luke 5

Jesus is standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, another name for the Sea of Galilee, and the crowd is pressing in so hard He's about to end up in the water. He sees two boats on the shore. The fishermen have gotten out and are washing their nets. He gets into the boat that belongs to Simon and asks him to push out a little, then sits down and teaches the crowd from the boat.

When He's done, He says to Simon, "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch."

Simon is a professional fisherman. Jesus is a carpenter's son from an inland village. And Simon has just worked all night without catching anything. You can hear the exhaustion in his reply: Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. "But because you say so, I will let down the nets."

They catch so many fish that the nets begin to break. They signal their partners in the other boat, and both boats fill up so full that they begin to sink.

Simon's reaction is not what you'd expect. He doesn't high-five anyone. He falls at Jesus' knees and says, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" In that moment, Simon realizes who he's dealing with, and he realizes who he is. That's what happens when people

encounter God's holiness up close. They don't feel impressive. They feel exposed.

Jesus doesn't go away. He says, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will fish for people." Simon, his brother Andrew, and their partners James and John pull their boats up on shore, leave everything, and follow Him. The biggest catch of their careers is sitting right there in the boats, and they walk away from it.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Fishing on the Sea of Galilee**
>
> The Sea of Galilee is actually a freshwater lake, about thirteen miles long. Fishing was a major industry. Fishermen often worked at night with large nets, because fish came closer to the surface in the dark and the cooler water. Fishing in deep water in the middle of the day, as Jesus told Simon to do, went against everything a professional knew. In 1986, during a drought, two brothers found the remains of a first-century fishing boat in the mud near the lake. It was about 27 feet long and could hold a dozen or more people.

Then a man covered with leprosy sees Jesus and falls with his face to the ground, begging, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean." Luke the doctor says he was covered with it, an advanced case. Jesus reaches out His hand and touches him. "I am willing... Be clean!" Immediately the leprosy leaves him.

News spreads, and huge crowds gather. "But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed." Here it is again. The busier and more popular He becomes, the more He prays.

One day, Pharisees and teachers of the law from all over have come to hear Jesus teach. Some men bring a paralyzed man on a mat. They can't get through the crowd, so they go up on the roof, remove tiles, and lower him right in front of Jesus. When Jesus sees their faith, He says, "Friend, your sins are forgiven."

The religious experts are offended. Only God can forgive sins. Exactly. Jesus asks which is easier, to say your sins are forgiven or to say get up and walk. Then, so they will know He has authority on earth to forgive sins, He tells the man to get up, take his mat, and go home. The man does, praising God.

Next, Jesus sees a tax collector named Levi sitting at his tax booth, and says, "Follow me." Levi gets up, leaves everything, and follows Him. Then he throws a huge party at his house, with a large crowd of tax collectors and other guests.

The Pharisees and their teachers complain to Jesus' disciples: Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners? Sharing a meal was a sign of acceptance. Respectable people didn't eat with that crowd.

Jesus' answer is a doctor's answer, which Luke must have loved. Healthy people don't need a doctor; sick people do. He didn't come for people who think they're fine. He came for people who know they need help.

Then they ask why His disciples don't fast like John's disciples and the Pharisees' disciples. Jesus says you don't fast at a wedding while the bridegroom is with you. A time is coming for that. Then He gives a picture: nobody sews a patch from a new garment onto an old one, and nobody pours new wine into old wineskins. What Jesus brings won't fit inside the old religious containers. It will burst them. And Luke adds a line only he records, with a bit of a smile: people who've been drinking old wine don't want the new; they say, "The old is better."

KEY VERSE

It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

Luke 5:31–32 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Simon obeyed Jesus even though it didn't make sense to him as a fisherman. When have you had to trust God over your own experience?
2. When Simon saw who Jesus really was, he felt like a sinner. Why do you think being near Jesus made him feel that way?
3. Levi threw a party so his friends could meet Jesus. What would it look like for you to introduce your friends to Jesus?

CHAPTER 6

Upside-Down Blessings

Luke 6

One Sabbath, Jesus and His disciples walk through grainfields, and the disciples pick some heads of grain, rub them in their hands, and eat. Some Pharisees object: that's harvesting on the Sabbath. Jesus reminds them that David once ate the sacred bread from God's house when he was hungry. Then He makes a staggering claim: "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."

On another Sabbath, a man with a shriveled right hand is in the synagogue. (Luke the doctor tells us it was his right hand. Mark and Matthew don't.) The Pharisees watch closely, looking for a reason to accuse Jesus. Jesus knows what they're thinking. He tells the man to stand up in front of everyone, then asks the room: Which is lawful on the Sabbath, to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it? He looks around at all of them, then tells the man to stretch out his hand. It's completely restored. The leaders are furious.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Sabbath**
>
> The Sabbath, from Friday evening to Saturday evening, was a weekly day of rest commanded in the Ten Commandments. It was one of the main things that set Jewish people apart from the nations around them. Over the centuries, teachers developed detailed rules about what counted as work, to make sure no one broke the command by accident. Jesus honored the

> Sabbath. He was regularly in the synagogue. But He rejected the idea that the Sabbath was more important than people in need.

Then comes a moment Luke doesn't want you to miss. Before choosing His twelve apostles, Jesus goes out to a mountainside to pray and spends the night praying to God. The whole night. The next morning He chooses twelve men from among His followers. The list includes fishermen, a tax collector, a political zealot, and Judas Iscariot, "who became a traitor." Jesus prayed all night and still chose Judas. He knew exactly what He was doing.

He comes down and stands on a level place, with a large crowd from all over, including people from the Gentile coastal cities of Tyre and Sidon. Power is coming from Him and healing them all. Then He looks at His disciples and starts teaching. This is sometimes called the Sermon on the Plain. It's similar to the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, but shorter, sharper, and with a twist.

"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." Blessed are you who are hungry now, who weep now, who are hated because of the Son of Man. And then Luke includes what Matthew doesn't: woes. Woe to you who are rich, because you've already received your comfort. Woe to you who are well fed now, who laugh now, who everyone speaks well of.

That's uncomfortable for most of us. By world standards, if you have a phone, enough food, and a closet full of clothes, you're among the rich. Jesus isn't saying poor people automatically go to heaven and rich people automatically don't. He's saying that wealth and comfort can make you think you don't need God. The people who know they're empty are the ones ready to be filled.

Then Jesus says the hardest thing in the sermon: “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you.” Bless people who curse you. Pray for people who mistreat you. If someone slaps you on one cheek, offer the other. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

He pushes it further. If you only love people who love you, what’s special about that? Even sinners do that. Instead, love your enemies, do good to them, and lend without expecting anything back. Then you’ll be children of the Most High, “because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked.” That’s how God treats us. “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”

Don’t judge, and you won’t be judged. Forgive, and you’ll be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you, pressed down, shaken together, running over. Jesus is describing a grain merchant filling a customer’s container so full it spills. That’s how generous God is.

Then He asks a question that should make everyone laugh: Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own? Take out the plank first. Then you’ll see clearly to help with the speck.

A good tree produces good fruit. What comes out of your mouth shows what’s filling your heart. And then He asks, “Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?” He ends with two builders. One digs down deep and lays a foundation on rock. The other builds without a foundation. When the flood comes, one house stands, and the other collapses completely. Same storm. Different foundation.

KEY VERSE

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.

Luke 6:27–28 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Jesus prayed all night before choosing the Twelve. What decisions in your life deserve that kind of prayer?
2. Who is someone it would be really hard for you to love, bless, or pray for? What would one step look like?
3. Jesus said it's possible to call Him "Lord" and not do what He says. Where are you most tempted to do that?

TRY THIS *Pick one person who has treated you badly. Pray for them by name every day this week. Pay attention to what changes in you.*

CHAPTER 7

The Woman with the Jar

Luke 7

Luke 7 is a parade of outsiders. Watch who shows up.

First, a Roman centurion in Capernaum. A centurion commanded about a hundred soldiers, so he was a symbol of the occupying army. His servant, whom he values highly, is sick and about to die. He sends some Jewish elders to ask Jesus for help, and they make an unusual argument: this man deserves it, because he loves our nation and built our synagogue.

Jesus goes with them. But before He reaches the house, the centurion sends friends with a second message: Lord, don't trouble yourself. I don't deserve to have You come under my roof. Just say the word, and my servant will be healed. I'm a man under authority myself. I tell a soldier to go, and he goes.

The elders said he deserved it. He said he didn't. And Jesus is amazed at him. He turns to the crowd and says He hasn't found such great faith even in Israel. The servant is healed. The person Jesus praises for his faith is a Gentile soldier.

Next, Jesus comes to a town called Nain. As He approaches the gate, a funeral procession is coming out. The dead man was "the only son of his mother, and she was a widow." Luke wants you to feel the weight of that. In that world, a widow with no son had no one to

provide for her or protect her. She had just lost her son, and her future along with him.

"When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her." No one asked Him to do anything. He says to her, "Don't cry." Then He walks up and touches the coffin, an open stretcher, and the bearers stop. He tells the young man to get up. The dead man sits up and begins to talk, "and Jesus gave him back to his mother." The crowd is filled with awe: God has come to help His people.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Widows in the Ancient World**
>
> Women in the ancient world usually depended on a father, husband, or son for food, shelter, and legal protection. A widow without grown sons could quickly fall into poverty. That's why the Old Testament repeatedly commands God's people to care for widows and orphans. Luke mentions widows more than any other Gospel: Anna in the temple, the widow of Nain, the persistent widow in a parable, and the poor widow with her two coins.

Then a message comes from John the Baptist, who is sitting in Herod's prison. He sends two disciples with a question: "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" Even John had doubts. Prison will do that to you.

Jesus doesn't scold him. He tells the messengers to report what they've seen: the blind see, the lame walk, those with leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. That's the list from Isaiah, the same mission Jesus announced in Nazareth. Then Jesus praises John to the crowd. Doubting didn't disqualify him.

Then comes one of the most beautiful scenes in Luke. A Pharisee named Simon invites Jesus to dinner. At formal meals, guests reclined on cushions around a low table, leaning on one elbow with

their feet stretched out behind them. Houses were often open, and people from the town could wander in and watch.

A woman from the town who had lived a sinful life learns that Jesus is there. Everyone knows her reputation. She comes in with an alabaster jar of perfume and stands behind Him at His feet, weeping. Her tears fall on His feet, and she wipes them with her hair, kisses His feet, and pours perfume on them.

For a woman to let down her hair in public was shocking. The whole room is uncomfortable. Simon thinks to himself that if Jesus were really a prophet, He'd know what kind of woman is touching Him.

Jesus knows exactly what kind of woman she is, and He knows exactly what Simon is thinking. "Simon, I have something to tell you." Two people owed money to a lender. One owed five hundred days' wages, the other fifty. Neither could pay, so he forgave both debts. Which one will love him more? Simon answers, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven."

Then Jesus turns toward the woman, but keeps talking to Simon. "Do you see this woman?" You didn't give Me water for My feet. She washed them with her tears. You didn't greet Me with a kiss. She hasn't stopped kissing My feet. You didn't put oil on My head. She poured perfume on My feet.

Simon gave Jesus the bare minimum. She gave Him everything. Simon thought he was the righteous one who didn't need much forgiveness. She knew how much she'd been forgiven. And her love proved it.

Jesus says to her, "Your sins are forgiven." The other guests start whispering: Who is this who even forgives sins? Jesus says to her, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

KEY VERSE

Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little.

Luke 7:47 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. John the Baptist had doubts in prison, and Jesus answered him with evidence instead of a lecture. What do you do with your own doubts?
2. Jesus helped the widow of Nain before she asked. What does that tell you about His heart for hurting people?
3. Are you more like Simon or the woman? How much do you think you've been forgiven?

CHAPTER 8

Soil, Storm, and Twelve Years

Luke 8

Luke opens this chapter with a detail the other Gospels mostly skip. As Jesus travels from town to town, the Twelve are with Him, "and also some women." Luke names them: Mary Magdalene, from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna, the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were "helping to support them out of their own means."

Think about that. A woman connected to Herod's palace was helping to fund Jesus' ministry. A woman who had once been tormented by demons was now one of His most loyal followers. In a culture where religious teachers rarely had female disciples, Jesus welcomed them. And these same women will be the ones standing near the cross and the first ones at the empty tomb.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Women Who Followed Jesus**
>
> In first-century Judaism, women generally did not study under rabbis or travel with them. Luke makes a point of showing that women were among Jesus' followers from early on, and that some of them provided financially for His ministry. Mary Magdalene is mentioned more than most of the apostles in the Gospels. Despite later legends, the Bible never says she was a prostitute. What it says is that Jesus set her free from seven demons, and she never left Him.

Then Jesus tells the parable of the sower. A farmer scatters seed. Some falls on the path and gets trampled or eaten by birds. Some falls on rock and withers for lack of moisture. Some falls among thorns, which choke it. And some falls on good soil and produces a crop a hundred times more than was sown.

The disciples ask what it means. The seed is the word of God. The path is people who hear, but the devil takes the word away. The rock is people who receive it with joy but have no root, so they fall away when testing comes. The thorns are people choked by life's worries, riches, and pleasures. The good soil is people with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, hold on to it, and keep going until it produces fruit.

Notice the word "persevering." Good soil isn't about how excited you feel when you first hear. It's about whether you're still holding on months and years later.

Jesus' mother and brothers come to see Him but can't get through the crowd. Jesus says, "My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice." He's not rejecting His family. He's widening it.

Then a storm. Jesus and the disciples are crossing the lake when He falls asleep. A squall comes down, and the boat is filling with water. They wake Him: "Master, Master, we're going to drown!" He gets up, rebukes the wind and the raging waters, and everything goes calm. Then He asks them, "Where is your faith?" They're terrified and amazed: Who is this? He commands even the winds and the water.

On the other side of the lake, in Gentile territory, a man possessed by demons meets them. He hasn't worn clothes for a long time and

lives in the tombs. When Jesus asks his name, he says “Legion,” because many demons had entered him. The demons beg to go into a large herd of pigs, and Jesus allows it. The herd rushes down the bank into the lake and drowns.

The people of the town come out and find the man “sitting at Jesus’ feet, dressed and in his right mind.” That’s the posture of a disciple. And the townspeople are so afraid that they ask Jesus to leave. The man begs to go with Jesus, but Jesus sends him home to tell how much God has done for him. So he goes all over town telling everyone what Jesus did.

Back across the lake, a synagogue leader named Jairus falls at Jesus’ feet. His only daughter, about twelve, is dying. On the way, the crowds almost crush Jesus. In that crowd is a woman who has been bleeding for twelve years. Twelve years. The same length of time Jairus’s daughter has been alive.

Luke the doctor adds an honest detail: no one could heal her. (Mark says she’d spent all her money on doctors and only got worse. Luke, maybe protecting his profession, leaves that part out.) Under the law, her condition made her ceremonially unclean, which meant years of isolation.

She comes up behind Jesus and touches the edge of His cloak, and immediately the bleeding stops. Jesus asks, “Who touched me?” Peter points out that the whole crowd is pushing against Him. But Jesus says He knows power has gone out from Him. The woman, trembling, falls at His feet and tells everyone why she touched Him and how she was healed. Jesus calls her “Daughter.” The woman nobody would touch is welcomed into the family. “your faith has healed you. Go in peace.”

While He's still speaking, someone comes from Jairus's house: your daughter is dead. Don't bother the teacher anymore. Jesus says, "Don't be afraid; just believe, and she will be healed." At the house, everyone is wailing. He tells them she's not dead but asleep, and they laugh at Him. He takes her by the hand and says, "My child, get up!" She stands up at once. And Jesus, practical as ever, tells them to give her something to eat.

KEY VERSE

But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.

Luke 8:15 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Which kind of soil best describes your heart right now? What's one "thorn" that tends to choke out your faith?
2. Jesus stopped for a desperate woman even while a powerful man's daughter was dying. What does that tell you about how He values people?
3. Jesus asked His disciples, "Where is your faith?" in the middle of a storm. Where do you need faith in a storm you're facing?

CHAPTER 9

Set Toward Jerusalem

Luke 9

Jesus gives the Twelve power and authority to drive out demons and heal diseases, and sends them out to proclaim the kingdom of God. Take nothing for the journey, He says: no staff, no bag, no bread, no money, no extra shirt. They'll have to depend on God and on the hospitality of others.

Back in his palace, Herod is getting reports about Jesus and is confused. Some people say John the Baptist has come back from the dead. Herod says, I beheaded John. "Who, then, is this I hear such things about?" He tries to see Jesus. He'll finally get his wish near the end of the book, and it won't go well.

When the apostles return, Jesus takes them to Bethsaida to rest. The crowds follow, and He welcomes them, teaches, and heals. As evening comes, the Twelve suggest sending the people away to find food and lodging. Jesus says, "You give them something to eat." They have five loaves and two fish for about five thousand men. Jesus gives thanks, breaks the bread, and gives it to the disciples to distribute. Everyone eats and is satisfied, and the leftovers fill twelve baskets, one for each of the Twelve.

Then, once again, Luke notices that Jesus is praying in private. Afterward He asks His disciples who the crowds say He is. Some say

John the Baptist, some Elijah, some one of the ancient prophets. "But what about you?… Who do you say I am?" Peter answers, "God's Messiah."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **What Does "Messiah" Mean?**
>
> "Messiah" is a Hebrew word meaning "anointed one." The Greek equivalent is "Christ." In the Old Testament, kings and priests were anointed with oil when God set them apart for a task. Over time, God's people came to hope for one special Anointed King from David's family who would rescue them and rule forever. By Jesus' time, many expected a military leader who would overthrow Rome. Jesus accepted the title, but He kept redefining it.

Immediately Jesus tells them what being the Messiah will mean: the Son of Man must suffer many things, be rejected by the religious leaders, be killed, and on the third day be raised to life. Then He tells them what following Him will mean. "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me."

Daily. Only Luke includes that word. Following Jesus isn't a one-time decision you make at camp. It's a decision you make every morning. Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for Jesus will save it. What good is it to gain the whole world and lose yourself?

About eight days later, Jesus takes Peter, John, and James up a mountain to pray. "As he was praying," His face changes, and His clothes become as bright as a flash of lightning. Moses and Elijah appear in glory and talk with Him. Luke is the only one who tells us what they talked about: His "departure," which He was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem. The Greek word is exodus.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **A New Exodus**
>
> In the Old Testament, the exodus was the great rescue when God brought Israel out of slavery in Egypt, led by Moses. When Luke says Moses and Elijah spoke with Jesus about His "departure," he uses the Greek word exodus. Luke is hinting that Jesus' death and resurrection in Jerusalem will be a new and greater rescue, setting people free not from Pharaoh but from sin and death.

Peter, half-asleep and not knowing what he's saying, suggests building three shelters. A cloud covers them, and a voice says, "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him." Then Jesus is alone again.

The next day, a father in the crowd begs Jesus to look at his son, his only child, who is seized by a spirit. The disciples couldn't help. Jesus heals the boy and gives him back to his father. Everyone is amazed. Jesus tells the disciples a second time that He will be betrayed, but they don't understand.

Instead, they argue about which of them will be the greatest. Jesus takes a little child, stands the child beside Him, and says that whoever welcomes this child in His name welcomes Him. "For it is the one who is least among you all who is the greatest."

Then comes a turning point in Luke's Gospel: "Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem." Older translations say He "set His face." From here until chapter 19, Jesus is on the road, heading toward the cross on purpose. Much of the material that's found only in Luke happens on this journey.

Right away He hits resistance. A Samaritan village won't welcome Him because He's heading for Jerusalem. James and John, the "Sons of Thunder," ask if they should call down fire from heaven to destroy the village. Jesus turns and rebukes them. They go to another village instead.

On the road, people volunteer to follow Him, with conditions. One says he'll follow anywhere; Jesus warns that He has no place to lay His head. Another wants to bury his father first. Another wants to say goodbye to his family. Jesus answers that no one who puts a hand to the plow and keeps looking back is fit for service in the kingdom of God. Following Jesus can't be something you'll get around to later.

KEY VERSE

Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.

Luke 9:23 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Jesus asked, "Who do you say I am?" Not your parents, not your church. You. How would you answer today?
2. What would it look like for you to "take up your cross daily"? What's one thing you'd have to say no to tomorrow morning?
3. James and John wanted to destroy a village that rejected Jesus. Why do you think Jesus rebuked them?

CHAPTER 10

Who Is My Neighbor?

Luke 10

Jesus appoints seventy-two others and sends them out two by two ahead of Him to every town He's about to visit. Some manuscripts say seventy. Either number points back to the list of nations in Genesis, a hint that the message is for the whole world. "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few," Jesus says. Ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers.

He warns them that He's sending them out like lambs among wolves. When they come back, they're thrilled: "Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name." Jesus says He saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. But then He redirects their joy. Don't rejoice that the spirits submit to you. Rejoice that your names are written in heaven.

Then Luke shows us something rare. Jesus, "full of joy through the Holy Spirit," prays out loud, thanking the Father for hiding these things from the wise and learned and revealing them to little children. The Father, the Son, and the Spirit all in one sentence, and the mood is joy.

An expert in the law stands up to test Jesus: "Teacher… what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus asks what the law says. The man answers well: love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul,

strength, and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus says, Correct. Do this and you will live.

But the man wants to justify himself, so he asks, "And who is my neighbor?" He's looking for a limit. Who exactly do I have to love? Where does my responsibility end?

Jesus answers with a story. A man is traveling from Jerusalem down to Jericho. He's attacked by robbers, stripped, beaten, and left half dead. A priest happens to be going down the same road. He sees the man and passes by on the other side. A Levite, a temple worker, does the same.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Jericho Road**
>
> The road from Jerusalem to Jericho dropped about 3,300 feet in roughly seventeen miles through rocky, desolate country. It was known for bandits who hid among the rocks. Jesus' listeners would have known exactly what kind of road He meant. The priest and Levite may have worried that the man was dead, since touching a corpse would make them ceremonially unclean and unable to serve in the temple. Jesus doesn't bother to explain their reasons. Whatever they were, they kept walking.

Everyone listening expects the third person in the story to be an ordinary Jewish man, the hero. Instead, Jesus says, "But a Samaritan."

You have to understand how shocking that was. Jews and Samaritans had hated each other for centuries. They disagreed about the right place to worship and accused each other of corrupting the faith. Remember the Samaritan village that just refused to welcome Jesus? A Jewish audience would have expected the Samaritan to be the villain, not the hero.

The Samaritan sees the man and takes pity on him. He bandages his wounds, pouring on oil and wine, which were basic first aid. He puts the man on his own donkey and takes him to an inn. He pays the innkeeper two denarii, about two days' wages, and promises to cover anything more when he comes back. He doesn't just feel sorry. He spends his time, his money, and his safety.

Then Jesus flips the question. The expert had asked, Who is my neighbor? Jesus asks, "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The expert can't even bring himself to say "the Samaritan." He says, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus tells him, "Go and do likewise."

The question isn't who deserves my love. The question is whether I will be a neighbor to whoever is in front of me. Even if that person is someone I've been taught to look down on.

The chapter ends in a home. Jesus visits two sisters, Martha and Mary. Martha opens her home and gets busy with all the preparations. Mary sits at the Lord's feet listening to what He says. That's the posture of a disciple, and women didn't usually get to take it.

Martha finally snaps. Lord, don't You care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me! Jesus answers gently. "Martha, Martha… you are worried and upset about many things." Only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it won't be taken away from her.

Jesus isn't saying serving is bad. He's saying that being busy for Jesus can crowd out being with Jesus. Martha was doing a lot for Him. Mary was paying attention to Him.

KEY VERSE

"Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

Luke 10:36–37 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. If Jesus told the Good Samaritan story at your school, who would the "Samaritan" be? Who would be the most shocking hero?
2. The expert wanted to know where his responsibility ended. When are you tempted to look for the minimum?
3. Are you more of a Martha or a Mary? What would help you sit at Jesus' feet this week?

TRY THIS *This week, look for one person who's "on the side of the road" at school or online: ignored, hurting, left out. Do one concrete thing to help, even if it costs you something.*

CHAPTER 11

Teach Us to Pray

Luke 11

"One day Jesus was praying in a certain place." By now you shouldn't be surprised. When He finishes, one of His disciples asks, "Lord, teach us to pray."

Think about that request. They'd watched Jesus heal, cast out demons, and feed thousands. They never asked Him to teach them how to do miracles. They asked Him to teach them how to pray. They'd figured out where His power came from.

Jesus gives them a short prayer, a version of what we call the Lord's Prayer. Father, may Your name be honored as holy. May Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation. It's simple enough for a child, deep enough for a lifetime.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **"Father"**
>
> Jewish prayers often addressed God with titles of majesty: Lord, King of the universe, Holy One. Calling God "Father" was not unheard of, but Jesus made it the center of how He prayed and how He taught His followers to pray. It suggests closeness, trust, and belonging. Through Jesus, people who were far from God are invited to speak to Him the way a child speaks to a loving parent.

Then Jesus tells a funny story. Imagine you go to a friend's house at midnight and bang on the door: a friend of mine just showed up from a trip, and I have nothing to feed him. Lend me three loaves of bread. Your friend yells from inside: Don't bother me. The door is locked. My kids are asleep in bed with me. In a one-room house, the whole family slept together on a mat. Getting up meant waking everyone.

Jesus says that even if he won't get up because you're his friend, he'll get up because of your "shameless audacity." You just won't stop knocking. Then Jesus says, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you."

The point isn't that God is a grumpy neighbor who has to be nagged. The point is the opposite. If even a sleepy neighbor will help, how much more will God? Which father, if his son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? If you, even though you're evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, "how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

Notice what Luke says the Father gives. Matthew's version says "good gifts." Luke says the Holy Spirit. The best answer to prayer isn't always the thing you asked for. It's more of God Himself.

Next, Jesus drives out a demon from a man who couldn't speak, and some people claim He's doing it by the power of Beelzebub, the prince of demons. Jesus points out how ridiculous that is. A kingdom divided against itself falls. Why would Satan fight against himself? "But if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you."

A woman in the crowd calls out, Blessed is the mother who gave You birth and nursed You. Jesus replies, "Blessed rather are those

who hear the word of God and obey it." Being close to Jesus physically isn't the point. Obeying Him is.

The crowds keep growing, and Jesus warns them: "This is a wicked generation. It asks for a sign." The only sign they'll get is the sign of Jonah. Jonah was a sign to the people of Nineveh, and they repented. Someone greater than Jonah is here, and these people aren't listening.

Then a Pharisee invites Jesus to eat, and Jesus doesn't do the ceremonial hand washing before the meal. The host is surprised. Jesus uses the moment to get to the real issue. You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. Didn't the One who made the outside make the inside too?

Then He pronounces six woes, three on the Pharisees and three on the experts in the law. They tithe even their garden herbs but neglect justice and the love of God. They love the most important seats and respectful greetings. They load people with heavy religious burdens and won't lift a finger to help. They honor the prophets their ancestors killed. And they've "taken away the key to knowledge," refusing to enter and blocking others from entering too.

By the end of the meal, the Pharisees and teachers of the law are furious. They begin waiting to catch Jesus in something He might say.

KEY VERSE

So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.

Luke 11:9 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, not to do miracles. What does that tell you about what they saw in Him?
2. Jesus said the Father gives the Holy Spirit to those who ask. Have you ever asked God for more of Himself instead of just for things?
3. Jesus said the Pharisees cleaned the outside of the cup but not the inside. What's the difference between looking good and being good?

TRY THIS *Pray the Lord's Prayer slowly once a day this week. Stop after each line and put it into your own words.*

CHAPTER 12

Bigger Barns

Luke 12

The crowd around Jesus has grown to thousands, so many that people are trampling on each other. And Jesus starts by warning His disciples: “Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.” Everything hidden will be revealed. What you whisper in private will be shouted from the rooftops.

Then He tells them not to fear people who can kill the body and then can do nothing more. Fear God. But that isn’t meant to scare them. Five sparrows are sold for two pennies, and God doesn’t forget a single one. “Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered.” You are worth more than many sparrows.

Someone in the crowd calls out: Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me. It’s a family fight about money. Jesus refuses to be the judge. Instead He goes to the heart of the problem: “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.”

Then He tells a story found only in Luke. The ground of a certain rich man produces a huge crop. He thinks to himself: What should I do? I don’t have room to store everything. I know! I’ll tear down my barns and build bigger ones. Then I’ll say to myself, You’ve got

plenty saved up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink, and be merry.

Listen to how many times he says "I" and "my." He talks only to himself. He never thinks about God or about anyone else who might need what he has.

"But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you.'" And then who will get everything you've stored up? That's how it will be for anyone who stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Barns and Bigger Barns**
>
> In an agricultural economy, a bumper crop was a gift from God and a chance to provide for others. The Old Testament law required farmers to leave the edges of their fields and the leftovers of the harvest for the poor, foreigners, widows, and orphans. The rich fool's sin wasn't that he had a good year. It was that he treated the harvest as his alone, as if he would live forever and no one else needed it.

Jesus turns to His disciples and says, Don't worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. Consider the ravens. They don't plant or harvest, they don't have barns, and God feeds them. Can worrying add a single hour to your life? Consider how the wildflowers grow. Not even Solomon in all his royal clothes was dressed like one of them.

Instead, "seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well." Then He adds one of the gentlest lines in Luke: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom." Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Get the kind of treasure that can't be stolen or eaten by moths. "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

That last line works in both directions. Your heart follows your money. If you want to know what you really love, look at where your money and time go.

Then Jesus talks about being ready. Be dressed and ready for service, like servants waiting for their master to come home from a wedding banquet, so they can open the door the moment he knocks. And here's the surprise: when the master comes and finds them ready, he will dress himself to serve, have them recline at the table, and wait on them. The master serves the servants. That's the kind of Lord Jesus is.

Peter asks if this story is just for the disciples or for everyone. Jesus answers with another picture: a manager put in charge of a household. If he's faithful while the master is away, he'll be put in charge of more. If he starts beating the other servants and getting drunk, the master will come back on a day he doesn't expect. "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded."

Then Jesus says something startling. He has come to bring fire on the earth, and He wishes it were already kindled. Do you think He came to bring peace on earth? No, but division. Families will be divided over Him. He isn't saying He wants families to fight. He's saying that following Him is so serious that not everyone will go along with it, even at home.

He ends by calling the crowd hypocrites. They can read the weather from clouds and wind. Why can't they interpret the present time? Something huge is happening right in front of them, and they're missing it.

KEY VERSE

Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.

Luke 12:15 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The rich fool only talked to himself. Who do you talk to when you're making big decisions?
2. What do you worry about most? What would it look like to "seek his kingdom" in that area?
3. Jesus said your heart follows your treasure. If someone looked at how you spend your money and time, what would they say you treasure?

CHAPTER 13

The Narrow Door

Luke 13

Some people bring Jesus the latest breaking news. Pilate's soldiers have killed some Galileans while they were offering sacrifices, mixing their blood with the blood of the animals. It's a horrifying story, and the people telling it seem to want Jesus' opinion: Those victims must have done something really bad, right?

Jesus asks a question back. Do you think they were worse sinners than everyone else in Galilee because they suffered this way? "I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish." Then He brings up another tragedy: eighteen people killed when a tower in Siloam fell on them. Were they more guilty than everyone else in Jerusalem? No. Same warning.

People still ask the same question today when disaster strikes: Why did God let this happen to them? Jesus refuses to treat tragedy as proof that the victims were especially bad. But He also refuses to let His listeners off the hook. The real question isn't why bad things happened to them. It's whether you're ready to stand before God yourself.

Then He tells a short parable. A man has a fig tree in his vineyard, but for three years it hasn't produced any fruit. He tells the gardener to cut it down. The gardener asks for one more year. Let

me dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine. If not, then cut it down. God is patient. But His patience is an invitation, not a permanent excuse.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Tower of Siloam**
>
> Siloam was an area in the southern part of Jerusalem with a famous pool, the same pool where Jesus would later send a blind man to wash in John's Gospel. Archaeologists have excavated the Pool of Siloam, including steps that date to the time of Jesus. We don't know anything else about the tower collapse Jesus mentions, but His listeners clearly did. It was the kind of local tragedy everyone was talking about.

On a Sabbath, Jesus is teaching in a synagogue, and a woman is there who has been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She is bent over and can't straighten up at all. For eighteen years, she has stared at the ground.

Jesus sees her and calls her forward. Notice that she doesn't ask for anything. He says, "Woman, you are set free from your infirmity." He puts His hands on her, and immediately she straightens up and praises God.

The synagogue leader is indignant, and instead of speaking to Jesus directly, he scolds the crowd: There are six days for work. Come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath. Jesus calls out the hypocrisy. Every one of you unties your ox or donkey on the Sabbath to lead it to water. Shouldn't this woman, "a daughter of Abraham," whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day? His opponents are humiliated, and the people are delighted.

Jesus calls her a daughter of Abraham. That was a title of honor. Nobody else in the room would have given it to her.

Then He describes the kingdom of God with two tiny pictures. It's like a mustard seed that grows into a tree big enough for birds to perch in. It's like a little yeast that works all through a large batch of dough. The kingdom starts small and quiet, almost invisible, and then it spreads everywhere.

As He continues toward Jerusalem, someone asks Him, "Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?" It's the kind of question people love to argue about. Jesus doesn't answer it the way they want. Instead He makes it personal: "Make every effort to enter through the narrow door." Many will try and won't be able to.

He describes the owner of a house getting up and closing the door. People outside knock and say, We ate and drank with you; you taught in our streets! And he answers, I don't know you or where you come from. Knowing about Jesus, being near Jesus, even attending His events, isn't the same as knowing Him.

Then the twist. People will come from east and west and north and south and take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God. The ones who assumed they'd be inside will find themselves outside, and outsiders from every direction will be seated at the table. "There are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last."

Some Pharisees warn Jesus to leave because Herod wants to kill Him. Jesus calls Herod "that fox" and says He'll keep doing His work until He reaches His goal, because no prophet can die outside Jerusalem.

Then His voice changes. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets." How often He has longed to gather her children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, "and you were not

willing!" It's not anger. It's heartbreak. Jesus is heading toward a city that will reject Him, and He loves it anyway.

KEY VERSE

Indeed there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last.

Luke 13:30 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. When something terrible happens, why do people tend to ask whether the victims deserved it? How did Jesus answer that question?
2. The bent-over woman didn't ask for help. Jesus noticed her. Who in your life might need someone to notice them?
3. Someone asked how many will be saved, and Jesus said, Make sure you go through the door. Why do you think He made the question personal?

CHAPTER 14

Pull Up a Chair

Luke 14

Food is everywhere in Luke. Jesus is always eating with someone, and the meals keep turning into lessons. This chapter is one long dinner party.

On a Sabbath, Jesus goes to eat at the house of a prominent Pharisee, and He's being carefully watched. In front of Him is a man suffering from abnormal swelling of his body. (Luke uses a medical term for the condition.) Jesus asks the Pharisees and experts in the law if it's lawful to heal on the Sabbath. Silence. So He heals the man and sends him on his way. Then He asks: If your son or your ox fell into a well on the Sabbath, wouldn't you pull him out right away? Silence again.

Then He watches the guests. They're all scrambling for the places of honor at the table, the seats closest to the host. Seating arrangements at a banquet showed everyone your social rank. Think of the lunch table at school, where where you sit says a lot about where you stand.

Jesus gives them some advice. When you're invited to a wedding feast, don't take the best seat. Someone more important than you might show up, and the host will ask you to move, and you'll be humiliated in front of everyone. Instead, take the lowest place.

Then the host may come and say, “Friend, move up to a better place.” Then you’ll be honored in front of everybody.

It sounds like etiquette. But Jesus is describing how God’s kingdom works. “For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Then He turns to the host. When you give a lunch or dinner, don’t invite your friends, relatives, or rich neighbors. They’ll just invite you back, and you’ll be repaid. “But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind,” and you will be blessed. They can’t repay you. You’ll be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Honor and Shame**
>
> In the ancient Mediterranean world, honor was one of the most valuable things a person could have. It came from your family, your wealth, your reputation, and your connections. Meals were a way to gain and display honor. You invited people who could raise your status and expected them to return the favor. Inviting people who could never repay you, and who might even lower your reputation, went against the whole system. Jesus didn’t just adjust the system. He turned it inside out.

One of the guests, trying to sound spiritual, says, Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God! Jesus answers with another story.

A man is preparing a great banquet and invites many guests. When everything is ready, he sends his servant to tell them, Come, it’s ready. “But they all alike began to make excuses.” One just bought a field and needs to go see it. Another just bought five pairs of oxen and wants to try them out. Another just got married and can’t come.

Those excuses are ridiculous. Nobody buys a field without looking at it first. Nobody buys oxen without testing them. And the guests had already accepted the invitation earlier. They're not busy. They're insulting the host.

The owner is angry. He tells his servant to go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame. The servant does, and there's still room. So the master sends him out again, beyond the town to the roads and country lanes, to urge people to come in so his house will be full.

The people who thought they had a guaranteed seat stayed home. The people who never expected an invitation ended up at the table. That's Luke's whole Gospel in one story.

Then Jesus turns to the large crowds traveling with Him and says something designed to thin them out. Anyone who comes to Him and doesn't hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, even their own life, can't be His disciple. That's a Hebrew way of speaking. "Hate" here means "love less by comparison." Jesus isn't telling you to despise your family. He's saying your loyalty to Him has to be so strong that every other loyalty looks small next to it.

Then He tells two short stories. Suppose you want to build a tower. Won't you first sit down and figure out the cost, so you don't end up with a foundation and no money to finish? People will laugh at you. Or suppose a king is about to go to war against a bigger army. Won't he first sit down and consider whether he can win? "In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples."

Jesus never tricked anyone into following Him. He didn't hide the fine print. He told people up front what it would cost.

KEY VERSE

For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

Luke 14:11 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Where do you see people scrambling for the "best seat" at your school or online? Where do you do it?
2. Jesus said to invite people who can't pay you back. Who would that be in your world?
3. Jesus told people to count the cost before following Him. What has following Jesus cost you so far? What might it cost in the future?

TRY THIS *This week, sit with someone at lunch who usually sits alone, or invite someone into your group who's usually left out.*

CHAPTER 15

Lost and Found

Luke 15

If you only read one chapter of Luke, read this one.

It starts with a complaint. “Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus.” All of them. The religious crowd is not happy. The Pharisees and teachers of the law mutter, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

They meant it as an insult. It’s actually one of the best descriptions of Jesus ever spoken.

So Jesus tells three stories. They’re really one story told three ways, each one building on the last.

First: a shepherd has a hundred sheep and loses one. Doesn’t he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he doesn’t scold it. He puts it on his shoulders, joyfully, and carries it home. He calls his friends and neighbors: Celebrate with me, I’ve found my lost sheep! Jesus says there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who don’t need to repent.

Second: a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. She lights a lamp, sweeps the house, and searches carefully until she finds it. Then she calls her friends and neighbors to celebrate. “In the same

way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Ten Silver Coins**

The coin in the second story was a drachma, worth about a day's wages. Ten of them may have been a woman's savings, or possibly part of her dowry, sometimes worn on a headdress. Village houses were often dark, with small windows and dirt or stone floors, so a coin could easily get lost in a crack. That's why she lights a lamp and sweeps. Notice that Jesus uses a woman to picture God searching for the lost. The religious teachers listening would not have expected that.

Third: "There was a man who had two sons." The younger son asks for his share of the inheritance now. In that culture, that was like saying, Dad, I wish you were dead. I want your money, not you. Amazingly, the father divides his property between them.

The younger son packs everything and goes to a distant country, where he wastes it all on wild living. Then a severe famine hits. He's broke and desperate, and he takes a job feeding pigs for a foreigner. For a Jewish listener, you can't get any lower than that. Pigs were unclean. He's so hungry that he wishes he could eat the pigs' food, and no one gives him anything.

"When he came to his senses," he realizes his father's hired workers have more than enough food, and here he is starving. He decides to go home and say: Father, I've sinned against heaven and against you. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants. He practices the speech. He's hoping for a job, not a family.

He starts the long walk home. "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him." The father had been watching the road. He's

filled with compassion. He runs to his son, throws his arms around him, and kisses him.

In that culture, a respectable older man did not run. He would have to pull up his long robe and show his legs, which was considered humiliating. The father doesn't care. He'd rather be embarrassed in front of the whole village than make his son walk that road alone.

The son starts his speech, but the father doesn't even let him finish. He calls to his servants: Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. "For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

The robe meant honor. The ring meant authority and belonging. Sandals meant he was a son, because servants usually went barefoot. The son came home hoping to be a servant. The father wouldn't hear of it.

But the story isn't over. The older son is out in the field. As he comes near the house, he hears music and dancing. A servant tells him what happened. The older brother becomes angry and refuses to go in.

So the father goes out to him too. He goes out to both of his sons. The older son unloads: All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed you. You never gave me even a young goat to celebrate with my friends. "But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home," you kill the fattened calf for him!

Notice he doesn't say "my brother." He says "this son of yours." And notice he describes his relationship with his father as "slaving." He's

been in the house the whole time, and he's just as lost as his brother was. One son was lost in a far country. The other was lost at home.

The father answers gently: My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.

And then the story ends. Jesus doesn't tell us whether the older brother went in to the party. That's on purpose. Remember who He's talking to: the Pharisees and teachers of the law who were complaining that He welcomed sinners. They are the older brother. The story ends with the door open and the music playing, waiting to see whether they'll come in.

KEY VERSE

For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.

Luke 15:24 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. All three stories end with a party. What does that tell you about how God feels when someone comes back to Him?
2. Are you more like the younger son or the older son? What would "coming home" look like for you?
3. Why do you think Jesus left the ending open? If you were the older brother, would you go in?

TRY THIS *Read Luke 15 out loud, all the way through, in one sitting. Then write a short ending for the older brother's story.*

CHAPTER 16

A Chasm Between

Luke 16

This chapter has two stories about money, and both are surprising.

The first is one of the strangest parables Jesus ever told. A rich man has a manager, someone who handles his business. The manager is accused of wasting his master's possessions. The master calls him in: Give an account of your management, because you can't be manager any longer.

The manager panics. He's not strong enough to dig ditches, and he's too ashamed to beg. So he comes up with a plan. Before his firing becomes official, he calls in each person who owes his master money. How much do you owe? A hundred jugs of olive oil. Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty. How much do you owe? A thousand bushels of wheat. Make it eight hundred. He's making friends who will take care of him once he's out of a job.

And then the twist: "The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly."

Wait. Is Jesus praising cheating? No. The manager is still called dishonest. What the master admires is that he was smart about the future. He saw trouble coming and used the resources he had right now to prepare for it. Jesus says the people of this world are often

smarter about their worldly future than God's people are about their eternal future.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Debts and Managers**
>
> Wealthy landowners in the ancient world often had managers who ran their estates, rented land to tenant farmers, and collected payments in the form of crops. The bills in the parable may have included hidden interest or the manager's own commission. By reducing them, the manager may have been cutting his own share, or he may simply have been giving away his master's money. Either way, the debtors would have been grateful, and the master's generosity would have looked good in public.

So what's the lesson? Use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it's gone, you'll be welcomed into eternal dwellings. In other words, money won't last. Use it for things that will. Then Jesus adds a principle: whoever can be trusted with very little can be trusted with much. If you can't be trusted with money, who will trust you with true riches? "No one can serve two masters." You cannot serve both God and money.

The Pharisees, "who loved money," hear all this and sneer at Him. Jesus tells them that what people value highly is detestable in God's sight. Then He tells a second story, one found only in Luke.

There was a rich man dressed in purple and fine linen who lived in luxury every day. Purple dye was incredibly expensive. This man wore designer clothes every day and threw a party every night. At his gate lay a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores, longing to eat whatever fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

Notice something. The rich man has no name in the story. The poor man does. In the parables recorded in the Gospels, Lazarus is the only character Jesus gives a name to, apart from Abraham, a real

figure from Israel's history. To everyone else, Lazarus was invisible. To God, he was known by name. His name is a form of the Hebrew name Eleazar, which means "God has helped."

The time comes when the beggar dies, and the angels carry him to Abraham's side. The rich man also dies and is buried. In Hades, where he is in torment, he looks up and sees Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side.

The rich man calls out, asking Abraham to send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool his tongue. Even now, he still sees Lazarus as a servant to be sent. Abraham answers that during his lifetime he received good things while Lazarus received bad things. Now Lazarus is comforted, and he is in agony. And there's a great chasm between them that no one can cross.

So the rich man asks Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his five brothers, so they won't end up in this place too. Abraham says, They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them. No, father Abraham, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent. And Abraham gives the final line of the story: "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."

That line lands hard, because someone is about to rise from the dead. And many still won't believe.

The rich man's sin wasn't being rich. It was stepping over Lazarus every day and never really seeing him. The chasm in the afterlife was just the permanent version of the gap he'd kept between them his whole life.

This is a parable, so we shouldn't treat every detail as a map of the afterlife. But the warning is real. How we treat the poor matters to

God. And the choices we make in this life have consequences that last forever.

KEY VERSE

No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.

Luke 16:13 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The dishonest manager planned ahead for his future. How are you preparing for your eternal future?
2. Who are the people "at the gate" in your world, people who are easy to step over and not really see?
3. Abraham said people who won't listen to Scripture won't be convinced even by a resurrection. Why do you think that's true?

CHAPTER 17

Only One Came Back

Luke 17

Jesus starts this chapter with some hard teaching for His disciples. Things that cause people to stumble are bound to come, but woe to the person who causes them. It would be better to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around your neck than to cause one of these little ones to stumble.

"So watch yourselves." If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them. And if they repent, forgive them. Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and come back seven times saying, I repent, you must forgive them.

The apostles' response is honest: "Increase our faith!" That sounds impossible. We're going to need help.

Jesus says that if they had faith as small as a mustard seed, they could tell a mulberry tree to be uprooted and planted in the sea, and it would obey. It isn't about how much faith you have. It's about who your faith is in. A tiny faith in a great God can do great things.

Then a short parable about servants. When a servant comes in from plowing the field, does the master tell him to sit down and eat? No. He says, Get my dinner ready, and you can eat after. So when you've done everything you were told to do, you should say, We are unworthy servants; we've only done our duty. Obedience isn't a way

to earn credit with God. It's just the normal life of someone who belongs to Him.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Samaritans**
>
> Samaritans lived in the region between Galilee and Judea. They worshiped the God of Israel and accepted the five books of Moses, but they had their own temple on Mount Gerizim and their own version of Israel's history. Many Jews saw them as half-breeds and heretics. Many Samaritans returned the hostility. Some Jewish travelers would cross the Jordan River and go the long way around to avoid passing through Samaria.

Still on His way to Jerusalem, Jesus travels along the border between Samaria and Galilee. As He's entering a village, ten men with leprosy meet Him. They stand at a distance, as the law required, and call out in a loud voice, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!"

Jesus tells them to go show themselves to the priests. That's what a person was supposed to do after being healed from a skin disease, to be declared clean and allowed back into the community. But they haven't been healed yet. Jesus is asking them to start walking before anything changes.

They go. "And as they went, they were cleansed."

Then Luke slows down for one man. "One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice." He throws himself at Jesus' feet and thanks Him. "And he was a Samaritan."

Jesus asks, Weren't all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner? Then He says to the man, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well."

All ten got healed. Only one came back. And the one who came back was the outsider, the one nobody expected. Nine received a gift. One met the Giver.

The Pharisees ask Jesus when the kingdom of God will come. He tells them the kingdom isn't something you can track with careful observation. "The kingdom of God is in your midst." It was standing right in front of them, and they were asking when it would arrive.

Then He tells His disciples about the day the Son of Man will return. People will say, Look, there He is! Don't run after them. When He comes, it will be as obvious as lightning that lights up the whole sky. But first He must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation.

He compares the end to the days of Noah and the days of Lot. People were eating, drinking, marrying, buying, selling, planting, building, completely ordinary life, and then judgment came suddenly. "Remember Lot's wife!" She was rescued from Sodom but looked back longingly at the life she was leaving. Whoever tries to keep their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life will preserve it.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **A Missing Verse**
>
> If you look at Luke 17 in the NIV, you'll notice that verse 36 is missing, with a footnote. The earliest and most reliable manuscripts of Luke don't include it. Later copies added a line similar to Matthew 24:40. Modern translations like the NIV keep the verse numbers that older Bibles used, so they skip the number and explain why in a note. Nothing is being hidden. It's an honest sign of careful work.

KEY VERSE

One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan.

Luke 17:15–16 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Jesus said to forgive someone even seven times in a day. Who is hardest for you to keep forgiving?
2. The ten lepers had to start walking before they were healed. When has God asked you to obey before you could see the result?
3. Why do you think only one of the ten came back? What keeps you from thanking God?

TRY THIS *Make a list of ten things God has given you this year. Then go back, like the Samaritan did, and thank Him for each one by name.*

CHAPTER 18

Two Men Went Up to Pray

Luke 18

Luke tells us exactly why Jesus told the next parable: to show His disciples "that they should always pray and not give up."

In a certain town there was a judge who didn't fear God or care what people thought. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with a plea: Grant me justice against my adversary. Remember, a widow had almost no power. She had no money for bribes and no husband to speak for her. All she had was persistence.

For a while the judge refuses. But finally he says to himself, Even though I don't care about God or people, this widow keeps bothering me, so I'll make sure she gets justice, "so that she won't eventually come and attack me!" Jesus is being funny here. The Greek verb literally means to strike under the eye, so some translators think the judge is afraid of a black eye. Others think it's a figure of speech for wearing him out. Either way, the picture is a powerful judge worn down by a powerless widow.

Then Jesus makes the point. If even an unjust judge eventually gives in, won't God bring about justice for His chosen ones, who cry out to Him day and night? He won't keep putting them off. God isn't like the judge. He's the opposite. Then Jesus asks a question that hangs

in the air: When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Temple and Prayer**
>
> The temple in Jerusalem held daily services in the morning and the afternoon, with sacrifices and prayers. Many people went up to the temple courts at those times to pray. Pharisees were respected for their careful obedience to the law. They fasted twice a week, more than the law required, and tithed everything, even small garden herbs. Tax collectors were seen as traitors who got rich by cheating their own people. Everyone listening would have known who the good guy and the bad guy were supposed to be.

Then Jesus tells a parable "to some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else." Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

The Pharisee stands by himself and prays about himself: God, I thank You that I'm not like other people, robbers, evildoers, adulterers, "or even like this tax collector." I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get. Technically he's praying, but he's really giving God his résumé. And he's comparing himself to the guy in the back.

"But the tax collector stood at a distance." He won't even look up to heaven. He beats his chest, a sign of deep grief, and says, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

Then Jesus says the shocking part: the tax collector, not the Pharisee, went home justified before God. "For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

The Pharisee's problem wasn't that he obeyed God. It was that he trusted in his obedience and looked down on others. The tax collector had nothing to offer. He just asked for mercy. And mercy is the only way anyone gets right with God.

Right after that, people are bringing babies to Jesus to have Him touch them. The disciples rebuke the parents. Jesus is too important for this. But Jesus calls the children to Him and says, Let the little children come to Me, and don't stop them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Anyone who won't receive the kingdom like a little child will never enter it. Babies can't earn anything. They just receive.

Then a ruler asks Him, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus lists some commandments. The ruler says he's kept them all since he was a boy. Jesus says, "You still lack one thing." Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you'll have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow Me.

The man becomes very sad, because he's very wealthy. Jesus looks at him and says how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom. It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. The listeners ask, Then who can be saved? "What is impossible with man is possible with God."

The rich ruler and the tax collector in the temple are opposites. One asked what he could do. The other asked for mercy. The one who thought he had everything walked away sad. The one who knew he had nothing went home right with God.

Peter says, We've left everything to follow You. Jesus promises that no one who has left home or family for the kingdom will fail to receive much more in this age, and eternal life in the age to come.

Then He tells the Twelve, for the third time, exactly what's going to happen in Jerusalem: He will be handed over to the Gentiles, mocked, insulted, spit on, flogged, and killed. On the third day He will rise again. They don't understand any of it.

As Jesus approaches Jericho, a blind man is sitting by the roadside begging. When he hears that Jesus of Nazareth is passing by, he calls out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" The people in front tell him to be quiet, but he shouts even louder. Jesus stops and asks, "What do you want me to do for you?" "Lord, I want to see." Jesus says, Receive your sight; your faith has healed you. Immediately he can see, and he follows Jesus, praising God.

A blind beggar shouting for mercy gets more than a rich ruler with a perfect record. That's how Luke's Gospel works.

KEY VERSE

But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

Luke 18:13 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Jesus said to always pray and not give up. What have you stopped praying about? Why?
2. When are you tempted to compare yourself to others to feel better about yourself?
3. The rich ruler asked what he could do; the tax collector asked for mercy. Which kind of prayer is easier for you? Why?

CHAPTER 19

Up a Tree

Luke 19

Jericho was a wealthy city, a center of trade on the road to Jerusalem. And in Jericho lived a man named Zacchaeus. Luke gives us three facts about him: he was a chief tax collector, he was wealthy, and he was short.

A chief tax collector wasn't just a tax collector. He was the boss of the tax collectors, the one getting a cut of everyone else's cut. If regular tax collectors were hated, Zacchaeus was public enemy number one. He was rich, and everyone knew exactly how he'd gotten that way.

He wants to see who Jesus is, but because of the crowd and his height, he can't. Nobody is going to let him squeeze to the front. So he runs ahead and climbs a sycamore-fig tree to see Him.

Picture this. A wealthy, important man, dressed in expensive clothes, running down the road and climbing a tree like a ten-year-old. Grown men in that culture didn't run, and they definitely didn't climb trees. Zacchaeus doesn't care how it looks. He's desperate to see Jesus.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Sycamore-Fig**

The sycamore-fig is not the same as the sycamore tree common in North America. It's a sturdy, wide tree with low, spreading branches, easy to climb,

> and with thick leaves that could partly hide someone. Jericho, in the warm Jordan Valley, was famous for its trees and gardens. Zacchaeus may have chosen that tree not only to see Jesus but also to watch without being seen.

When Jesus reaches the spot, He looks up and calls him by name: "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today."

Jesus knew his name. Nobody introduced them. And of all the houses in Jericho, Jesus picks the one belonging to the most hated man in town. He doesn't say, I'd like to stay with you. He says, I must. It's part of His mission.

Zacchaeus comes down at once and welcomes Him gladly. And the crowd? "All the people saw this and began to mutter." He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.

But something happens to Zacchaeus that no lecture could have done. He stands up and says, Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor. And if I've cheated anybody out of anything, I'll pay back four times the amount.

Nobody told him to do that. Jesus didn't give him a list of rules. He just accepted him, and the acceptance changed him. The law only required paying back the amount plus a fifth in many cases. Zacchaeus goes way beyond it. Remember the rich ruler in the last chapter who walked away sad because he couldn't let go of his money? Zacchaeus lets go of it with joy.

Jesus says, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham." The town had written him off. Jesus brings him back into the family. Then He explains why: "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

That's the whole Gospel of Luke in one sentence. Jesus came looking. The shepherd for the sheep. The woman for the coin. The father for his sons. And Jesus for Zacchaeus, up a tree. He's still looking.

Because they are near Jerusalem and the people think the kingdom is about to appear any minute, Jesus tells a parable about a man of noble birth who goes to a distant country to be made king. Before he leaves, he gives ten servants money to put to work. Some of his subjects hate him and send a delegation saying they don't want him as king.

When he returns as king, he calls his servants to account. One has turned his money into ten times as much and is put in charge of ten cities. Another has made five times as much and gets five cities. But one comes and says, Here's your money. I kept it wrapped up in a cloth, because I was afraid of you. The king takes it away from him. And those enemies who didn't want him as king face judgment.

Jesus is about to go away and come back as King. The question for His followers is what they'll do with what He's given them while He's gone. Playing it safe isn't faithfulness.

Then Jesus approaches Jerusalem. He sends two disciples ahead to bring a colt that has never been ridden. They throw their cloaks on it and put Jesus on it, and as He goes along, people spread their cloaks on the road. When He comes near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples begins joyfully praising God, shouting, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" and "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!"

Some Pharisees in the crowd tell Jesus to rebuke His disciples. Jesus answers that if they keep quiet, “the stones will cry out.”

Then, as He sees the city, He weeps over it. If only you had known on this day what would bring you peace. But now it is hidden from your eyes. He predicts that enemies will surround the city and tear it down, not leaving one stone on another, because they didn’t recognize the time of God’s coming to them. Forty years later, Roman armies did exactly that.

The crowd is cheering, and Jesus is crying. He sees what they can’t.

He enters the temple and drives out those who are selling, saying that God’s house is meant to be a house of prayer, and they’ve made it “a den of robbers.” Every day He teaches at the temple. The chief priests, the teachers of the law, and the leaders want to kill Him, but they can’t find a way, “because all the people hung on his words.”

KEY VERSE

Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham."

Luke 19:9 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Zacchaeus didn't care how he looked as long as he could see Jesus. What keeps you from going after Jesus that wholeheartedly?
2. Jesus chose to stay with the most hated man in town, and the crowd grumbled. Who would the crowd grumble about if Jesus went to their house today?
3. Nobody told Zacchaeus to give his money away. Why do you think meeting Jesus changed him so quickly?

TRY THIS *Read Luke 19:10 every morning this week. Each day, ask God to show you someone who feels lost, and find one way to show them they're noticed.*

CHAPTER 20

Trick Questions

Luke 20

It's the final week. Jesus is teaching in the temple courts every day, and the religious leaders are taking turns trying to trap Him. This chapter is a series of verbal ambushes. Watch how He handles each one.

Round one: the chief priests, the teachers of the law, and the elders confront Him. "Tell us by what authority you are doing these things." Who gave You the right to clear out the temple and teach here?

Jesus answers with His own question. John's baptism, was it from heaven, or of human origin? They huddle. If they say from heaven, He'll ask why they didn't believe John. If they say human, the crowd will stone them, because everyone believes John was a prophet. So they say they don't know. Jesus says, then neither will I tell you. They weren't really asking. They were trapping. So He doesn't play.

Then He tells a parable. A man plants a vineyard, rents it to some farmers, and goes away for a long time. At harvest time he sends a servant to collect some of the fruit. The tenants beat him and send him away empty-handed. He sends another servant, and another. Each is beaten and thrown out. Finally the owner says, I'll send my son, whom I love. Maybe they'll respect him. But when the tenants

see the son, they decide to kill him so the inheritance will be theirs. They throw him out of the vineyard and kill him.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Vineyard**
>
> In the Old Testament, Israel is often pictured as God's vineyard. Isaiah 5 contains a famous song about a vineyard that God planted and cared for but that produced only bad fruit. Jesus' listeners would have recognized the image right away. The servants in the parable represent the prophets God sent to His people over the centuries, many of whom were rejected or killed. The beloved son is Jesus Himself.

What will the owner do? He'll come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others. The people listening say, "God forbid!" Jesus looks directly at them and quotes a psalm: the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. The leaders know He's told this parable against them, and they want to arrest Him immediately. But they're afraid of the people.

Round two: they send spies who pretend to be sincere. They flatter Him first: Teacher, we know You speak and teach what is right, and You don't show favoritism. Then the trap: "Is it right for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"

If Jesus says yes, the crowds will see Him as a Roman sympathizer. If He says no, the Romans can arrest Him as a rebel. Jesus sees right through it. Show Me a denarius. Whose image and inscription are on it? Caesar's, they answer.

Jesus says, "Then give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." The coin has Caesar's image on it, so give it to him. But you have God's image on you. You were made in His image. Give yourself to Him.

They're unable to trap Him in front of the people, and astonished by His answer, they go silent.

Round three: some Sadducees come. The Sadducees were wealthy, powerful priests who accepted only the five books of Moses and didn't believe in the resurrection. They tell a ridiculous story. Moses wrote that if a man dies childless, his brother should marry the widow. Suppose there were seven brothers. The first marries and dies childless. The second marries the widow and dies, then the third, and so on, all seven. Finally the woman dies too. At the resurrection, whose wife will she be?

They're trying to make the idea of resurrection look ridiculous. Jesus answers that life in the age to come isn't just this life continued. People there won't marry, and they can't die anymore. They're like the angels, God's children, children of the resurrection.

Then He beats them using the only Scriptures they accept. At the burning bush, Moses calls the Lord "the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Not was. Is. Those men had been dead for centuries, but God is still their God. "He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive."

Some teachers of the law, who believed in the resurrection and disliked the Sadducees, say, "Well said, teacher!" And no one dares ask Him any more questions.

Now Jesus asks a question of His own. Why do people say the Messiah is the son of David? David himself, in the book of Psalms, calls the Messiah "Lord." If David calls Him Lord, how can He be David's son? The answer the Gospels point to is that the Messiah is both: a descendant of David, and far greater than David.

The chapter ends with a warning. While all the people are listening, Jesus tells His disciples to beware of the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes, love to be greeted with respect in public, and take the most important seats. They devour widows' houses and make lengthy prayers for show. Such people will be punished most severely. Keep that line about widows in mind. The next chapter starts with one.

KEY VERSE

He said to them, "Then give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

Luke 20:25 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The religious leaders asked questions to trap Jesus, not to learn. How can you tell the difference between honest questions and trap questions, even in yourself?
2. If the coin belonged to Caesar because it had his image, what belongs to God because it bears His image?
3. Jesus said God "is not the God of the dead, but of the living." How does believing in the resurrection change how you see death?

CHAPTER 21

Two Coins and the End of the World

Luke 21

Jesus looks up and sees the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury. Then He sees a poor widow put in two very small copper coins. They were the smallest coins in circulation, worth almost nothing.

Jesus says this poor widow has put in more than all the others. They gave out of their wealth. She, out of her poverty, put in all she had to live on.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **The Temple Treasury**
>
> The temple courts had collection boxes, often described as shaped like trumpets, where worshipers could drop in offerings. Metal coins clattering into them would have made noise, so a large gift might be heard by everyone nearby. Two tiny copper coins wouldn't have made much sound at all. No one else noticed her. Jesus did.

God doesn't measure gifts by the amount. He measures them by what they cost. The rich gave what they could easily spare. She gave everything. And right after Jesus warned about leaders who swallow up widows' houses, here is a widow giving her last coins to the

temple those leaders ran. Jesus sees her, and He sees the system that's crushing her.

Some of the disciples are talking about how the temple is decorated with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God. It really was spectacular. Herod the Great had spent decades rebuilding it, and parts of it shone with white stone and gold. But Jesus says the time is coming when not one stone will be left on another. Every one of them will be thrown down.

They ask the obvious question: When will these things happen, and what sign will show that they're about to take place? Jesus' answer is a sobering look at the future.

First, a warning: watch out that you aren't deceived. Many will come in His name, claiming to be Him, and saying the time is near. Don't follow them. When you hear of wars and uprisings, don't be frightened. Those things must happen first, but the end won't come right away.

There will be nations rising against nations, great earthquakes, famines, and plagues, and fearful events and great signs from heaven. But before all this, His followers will be arrested and persecuted. They'll be handed over to synagogues and prisons, brought before kings and governors, all because of His name. And He says this will be an opportunity: "And so you will bear testimony to me."

Don't worry ahead of time about how to defend yourselves, He tells them. He will give them words and wisdom that none of their opponents can resist. Even parents, brothers and sisters, relatives, and friends will betray some of them. Everyone will hate them

because of Him. “But not a hair of your head will perish.” Stand firm, and you will win life.

Then Jesus gets specific about Jerusalem. When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you’ll know its desolation is near. Let those in Judea flee to the mountains. This happened in AD 70. Roman armies besieged Jerusalem and destroyed the temple. Early Christian writers say many believers in Jerusalem remembered Jesus’ warning and fled before the end.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **AD 70**
>
> In AD 66, the Jewish people revolted against Rome. Roman legions under the general Titus eventually surrounded Jerusalem, and in AD 70 they broke through the walls, burned the temple, and tore down much of the city. The Jewish historian Josephus described the horror of the siege in detail. Today, visitors to Jerusalem can still see huge stones from the temple complex lying where the Romans threw them down near the Western Wall.

Then Jesus looks beyond Jerusalem to the end of history. There will be signs in the sun, moon, and stars, and nations will be in anguish. People will faint from terror. “At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.” And then He says something surprising. When these things begin to take place, don’t hide. “Stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

For people who belong to Jesus, the end of the world isn’t the worst news. It’s the best news. It’s the day the King comes back to set everything right.

He gives them a picture: look at the fig tree. When it sprouts leaves, you know summer is near. In the same way, when you see these things happening, you know the kingdom of God is near. “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.”

So be careful, He says, or your hearts will be weighed down with partying, drunkenness, and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you suddenly like a trap. Be always on the watch, and pray.

Luke ends the chapter with a simple routine. Each day Jesus is teaching at the temple, and each evening He goes out to spend the night on the Mount of Olives. And all the people come early in the morning to hear Him at the temple.

KEY VERSE

Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

Luke 21:33 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The widow gave almost nothing by the world's standards, and Jesus said it was more than everyone else. What does that tell you about what God values?
2. Jesus said hard times would be an opportunity to "bear testimony." How could a difficult situation in your life become a chance to show who Jesus is?
3. Jesus warned about hearts weighed down by partying and the anxieties of life. Which of those two is more of a danger for you?

CHAPTER 22

The Longest Night

Luke 22

Passover is approaching, and the chief priests and teachers of the law are looking for some way to get rid of Jesus. They're afraid of the crowds. Then they get a gift they never expected. "Then Satan entered Judas, called Iscariot, one of the Twelve." Judas goes to the leaders and offers to hand Jesus over when no crowd is around. They're delighted and agree to give him money.

Jesus sends Peter and John to prepare the Passover meal. When the hour comes, He reclines at the table with His apostles and says, I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. He takes a cup, gives thanks, and tells them to share it. Then He takes bread, gives thanks, breaks it, and gives it to them: "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me." After supper, He takes the cup: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you."

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Passover**
>
> Passover celebrated the night God rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt. The angel of death passed over the houses marked with the blood of a lamb. Every year, families ate a meal of lamb, unleavened bread, and bitter herbs, and drank cups of wine while retelling the story. Jesus took this ancient meal and gave it new meaning. He was the true Passover Lamb. His blood would mark a new covenant, a new rescue, not from Egypt but from sin and death.

Then Jesus says one of the people at this table will betray Him. They start asking each other who it could be. And then, incredibly, within minutes, the conversation turns into an argument about which of them is the greatest.

Jesus doesn't lose His temper. He explains that the kings of the Gentiles lord it over their people. "But you are not to be like that." The greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the leader like the one who serves. Who is greater, the one at the table or the one who serves? "But I am among you as one who serves."

Then He turns to Peter. "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift all of you as wheat." But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.

Notice that. Jesus knew Peter was about to fail, and He'd already prayed for him. He tells Peter what to do after he comes back. Peter insists he's ready to go to prison and death. Jesus tells him that before the rooster crows today, he will deny three times that he knows Him.

They go out, as usual, to the Mount of Olives. Jesus tells them, "Pray that you will not fall into temptation." He goes a stone's throw away, kneels down, and prays, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done."

In many Bibles, the next two verses describe an angel from heaven strengthening Him, and Jesus praying so earnestly in His anguish that His sweat was like drops of blood. The NIV includes these verses with a note that many early manuscripts don't have them. Whether or not Luke wrote those two verses, the scene is clear: Jesus was in agony, and He chose the Father's will anyway.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Luke 22:43–44**

Bible scholars carefully compare thousands of ancient copies of the New Testament. Some of the oldest and most reliable manuscripts of Luke include the verses about the angel and the bloody sweat, and some don't. That's why the NIV puts them in the text with a footnote. Christians have debated whether Luke wrote them or whether they were added early. No Christian belief depends on these two verses. The footnote is a sign of honesty, not a cover-up.

When He gets up from prayer, He finds the disciples asleep, "exhausted from sorrow." Luke, the doctor, gives them a little grace there. Jesus wakes them: Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray.

While He's still speaking, a crowd arrives, led by Judas. Judas approaches to kiss Him. Jesus asks, "Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?" One of the disciples swings a sword and cuts off the right ear of the high priest's servant. Jesus says, "No more of this!" And He touches the man's ear and heals him. Only Luke, the doctor, tells us that. Even while being arrested, Jesus heals an enemy.

They arrest Jesus and take Him to the high priest's house. Peter follows at a distance. In the courtyard, people have kindled a fire and are sitting around it. Peter sits down with them.

A servant girl sees him in the firelight and says, This man was with Him. Peter denies it: I don't know Him. A little later someone else says, You're one of them too. Peter says, I'm not. About an hour later, another person insists, This fellow was with Him, for he is a Galilean. Peter says, Man, I don't know what you're talking about.

"Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed. The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter." Only Luke tells us about that look. Jesus was somewhere across the courtyard, and in that moment their eyes

met. Peter remembers what Jesus said, goes outside, and weeps bitterly.

That look was not hatred. Remember what Jesus had already said: I have prayed for you. When you have turned back. Peter's story isn't over.

The guards mock Jesus and beat Him. They blindfold Him and demand that He prophesy who hit Him. At daybreak, the council meets and asks Him if He is the Messiah. He says if He tells them, they won't believe. "But from now on, the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the mighty God." They ask, Are You then the Son of God? He replies, "You say that I am." That's all they need.

KEY VERSE

Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.

Luke 22:42 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Jesus prayed for Peter before Peter failed. How does it feel to know Jesus prays for His followers?
2. The disciples argued about greatness at the Last Supper. Why is it so easy to care about status even when something sacred is happening?
3. Imagine being Peter when Jesus looked at him. What do you think was in that look?

CHAPTER 23

Today in Paradise

Luke 23

The whole council brings Jesus to Pilate, the Roman governor, and starts accusing Him: He's subverting the nation, opposing paying taxes to Caesar, and claiming to be a king. Two of those three are lies. Remember what He said about giving to Caesar.

Pilate questions Him and then announces, "I find no basis for a charge against this man." But the crowd insists. When Pilate hears that Jesus is from Galilee, he sends Him to Herod, who rules Galilee and happens to be in Jerusalem.

Herod is thrilled. He's wanted to see Jesus for a long time, hoping to watch a miracle. He asks Him question after question. Jesus says nothing. The chief priests are there accusing Him loudly. Herod and his soldiers mock Him, dress Him in an elegant robe, and send Him back to Pilate. Luke adds a strange note: Herod and Pilate had been enemies, but that day they became friends. A common enemy can unite people who agree on nothing else.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Pilate and Herod**

Pontius Pilate was the Roman governor of Judea from about AD 26 to 36. Ancient sources describe him as harsh and willing to use violence, and an inscription with his name was discovered in 1961 at Caesarea. Herod Antipas, a son of Herod the Great, ruled Galilee under Roman approval. He's the Herod

> who had John the Baptist executed. Luke is the only Gospel that tells us Jesus was sent to him.

Pilate calls the leaders and the people together. He tells them he examined Jesus and found no basis for their charges, and neither did Herod. Jesus has done nothing deserving death. Pilate offers to punish Him and release Him.

But the whole crowd shouts, “Away with this man! Release Barabbas to us!” Barabbas had been thrown into prison for an insurrection in the city and for murder. Pilate wants to release Jesus and appeals to them again. They keep shouting, “Crucify him! Crucify him!”

For the third time, Pilate says, Why? What crime has this man committed? I have found in Him no grounds for the death penalty. Three times, the Roman governor declares Jesus innocent. But the crowd’s shouts prevail. Pilate releases the man who was guilty of rebellion and murder and surrenders Jesus to their will.

A guilty man goes free. An innocent man takes his place. You can’t get a clearer picture of what the cross is about.

As the soldiers lead Him away, they grab a man named Simon from Cyrene, who’s coming in from the country, and make him carry the cross behind Jesus. A large crowd follows, including women who mourn and wail for Him. Jesus turns to them. “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children.” Even on the way to His own execution, He’s thinking about the suffering coming to them.

Two other men, both criminals, are led out with Him to be executed. When they come to the place called the Skull, they crucify Him there, along with the criminals, one on His right and one on His left.

And then Jesus says, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” Some early manuscripts don’t include those words, but many do, and they fit everything Luke has shown us about Jesus. He told His followers to pray for those who mistreat them. Now He does it with nails in His hands.

The soldiers divide His clothes by casting lots. The people stand watching. The rulers sneer: He saved others; let Him save Himself if He is God’s Messiah, the Chosen One. The soldiers mock Him too. Above Him is a written notice: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.

One of the criminals hanging there insults Him: Aren’t You the Messiah? Save Yourself and us!

But the other criminal rebukes him. Don’t you fear God, since you’re under the same sentence? We’re getting what our deeds deserve. “But this man has done nothing wrong.” Then he says, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

This man has nothing. He can’t be baptized. He can’t go to church. He can’t do a single good deed or make up for anything he’s done. All he can do is turn his head and ask.

Jesus answers him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

Today. Not after a waiting period. Not after he’s proved himself. Today.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Crucifixion**
>
> Crucifixion was a Roman method of execution designed to be as slow, painful, and public as possible. It was usually reserved for slaves, rebels, and the worst criminals. Victims could hang for hours or even days before dying, often from exhaustion and suffocation. Roman citizens were generally exempt. The

> cross was a symbol of total shame. That's what makes it astonishing that the first Christians chose it as the center of their message.

It's now about noon, and darkness comes over the whole land until three in the afternoon, for the sun stops shining. The curtain of the temple is torn in two. Jesus calls out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." Having said this, He breathes His last.

In Luke, Jesus' last words are a prayer of trust. They come from Psalm 31, a prayer of someone handing his life over to God with complete trust.

The centurion, seeing what happened, praises God and says, "Surely this was a righteous man." The crowds go home beating their chests. And the women who had followed Him from Galilee stand at a distance, watching.

A member of the council named Joseph, from Arimathea, a good and upright man who had not agreed with their decision, goes to Pilate and asks for Jesus' body. He takes it down, wraps it in linen cloth, and places it in a tomb cut in the rock, where no one had yet been laid. The women from Galilee follow, see the tomb and how His body was laid in it, and go home to prepare spices and perfumes. Then they rest on the Sabbath, in obedience to the commandment.

KEY VERSE

Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

Luke 23:43 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Pilate declared Jesus innocent three times and still handed Him over. Why do you think he gave in to the crowd?
2. Jesus prayed for the people crucifying Him. What would it take for you to forgive someone who hurt you badly?
3. The criminal on the cross had nothing to offer Jesus, and Jesus promised him paradise. What does that tell you about how salvation works?

CHAPTER 24

Burning Hearts

Luke 24

On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women take the spices they've prepared and go to the tomb. They find the stone rolled away. They go in, but they don't find the body of the Lord Jesus.

While they're standing there confused, two men in clothes that gleam like lightning suddenly stand beside them. The women are terrified and bow down with their faces to the ground. The men ask, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" Then: "He is not here; he has risen! Remember how He told you, while He was still with you in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be delivered over, crucified, and on the third day be raised again?

Then the women remember His words.

They go back and tell all of this to the Eleven and everyone else. Luke names them: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and others with them. These are some of the same women Luke introduced back in chapter 8. They followed Jesus in Galilee, they stood near the cross, they watched where He was buried, and now they're the first to hear that He's alive.

The apostles' response? They don't believe the women, "because their words seemed to them like nonsense." Peter, though, gets up

and runs to the tomb. Bending over, he sees the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he goes away wondering what had happened.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Women as Witnesses**
>
> In the first-century world, the testimony of women was often treated as less reliable than that of men, and in some legal settings it wasn't accepted at all. If someone were inventing a story about the resurrection to convince people, they would not have made women the first witnesses. All four Gospels do. Many historians see that as a strong sign that the Gospel writers were reporting what actually happened, even when it was embarrassing.

That same day, two of Jesus' followers are walking to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. One of them is named Cleopas. They're talking about everything that happened. As they talk, Jesus Himself comes up and walks along with them, "but they were kept from recognizing him."

He asks what they're discussing. They stand still, their faces downcast. Cleopas says, Are You the only visitor to Jerusalem who doesn't know what's happened there in the last few days? "What things?" Jesus asks.

Notice that. Jesus lets them tell Him the story. They explain that Jesus of Nazareth was a prophet, powerful in word and deed, and that the chief priests and rulers handed Him over to be crucified. "But we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel." Had hoped. Past tense. Their hope died on Friday.

They mention that some women found the tomb empty and saw angels who said He was alive. But they didn't see Him. They've heard the news and they still walk away in despair.

Then Jesus says, "How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken!" Didn't the Messiah have to suffer

these things and then enter His glory? And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, He explains to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning Himself.

Imagine that Bible study. Seven miles of Jesus walking through the Old Testament, showing them how the whole story pointed to Him.

As they approach the village, Jesus acts as if He's going farther. But they urge Him to stay with them, because it's nearly evening. So He goes in. When He's at the table with them, He takes bread, gives thanks, breaks it, and begins to give it to them. "Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight."

They say to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?"

They get up immediately. Seven miles. At night. They don't care. They return to Jerusalem and find the Eleven and those with them, who are already saying, "It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon." Then the two tell what happened on the road, and how Jesus was recognized when He broke the bread.

While they're still talking about this, Jesus Himself stands among them and says, "Peace be with you." They're startled and frightened. They think they're seeing a ghost. He asks why they're troubled and why doubts rise in their minds. Look at My hands and feet. It's I Myself! Touch Me and see. A ghost doesn't have flesh and bones.

They still can't believe it, because of joy and amazement. So He asks, "Do you have anything here to eat?" They give Him a piece of broiled fish, and He eats it in front of them.

Luke the investigator includes the fish for a reason. A ghost doesn't eat lunch. The resurrection wasn't a vision or a feeling. It was a real body that could be touched and could eat.

Then Jesus opens their minds so they can understand the Scriptures. Everything written about Him in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms had to be fulfilled. The Messiah would suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins would be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. "You are witnesses of these things." He tells them to stay in the city until they've been clothed with power from on high. That's the Holy Spirit, and that's exactly where Luke's second book, Acts, picks up.

He leads them out to the vicinity of Bethany, lifts up His hands, and blesses them. While He is blessing them, He leaves them and is taken up into heaven. They worship Him and return to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stay continually at the temple, praising God.

Luke's Gospel began in the temple with a priest who couldn't speak because he didn't believe. It ends in the temple with a crowd of witnesses who can't stop praising God, because now they do.

KEY VERSE

They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?"

Luke 24:32 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The two travelers had heard the news of the empty tomb and still walked away discouraged. What keeps people from believing even when they've heard the facts?
2. Jesus showed them how the whole Old Testament pointed to Him. Have you ever thought of the Bible as one big story about Jesus?
3. Luke started his book by promising "certainty." After reading the whole thing, what are you more certain about? What questions do you still have?

TRY THIS *Pick one Old Testament story you know (Noah, Abraham and Isaac, the Passover, David and Goliath). Ask someone you trust, or do some research, about how it points to Jesus.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Now What? The Bottom Line

You've just walked through the whole Gospel of Luke. You've seen angels announce good news to shepherds, Jesus eat with tax collectors, touch lepers, raise a widow's son, tell stories about lost sheep and lost sons, call a short man down from a tree, forgive the men nailing Him to a cross, and walk beside two confused friends on the road home. Now the question Jesus asked His disciples is the question He asks you: "But what about you?... Who do you say I am?"

Here's what the Bible says, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and God is looking for you.

You weren't an accident. God created you to know Him, love Him, and live under His good rule. Remember the shepherd who left the ninety-nine to find one lost sheep? That's how God feels about people who have wandered away.

2 We've all wandered.

Some of us are like the younger son who ran off and wasted everything. Some of us are like the older brother who stayed home and was proud of it. Either way, we're far from the Father. The Bible calls it sin, and it separates us from God.

> *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,* **Romans 3:23 (NIV)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. The Bible says the result of sin is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (NIV)**

4 Jesus paid it.

On the cross, Jesus, the only person who ever lived a perfect life, took our place. Even a criminal dying next to Him could see it: Jesus had done nothing wrong. Then He rose from the dead, proving His payment was accepted and death was beaten.

> *But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.* **Romans 5:8 (NIV)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

The tax collector in the temple had nothing to offer God. All he could say was, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." Jesus said he went home right with God. The thief on the cross couldn't do a single good deed, and Jesus promised him paradise. Salvation isn't a checklist you complete. It's a gift you receive by trusting Jesus.

> *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.* **Ephesians 2:8–9 (NIV)**

6 Coming home means turning around.

The younger son "got up and went to his father." That's what repentance is: turning from running your own life and turning to God through Jesus as your Savior and King. And the Father doesn't wait with folded arms. He runs. It doesn't mean you'll never fail again. Peter denied Jesus three times, and Jesus still restored him. It means you belong to Him now.

> *If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* **Romans 10:9 (NIV)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. The tax collector used seven. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

God, I've been running my own life, and I've sinned against You. I can't fix that myself. I believe Jesus is Your Son, that He died on the cross in my place, and that You raised Him from the dead. I'm coming home. Have mercy on me, a sinner, and forgive me. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want to follow Him as my King. Fill me with Your Holy Spirit and teach me to pray. In Jesus' name, amen.

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. When Zacchaeus met Jesus, everyone knew by dinnertime. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read Luke straight through in a Bible, a chapter a day. Then read Luke's second volume, the book of Acts, and watch what the Holy Spirit does next.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Ask about being baptized. The first followers of Jesus in Acts did it right away.

Talk to God every day. In Luke, Jesus prays before every big moment. If He needed time with the Father, so do we. Be honest. He can handle it.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Luke wrote for someone who wanted to be sure. Keep investigating. Keep reading. Talk to someone you trust. Ask hard questions. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because in Luke, the people who thought they had nothing to learn walked away empty. The ones who knew they were lost got found. Don't be the one standing outside the party.

For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.

Jesus, Luke 19:10 (NIV)

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

The King Who Said I AM

John, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

The King Who Said I AM: The Gospel of John, Unfiltered

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All Scripture quotations in this book are from the NIV. Some are abridged, with omissions marked by ellipses; paraphrases are not placed in quotation marks.

Pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence in the author's own words. Inside Scripture quotations, capitalization and wording follow the 2011 NIV exactly.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

By now you know the saying that keeps showing up in this series: “If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all.” This is the fourth book. The saying stays. Consider it a family tradition.

Here’s why it matters for John. Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell a lot of the same stories, often in the same order. Scholars call them the Synoptic Gospels, meaning they “see together.” Then John comes along and tells the story from a completely different angle. If you think you already know the story of Jesus, John is the Gospel most likely to surprise you.

John doesn’t start in Bethlehem or at the Jordan River. He starts before the universe existed. He calls Jesus “the Word,” and he says the Word was with God and was God. Most of the stories in this book aren’t in the other Gospels at all: water turned into wine, a late-night talk with a religious leader named Nicodemus, a conversation with a Samaritan woman at a well, a man born blind, Lazarus walking out of his tomb, Jesus washing His friends’ feet, Thomas and his doubts, and Peter getting a second chance on a beach.

John also gives us the “I am” sayings. Jesus says, I am the bread of life. I am the light of the world. I am the good shepherd. I am the resurrection and the life. I am the way and the truth and the life. Those two words, “I am,” echo the name God gave Himself when He spoke to Moses from a burning bush. John wants you to hear that echo.

The writer was probably John, one of the Twelve, the son of Zebedee. He never uses his own name. He calls himself "the disciple whom Jesus loved." He was there at the Last Supper, at the cross, and at the empty tomb. He wrote as an old man, looking back on a lifetime of following Jesus.

And John tells you exactly why he wrote. Near the end of his book, he says he wrote these things so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life. That's the challenge. John doesn't want you to finish this book knowing more facts. He wants you to finish it believing. So bring your questions. Bring your doubts. Thomas did. Then look closely at the evidence, and decide what you think.

How This Book Works

This book walks through all 21 chapters of John, in order, one chapter of this book for each chapter of John. Each one tells what happened, adds background about the world Jesus lived in (Jewish festivals, Samaritans, Pharisees, the temple, Roman rule, crucifixion), and points out what John wants you to notice, especially the signs and the "I am" sayings.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the New International Version (NIV), the same translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (pronouns for God are capitalized in the author's own words out of reverence; inside Scripture quotations, capitalization follows the NIV exactly); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and sometimes a Try This challenge.

One more thing: this book is a guide, not a replacement. Keep a Bible open next to it and read each chapter of John for yourself.

John wrote so that you would believe, not so that you'd take someone else's word for it. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. Like the earlier books in this series, on Matthew, Mark, and Luke, it's written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

This book follows the whole Gospel of John, all 21 chapters, in order. I have worked to stay faithful to the text: no invented events, no rewritten dialogue that changes the meaning. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the New International Version (NIV); elsewhere I paraphrase and explain. Historical background is included where it helps the story make sense, and I've tried to stay with what's well established rather than speculation.

John is in some ways the deepest of the Gospels, but it's also full of personal conversations: Nicodemus at night, the woman at the well, Martha and Mary at Lazarus's tomb, Thomas, and Peter on the beach. Teenagers are wrestling with identity, belief, and belonging, and John speaks right to those questions. I've emphasized the seven signs, the "I am" sayings, Jesus' long conversation with His disciples at the Last Supper, and the way John keeps calling the reader to believe. The hard parts are here too, including the crucifixion, told truthfully but without graphic excess.

The book also deals honestly with the story of the woman caught in adultery (John 7:53–8:11). The NIV notes that the earliest manuscripts and many other ancient witnesses do not include it. I've explained that briefly and respectfully, and I've still covered the story, so that students aren't surprised when they see the note in their own Bibles. I've also noted briefly that John 5:4 is missing from the earliest manuscripts.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will come to the same place Thomas did, and say to Jesus, from the heart, "My Lord and my God!"

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

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CHAPTER 1

The Word Moved In

John 1

Matthew starts with a family tree. Mark starts with John the Baptist. Luke starts with a research report. John starts before time.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." If those first three words sound familiar, they should. They're the first three words of the Bible, from Genesis 1. John is telling you he's about to retell the story of creation, and this time the Word is the main character.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Why "the Word"?**
>
> The Greek term John uses is logos. To Jewish readers, it would bring to mind God's word that created the world ("And God said, 'Let there be light'") and spoke through the prophets. To Greek readers, logos was a philosophical idea: the reason or order behind the universe. John uses a word both groups recognized and then says something neither group expected. This Word is a person. He was with God, He was God, and He became human.

Through the Word, all things were made. Nothing that exists was made without Him. In Him was life, and that life was the light of all people. Then John says, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." Darkness never wins in John's Gospel. It tries. It fails.

Next John introduces another John, John the Baptist. He came as a witness to the light. He wasn't the light himself. Then comes a heartbreaking line: the Word came to His own world, and His own people didn't receive Him. But to everyone who did receive Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God. Not by family background or human decision. Born of God.

Then the sentence the whole book hangs on: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us." The God who made galaxies became a baby. He got tired, hungry, and sore. The word translated "made his dwelling" literally means He pitched His tent. It points back to the tabernacle, the tent where God's presence lived among Israel in the wilderness. In Jesus, God moved into the neighborhood.

No one has ever seen God, John says. But the one and only Son, who is Himself God and is close to the Father's side, has made Him known. If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus.

Then the story begins on the ground. Religious leaders from Jerusalem send priests and Levites to ask John the Baptist who he is. Are you the Messiah? No. Elijah? No. The Prophet? No. He finally says he's just a voice calling in the wilderness: make straight the way for the Lord.

The next day, John sees Jesus coming and says, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" Every Jewish listener knew what lambs were for. Lambs were sacrificed. John is announcing, on day one, how this story will end.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Lamb**

In the Old Testament, lambs were sacrificed in the temple every morning and evening, and at Passover each family killed a lamb to remember the night God rescued Israel from Egypt. The blood of the Passover lamb on the doorposts meant death passed over that house. When John the Baptist calls Jesus "the Lamb of God," he's saying Jesus is the sacrifice God Himself provides. Later in this Gospel, Jesus will die at the very time the Passover lambs were being slaughtered.

Two of John's disciples hear this and start following Jesus. He turns around and asks, "What do you want?" It's the first thing Jesus says in this Gospel, and it's a question for every reader. They ask where He's staying. He says, "Come… and you will see." So they spend the day with Him.

One of the two is Andrew. The first thing he does is find his brother Simon and tell him, We've found the Messiah. He brings Simon to Jesus, and Jesus looks at him and gives him a new name: Cephas, which means Peter, "rock." Jesus sees what Simon will become before Simon does.

The next day Jesus finds Philip and says, "Follow me." Philip finds his friend Nathanael and tells him they've found the one Moses and the prophets wrote about, Jesus of Nazareth. Nathanael's response is the first recorded insult about Jesus' hometown: "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Philip doesn't argue. He just says, "Come and see."

That's still the best answer to a skeptic. Don't win the debate. Invite them to look for themselves.

When Jesus sees Nathanael coming, He says, Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit. Nathanael is startled: How do You know me? Jesus says He saw him under the fig tree before

Philip called him. Whatever happened under that fig tree, it was private, and Nathanael is floored. "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel." Jesus smiles at how little it took to convince him. You'll see greater things than that, He says. You'll see heaven open and the angels of God going up and coming down on the Son of Man.

That's a reference to Jacob's dream of a stairway to heaven in Genesis. Jesus is saying He Himself is the connection between heaven and earth.

Count the titles for Jesus in this one chapter: the Word, God, the light, the one and only Son, the Lamb of God, the Messiah, Rabbi, the Son of God, the king of Israel, the Son of Man. John isn't easing into anything. He wants you to know from the first page exactly who you're dealing with.

KEY VERSE

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.
We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son,
who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

John 1:14 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. John says that if you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus. What's one thing about Jesus that changes how you picture God?
2. The first words Jesus says in John are "What do you want?" How would you honestly answer Him?
3. Philip didn't argue with Nathanael. He said, "Come and see." Who could you invite to come and see?

CHAPTER 2

Water into Wine

John 2

On the third day, there's a wedding in Cana, a village in Galilee. Jesus' mother is there, and Jesus and His disciples have been invited too.

Weddings in that culture weren't a single afternoon. They could last a whole week, and the groom's family was responsible for providing food and drink the entire time. Running out was more than inconvenient. It was a public embarrassment that people would talk about for years.

And they run out of wine.

Jesus' mother comes to Him and says simply, "They have no more wine." She doesn't tell Him what to do. She just brings Him the problem. "Woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replies. "My hour has not yet come." It sounds rude in English, but "Woman" was a polite form of address, like "ma'am." Still, Jesus is making a point. His "hour" is a big theme in John. It refers to the moment of His death and glory. He's not on anyone else's schedule.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Hour**
>
> Throughout the first half of John, Jesus says His hour has not yet come. People try to arrest Him and can't, because His hour hasn't come. Then in chapter 12, right before His death, He finally says, "The hour has come." In

> John, the "hour" is the time when Jesus will be lifted up on the cross, rise again, and return to the Father. Everything in the book is moving toward it.

Mary doesn't argue. She tells the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." That's good advice for anybody.

Nearby stand six stone water jars, the kind used for Jewish ceremonial washing, each holding twenty to thirty gallons. Jesus tells the servants to fill them with water, so they fill them to the brim. Then He tells them to draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet.

The master of the banquet tastes the water that has become wine. He has no idea where it came from, but the servants know. He calls the groom aside and says, Everybody brings out the good wine first, and then the cheap stuff after the guests have had plenty. But you've saved the best till now.

Do the math. Six jars, twenty to thirty gallons each. That's somewhere between 120 and 180 gallons of the best wine anyone at that wedding had ever tasted. Jesus doesn't do just enough. He's generous to the point of excess.

John calls this "the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory." Notice that word, "signs." John doesn't usually call Jesus' miracles "miracles." He calls them signs, because they point to something beyond themselves. The jars were for religious washing, the old system of trying to become clean. Jesus fills them with something new and better. Something like a party.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Seven Signs**
>
> John carefully selects seven signs from the first half of Jesus' ministry: water into wine (chapter 2), healing an official's son (chapter 4), healing a disabled man at a pool (chapter 5), feeding five thousand (chapter 6), walking on water

> (chapter 6), healing a man born blind (chapter 9), and raising Lazarus (chapter 11). Each one reveals something about who Jesus is. John says Jesus did many other signs, but he wrote these so that readers would believe.

After a few days in Capernaum, Jesus goes up to Jerusalem for Passover. In the temple courts, He finds people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and money changers sitting at tables. He makes a whip out of cords and drives them all out, sheep and cattle too. He scatters the coins and overturns the tables. To the dove sellers He says, Get these out of here! "Stop turning my Father's house into a market!"

Matthew, Mark, and Luke put the temple clearing near the end of Jesus' ministry. John puts a temple clearing right at the start. Some scholars think Jesus did it twice. Others think John arranged his material to make a point up front. Either way, John wants you to see this early: Jesus has come to replace the old way of meeting God.

The leaders demand a sign to prove He has authority to do this. Jesus answers, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." They're baffled. It's taken forty-six years to build this temple, and You're going to raise it in three days? But John explains that the temple Jesus was talking about was His body. After He rose from the dead, His disciples remembered He'd said this, and they believed.

The temple was where God met His people. Jesus is saying that from now on, He is that meeting place.

Many people in Jerusalem see His signs and believe in His name. But John adds an unsettling note: Jesus didn't entrust Himself to them, because He knew all people. He knew what was in each person. He knew the difference between people who were impressed by Him and people who actually trusted Him.

KEY VERSE

What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

John 2:11 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Mary brought Jesus the problem without telling Him how to fix it. What would it look like for you to pray that way?
2. Jesus turned 150 gallons of water into the best wine at the party. What does that tell you about His generosity?
3. Jesus knew the difference between people who were impressed with Him and people who trusted Him. Which describes you right now?

CHAPTER 3

Born Again at Night

John 3

There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He was a respected teacher, an insider, the kind of person everyone assumed had God figured out. And he comes to Jesus at night.

Maybe he didn't want to be seen. Maybe night was just a quiet time for serious conversation. But in John's Gospel, darkness and light always mean something. Nicodemus is coming out of the dark to talk to the light of the world.

He opens politely: Rabbi, we know You're a teacher who has come from God, because no one could do the signs You're doing unless God were with him. Jesus skips the small talk. "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."

The Greek word can mean "again" or "from above." Jesus probably means both. You need a second birth, and it has to come from God.

Nicodemus takes it literally. How can someone be born when they're old? Surely they can't go back into their mother's womb! Jesus explains that no one can enter God's kingdom unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. Then He compares the Spirit to the wind. You

hear it, but you can't tell where it comes from or where it's going. You can't control the Spirit. You can only see what He does.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Who Was Nicodemus?**
>
> Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin, the seventy-member council that served as the highest Jewish court in Jerusalem. He shows up three times in John. Here he comes at night with questions. In chapter 7 he cautiously defends Jesus in front of the council. And in chapter 19, after the crucifixion, he brings about seventy-five pounds of spices to help bury Jesus' body. John lets us watch his slow journey from the shadows toward the light.

Nicodemus asks, "How can this be?" And Jesus says, with what sounds like a little surprise, You're Israel's teacher, and you don't understand these things?

Being religious isn't the same as being born again. Nicodemus had the education, the reputation, and the rule-keeping. What he needed was new life.

Then Jesus points back to a strange story from Numbers 21. When the Israelites were dying from snakebites in the wilderness, God told Moses to make a bronze snake and put it on a pole. Anyone who looked at it would live. Just as Moses lifted up the snake, Jesus says, the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes may have eternal life in Him. He's talking about the cross.

And then the most famous verse in the Bible: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

Read it slowly. God loved. Not tolerated. The world. Not just good people. He gave. It cost Him. Whoever. No one is left out. Believes.

Not earns. Shall not perish. Rescue. Eternal life. Not just later, but a new kind of life starting now.

The next verse matters too. God didn't send His Son to condemn the world, but to save it. Whoever believes isn't condemned. But whoever doesn't believe stands condemned already. Then John explains why: light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. People who do evil hate the light and won't come into it, because they're afraid their deeds will be exposed.

That's the real reason many people stay away from Jesus. It isn't always lack of evidence. Sometimes it's that the light would show us things we don't want to see.

Meanwhile, John the Baptist's disciples are worried. Jesus is baptizing too, and everybody is going to Him instead. They're basically saying, Your numbers are down. John's answer is beautiful. He's like the best man at a wedding. The best man doesn't get jealous of the groom. He's thrilled just to hear the groom's voice. Then John says one of the most freeing sentences a person could say: "He must become greater; I must become less."

KEY VERSE

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

John 3:16 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Nicodemus was religious but still needed to be born again. What's the difference between being religious and having new life?
2. Jesus said some people avoid the light because they don't want their deeds exposed. Is there anything you'd rather keep in the dark?
3. John the Baptist said, "He must become greater; I must become less." Where in your life do you need to become less?

TRY THIS *Rewrite John 3:16 in your own words, putting your own name in place of "the world" and "whoever." Read it out loud.*

CHAPTER 4

The Woman at the Well

John 4

Jesus leaves Judea and heads back to Galilee, and John says He "had to go through Samaria." Geographically, that was the most direct route. But many Jewish travelers went the long way around to avoid Samaria entirely. Jesus didn't have to go through Samaria because of the map. He had to go because someone there needed Him.

He comes to a town called Sychar, near a well Jacob had dug centuries before. Tired from the journey, He sits down by the well. It's about noon. The disciples have gone into town to buy food.

A Samaritan woman comes to draw water. Women usually came to the well in the cooler morning or evening, together. This woman comes alone, in the heat of the day. It's likely she was avoiding people.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Jews and Samaritans**

Samaritans lived in the region between Judea and Galilee. They were descendants of Israelites who had intermarried with foreigners after the Assyrian conquest centuries earlier. They worshiped the God of Israel but only accepted the five books of Moses, and they worshiped on Mount Gerizim instead of in Jerusalem. The two groups had a long history of hostility, including the destruction of the Samaritan temple by a Jewish ruler about 150 years before Jesus. Devout Jews avoided contact with Samaritans whenever possible.

Jesus says to her, "Will you give me a drink?" She's shocked. You're a Jew and I'm a Samaritan woman. How can You ask me for a drink? John adds the explanation: Jews didn't share things with Samaritans. A Jewish man talking alone with a Samaritan woman broke at least three social rules at once.

Jesus says that if she knew who was asking, she would have asked Him, and He would have given her "living water." She points out that He doesn't even have a bucket, and the well is deep. Is He greater than Jacob? Jesus says that anyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again. "But whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst."

She says, Sir, give me this water so I won't have to keep coming here. She's still thinking about plumbing. So Jesus changes direction. "Go, call your husband and come back."

"I have no husband," she says. Jesus answers that she's right. She's had five husbands, and the man she's with now isn't her husband.

We don't know her whole story. In that culture, women couldn't usually initiate divorce, so she may have been abandoned or widowed more than once. Whatever happened, she carried a lot of pain and probably a lot of shame. Jesus knew everything about her. And He was still talking to her.

She tries to change the subject, the way people do when a conversation gets too personal. She brings up a religious debate: our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews say people must worship in Jerusalem. Jesus answers that a time is coming, and has now come, when true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth. "God is spirit, and his worshipers must

worship in the Spirit and in truth." It's not about which mountain. It's about the heart.

She says she knows the Messiah is coming, and when He comes, He'll explain everything. And Jesus says, "I, the one speaking to you —I am he." In Greek, His words are simply "I am, the one speaking to you."

The first person in John's Gospel to hear Jesus plainly say He is the Messiah isn't a priest or a scholar. It's a Samaritan woman with a messy past who came to the well alone.

The disciples come back and are surprised to find Him talking with a woman. Nobody asks Him about it. And the woman leaves her water jar, the thing she came for, and runs back to town. She tells the very people she'd been avoiding, "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did." The thing she was ashamed of became her testimony. Many Samaritans from that town believe because of her, and when they meet Jesus themselves, they say, "We know that this man really is the Savior of the world."

Meanwhile, the disciples urge Jesus to eat. He says He has food they don't know about: to do the will of the One who sent Him. Open your eyes, He tells them, and look at the fields. They're ripe for harvest. As He says this, a crowd of Samaritans is probably walking toward them across the fields.

Back in Cana, a royal official comes to Jesus because his son is dying in Capernaum, about twenty miles away. Jesus tells him to go, his son will live. The man takes Jesus at His word and leaves. On the way home, his servants meet him with the news: the boy is alive. The fever left at one in the afternoon, exactly when Jesus spoke. John calls it the second sign.

KEY VERSE

Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst."

John 4:13–14 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Jesus knew everything about the woman and still wanted to talk with her. How does it feel to know Jesus knows everything about you?
2. The woman changed the subject when things got personal. How do you change the subject with God?
3. Her shame became her story. Is there a part of your story God might use to help someone else?

CHAPTER 5

Do You Want to Get Well?

John 5

Jesus goes up to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish festivals. Near the Sheep Gate there's a pool called Bethesda, surrounded by five covered colonnades. A huge number of disabled people lie there: blind, lame, paralyzed. Many believed that when the water was stirred, the first person into the pool would be healed.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Pool of Bethesda and Verse 4**
>
> For a long time, some critics doubted that a pool with five colonnades ever existed. Then archaeologists excavated the site in Jerusalem and found a double pool with porches around it, matching John's description. If you look at your NIV, you'll also notice that verse 4 is missing, with a footnote. Some later manuscripts add a line explaining that an angel stirred the water. The earliest and most reliable manuscripts don't include it, so the NIV leaves it out while keeping the verse numbers the same.

One man there has been an invalid for thirty-eight years. Jesus sees him lying there, learns he's been that way a long time, and asks him a question that sounds almost rude: "Do you want to get well?"

Of course he does. Right? But the man doesn't say yes. He makes an excuse. Sir, I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I'm trying to get in, someone else goes ahead of me.

Sometimes we get so used to being stuck that we stop expecting change. We have explanations ready for why things can't be different. Jesus' question cuts through all of that.

Jesus doesn't help him into the pool. He says, "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk." At once the man is cured. He picks up his mat and walks. This is John's third sign.

But it's the Sabbath. Some religious leaders see the man carrying his mat and tell him it's against the law. He says the man who healed him told him to. Who? He doesn't know. Jesus has slipped away into the crowd.

Later, Jesus finds him at the temple and tells him he's well again; stop sinning, or something worse may happen to him. The man goes and tells the leaders it was Jesus. That's where the conflict begins. Because Jesus was doing these things on the Sabbath, the leaders begin to persecute Him.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Sabbath Debate**

The law of Moses commanded rest on the Sabbath, the seventh day. Teachers in Jesus' time had developed long lists of activities that counted as work, including carrying objects from one place to another. Jewish teachers also agreed that God Himself kept working on the Sabbath in some sense, since people were still born and died and the world kept running. When Jesus says His Father is always working, and so is He, He is claiming to share in work that belongs only to God.

Jesus answers them: "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working." The leaders understand exactly what He's claiming. Now they try even harder to kill Him. Not only is He breaking the Sabbath, but He's calling God His own Father, "making himself equal with God."

Jesus doesn't back down. He explains that the Son can do nothing by Himself. He only does what He sees the Father doing. The Father loves the Son and shows Him everything. Just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so the Son gives life to whomever He wants. And the Father has entrusted all judgment to the Son, so that everyone may honor the Son just as they honor the Father.

Then He makes a promise. "Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life." Not will cross over someday. Has crossed over. Eternal life begins the moment you believe.

Jesus then lists His witnesses, like a lawyer in court. John the Baptist testified about Him. The works He does testify about Him. The Father Himself has testified. And the Scriptures testify about Him. Then He says something stunning to these Bible experts: You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about Me, yet you refuse to come to Me to have life.

It's possible to know the Bible inside and out and still miss Jesus. The point of the Bible isn't the Bible. It's the One it points to.

Finally He tells them that Moses, the very person they think is on their side, will be the one who accuses them. If they really believed Moses, they would believe Jesus, because Moses wrote about Him.

KEY VERSE

Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life.

John 5:24 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Jesus asked a man who'd been stuck for thirty-eight years, "Do you want to get well?" Where have you gotten used to being stuck?
2. The man had an excuse ready instead of an answer. What excuses do you tend to give God?
3. Jesus said it's possible to study the Scriptures and still miss Him. How can you read the Bible in a way that actually leads you to Jesus?

CHAPTER 6

The Bread of Life

John 6

Jesus crosses to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee, and a huge crowd follows Him because they've seen His signs on the sick. He goes up on a mountainside and sits down with His disciples. It's near Passover, the festival that remembered how God fed Israel in the wilderness.

Jesus looks up, sees the crowd coming, and asks Philip where they can buy bread for all these people. John tells us He asked "only to test him," because He already knew what He was going to do. Philip does the math: more than half a year's wages wouldn't buy enough for each person to get a bite.

Andrew has found something, though not much. "Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?" Barley bread was the cheap bread, the food of the poor. Only John tells us it came from a boy.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Five Thousand Men**
>
> John says about five thousand men sat down. In that culture, crowds were often counted by the number of men, so the total crowd including women and children may have been much larger. A denarius was a typical day's wage for a laborer, and Philip's estimate of two hundred denarii was roughly eight months of work. Feeding a crowd like that in a remote area was simply impossible by normal means.

Jesus has the people sit down on the grass. He takes the loaves, gives thanks, and distributes as much as they want, and the same with the fish. When everyone has had enough, He tells the disciples to gather the leftovers so that nothing is wasted. They fill twelve baskets. A boy's lunch, in Jesus' hands, became more than enough.

The people are thrilled. This must be the Prophet Moses promised! They're ready to come and make Him king by force. Jesus knows it, and He withdraws to a mountain by Himself. He won't be the kind of king they want.

That evening, the disciples get into a boat to cross the lake back toward Capernaum. It's dark, Jesus hasn't joined them, and a strong wind is churning the water. After rowing three or four miles, they see Jesus walking on the water, coming toward the boat, and they're terrified. He says to them, "It is I; don't be afraid." In Greek, His words are literally "I am." Then they're willing to take Him into the boat, and immediately they reach the shore.

The next day, the crowd tracks Him down in Capernaum. Jesus tells them honestly that they're looking for Him not because they understood the signs, but because they ate their fill of bread. Don't work for food that spoils, He says, but for food that lasts to eternal life.

They ask for a sign. Moses gave our ancestors manna from heaven. What will You do? Jesus says it wasn't Moses who gave them bread from heaven. It's His Father who gives the true bread from heaven. They say, Sir, always give us this bread. And Jesus says it: "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

BACKGROUND CHECK **I AM**

When God spoke to Moses from the burning bush in Exodus 3, Moses asked for His name. God answered, "I AM WHO I AM." That name became the most sacred name of God in Israel. In John's Gospel, Jesus says "I am" in seven famous statements with images: the bread of life, the light of the world, the gate, the good shepherd, the resurrection and the life, the way and the truth and the life, and the true vine. He also says "I am" by itself several times, in ways that clearly echo God's name.

This is the first of the seven "I am" statements in John. Bread was the most basic food in that world. Jesus isn't claiming to be dessert, a nice extra. He's claiming to be what you can't live without.

Then it gets harder. Jesus says He has come down from heaven, and the crowd grumbles. Isn't this Jesus, Joseph's son? We know His parents. Jesus goes further. The bread He will give for the life of the world is His flesh. Whoever eats His flesh and drinks His blood has eternal life.

That shocks everyone. Is He talking about cannibalism? No. He's speaking in vivid pictures about His coming death and about trusting Him so completely that He becomes your very life. Many Christians also hear in these words a connection to the Lord's Supper. Either way, Jesus doesn't soften it.

Many of His followers say, "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?" And from that point on, many of them turn back and no longer follow Him.

Jesus watches the crowd leave. Then He turns to the Twelve and asks, "You do not want to leave too, do you?"

Peter answers, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." Peter doesn't say he understands everything. He

doesn't. He says there's nowhere else to go. Sometimes faith sounds like that. I don't get all of this, but I know You're the only one with real life.

Jesus answers with a sobering note: He chose the Twelve, and yet one of them is a devil. He meant Judas.

KEY VERSE

I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

John 6:35 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The crowd followed Jesus for free bread. What are some reasons people follow Jesus that aren't really about Him?
2. What are you hungry for that you hope will satisfy you? How is Jesus different?
3. Peter didn't understand everything, but he knew there was nowhere else to go. Have you ever felt that way about following Jesus?

TRY THIS *The next time you eat bread this week, stop before the first bite and thank God that Jesus is the bread of life.*

CHAPTER 7

Thirsty?

John 7

By now, the leaders in Judea are looking for a way to kill Jesus, so He stays in Galilee. But the Festival of Tabernacles is near, and His brothers start pushing Him. You should go to Judea, they say. No one who wants to be famous works in secret. If You're doing these things, show Yourself to the world. John adds a painful line: "For even his own brothers did not believe in him."

Jesus' own family thought He was either wrong or just bad at publicity. If you've ever had family members who don't share your faith, Jesus knows what that feels like. (The good news: after the resurrection, at least two of these brothers, James and Jude, became leaders in the early church and wrote books of the New Testament.)

> BACKGROUND CHECK **The Festival of Tabernacles**
>
> Tabernacles, also called Booths, was a joyful week-long festival in the fall. Families lived in temporary shelters made of branches to remember Israel's years in the wilderness. Two ceremonies stood out. Each morning, priests carried water in a golden pitcher from the Pool of Siloam and poured it out at the altar, praying for rain and remembering the water God gave in the desert. At night, huge lamps were lit in the temple courts, and people said the light filled the whole city. Keep those two images in mind: water and light.

Jesus tells His brothers to go on ahead. Later He goes up privately. Halfway through the festival, He suddenly begins teaching in the

temple courts. The crowd is divided. Some say He's a good man. Others say He's deceiving people. The leaders are amazed that He knows so much without formal training. Jesus says His teaching isn't His own; it comes from the one who sent Him. Anyone who chooses to do God's will, He says, will find out whether His teaching comes from God.

That's an interesting test. Jesus doesn't say, Figure out every question first, then obey. He says if you really want to do God's will, the truth will become clear.

The people argue about Him. Some say, Isn't this the man they're trying to kill? Here He is, speaking publicly, and they aren't saying anything. Have the authorities decided He's the Messiah? Others say, We know where this man is from. When the Messiah comes, no one will know where He's from.

The chief priests and Pharisees send temple guards to arrest Him. But no one lays a hand on Him, "because his hour had not yet come."

Then, on the last and greatest day of the festival, with the water ceremony happening in front of everyone, Jesus stands and calls out in a loud voice: "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink." Whoever believes in Him, rivers of living water will flow from within them. John explains that Jesus was talking about the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were later to receive.

Picture it. The priests have just poured out the water, and the crowd is celebrating. And Jesus stands up and shouts, essentially, This ceremony is about Me. If you're thirsty, come to Me.

The crowd splits again. Some say He's the Prophet. Some say He's the Messiah. Others say the Messiah can't come from Galilee; He

has to come from Bethlehem, David's town. (John's readers know Jesus was born in Bethlehem. The crowd doesn't.)

The temple guards come back empty-handed. The chief priests and Pharisees demand to know why they didn't bring Him in. The guards answer, "No one ever spoke the way this man does." The guards were sent to arrest Jesus, and Jesus ended up arresting them.

The Pharisees sneer. Has He deceived you too? Have any of the rulers or Pharisees believed in Him? This mob that doesn't know the law is cursed.

And then one of their own speaks up. Nicodemus, the man who came to Jesus at night, asks whether their law condemns a man without first hearing him to find out what he's doing. It's a small question, but it's brave. The others turn on him: Are you from Galilee too? Look into it, and you'll find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee.

Nicodemus isn't fully in the light yet. But he's moving.

KEY VERSE

Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink.

John 7:37 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Even Jesus' brothers didn't believe in Him at first. How does that encourage you if people close to you don't share your faith?
2. Jesus said people who want to do God's will will recognize His teaching. Do you want to do God's will, or do you mostly want answers?
3. Nicodemus asked one brave question in a room full of critics. When is it hard for you to speak up for Jesus?

CHAPTER 8

The Light of the World

John 8

Before we get to the rest of this chapter, there's something you should know. In most Bibles, the end of John 7 and the start of John 8 tell a famous story about a woman caught in adultery. If you look at your NIV, you'll see a note in brackets. The earliest manuscripts and many other ancient witnesses don't have John 7:53 through 8:11, and a few manuscripts put the story in other places.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Woman Caught in Adultery**
>
> Most scholars believe this story was not originally part of John's Gospel. It's missing from the oldest Greek manuscripts, its style is different from John's, and it appears in different locations in later copies. At the same time, many scholars think it records a real event from Jesus' life that was passed down in the early church before it was added here. That's why most Bibles still print it, with a note. Christians can read it with that honesty in mind. Nothing we believe about Jesus depends on this passage alone, but it fits who He is.

Here's the story. At dawn, Jesus is teaching in the temple courts when the teachers of the law and the Pharisees drag in a woman caught in adultery. They make her stand in front of everyone. Teacher, she was caught in the act. The law of Moses says to stone such women. What do You say?

It's a trap. If Jesus says let her go, He's breaking the law. If He says stone her, He loses His reputation for mercy, and He'd be calling for

an execution the Romans didn't allow. And notice who's missing. If she was caught in the act, where is the man?

Jesus bends down and writes on the ground with His finger. Nobody knows what He wrote, and plenty of people have guessed. They keep pressing Him. So He straightens up and says, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." Then He bends down and writes again.

One by one, starting with the oldest, they leave. Finally only Jesus is left, with the woman still standing there. He asks her where her accusers went. Has no one condemned you? "No one, sir," she says. Then Jesus says, "Then neither do I condemn you." And then, "Go now and leave your life of sin."

Both halves matter. No condemnation. And a call to a new life. Jesus doesn't excuse her sin, and He doesn't crush her with it.

Then, in the temple courts during or just after the Festival of Tabernacles, with those giant lamps fresh in everyone's mind, Jesus makes the second "I am" statement: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

The Pharisees challenge Him. You're testifying about Yourself, so Your testimony isn't valid. Jesus answers that His Father testifies about Him too. Where is Your father? they ask. Jesus says, You don't know Me or My Father.

Then Jesus says something that's often quoted out of context. To those who had believed Him, He says if they hold to His teaching, they are really His disciples. "Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

People put that line on university buildings as if it's about education. Jesus means something deeper. They answer, We're Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. (Apparently they'd forgotten Egypt, Babylon, and the Roman soldiers standing outside.) Jesus explains that everyone who sins is a slave to sin. "So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Slaves to Sin**
>
> Slavery was common in the Roman world, and everyone knew the difference between a slave and a son. A slave had no permanent place in the household, but a son belonged forever. Jesus uses that picture to describe sin. Sin isn't just doing wrong things. It's a power that takes over and controls people. Only the Son, who belongs to the household permanently, has the authority to set slaves free and bring them into the family.

The argument heats up. They say Abraham is their father. Jesus says if they were Abraham's children, they'd act like Abraham. Instead they're trying to kill Him. He says, frankly, that their real father is the devil, a liar and a murderer from the beginning. They accuse Him of being a Samaritan and demon-possessed.

Jesus says that whoever obeys His word will never see death. Now they're sure He's crazy. Abraham died. The prophets died. Who do You think You are? Jesus says Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing His day. They scoff. You're not even fifty years old, and You've seen Abraham!

And Jesus says, "Very truly I tell you… before Abraham was born, I am!"

Not "I was." I am. He's using God's own name from the burning bush. Everyone in the temple courts understands exactly what He's claiming. They pick up stones to kill Him. But Jesus hides Himself and slips away from the temple grounds.

You can disagree with Jesus. But you can't call Him just a good teacher. Good teachers don't say things like that. Either He was telling the truth, or He wasn't.

KEY VERSE

I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.

John 8:12 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Jesus told the woman both "neither do I condemn you" and "leave your life of sin." Why do you think both are necessary?
2. What's one way sin has acted like a master in your life, something that controlled you?
3. Jesus claimed to exist before Abraham, using God's own name. If that claim is true, what does it change?

CHAPTER 9

I Was Blind, Now I See

John 9

As Jesus walks along, He sees a man who has been blind from birth. His disciples ask Him a theology question: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

Many people back then believed that suffering was always a direct punishment for someone's sin. If you were born blind, someone must have done something wrong. Some people still think that way today.

Jesus says neither one sinned. This happened "so that the works of God might be displayed in him." Jesus doesn't explain all suffering. But He refuses to treat this man as a lesson in blame. Instead, He treats him as a person God is about to do something wonderful for. "While I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

Then Jesus spits on the ground, makes some mud with the saliva, and puts it on the man's eyes. Go, He tells him, wash in the Pool of Siloam. The man goes and washes, and comes home seeing. This is John's sixth sign.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **The Pool of Siloam**
>
> The Pool of Siloam was at the southern end of Jerusalem, fed by a tunnel King Hezekiah had cut through solid rock about seven hundred years earlier to bring water into the city. It was also the source of the water poured out at the

> Festival of Tabernacles. In 2004, workers repairing a sewer pipe uncovered steps of the pool from Jesus' time. The name Siloam means "Sent," which John points out, because Jesus is the one sent from the Father.

Now the rest of the chapter is basically a courtroom drama, and it's a little funny.

The neighbors can't agree it's the same man. Some say it's him. Others say it just looks like him. He keeps saying, "I am the man." They ask how his eyes were opened. He tells them plainly: the man they call Jesus made mud, put it on my eyes, told me to wash, and now I see.

They take him to the Pharisees. And, of course, it was a Sabbath. Making mud counted as work. Some of the Pharisees say this man can't be from God, because He doesn't keep the Sabbath. Others say, How can a sinner perform such signs? They're divided. They ask the man what he thinks. He says, "He is a prophet."

They don't believe he was ever blind, so they call in his parents. Is this your son? Was he born blind? How can he see now? The parents are terrified. The leaders had already decided that anyone who acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. So they say: Yes, he's our son, and yes, he was born blind, but we don't know how he sees. Ask him. He's of age.

Being kicked out of the synagogue meant being cut off from your community, your friends, and much of your social life. The parents chose safety over the truth.

The leaders call the man back a second time. "Give glory to God by telling the truth," they say. We know this man is a sinner. And the formerly blind man gives one of the greatest answers in the Bible.

"Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!"

He doesn't have a theology degree. He can't answer every question. But he knows what happened to him. That's what a testimony is.

They ask him again how Jesus did it. And the man gets bold, even sarcastic. I already told you, and you didn't listen. Why do you want to hear it again? "Do you want to become his disciples too?"

They hurl insults at him. You're His disciple! We're disciples of Moses! We know God spoke to Moses, but this fellow, we don't even know where He comes from.

The man can't believe it. Now that is remarkable! You don't know where He comes from, yet He opened my eyes. Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. If this man weren't from God, He couldn't do anything. The experts reply, You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us! And they throw him out.

Jesus hears that they've thrown him out. And He goes looking for him. He finds him and asks, Do you believe in the Son of Man? The man asks, Who is He, sir? Tell me so that I may believe. Jesus says, You have now seen Him; in fact, He is the one speaking with you. The man says, "Lord, I believe," and he worships Him.

The man lost his place in the synagogue and found Jesus. He ended up seeing more clearly than anyone in the story.

Jesus says He came into this world so that the blind would see and those who think they see would become blind. Some Pharisees overhear and ask, What? Are we blind too? Jesus says if they admitted they were blind, they wouldn't be guilty. But since they claim they can see, their guilt remains.

The most dangerous kind of blindness is thinking you see perfectly.

KEY VERSE

He replied, "Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!"

John 9:25 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The disciples wanted to know whose fault the man's blindness was. Why do people look for someone to blame when they see suffering?
2. The man's parents chose safety over the truth. When are you tempted to do the same?
3. The man didn't have every answer, but he knew what Jesus had done for him. What could you honestly say Jesus has done in your life?

TRY THIS *Write your own "One thing I do know" sentence about God. Keep it honest, even if it's small.*

CHAPTER 10

The Good Shepherd

John 10

Jesus keeps talking to the same Pharisees who just threw the formerly blind man out. And He talks about sheep.

Every listener knew how sheepfolds worked. A shepherd would bring his flock into a walled pen at night, often shared with other flocks. In the morning, he'd come to the gate and call his own sheep by name, and they would come out and follow him, because they knew his voice. A stranger could call all day, and they wouldn't follow.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Shepherds and Sheep**
>
> In Israel, shepherds lived with their flocks for weeks at a time, leading them to pasture and water and protecting them from wolves, lions, bears, and thieves. Sheep really do learn their shepherd's voice. The Old Testament often pictures God as Israel's shepherd, as in Psalm 23, and describes Israel's bad leaders as shepherds who fed themselves instead of the flock (Ezekiel 34). Jesus' listeners would have heard both of those echoes.

Jesus says He is "the gate for the sheep." Some shepherds slept in the doorway of the pen, becoming the gate themselves. Whoever enters through Him will be saved. Then He contrasts Himself with a thief. "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."

Some people think following Jesus means a smaller, more boring life. Jesus says the opposite. The thing that's stealing from you isn't Jesus. He's the one offering a full life.

Then He says, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." He compares Himself with a hired hand who runs when the wolf comes, because the sheep aren't his. Jesus isn't like that. He knows His sheep, and His sheep know Him, just as the Father knows Him and He knows the Father. And He will lay down His life for them.

Then He mentions something easy to miss: He has other sheep that aren't of this sheep pen. He must bring them also, and there will be one flock and one shepherd. He's talking about people outside Israel, Gentiles from all over the world. That's probably you.

He's also clear that no one is taking His life from Him. He lays it down of His own accord, and He has authority to take it up again. The cross won't be an accident. It will be a choice.

The crowd is divided again. Some say He's demon-possessed and out of His mind. Others say, Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?

Then it's winter, and Jesus is in Jerusalem for the Festival of Dedication. He's walking in a covered walkway of the temple called Solomon's Colonnade. The leaders surround Him: How long will You keep us in suspense? If You are the Messiah, tell us plainly.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Festival of Dedication**

This festival, known today as Hanukkah, remembered how Jewish rebels led by Judas Maccabeus retook the temple in 164 BC, after a Greek-Syrian king had defiled it by sacrificing to a pagan god on its altar. The temple was cleansed and rededicated to God. The festival was a celebration of freedom

> and of God's presence returning to His house. It's a fitting backdrop for Jesus' claim that He and the Father are one.

Jesus says He already told them, and they didn't believe. The works He does in His Father's name testify about Him. They don't believe because they aren't His sheep. Then He says a line that has comforted many believers who struggle with doubt: His sheep listen to His voice, He knows them, and they follow Him. He gives them eternal life, and they will never perish. "No one will snatch them out of my hand." His Father, who has given them to Him, is greater than all, and no one can snatch them out of the Father's hand.

Then: "I and the Father are one."

For the second time, they pick up stones to stone Him. Jesus asks, I've shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these are you stoning Me? They say it's not for any good work but for blasphemy, "because you, a mere man, claim to be God."

Notice: His enemies understood exactly what He was claiming. Jesus points them back to His works. Even if you don't believe Me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in Me, and I in the Father. They try to seize Him, but He escapes.

He goes back across the Jordan to the place where John the Baptist had first been baptizing. Many people come to Him there. They say John never performed a sign, but everything John said about this man was true. And in that place, many believe in Jesus.

KEY VERSE

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

John 10:10 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Some people think following Jesus means a smaller life. Jesus said He gives life "to the full." What do you think a full life looks like?
2. Sheep learn their shepherd's voice by spending time with him. How can you learn to recognize Jesus' voice?
3. Jesus said no one can snatch His sheep out of His hand. How does that promise help when you're struggling with doubt or failure?

CHAPTER 11

Jesus Wept

John 11

A man named Lazarus is sick. He lives in Bethany, a village about two miles from Jerusalem, with his sisters, Mary and Martha. They were close friends of Jesus. The sisters send Him a short message: "Lord, the one you love is sick."

They don't ask Him to come. They don't need to. They know He loves Lazarus. Surely He'll hurry.

When Jesus hears the news, He says this sickness won't end in death; it's for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it. Then John writes two sentences that seem like they don't belong together. "Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days."

He loved them, so He waited. That's hard to understand. Sometimes God's delays feel like He doesn't care. John wants you to know that in this story, the delay came from love, not indifference.

After two days, Jesus says, Let's go back to Judea. The disciples are alarmed. A short while ago they tried to stone You there, and You're going back? Jesus says Lazarus has fallen asleep, and He's going to wake him up. The disciples think that's good news; if he's sleeping,

he'll get better. So Jesus tells them plainly: "Lazarus is dead." And He's glad He wasn't there, for their sake, so that they may believe.

Thomas, the one later known for doubting, says something brave and a little gloomy: "Let us also go, that we may die with him." Remember that the next time someone calls him "Doubting Thomas."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Burial Customs**
>
> In Jesus' time, Jewish families buried their dead quickly, usually on the day of death, because of the hot climate. The body was washed, wrapped in strips of linen with spices, and placed in a tomb, often a cave cut into rock and sealed with a large stone. Mourning lasted for days, and friends and professional mourners would come to weep with the family. Some Jewish teachers believed the soul stayed near the body for three days. By the fourth day, everyone knew there was no hope.

When Jesus arrives, Lazarus has been in the tomb four days. Many people have come from Jerusalem to comfort the sisters. Martha hears Jesus is coming and goes out to meet Him. Mary stays home.

Martha says what both sisters had been thinking for days: "Lord... if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Then she adds, But I know that even now God will give You whatever You ask. Jesus tells her, Your brother will rise again. Martha says, I know he'll rise again in the resurrection at the last day. She knows her theology.

Then Jesus says the fifth "I am" statement: "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die." And then He asks her, "Do you believe this?"

Jesus doesn't say, I will bring the resurrection someday. He says, I am the resurrection. Life isn't just something He gives. It's who He is.

Martha answers with one of the great confessions in the Gospels: Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.

Then she goes back and quietly tells Mary that the Teacher is asking for her. Mary gets up quickly and goes to Him, and the mourners follow, thinking she's going to the tomb to weep. When Mary reaches Jesus, she falls at His feet and says the exact same words Martha said: Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.

But this time, Jesus doesn't give a theology lesson. When He sees her weeping, and the people with her weeping, He is deeply moved and troubled. He asks where they've laid him. They say, "Come and see, Lord." Then comes the shortest verse in most English Bibles: "Jesus wept."

He knew He was about to raise Lazarus. He wept anyway. Jesus doesn't skip over our grief to get to the happy ending. He enters it. He feels it with us. Some of the crowd say, See how He loved him! Others say, Couldn't He who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?

Jesus comes to the tomb, deeply moved again. It's a cave with a stone across the entrance. He says, "Take away the stone." Martha, ever practical, objects: Lord, by this time there's a bad odor. He's been there four days. Jesus reminds her that He told her if she believed, she would see the glory of God.

They roll away the stone. Jesus looks up and thanks His Father out loud, so the people standing there will believe the Father sent Him. Then He calls in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!”

And the dead man comes out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen and a cloth around his face. Jesus says, Take off the grave clothes and let him go. This is the seventh and greatest sign in John.

Many who saw it believe. But some go to the Pharisees and report what happened. The chief priests and Pharisees call a meeting of the council. If we let Him go on like this, everyone will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation.

Then Caiaphas, the high priest that year, speaks up. You know nothing at all! It’s better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish. John says Caiaphas didn’t say this on his own. Without realizing it, he was prophesying that Jesus would die for the nation, and not only for that nation, but to gather God’s scattered children from everywhere.

From that day on, they plot to kill Him. The irony is sharp: Jesus gives a man life, and it gets Him sentenced to death.

KEY VERSE

I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?

John 11:25–26 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Jesus loved Lazarus and still waited two days. Have you ever felt like God was late? How does this story change how you see that?
2. Jesus wept even though He knew He was about to raise Lazarus. What does that tell you about how He feels about your pain?
3. Jesus asked Martha, "Do you believe this?" How would you answer?

CHAPTER 12

Unless a Seed Dies

John 12

Six days before Passover, Jesus comes back to Bethany, and they throw a dinner in His honor. Martha serves. Of course she does. Lazarus, recently dead, is reclining at the table. Imagine being at that dinner.

Then Mary takes about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume, and pours it on Jesus' feet, and wipes His feet with her hair. "And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume."

Judas Iscariot, who will soon betray Jesus, objects. Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages. It sounds noble. But John tells us what was really going on: Judas didn't care about the poor. He was a thief. As keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.

Jesus defends Mary. Leave her alone. It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of My burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you won't always have Me.

Mary seems to understand what the disciples don't: Jesus is going to die. Her gift was extravagant, and Jesus called it beautiful. Judas measured it in money. Mary measured it in love.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Nard**

Nard, or spikenard, was a fragrant oil made from a plant that grows in the Himalayan mountains. It was imported from as far away as India, which made it extremely expensive. A pound of it was worth about three hundred denarii, close to a year's wages for a laborer. Some families kept such perfume as a kind of savings or for special occasions like weddings and burials. Mary may have poured out the most valuable thing she owned.

A large crowd finds out Jesus is there and comes to see Him, and also to see Lazarus, the man He raised. So the chief priests make plans to kill Lazarus too, because on account of him many people are believing in Jesus. Lazarus is living evidence, and they want to get rid of the evidence.

The next day, the great crowd that had come for the festival hears that Jesus is on His way to Jerusalem. They take palm branches and go out to meet Him, shouting, "Hosanna!" Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the king of Israel! Jesus finds a young donkey and sits on it, fulfilling a prophecy from Zechariah about Zion's king coming on a donkey's colt.

The Pharisees say to one another that they're getting nowhere. "Look how the whole world has gone after him!"

As if on cue, some Greeks who had come to worship at the festival come to Philip with a request: "Sir… we would like to see Jesus." Philip tells Andrew, and they go tell Jesus.

And Jesus says, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified."

For eleven chapters, His hour hadn't come. Now, when people from the wider world come looking for Him, it has. Then He explains what His glory will look like, and it isn't a throne. "Very truly I tell

you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds."

His death will be like a seed planted in the ground. It will look like the end. Instead, it will produce a harvest of people from every nation. Then He applies the principle to His followers. Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves Him must follow Him.

Then Jesus admits something deeply human: "Now my soul is troubled." Should He ask the Father to save Him from this hour? No, it was for this very reason He came. "Father, glorify your name!" A voice comes from heaven: I have glorified it, and will glorify it again. Some in the crowd think it thundered. Others say an angel spoke to Him.

Jesus says the voice was for their benefit. Now is the time for judgment on this world. The prince of this world will be driven out. "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." John explains: He said this to show the kind of death He was going to die. Lifted up on a cross.

Then John steps back and gives a sad summary. Even after Jesus had performed so many signs in their presence, many still wouldn't believe in Him. John quotes Isaiah about eyes that are blinded and hearts that are hardened. And yet many even among the leaders did believe in Him. But because of the Pharisees, they wouldn't openly acknowledge their faith, for fear they'd be put out of the synagogue. "For they loved human praise more than praise from God."

That sentence describes a lot of people. Believing privately, staying quiet publicly, because what others think matters more.

Jesus' public ministry ends with one last call. He came into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in Him should stay in darkness. He didn't come to judge the world, but to save it.

KEY VERSE

Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.

John 12:24 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Judas measured Mary's gift in money. Mary measured it in love. What's the most extravagant thing you've ever given to Jesus?
2. Jesus said a seed has to die to produce a harvest. What might God be asking you to let go of so that something better can grow?
3. Some leaders believed in Jesus but kept quiet because they loved human praise. Where are you tempted to do the same?

CHAPTER 13

The Towel and the Basin

John 13

The second half of John's Gospel slows way down. Chapters 13 through 17 all happen on one night, the night before Jesus dies. It's often called the Upper Room Discourse, His last long conversation with His closest friends.

John sets the scene with one of the most tender sentences in the Bible. Jesus knew the hour had come for Him to leave this world and go to the Father. "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end." To the end. All the way. Completely.

The evening meal is in progress. The devil has already prompted Judas to betray Jesus. And Jesus, knowing that the Father had put all things under His power, and that He had come from God and was returning to God, gets up from the meal.

Watch what He does with all that power. He takes off His outer clothing and wraps a towel around His waist. He pours water into a basin and begins to wash His disciples' feet, drying them with the towel.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Foot Washing**
>
> In a world of dusty roads and sandals, feet got filthy. When guests arrived for a meal, a host would provide water for them to wash their feet, or a servant would do it. Washing someone else's feet was considered one of the lowest

> tasks, often given to the lowest-ranking servant in the household. Some Jewish writings say a Jewish servant shouldn't even be required to do it. That evening, no servant was there, and none of the disciples volunteered.

He comes to Simon Peter, who is horrified. "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus says Peter doesn't understand now, but later he will. Peter says, You shall never wash my feet. Jesus answers that unless He washes him, Peter has no part with Him.

Peter swings to the other extreme. Then, Lord, not just my feet but my hands and my head as well! Jesus explains that someone who has had a bath only needs to wash their feet. You're clean, He tells them, though not every one of you. He knew who was going to betray Him. And He washed Judas's feet too.

When He finishes, He puts His clothes back on and returns to His place. Do you understand what I've done for you? You call Me Teacher and Lord, and rightly so, because that's what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I've set you an example. No servant is greater than his master. "Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them."

Knowing isn't the blessing. Doing is.

Then Jesus becomes troubled in spirit and says plainly, One of you is going to betray Me. The disciples stare at each other, completely confused. The disciple whom Jesus loved is reclining next to Him, and Peter motions to him to ask who it is. Jesus says it's the one He'll give a piece of bread to after dipping it in the dish. He dips the bread and gives it to Judas.

Offering someone a choice piece of food at a meal was a gesture of friendship and honor. Even then, Jesus was offering Judas love.

As soon as Judas takes the bread, Satan enters him. Jesus says, What you're about to do, do quickly. No one else at the table understands. Some think Judas is being sent to buy something for the festival or give something to the poor. Judas goes out. And John adds four chilling words: "And it was night."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Disciple Whom Jesus Loved**
>
> Five times in John's Gospel, a follower is called "the disciple whom Jesus loved." He reclines next to Jesus at the Last Supper, stands at the cross, runs to the empty tomb, and recognizes Jesus on the shore of the lake. The last chapter says this disciple is the one who wrote these things down. Early church tradition identifies him as John, the son of Zebedee. He never names himself. He identifies himself by one thing: he was loved by Jesus.

After Judas leaves, Jesus talks about being glorified, and tells His friends He'll only be with them a little longer. Then He gives them something new. "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another." By this everyone will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another.

The command to love wasn't new. It was in the law of Moses. What's new is the standard: as I have loved you. Like the One who just washed your feet. Like the One who's about to die for you. And the world will recognize Jesus' followers by that kind of love, not by their arguments, their rules, or their T-shirts.

Peter asks where He's going. Jesus says Peter can't follow now, but will later. Peter insists: Lord, why can't I follow You now? I will lay down my life for You. Jesus answers, Will you really lay down your life for Me? Before the rooster crows, you will disown Me three times.

KEY VERSE

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.

John 13:34 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Jesus knew He had all power, and He used it to wash feet. What does that tell you about what real power looks like?
2. Jesus washed Judas's feet, knowing what Judas would do. Who would be hardest for you to serve like that?
3. Jesus said people would know His followers by their love. If someone looked at your life this week, what would they conclude?

TRY THIS *Do one humble, behind-the-scenes act of service for someone in your family this week, without being asked and without telling anyone.*

CHAPTER 14

The Way

John 14

The disciples are reeling. Judas has left, Jesus has said He's going away, and Peter has just been told he'll deny Him. Into that fear, Jesus says, "Do not let your hearts be troubled." You believe in God; believe also in Me.

Then He gives them a promise. His Father's house has many rooms. He's going there to prepare a place for them. And if He goes, He'll come back and take them to be with Him, so that they can be where He is.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **My Father's House**
>
> In Jesus' time, when a son got married, he often added a room onto his father's house for his new family. Large families lived in clusters of rooms around a shared courtyard. When Jesus talks about rooms in His Father's house, He's describing belonging, not a hotel. It's a picture of family, with a place prepared especially for you, and with Jesus Himself there.

Jesus says, You know the way to the place where I'm going. Thomas, honest as always, says what everyone is thinking: Lord, we don't know where You're going, so how can we know the way?

And Jesus answers with the sixth "I am" statement: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

That's one of the most controversial sentences Jesus ever said. In a world that values every path equally, it sounds narrow. But notice what Jesus is claiming. He doesn't say He'll show you a way. He says He is the way. He doesn't say He teaches truth. He is the truth. He doesn't say He'll give you some tips on life. He is the life. If Jesus is who He said He was in this Gospel, the Word who was God, then of course He's the way to God. If He's not, then nothing He said matters.

Philip asks next: Lord, show us the Father, and that will be enough for us. Jesus' answer is almost sad. Don't you know Me, Philip, even after I've been among you such a long time? "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father."

If you've ever wondered what God is like, here's the answer. He's like Jesus. Kind to outsiders. Fierce against hypocrisy. Weeping at a friend's tomb. Kneeling with a towel.

Then Jesus makes some surprising promises. Whoever believes in Him will do the works He has been doing, and even greater things, because He's going to the Father. And He'll do whatever they ask in His name, so that the Father may be glorified. Asking in His name doesn't mean tacking "in Jesus' name" onto the end of a prayer like a password. It means asking for what Jesus Himself would want.

Then the biggest promise of the night. If you love Me, keep My commands. And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever, the Spirit of truth. The world can't accept Him because it neither sees Him nor knows Him. But you know Him, for He lives with you and will be in you.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Advocate**

The Greek word Jesus uses for the Holy Spirit is parakletos. It's hard to translate with a single English word. It describes someone called to stand beside you: a helper, a counselor, a comforter, or a defense attorney. The NIV usually uses "Advocate." When Jesus calls the Spirit "another advocate," He means another one like Himself. The Spirit will do for the disciples what Jesus has been doing, and more, because He will live inside them.

"I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you." The disciples were afraid of being abandoned. Jesus promises they won't be.

Then He links love and obedience again. Whoever has His commands and keeps them is the one who loves Him. Love for Jesus isn't just a feeling. It shows up in what you do. And the Father and Son will come and make their home with anyone who loves Jesus and obeys Him. Remember the many rooms in the Father's house? Now Jesus says God will make His home in you.

The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in Jesus' name, will teach them all things and remind them of everything Jesus said. That's one reason we can trust the Gospels. Jesus promised that the Spirit would help His followers remember.

Then He gives them a gift. "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you." Not the kind of peace the world gives, which depends on everything going well. His peace holds even when everything is falling apart. He's about to be arrested, beaten, and crucified, and He's giving away peace.

The chapter ends with Jesus saying, "Come now; let us leave." The prince of this world is coming, but he has no hold over Jesus. Jesus will go to the cross not because He is trapped, but because He loves the Father and does exactly what the Father commanded.

KEY VERSE

Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life.
No one comes to the Father except through me."

John 14:6 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Thomas and Philip both asked honest questions. What honest question would you ask Jesus if you'd been at that table?
2. Jesus said, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father." How does that change the way you picture God?
3. Jesus promised peace that's different from the world's peace. What's the difference? When do you need that kind of peace?

CHAPTER 15

The Vine

John 15

Jesus and His disciples may be walking through the dark streets or still in the upper room. Either way, He gives them one more picture, the seventh "I am" statement: "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener."

Every branch in Him that doesn't bear fruit, the Father cuts off. Every branch that does bear fruit, He prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Vineyards**
>
> Grapevines were everywhere in Israel, and the vine was a symbol of the nation itself. Psalm 80 and Isaiah 5 picture Israel as a vine God planted, which too often produced bad fruit. The historian Josephus says a huge golden vine decorated the entrance to the temple sanctuary. Vinedressers pruned vines heavily, cutting away dead wood and trimming healthy branches so the plant's energy would go into producing grapes instead of leaves. A vine left unpruned grows wild and produces little fruit.

Pruning sounds painful, and it is. Sometimes God cuts things out of your life, not because He's punishing you, but because He wants you to grow. A gardener only prunes the branches he has hope for.

Then Jesus repeats one word over and over: remain. Remain in Me, as I also remain in you. A branch can't bear fruit by itself. It has to

remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in Me.

"I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."

Think about a branch for a minute. It doesn't strain to produce grapes. It doesn't grit its teeth and try harder. It just stays connected, and the life of the vine flows through it. The fruit is the natural result of the connection.

Nothing. That's a strong word. Apart from Jesus, you can stay busy. You can stay religious. But you can't produce the kind of fruit that lasts. A branch that's cut off from the vine withers and is thrown away.

How do you remain? Jesus explains: if you keep My commands, you will remain in My love. Stay close to Him. Listen to His words. Obey what He says. Talk to Him. It's a relationship, not a technique.

Then He tells them why He's saying all this: so that His joy may be in them and their joy may be complete. Jesus wants His followers to be joyful, not miserable.

He repeats the command from chapter 13: love each other as I have loved you. Then He shows them what that looks like. "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends." In a few hours, He'll do exactly that.

Then He says something that would have amazed them. "You are my friends if you do what I command." He no longer calls them servants, because a servant doesn't know his master's business. Instead, He calls them friends, because He's told them everything He learned from His Father.

The disciples might have thought they chose Jesus. He says, You didn't choose Me, but I chose you, and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.

Then the conversation turns darker. If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated Me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. But you don't belong to the world. I've chosen you out of the world, and that's why it hates you. Remember: a servant isn't greater than his master. If they persecuted Me, they'll persecute you too.

That isn't a call to go looking for a fight or to act self-righteous. It's a warning. If you follow Jesus, not everyone will like it. And when that happens, it doesn't mean something has gone wrong. Jesus said it would.

He ends by repeating His promise of the Advocate, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, who will testify about Jesus. And you also must testify, He tells them, because you've been with Me from the beginning.

KEY VERSE

I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

John 15:5 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What does it look like, practically, for you to "remain" in Jesus during a normal school week?
2. Has God ever "pruned" something out of your life? Looking back, what grew because of it?
3. Jesus calls His followers friends. How is being Jesus' friend different from being His servant?

TRY THIS *For one week, start each day by reading John 15:1–11 and asking Jesus to help you stay connected to Him all day. At night, notice where you felt connected and where you didn't.*

CHAPTER 16

The Helper Is Coming

John 16

Jesus is still talking with His disciples on the night before He dies, and He doesn't sugarcoat what's ahead. They'll be thrown out of synagogues. A time is coming when people who kill them will think they're serving God. He's telling them now, so that when it happens, they'll remember He warned them.

Then He says something that must have sounded impossible. "But very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away." Unless He goes away, the Advocate won't come to them. But if He goes, He'll send Him.

How could anything be better than having Jesus physically present? Here's the answer: in His earthly body, Jesus could only be in one place at a time. The Holy Spirit would live inside every believer, everywhere, all at once.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **The Holy Spirit in John**
>
> John's Gospel says more about the Holy Spirit than Matthew, Mark, or Luke. The Spirit gives new birth (chapter 3), is the living water (chapter 7), is the Advocate who will be with believers forever (chapter 14), testifies about Jesus (chapter 15), convicts the world and guides into truth (chapter 16), and is breathed on the disciples by the risen Jesus (chapter 20). In John, the Spirit is not a force or a feeling. He is a person who teaches, reminds, speaks, and guides.

When the Spirit comes, Jesus says, He will prove the world wrong about sin, righteousness, and judgment. He will show people their sin, show them what true righteousness is, and show that the prince of this world now stands condemned. And for the disciples, "when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth." He won't speak on His own; He'll take what belongs to Jesus and make it known to them.

Then Jesus says something cryptic: In a little while you will see Me no more, and then after a little while you will see Me. The disciples whisper to each other. What does He mean, "a little while"? We don't understand.

Jesus knows they want to ask, so He explains with a picture any family would understand. A woman giving birth has pain because her time has come. But when her baby is born, she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world. So with you, He says. Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy.

Within hours, the disciples would watch Jesus die. That would feel like the worst pain imaginable. Three days later, they'd see Him alive. The grief would turn into a joy no one could take away.

Then Jesus talks about prayer. Until now, they haven't asked for anything in His name. Ask and you will receive, He says, and your joy will be complete. The Father Himself loves you, because you have loved Me and have believed that I came from God.

The Father loves you. Not just tolerates you because Jesus asked Him to. He loves you.

Finally the disciples say, Now You're speaking clearly! Now we can see that You know all things. This makes us believe You came from

God. Jesus answers with a gentle reality check. Do you now believe? A time is coming, in fact it has come, when you'll be scattered, each to your own home. You'll leave Me all alone. Yet I am not alone, for My Father is with Me.

And then His final words of the conversation, a promise for every follower of Jesus in every hard season: "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

Notice what He doesn't say. He doesn't promise you won't have trouble. He promises the opposite. You will have trouble. But trouble doesn't get the last word. Jesus does.

KEY VERSE

I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.

John 16:33 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Jesus said it was better for His followers that He go away, so the Spirit could come. Why do you think that was better?
2. Jesus compared His followers' grief to the pain of childbirth that turns into joy. Have you ever had grief that later turned into something good?
3. Jesus promised trouble and peace in the same sentence. How can both be true at once?

CHAPTER 17

Jesus Prays for You

John 17

After all His teaching, Jesus looks toward heaven and prays. This is the longest prayer of Jesus recorded anywhere in the Bible. It's sometimes called His High Priestly Prayer, because He's standing between God and His people, praying for them like a priest.

He prays for three groups. First Himself, then His disciples, then everyone who would ever believe in Him. That last group includes you.

He begins, "Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you." He's about to go to the cross, and He calls it glory. Then He defines eternal life, and it might surprise you: "Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent."

Eternal life isn't mainly about living forever, though it includes that. It's about knowing God. Not knowing about Him. Knowing Him, the way you know a friend.

Jesus says He has finished the work the Father gave Him to do. Then He asks to be glorified with the glory He had with the Father before the world began. That's John 1 all over again. The Word was with God in the beginning.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Glory**

In the Old Testament, God's glory was the visible sign of His presence: the cloud and fire in the wilderness, the brightness that filled the tabernacle and the temple. The Hebrew word carries the idea of weight or importance. In John's Gospel, Jesus reveals God's glory through His signs. But the greatest display of God's glory, in John, isn't a miracle. It's the cross, where Jesus shows the full weight of God's love.

Then He prays for His disciples. He's given them the Father's word, and they've accepted it. They belong to the Father, and the Father gave them to Him. He's leaving the world, but they're staying in it. So He prays for their protection.

He doesn't pray that the Father would take them out of the world. "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one." Jesus doesn't want His followers to hide in a bubble. He wants them out there, but protected. They're not of the world, just as He isn't. But He's sending them into the world, just as the Father sent Him.

He also prays that they'll be sanctified, set apart for God, by the truth. "your word is truth."

Then He prays for you. Literally. "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message." Every person who has ever believed in Jesus through the testimony of the apostles is in this prayer. That's everyone who has believed in Him since. If you believe in Jesus, then the night before He died, Jesus prayed for you by name, in a sense, before you were born.

And what does He pray? That all of them may be one, just as the Father is in Him and He is in the Father. That they will be brought to complete unity, so that the world will know the Father sent Him and has loved them even as He loved Jesus.

Read that again. The Father loves believers as much as He loves Jesus.

And Jesus' greatest desire for His followers is unity. Not uniformity, everyone being the same, but oneness. Christians often fight with each other over all kinds of things. Jesus prayed that we'd be united, because our unity is one of the main ways the world will see that He's real.

He ends by asking that His followers will be with Him where He is, to see His glory. And He promises to keep making the Father known, so that the Father's love for Him may be in them, and that He Himself may be in them.

KEY VERSE

Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.

John 17:3 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Jesus defined eternal life as knowing God. How is knowing God different from knowing about God?
2. Jesus prayed that His followers would stay in the world but be protected from the evil one. What does that look like at your school?
3. Jesus prayed for unity among His followers. Where do you see Christians divided? What could you do to help?

TRY THIS *Read John 17:20–26 slowly. Every time it says "those who will believe" or "them," remember that it includes you. Then thank Jesus for praying for you.*

CHAPTER 18

What Is Truth?

John 18

After the prayer, Jesus and His disciples cross the Kidron Valley to an olive grove. Judas knows the place, because Jesus often met there with His disciples. Judas arrives leading a detachment of soldiers and officials from the chief priests and Pharisees. They come with torches, lanterns, and weapons. They come with lanterns to look for the light of the world.

Jesus, knowing everything that's going to happen to Him, goes out to meet them. He doesn't hide. He asks, "Who is it you want?" They say, "Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus answers, "I am he." In Greek, it's just "I am." And when He says it, they draw back and fall to the ground.

A crowd of armed men falls over at two words. John wants you to see who's really in control here. Jesus isn't being captured. He's surrendering.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Garden and the Kidron**

The Kidron Valley runs along the east side of Jerusalem, between the city and the Mount of Olives. The other Gospels name the garden Gethsemane, which means "oil press," where olives were crushed for oil. Centuries before, King David had crossed the Kidron fleeing from his son Absalom, betrayed by his trusted adviser. Now the Son of David crosses the same valley, about to be betrayed by a friend.

He asks again who they want. Again they say Jesus of Nazareth. Then Jesus says, I told you that I am he. If you're looking for Me, let these men go. Even at His arrest, He's protecting His friends.

Simon Peter has a sword. He draws it and cuts off the right ear of the high priest's servant. John tells us the servant's name: Malchus. Jesus says to Peter, Put your sword away! "Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?" Peter was ready to fight for Jesus. Jesus was ready to die for Peter.

They arrest Jesus, bind Him, and bring Him first to Annas, the father-in-law of Caiaphas the high priest. Annas had been high priest years before and still held a lot of power.

Meanwhile, Peter and another disciple follow. The other disciple knows the high priest, so he goes into the courtyard and gets Peter in too. The servant girl at the door asks Peter, "You aren't one of this man's disciples too, are you?" Peter says, "I am not."

Notice the contrast. Inside, Jesus is saying "I am." Outside, Peter is saying "I am not."

It's cold, and the servants and officials stand around a fire they've made. Peter stands with them, warming himself.

Inside, the high priest questions Jesus about His disciples and His teaching. Jesus says He's spoken openly to the world. He taught in synagogues and the temple, where everyone gathers. He said nothing in secret. Ask the people who heard Me. One of the officials slaps Him in the face: Is this how You answer the high priest? Jesus replies, If I said something wrong, testify as to what is wrong. But if I spoke the truth, why did you strike Me?

Annas sends Him, still bound, to Caiaphas. Back at the fire, someone asks Peter again, "You aren't one of his disciples too, are

you?" He denies it: "I am not." Then a relative of Malchus, the man whose ear Peter cut off, says, Didn't I see you with Him in the garden? Again Peter denies it, and at that moment a rooster begins to crow.

Early in the morning, they bring Jesus to the palace of the Roman governor. The leaders won't go inside, because entering a Gentile's house would make them ceremonially unclean, and they want to be able to eat the Passover. They're plotting a murder, and they're worried about being ceremonially clean.

So Pilate comes out to them. What charges are you bringing? They say if He weren't a criminal, they wouldn't have handed Him over. Pilate says, Take Him yourselves and judge Him by your own law. But they say they don't have the right to execute anyone. Rome reserved that power for itself.

Pilate goes back inside and summons Jesus. "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus asks whether that's Pilate's own idea or whether others told him. Pilate says, Am I a Jew? Your own people handed You over. What have You done?

Jesus answers, "My kingdom is not of this world." If it were, His servants would fight to keep Him from being arrested. But His kingdom is from another place. "You are a king, then!" says Pilate. Jesus says the reason He was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to Him.

Pilate says, "What is truth?" And he walks out.

It's one of the saddest moments in the Bible. Pilate asks the most important question there is, while standing face to face with the one who said, "I am the way and the truth and the life." And he doesn't wait for an answer.

Pilate goes back out and tells the crowd he finds no basis for a charge against Jesus. He offers to release Him, since it's the custom to release one prisoner at Passover. They shout back, No, not Him! Give us Barabbas! John adds a short note: Barabbas had taken part in an uprising.

KEY VERSE

"You are a king, then!" said Pilate. Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."

John 18:37 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The soldiers fell back when Jesus said "I am he." Why do you think John included that detail?
2. Peter denied Jesus to a servant girl and a few people around a fire. Why is it sometimes hardest to stand up for Jesus in small, ordinary moments?
3. Pilate asked "What is truth?" and didn't wait for an answer. Do you ever ask big questions without really wanting an answer?

CHAPTER 19

It Is Finished

John 19

Pilate has Jesus flogged. The soldiers twist together a crown of thorns and put it on His head. They clothe Him in a purple robe, the color of royalty. They keep coming up to Him, saying, "Hail, king of the Jews!" And they slap Him in the face.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Flogging**
>
> Roman flogging was brutal. The victim was stripped and beaten with a whip made of leather straps that often had pieces of bone or metal tied into them. It tore the skin and could cause severe blood loss. Some prisoners died from flogging alone. It was often done before crucifixion to weaken the victim. Pilate may have hoped that seeing Jesus beaten would satisfy the crowd.

Pilate brings Jesus out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe, and says, "Here is the man!" He's probably hoping the crowd will see how pitiful Jesus looks and back off. Instead, the chief priests and officials shout, "Crucify! Crucify!" Pilate says, You take Him and crucify Him. As for me, I find no basis for a charge against Him.

They insist that by their law He must die, because He claimed to be the Son of God. When Pilate hears this, he's even more afraid. He goes back inside and asks Jesus, "Where do you come from?" Jesus gives no answer.

Pilate is frustrated. Don't You realize I have power either to free You or to crucify You? Jesus answers that Pilate would have no power over Him if it weren't given to him from above. Pilate, the most powerful man in Judea, is reminded that his power is borrowed.

From then on, Pilate tries to set Jesus free. But the leaders play their trump card: If you let this man go, you're no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar. That's a political threat. If word got back to Rome that Pilate had released a rival king, his career could be over.

Pilate brings Jesus out and sits on the judge's seat. John notes the time: it was the day of Preparation of the Passover, about noon. That's around the time the Passover lambs were being slaughtered in the temple. Remember what John the Baptist said in chapter 1: Look, the Lamb of God.

"Here is your king," Pilate says. They shout, Take Him away! Crucify Him! Pilate asks, Shall I crucify your king? And the chief priests answer, "We have no king but Caesar." For people who had waited centuries for God's King, that's a stunning thing to say.

Finally Pilate hands Him over to be crucified.

Carrying His own cross, Jesus goes out to the place called the Skull, which in Aramaic is Golgotha. There they crucify Him, with two others, one on each side and Jesus in the middle.

Pilate has a notice fastened to the cross: JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS. It's written in Aramaic, Latin, and Greek, so everyone can read it. The chief priests protest: Don't write "The King of the Jews," but that this man claimed to be king. Pilate answers, "What I have written, I have written." Without meaning to, Pilate announces the truth to the whole world in three languages.

The soldiers divide His clothes into four shares. His undergarment is seamless, woven in one piece, so they decide not to tear it but to cast lots for it. John notes that this fulfilled Psalm 22.

Near the cross stand Jesus' mother, her sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. Jesus sees His mother there, and the disciple whom He loved standing nearby. He says to her, "Woman, here is your son," and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, the disciple takes her into his home. Even dying, Jesus takes care of His mom.

Later, knowing everything has now been finished, Jesus says, "I am thirsty." The one who offered living water to a Samaritan woman is now thirsty Himself. They lift a sponge soaked in wine vinegar to His lips on a stalk of hyssop. That's the same plant used to put the blood of the Passover lamb on the doorposts in Egypt.

When He has received the drink, Jesus says, "It is finished." With that, He bows His head and gives up His spirit.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **"It Is Finished"**
>
> The Greek phrase behind "It is finished" is a single word: tetelestai. It was a common word used for completing a task or fulfilling an obligation. Ancient documents show related forms of the word written on receipts and records when a debt was settled. Jesus didn't say, "I am finished," as if He'd been defeated. He said, "It is finished." The work the Father gave Him to do was complete. The debt was paid in full.

Because it's the day of Preparation, and the next day is a special Sabbath, the leaders don't want bodies left on crosses. They ask Pilate to have the legs broken to speed up death. The soldiers break the legs of the two men crucified with Jesus. But when they come to Jesus, they find He's already dead, so they don't break His legs.

Instead, a soldier pierces His side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water.

John stops the story to make sure you know he's not making this up. The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe. John was there.

John points out that these things fulfilled Scripture. The law said none of the Passover lamb's bones were to be broken. And the prophet Zechariah spoke of people looking on the one they had pierced.

Then two secret followers come out of hiding. Joseph of Arimathea, a disciple of Jesus who had kept quiet because he feared the Jewish leaders, asks Pilate for the body. And Nicodemus, the man who first came to Jesus at night, brings about seventy-five pounds of myrrh and aloes, enough to bury a king. They wrap Jesus' body with the spices in strips of linen and lay Him in a new tomb in a garden near the place of crucifixion.

Nicodemus came to Jesus in the dark in chapter 3. Now, at the darkest moment, when everyone else has run, he steps into the light.

KEY VERSE

When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished."
With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

John 19:30 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Pilate knew Jesus was innocent but gave in because of pressure. Where do you feel pressure to go along with something you know is wrong?
2. Jesus said, "It is finished." What does it mean to you that Jesus completed the work of salvation, and you don't have to add to it?
3. Joseph and Nicodemus finally went public about their faith when it was most dangerous. What would it take for you to go public with yours?

CHAPTER 20

My Lord and My God

John 20

Early on the first day of the week, while it's still dark, Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb. She sees that the stone has been removed from the entrance. She runs to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and says, They've taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they've put Him!

Peter and the other disciple start running. The other disciple outruns Peter and gets there first. (John seems to enjoy telling you that he won the race.) He bends over and looks in at the strips of linen lying there but doesn't go in. Then Peter arrives and goes straight inside. He sees the linen strips lying there, and the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head, folded up by itself, separate from the linen.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **The Grave Clothes**
>
> If grave robbers had stolen Jesus' body, they wouldn't have unwrapped it first. Linen strips soaked in seventy-five pounds of spices would have stuck to the body, and removing them would take time. Thieves would have grabbed the body and run. The orderly grave clothes, with the head cloth folded separately, suggested that something very different had happened. When the other disciple saw them, John says, he believed.

Then the other disciple goes in too. “He saw and believed.” They still didn’t understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead. But the evidence was right there. The disciples go back home.

Mary stays. She stands outside the tomb crying. As she weeps, she bends over to look into the tomb and sees two angels in white, seated where Jesus’ body had been, one at the head and one at the foot. They ask her, “Woman, why are you crying?” She says, They’ve taken my Lord away, and I don’t know where they’ve put Him.

She turns around and sees Jesus standing there, but she doesn’t realize it’s Him. He asks her the same question: Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you’re looking for? She thinks He’s the gardener. Sir, if you’ve carried Him away, tell me where, and I’ll get Him.

Then Jesus says one word. “Mary.”

She turns toward Him and cries out in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” which means Teacher. Remember what Jesus said in chapter 10? The good shepherd calls His own sheep by name, and they know His voice. He said her name, and she knew.

Jesus tells her not to hold on to Him, because He hasn’t yet returned to the Father. Go to My brothers, He says, and tell them I’m returning to My Father and your Father, to My God and your God. Mary Magdalene goes to the disciples with the news: “I have seen the Lord!”

The first person to see the risen Jesus, in John’s Gospel, is a woman who had once been possessed by seven demons. The first witness of the resurrection was someone the world would have dismissed.

That evening, the disciples are together with the doors locked, afraid of the Jewish leaders. Jesus comes and stands among them

and says, “Peace be with you!” He shows them His hands and side. The disciples are overjoyed.

Again He says, Peace be with you! As the Father has sent Me, I am sending you. Then He breathes on them and says, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” In Genesis, God breathed life into the first human. Now Jesus breathes new life into His followers.

But Thomas wasn’t there. When the others tell him, “We have seen the Lord!” he refuses to believe it. Unless I see the nail marks in His hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe.

People call him Doubting Thomas. But think about it. He wasn’t asking for anything the other disciples hadn’t already gotten. They had seen Jesus’ hands and side. He wanted the same evidence.

A week later, the disciples are in the house again, and Thomas is with them. The doors are locked. Jesus comes and stands among them and says, Peace be with you! Then He goes straight to Thomas. Put your finger here; see My hands. Reach out your hand and put it into My side. Stop doubting and believe.

Jesus doesn’t scold him. He offers him exactly what he asked for.

And Thomas, the doubter, makes the greatest confession in the whole Gospel of John: “My Lord and my God!”

John started his Gospel by saying the Word was God. Now one of Jesus’ own disciples looks at Him and calls Him God. The book has come full circle.

Then Jesus says something to Thomas that’s really for us. “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” That’s you. You weren’t in that

room. You haven't touched His hands. Jesus calls you blessed if you believe anyway.

Then John tells us exactly why he wrote his book. Jesus did many other signs that aren't recorded here. "But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

KEY VERSE

Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

John 20:29 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Mary recognized Jesus when He said her name. What does it mean to you that Jesus knows your name?
2. Jesus didn't scold Thomas for his doubts. He gave him evidence. How should you handle your own doubts?
3. John wrote his book "that you may believe." After reading it, what do you believe about Jesus?

CHAPTER 21

Do You Love Me?

John 21

John's Gospel could have ended with chapter 20. It sounds like an ending. But there's one more story, and it's for anyone who has ever failed Jesus.

Some time later, seven of the disciples are back in Galilee, by the Sea of Galilee, which John calls the Sea of Tiberias. Peter says, "I'm going out to fish." The others say they'll go too. They fish all night and catch nothing.

Maybe Peter was just hungry. Maybe he was bored. Or maybe, after denying Jesus three times, he figured his days as a disciple were over, and he was going back to the only thing he knew.

Early in the morning, Jesus stands on the shore, but the disciples don't realize it's Him. He calls out, Friends, haven't you any fish? No, they answer. Throw your net on the right side of the boat, He says, and you'll find some. They do, and they can't haul the net in because there are so many fish.

The disciple whom Jesus loved says to Peter, "It is the Lord!" And Peter, being Peter, wraps his outer garment around him and jumps into the water. The others follow in the boat, towing the net full of fish. They're only about a hundred yards from shore.

When they land, they see a fire of burning coals with fish on it and some bread. Jesus has made them breakfast.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Charcoal Fires**
>
> John uses a specific Greek word for "a fire of burning coals" only twice in his Gospel. The first time is in the high priest's courtyard in chapter 18, where Peter stood warming himself when he denied Jesus three times. The second time is here, on the beach. Peter is standing by a charcoal fire again. This time, Jesus is the one who lit it.

Jesus tells them to bring some of the fish they just caught. Peter climbs back into the boat and drags the net ashore. It's full of large fish, 153 of them. (Someone counted.) Even with so many, the net isn't torn. Jesus says, "Come and have breakfast." None of the disciples dare ask Him who He is. They know it's the Lord. Jesus takes the bread and gives it to them, and does the same with the fish.

The risen Lord of the universe cooks breakfast for His tired, confused friends. That's what Jesus is like.

When they finish eating, Jesus turns to Peter. "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He doesn't call him Peter, "the rock." He uses his old name. Maybe "more than these" means more than the other disciples love Me. Peter had once claimed he'd never fall away even if everyone else did. Or maybe it means more than these boats and nets and fish, your old life.

Peter says, Yes, Lord, You know that I love You. Jesus says, "Feed my lambs."

Jesus asks a second time: Simon son of John, do you love Me? Peter answers again, Yes, Lord, You know that I love You. Jesus says, Take care of My sheep.

Then a third time. Simon son of John, do you love Me? "Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time." And Peter says, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." Jesus says, "Feed my sheep."

Three denials by a charcoal fire. Three questions by a charcoal fire. Jesus isn't rubbing it in. He's giving Peter a chance to undo every denial with a declaration of love. And each time, Jesus gives him a job. Peter thought he was disqualified. Jesus put him back to work.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Did Peter Follow Through?**
>
> Peter became one of the main leaders of the early church. In the book of Acts, he preaches to thousands in Jerusalem, is arrested and beaten for his faith, and opens the door for Gentiles to follow Jesus. Early Christian writers say that decades later, in Rome, Peter was crucified for his faith. The man who once denied knowing Jesus to a servant girl ended up giving his life for Him.

Then Jesus tells Peter that when he's old, someone else will dress him and lead him where he doesn't want to go. John explains that Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then Jesus says to him, "Follow me!"

Those are the same two words Jesus used when He first called His disciples. It's a fresh start.

Peter turns and sees the disciple whom Jesus loved following them, and asks, "Lord, what about him?" Jesus answers, more or less: That's not your concern. "You must follow me."

That's a good word for anyone who gets distracted comparing their story to someone else's. Jesus has a plan for your friend. He has a plan for you. Your job is to follow Him.

The book closes with John's signature. This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down. We know his

testimony is true. And Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, John says, he supposes that even the whole world wouldn't have room for the books that would be written.

That's a good place to end. This book is done. The story of what Jesus does isn't.

KEY VERSE

He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my sheep."

John 21:17 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Peter went back to fishing after his failure. Where do you go when you feel like you've let God down?
2. Jesus asked Peter three times, "Do you love me?" If Jesus asked you that question today, what would you say?
3. Peter asked, "What about him?" and Jesus said, "You must follow me." When are you tempted to compare your path to someone else's?

TRY THIS *Think of a time you failed. Write a short prayer telling Jesus about it, and then write down what you think He'd say back, based on how He treated Peter.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Now What? The Bottom Line

You've just walked through the whole Gospel of John. You've seen water become wine, a man born blind see for the first time, and a dead man walk out of his tomb. You've heard Jesus say "I am" again and again, watched Him wash His friends' feet, heard Him pray for you, and stood near the cross when He said, "It is finished." Now John asks you the question his whole book has been building toward. Do you believe?

Here's what the Bible says, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He loves you.

You weren't an accident. Everything that exists was made through the Word, and that includes you. God created you to know Him and to live in His light. And the most famous verse in the Bible says that God loved the world so much that He gave His one and only Son.

2 We've all chosen the dark.

John says the light came into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light. We hide from God, like Nicodemus coming at night, or like the woman at the well who changed the subject. The Bible calls it sin, and it separates us from God.

> *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,* **Romans 3:23 (NIV)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. The Bible says the result of sin is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (NIV)**

4 Jesus paid it.

John the Baptist pointed at Jesus and called Him "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" On the cross, Jesus, the only person who ever lived a perfect life, took our place. When He said, "It is finished," He meant the debt was paid in full. Then He rose from the dead, proving that His payment was accepted and death was beaten.

> *But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.* **Romans 5:8 (NIV)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

Over and over in John, the way to eternal life is to believe in Jesus. Not to work harder or to clean yourself up first. To trust Him. The woman at the well had nothing to offer, and Jesus offered her living water. Salvation is a gift you receive.

> *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.* **Ephesians 2:8–9 (NIV)**

6 Believing means following.

In John, believing isn't just agreeing with facts. It means trusting Jesus with your whole life, the way a branch depends on a vine. It doesn't mean you'll never fail again. Peter denied Jesus three times, and Jesus still met him on the beach and told him to feed His sheep. It means you belong to Him now.

> *If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* **Romans 10:9 (NIV)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. Thomas only used five. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

God, I've been living in the dark, running my own life, and I've sinned against You. I can't fix that myself. I believe Jesus is the Word who became flesh, the Lamb of God who died for my sin, and that You raised Him from the dead. I'm turning to You. Forgive me. I believe in Jesus. I trust Him as my Savior, and I want to follow Him as my Lord and my God. Fill me with Your Holy Spirit and help me stay connected to Jesus every day. In Jesus' name, amen.

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. The woman at the well ran straight back to town and told everyone. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read John straight through in a Bible, a chapter a day. It takes three weeks. Then read the short letters John wrote later: 1, 2, and 3 John.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Ask about being baptized. Jesus said His followers would be known by their love for one another, and that happens in a community.

Talk to God every day. Jesus prayed for His followers in John 17, and that includes you. Talk back. Be honest. He can handle it.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Thomas wasn't ready either. He said he wouldn't believe unless he saw the evidence for himself, and Jesus met him right where he was. Keep asking. Keep reading. Talk to someone you trust. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because John wrote his book for one reason: so that you may believe, and by believing have life. Don't close it without deciding what you think.

But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

John 20:31 (NIV)

THE BOOK OF ACTS

The King's Unstoppable Crew

Acts, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

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All Scripture quotations in this book are from the NIV. Some are abridged, with omissions marked by ellipses; paraphrases are not placed in quotation marks.

Pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence in the author's own words. Inside Scripture quotations, capitalization and wording follow the 2011 NIV exactly.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

If you've read the Gospel books in this series, you know the saying by now: "If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all." It's been in every book. It's not leaving now.

And honestly, Acts might be the best fit for it yet. The Gospels are about what Jesus did. Acts is about what Jesus' followers did next, and a lot of them were young, untrained, and not very impressive by the world's standards. Fishermen. A former tax collector. A teenager who fell asleep during a sermon and fell out of a window. People who knew they didn't know it all, but who knew Jesus, and who had the Holy Spirit. That turned out to be enough to change the world.

Acts was written by Luke, the same careful researcher who wrote the Gospel of Luke. He even addresses it to the same person, Theophilus. Luke's Gospel ends with Jesus going up to heaven. Acts begins there and keeps going. In fact, Luke says his first book was about what Jesus "began to do and to teach." Acts is what Jesus keeps doing, now through His people and by His Spirit.

The story moves fast and covers about thirty years. It starts with about 120 believers in an upstairs room in Jerusalem and ends with Paul, under house arrest in Rome, the capital of the world, still telling anyone who would listen about Jesus. In between there are riots, shipwrecks, prison breaks, a sorcerer, a snakebite, a church meeting that changed history, and one very long sermon.

The book follows a simple map that Jesus gives in the first chapter: Jerusalem, then Judea and Samaria, then the ends of the earth. Peter is the main character in the first half. Paul, a man who once hunted Christians, takes over in the second half. Luke is there for some of it; you'll notice when the story suddenly switches to "we."

So here's the challenge. Acts isn't a museum. It's an unfinished story. It doesn't really have an ending, and that's on purpose. The same Spirit who filled those first believers is still at work, and the story is still being written. As you read, ask yourself where you fit in it.

How This Book Works

This book walks through all 28 chapters of Acts, in order, one chapter of this book for each chapter of Acts. Each one tells what happened, adds background about the world the first Christians lived in (Roman roads and cities, synagogues and temples, Jewish and Greek culture, Roman law and prisons), and points out what Luke wants you to notice.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the New International Version (NIV), the same translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (pronouns for God are capitalized in the author's own words out of reverence; inside Scripture quotations, capitalization follows the NIV exactly); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and sometimes a Try This challenge.

One more thing: this book is a guide, not a replacement. Keep a Bible open next to it and read each chapter of Acts for yourself. The people in Berea checked the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul

said was true. Do the same with me. Don’t take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. Like the earlier books in this series, on Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, it's written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

This book follows the whole book of Acts, all 28 chapters, in order. I have worked to stay faithful to the text: no invented events, no rewritten dialogue that changes the meaning. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the New International Version (NIV); elsewhere I paraphrase and explain. Historical background is included where it helps the story make sense, and I've tried to stay with what's well established rather than speculation.

Acts is especially good for this age group because it shows ordinary people, many of them young, living out their faith in public, under pressure, and often at great cost. I've emphasized the work of the Holy Spirit, the courage of the first believers, the way the good news crossed every barrier of race, culture, and class, and the honest picture Acts gives of a church that sometimes argued and failed. The hard parts are here too, including the deaths of Stephen and James, told truthfully but without graphic excess.

Where the NIV notes that some verses are missing from the earliest manuscripts (Acts 8:37, 15:34, 24:7, and 28:29), I've said so briefly, so that students aren't surprised when they see those notes in their own Bibles.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will see that the story of Acts isn't over, and that the same Spirit who turned frightened fishermen into bold witnesses wants to do the same in them.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

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CHAPTER 1

Wait for It

Acts 1

Luke starts his second book the way he started his first: with a note to Theophilus. In my former book, he says, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach. Notice the word "began." The Gospel was only the beginning. Acts is the sequel, and Jesus is still the main character. He's just working through His people now.

After His resurrection, Jesus appeared to His followers over a period of forty days and gave them many convincing proofs that He was alive. He talked with them about the kingdom of God. Then He gave them a strange instruction: don't leave Jerusalem. Wait for the gift the Father promised. John baptized with water, but in a few days you'll be baptized with the Holy Spirit.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Luke's Second Volume**
>
> Acts was written by Luke, the doctor and careful researcher who wrote the Gospel of Luke. Together the two books make up more than a quarter of the New Testament. Acts covers roughly AD 30 to the early 60s, from Jesus' ascension to Paul's imprisonment in Rome. Luke traveled with Paul for parts of the story, which is why some sections suddenly switch from "they" to "we." For the parts he didn't see, Luke had access to people who did, including Paul, Philip, and James the brother of Jesus.

The disciples still have one question on their minds. Lord, are You at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel? They're still

hoping for a political revolution. Jesus says it's not for them to know the times or dates the Father has set. Then He gives them their mission, and it's the outline for the whole book: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Jerusalem is home. Judea is the region around it. Samaria is the neighbor nobody liked. The ends of the earth is everyone else. Watch the story move outward in exactly that order.

After He said this, Jesus was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid Him from their sight. They're standing there staring at the sky when two men dressed in white appear beside them. "Men of Galilee… why do you stand here looking into the sky?" This same Jesus will come back the same way you saw Him go.

That's a good question for Christians in any century. Jesus is coming back, but that's not a reason to stand around staring at the sky. There's work to do.

They go back to Jerusalem, to the upstairs room where they were staying. Luke lists the eleven apostles by name. Along with them are the women, Mary the mother of Jesus, and His brothers, the same brothers who didn't believe in Him back in John 7. Something changed their minds. The resurrection will do that.

"They all joined together constantly in prayer." That's what they did while they waited. They didn't plan a strategy or build a brand. They prayed.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Waiting**
>
> Waiting is hard, especially when you've been given a huge mission. The disciples had just been told to reach the whole world, and their first

> instruction was to sit still for ten days. In Acts, prayer comes before almost every major move of God. The disciples had learned that from Jesus, who in Luke's Gospel prayed before every big moment of His life.

In those days, about 120 believers are gathered, and Peter stands up to speak. The group needs to replace Judas. Peter tells them what happened to Judas: he bought a field with the money he got for betraying Jesus, and there he died a gruesome death. The field became known as the Field of Blood. Peter quotes the Psalms: let someone else take his place of leadership.

The replacement has to be someone who was with them the whole time, from John's baptism until the ascension, so he can be a witness to the resurrection. They propose two men, Joseph called Barsabbas and Matthias. They pray, asking the Lord, who knows everyone's heart, to show them His choice. Then they cast lots, and the lot falls to Matthias.

Casting lots sounds like flipping a coin, but it was a practice used in the Old Testament to seek God's decision. Interestingly, this is the last time the Bible mentions believers making a decision this way. After the Holy Spirit comes in the next chapter, they're guided in a different way.

We never hear about Matthias again. Or Joseph Barsabbas, who wasn't chosen. Being faithful doesn't always mean being famous.

KEY VERSE

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Acts 1:8 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Jesus gave His followers a mission and then told them to wait. Why do you think waiting and praying came first?
2. The angels asked why they were standing there looking at the sky. What's the difference between hoping for Jesus' return and just waiting around?
3. Using Jesus' map, what's your "Jerusalem," your "Judea," your "Samaria," and your "ends of the earth"?

CHAPTER 2

Wind and Fire

Acts 2

When the day of Pentecost arrives, all the believers are together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind comes from heaven and fills the whole house. They see what seem to be tongues of fire that separate and rest on each of them. All of them are filled with the Holy Spirit and begin to speak in other languages as the Spirit enables them.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Pentecost**
>
> Pentecost, also called the Festival of Weeks, came fifty days after Passover. It was a harvest festival, and by Jesus' time many Jews also connected it with God giving the law at Mount Sinai. Jewish pilgrims came to Jerusalem from all over the Roman world and beyond. That's why the city was packed with people who spoke different languages. Jesus died at Passover; the Spirit came at Pentecost. The first harvest of believers came in on a harvest festival.

Jerusalem is full of devout Jews from every nation under heaven. When they hear the sound, a crowd gathers, and they're bewildered, because each one hears the believers speaking in his own native language. Aren't all these men Galileans? How is it that each of us hears them in our own language? Luke lists the places they're from, from Persia to Rome to North Africa. It's like a roll call of the known world.

Remember the Tower of Babel in Genesis, where God scattered people by confusing their languages? Pentecost is like Babel in reverse. God uses many languages to bring people together around Jesus.

Some are amazed and ask, What does this mean? Others laugh it off: They've had too much wine.

Then Peter stands up with the Eleven and raises his voice. Remember, this is the same Peter who, less than two months earlier, denied knowing Jesus to a servant girl. Now he's preaching to thousands. These people aren't drunk, he says. It's only nine in the morning. This is what the prophet Joel predicted: God would pour out His Spirit on all people. Sons and daughters would prophesy. Young men would see visions. Old men would dream dreams. Even servants, both men and women. "And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

Then Peter preaches Jesus. Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God with miracles and signs. He was handed over by God's deliberate plan, and you, with the help of wicked men, put Him to death by nailing Him to the cross. "But God raised him from the dead." Death couldn't keep its hold on Him.

Peter quotes David in the Psalms, and points out that David died and was buried, and his tomb is right here in Jerusalem. David was talking about the Messiah. God has raised this Jesus to life, "and we are all witnesses of it." Exalted to the right hand of God, He has poured out what you now see and hear. "God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah."

The crowd is cut to the heart. They ask Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"

Peter tells them: Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you, your children, and all who are far off, everyone the Lord our God will call.

About three thousand people accept the message and are baptized that day.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Three Thousand**
>
> Some people have wondered where you could baptize three thousand people in Jerusalem in one day. Archaeologists have found dozens of Jewish ritual immersion pools, called mikvaot, near the temple's southern steps, where worshipers washed before entering. There was plenty of water nearby. Some scholars also note a sad contrast: in Exodus 32, about three thousand people died after the golden calf incident at Sinai. At Pentecost, three thousand people received new life.

Then Luke gives us a snapshot of the first church. "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." Everyone is filled with awe at the signs the apostles perform. The believers share everything. They sell property and possessions to give to anyone in need. Every day they meet together in the temple courts and break bread in their homes, eating together with glad and sincere hearts. And the Lord adds to their number daily those who are being saved.

It's not a perfect church. You'll see that soon. But it's a picture of what happens when the Spirit moves: people learn, eat together, pray together, take care of each other, and others keep wanting to join.

KEY VERSE

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

Acts 2:42 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Peter went from denying Jesus to preaching to thousands. What made the difference?
2. Joel said God's Spirit would be poured out on sons and daughters, young and old. What does that mean for teenagers?
3. Look at the four things the first church devoted itself to. Which one is strongest in your life? Which one is weakest?

CHAPTER 3

Silver or Gold

Acts 3

One afternoon at about three o'clock, the time of prayer, Peter and John are going up to the temple. A man who has been lame from birth is being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he's put every day to beg from people going into the temple courts.

He's more than forty years old, Luke tells us later. Every day of his life, someone carried him to the same spot, and he asked strangers for spare change. He's probably been there when Jesus walked through those same gates.

When he sees Peter and John about to enter, he asks them for money. Peter looks straight at him, as does John. Then Peter says, "Look at us!" The man gives them his attention, expecting a few coins.

Then Peter says, "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk." Taking him by the right hand, Peter helps him up, and instantly the man's feet and ankles become strong.

Luke the doctor notices the feet and ankles. And then the man doesn't just walk. He jumps to his feet and goes into the temple courts with them, walking and jumping and praising God.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Temple Courts**

The temple in Jerusalem sat on a huge platform surrounded by courtyards. The outermost was the Court of the Gentiles, open to everyone. Further in were the Court of Women and the Court of Israel, open only to Jewish worshipers. People with certain disabilities were often kept from fully participating in temple worship. Solomon's Colonnade, where the crowd gathers in this chapter, was a long covered porch on the east side of the temple courts.

For the first time in his life, the man goes inside the temple. He couldn't walk in before. Now he's dancing in.

All the people see him and recognize him as the man who used to sit begging at the gate. They're filled with wonder and come running to Solomon's Colonnade.

Peter sees the crowd and uses the moment. Why does this surprise you? Why stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we made this man walk? It's God who did it. He has glorified His servant Jesus. Then Peter is blunt. You handed Him over to be killed. You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked for a murderer to be released to you. "You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead." We're witnesses of this.

It's faith in Jesus' name that has completely healed this man, as you can all see.

Then Peter's tone softens. I know you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders. But this is how God fulfilled what the prophets said, that the Messiah would suffer. "Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord."

Wiped out. Like erasing a whiteboard. And "times of refreshing." Repentance isn't only about feeling bad. It's about being refreshed.

Peter ends by reminding them who they are. You are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with Abraham, when He said that all peoples on earth would be blessed through his offspring. When God raised up His servant, He sent Him first to you to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways.

KEY VERSE

Then Peter said, "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk."

Acts 3:6 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The man expected money and got something much better. When have you asked God for something small when He wanted to give you something bigger?
2. Peter said, "What I do have I give you." What do you have, besides money, that you could give someone this week?
3. Peter described repentance as sins being wiped out and times of refreshing. How does that change the way you think about turning to God?

CHAPTER 4

No Other Name

Acts 4

While Peter and John are still speaking to the crowd, the priests, the captain of the temple guard, and the Sadducees come up to them. They're greatly disturbed, because the apostles are teaching that Jesus rose from the dead. Remember, the Sadducees didn't believe in resurrection at all. They seize Peter and John and put them in jail overnight.

But it's too late. Many who heard the message believe, and the number of men who believe grows to about five thousand.

The next day the rulers, the elders, and the teachers of the law meet in Jerusalem. Annas the high priest is there, and Caiaphas, and other members of the high priest's family. These are the same men who handed Jesus over to Pilate just a couple of months earlier. Now Peter and John are standing in front of them.

They ask, By what power or what name did you do this?

> BACKGROUND CHECK **The Sanhedrin**
>
> The Sanhedrin was the highest Jewish council in Jerusalem, with about seventy members plus the high priest. It included chief priests, elders, and teachers of the law, both Sadducees and Pharisees. Under Roman rule, it had authority over religious matters and many local affairs, though it generally

> couldn't carry out executions without Roman approval. It's the same council that put Jesus on trial.

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, answers them. If we're being questioned today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame, then know this: it is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. Jesus is the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone. "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved."

The council is stunned. "When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus."

That's one of the best compliments in the Bible. They didn't have degrees. They weren't trained speakers. But it was obvious they'd been with Jesus.

The leaders can't deny the miracle. The healed man is standing right there. So they send Peter and John out and discuss what to do. Everyone in Jerusalem knows about the miracle, and we can't deny it. But to stop this from spreading any further, we have to warn them to stop speaking in this name.

They call them back and command them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. Peter and John reply, Which is right in God's eyes, to listen to you or to Him? You be the judges. "As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard."

The council threatens them more and lets them go. They can't decide how to punish them, because all the people are praising God for what happened.

When Peter and John are released, they go back to their own people and report everything. And the believers' response is remarkable. They don't complain. They don't plan a protest. They pray. They praise God as Sovereign Lord who made heaven and earth, quote a psalm about nations raging against God's Anointed One, and then ask for something surprising. Not safety. Boldness. Lord, consider their threats and enable Your servants to speak Your word with great boldness.

After they pray, the place where they're meeting is shaken. They're all filled with the Holy Spirit and speak the word of God boldly.

Luke gives another snapshot of the church. All the believers are one in heart and mind. No one claims that any of their possessions are their own. There are no needy persons among them, because those who own land or houses sell them and bring the money to the apostles to be distributed to anyone who has need.

He introduces one man in particular: Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles call Barnabas, which means "son of encouragement." He sells a field and brings the money. Keep an eye on Barnabas. He's going to matter.

KEY VERSE

Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.

Acts 4:12 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. People could tell Peter and John "had been with Jesus." What would make people notice that about you?
2. Peter and John said they couldn't stop speaking about what they'd seen and heard. What has God done in your life that you could talk about?
3. When the church was threatened, they prayed for boldness, not safety. What would you pray for if you were in their situation?

CHAPTER 5

Lies and Lockdowns

Acts 5

After the generosity of Barnabas, Luke tells us about a couple who wanted the same reputation without the same heart.

A man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sells a piece of property. With his wife's full knowledge, he keeps back part of the money for himself and brings the rest to the apostles, as if it were the full price.

Peter confronts him. Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit? The land was yours before you sold it. The money was yours after you sold it. You didn't have to give any of it. "You have not lied just to human beings but to God." When Ananias hears this, he falls down and dies. Great fear seizes everyone who hears about it.

About three hours later, his wife comes in, not knowing what happened. Peter asks her if this was the price they got for the land. She says yes. Peter asks how they could agree to test the Spirit of the Lord. She falls down at his feet and dies too.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Why So Severe?**
>
> This story is hard to read, and it should be. Ananias and Sapphira weren't punished for keeping some money. Peter says plainly that it was theirs to keep. They were punished for lying to God, pretending to be more generous

> than they were in order to look spiritual. At the very beginning of the church, God showed that He takes hypocrisy seriously. It's similar to stories in the Old Testament, when God judged sin severely at the start of something new, such as Achan at the beginning of the conquest of Canaan.

Great fear seizes the whole church and everyone who hears about these events. It's the first time Luke uses the word "church" in Acts.

The apostles perform many signs and wonders among the people. People even carry the sick into the streets and lay them on beds and mats so that at least Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passes by. Crowds gather from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick, and all of them are healed.

The high priest and the Sadducees are filled with jealousy. They arrest the apostles and put them in the public jail. But during the night an angel of the Lord opens the doors of the jail and brings them out. Go, stand in the temple courts, he says, and tell the people all about this new life.

At daybreak, they do exactly that.

Meanwhile, the high priest calls together the full assembly of the elders of Israel and sends for the apostles. The officers go to the jail and come back with the report: The jail was securely locked, with the guards standing at the doors. But when we opened them, we found no one inside. While everyone is puzzled, someone comes in and says, The men you put in jail are standing in the temple courts teaching the people!

You can almost hear the council members groan.

The officers bring the apostles back, carefully, without force, because they're afraid the people will stone them. The high priest says, We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name. Yet you've

filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood.

Peter and the other apostles reply: "We must obey God rather than human beings!" Then Peter preaches the gospel to the council again. God raised Jesus from the dead, whom you killed by hanging Him on a cross. God exalted Him as Prince and Savior, to bring repentance and forgiveness. We are witnesses, and so is the Holy Spirit.

The council is furious and wants to put them to death. But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law honored by all the people, stands up and orders the apostles to be put outside for a little while. Then he gives the council some advice. He reminds them of other movements that rose and fell. Leave these men alone. If their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you won't be able to stop them. You'll only find yourselves fighting against God.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Gamaliel**
>
> Gamaliel was one of the most respected Jewish teachers of his time. Later Jewish writings remember him as a great rabbi. One of his students was a young Pharisee from Tarsus named Saul, who will show up in chapter 7 and later become the apostle Paul. Gamaliel's advice wasn't faith in Jesus, but it was wise, and it bought the apostles time.

His speech persuades them. They call the apostles in, have them flogged, order them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.

And here's how the apostles respond to being beaten: they leave the council "rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name." Day after day, in the temple courts

and from house to house, they never stop teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.

KEY VERSE

Peter and the other apostles replied: "We must obey God rather than human beings!"

Acts 5:29 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Ananias and Sapphira wanted to look more generous than they were. Where are you tempted to look more spiritual than you are?
2. Peter said, "We must obey God rather than human beings." When might you face a choice between those two?
3. The apostles rejoiced after being beaten for Jesus. Why do you think they reacted that way?

CHAPTER 6

Table Trouble

Acts 6

The church is growing fast, and growth brings problems. The Hellenistic Jews among the believers complain against the Hebraic Jews, because their widows are being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Hellenists and Hebrews**
> In the first century, many Jewish people lived outside Israel, scattered throughout the Roman Empire. Many of them spoke Greek as their first language and followed some Greek customs. They were called Hellenists, from the Greek word for Greece. Some moved back to Jerusalem, especially in old age. Jews who had grown up in Israel usually spoke Aramaic and were sometimes suspicious of Greek-speaking Jews. Both groups were in the early church, and the tension between them came with them.

This is the first recorded conflict inside the church. It's a cultural divide: the Greek-speaking widows feel they're being treated as second-class. In a church of thousands, someone was getting left out.

The Twelve gather all the disciples together. It wouldn't be right, they say, for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. So choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We'll turn this

responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.

They're not saying serving food is beneath them. They're saying the job is important enough to deserve full attention from qualified people. And the qualifications aren't business skills. They're "full of the Spirit and wisdom." Even for organizing a food program.

This proposal pleases the whole group. They choose seven men. Look at their names: Stephen, Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a convert to Judaism from Antioch. Every one of them has a Greek name. The church chose people from the group that felt overlooked to fix the problem. That's wisdom.

The apostles pray and lay their hands on them. And the result? "So the word of God spread." The number of disciples in Jerusalem increases rapidly, and a large number of priests become obedient to the faith.

Solving the problem well didn't distract from the mission. It fueled it.

Then Luke zooms in on one of the seven: Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, who performs great wonders and signs among the people. He was chosen to help with food distribution, and God uses him for much more.

Opposition comes from members of a synagogue for freed slaves, with people from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia, and Asia. They argue with Stephen, but they can't stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gives him as he speaks. So they do what people often do when they lose an argument. They secretly persuade some men to lie. We heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.

They stir up the people, the elders, and the teachers of the law. They seize Stephen and bring him before the Sanhedrin. They produce false witnesses who say this man never stops speaking against the temple and the law. We've heard him say that Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Cilicia**
>
> One of the synagogues that argued with Stephen included Jews from Cilicia, a region in what is now southern Turkey. The main city of Cilicia was Tarsus. Acts later tells us that Saul, the future apostle Paul, was from Tarsus. It's quite possible that Saul was one of the men who debated Stephen and lost.

All who are sitting in the Sanhedrin look intently at Stephen. And they see that his face is like the face of an angel.

KEY VERSE

and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.

Acts 6:4 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The first church conflict was about some people being overlooked. Who gets overlooked in your youth group or school?
2. The church chose people from the group that felt left out to solve the problem. Why was that a wise choice?
3. Stephen was chosen to serve food, and God used him for far more. How might God use you in a "small" role?

CHAPTER 7

The First Martyr

Acts 7

The high priest asks Stephen, Are these charges true? And Stephen answers with the longest speech in Acts.

It's a history lesson. He starts with Abraham, whom God called out of Mesopotamia, before he ever lived in the land of Israel. He tells about Joseph, whose brothers were jealous and sold him as a slave into Egypt, but God was with him. He tells about Moses, who was raised in Pharaoh's palace, tried to help his people, and was rejected by them. He tells about Israel in the wilderness, who refused to obey Moses and turned back to Egypt in their hearts, and made a golden calf.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Stephen's Point**
>
> Stephen was accused of speaking against the temple and the law. His speech answers both charges in a surprising way. He shows that God met His people long before there was a temple: with Abraham in Mesopotamia, with Joseph in Egypt, with Moses at a burning bush in the desert. God isn't confined to one building. And he shows a pattern in Israel's history: again and again, God sent deliverers, like Joseph and Moses, and the people rejected them at first.

Then Stephen talks about the tabernacle in the wilderness and the temple Solomon built. "However, the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands." He quotes Isaiah: heaven is God's

throne and earth is His footstool. What kind of house could you build for Him?

And then he turns the whole speech on the council. You stiff-necked people! You're just like your ancestors. You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your ancestors didn't persecute? They killed the ones who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered Him. You received the law that was given through angels, but you haven't obeyed it.

He's not on trial anymore. They are.

When the members of the Sanhedrin hear this, they're furious and gnash their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looks up to heaven and sees the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. "Look... I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

Elsewhere, the Bible usually describes Jesus as seated at God's right hand. Here He is standing. Many readers see it as Jesus rising to welcome His servant, or standing as a witness in Stephen's defense. Earthly judges are condemning Stephen. Heaven's judge is standing up for him.

At this, they cover their ears, yell at the top of their voices, and rush at him. They drag him out of the city and begin to stone him. The witnesses lay their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Saul**
>
> This is the first time we meet Saul. He was a Jew from Tarsus, a Roman citizen, a Pharisee trained under Gamaliel, and fiercely devoted to the law. Luke calls him a "young man," which in that culture could mean anyone from his late teens to his thirties. Holding the coats of the people stoning Stephen meant he approved. In a couple of chapters, his life will be turned completely upside down.

While they're stoning him, Stephen prays, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he falls on his knees and cries out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he has said this, he falls asleep.

Do those prayers sound familiar? On the cross, Jesus said, "Father, forgive them," and "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." Stephen died the way his Lord died. Praying for his enemies. Trusting God with his life. Luke says he "fell asleep." For followers of Jesus, death isn't the end. It's like falling asleep and waking up somewhere better.

Stephen was the first follower of Jesus killed for his faith. The Greek word for "witness" is martys, and because so many witnesses died for their testimony, it's where we get the English word "martyr."

And the young man holding the coats was watching the whole time. Some early Christians believed Stephen's prayer for his killers was answered in a way no one expected. One of them became the greatest missionary the church has ever known.

KEY VERSE

While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

Acts 7:59–60 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Stephen told the council that God doesn't live in buildings made by human hands. Where do you tend to think God "lives"? Where can you meet Him?
2. Stephen prayed for the people killing him, just as Jesus did. What would it take for you to pray for someone who is hurting you?
3. Saul watched Stephen die. How do you think that moment stayed with him?

CHAPTER 8

Scattered Seeds

Acts 8

On the day Stephen dies, a great persecution breaks out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles are scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Saul begins to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he drags off both men and women and puts them in prison.

It looks like a disaster. But look what Luke says next: "Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went." Remember Jesus' map in chapter 1? Jerusalem, then Judea and Samaria. The church wasn't moving out on its own, so persecution pushed it out. What looked like an attack became a launch.

Philip, another of the seven chosen to serve food, goes down to a city in Samaria and proclaims the Messiah there. Remember how Jews and Samaritans felt about each other. Jesus had once told a story about a good Samaritan, and James and John had once wanted to call down fire on a Samaritan village. Now the gospel is crossing that line.

Crowds pay close attention to Philip. Impure spirits come out of many people, and many who are paralyzed or lame are healed. "So there was great joy in that city."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Samaria**

Samaria was the region between Judea in the south and Galilee in the north. Samaritans were descendants of Israelites who had intermarried with other peoples after the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom in 722 BC. They had their own temple and their own version of the five books of Moses. Jews and Samaritans had been enemies for centuries. For the gospel to be welcomed in Samaria was a huge step, and the apostles in Jerusalem sent Peter and John to see it for themselves.

A man named Simon has been practicing sorcery in that city for a long time, amazing everyone. People call him the Great Power of God. But when the people believe Philip's message about the kingdom of God and Jesus, they're baptized, both men and women. Even Simon believes and is baptized, and he follows Philip everywhere, astonished by the signs he sees.

When the apostles hear that Samaria has accepted the word of God, they send Peter and John. The two pray for the new believers to receive the Holy Spirit, because the Spirit hasn't yet come on any of them. Then Peter and John place their hands on them, and they receive the Holy Spirit.

Why the delay? Many Bible teachers think God was making sure the Samaritan believers were fully connected to the Jerusalem church, so there wouldn't be two rival churches the way there had been two rival temples. The same Spirit came on Samaritans that had come on Jews at Pentecost.

When Simon sees this, he offers the apostles money. Give me this ability too. Peter's answer is fierce: May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! Your heart isn't right before God. Repent and pray. Simon asks Peter to pray for him.

Then an angel tells Philip to go south to the desert road that runs from Jerusalem to Gaza. So he starts out, and on his way he meets an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home he's sitting in his chariot reading the prophet Isaiah.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Ethiopian**
>
> "Ethiopia" in the ancient world usually referred to the kingdom of Kush, south of Egypt, in what is now Sudan. Its queens were often called by the title Candace. This official was probably a Gentile who worshiped Israel's God. As a eunuch, he would have been barred by the law from entering the inner courts of the temple. He traveled perhaps a thousand miles to worship, and still had to stand at a distance. The book of Isaiah he was reading includes a promise in chapter 56 that God would welcome eunuchs who held fast to His covenant.

The Spirit tells Philip to go to that chariot and stay near it. Philip runs up and hears the man reading Isaiah aloud, which was how people usually read. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asks. "How can I," he says, "unless someone explains it to me?" He invites Philip to come up and sit with him.

He's reading the passage from Isaiah 53 about one who was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and who did not open His mouth. Who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else? Then Philip begins with that very passage of Scripture and tells him the good news about Jesus.

As they travel along the road, they come to some water, and the eunuch says, "Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?" They both go down into the water, and Philip baptizes him. When they come up out of the water, the Spirit of the

Lord suddenly takes Philip away, and the eunuch doesn't see him again, "but went on his way rejoicing."

If you look closely at your NIV, you'll notice that verse 37 is missing, with a footnote. Some later manuscripts add a short confession of faith by the eunuch before his baptism. The earliest manuscripts don't have it, so the NIV leaves it in a note. It doesn't change the story. He believed and was baptized either way.

The man who had to stand outside the temple went home with the good news. Now the gospel is heading toward the ends of the earth.

KEY VERSE

Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.

Acts 8:4 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Persecution scattered the believers, and the gospel spread. Has something hard in your life ever led to something good?
2. Simon thought he could buy God's power. In what ways do people today try to get God's blessings without God?
3. The Ethiopian said he couldn't understand unless someone explained it to him. Who has helped you understand the Bible? Who could you help?

CHAPTER 9

The Hunter Becomes the Hunted

Acts 9

Meanwhile, Saul is still "breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples." He goes to the high priest and asks for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he finds any followers of the Way there, men or women, he can take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.

The Way. That's what the first believers called their faith. Jesus had said, I am the way.

As Saul nears Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashes around him. He falls to the ground and hears a voice: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asks. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."

Notice what Jesus says. Not, Why do you persecute My followers? Why do you persecute me? When someone hurts a follower of Jesus, Jesus takes it personally.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Damascus**
>
> Damascus, in Syria, is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world. It was about 150 miles north of Jerusalem, a journey of roughly a week. It had a large Jewish population and several synagogues. The fact that Saul wanted to hunt believers that far away shows how quickly the faith was spreading, and how determined he was to stop it.

Jesus tells him to get up, go into the city, and he'll be told what to do. The men traveling with Saul stand there speechless. They hear the sound but don't see anyone. Saul gets up from the ground, but when he opens his eyes, he can't see anything. So they lead him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he's blind, and he doesn't eat or drink anything.

The man who came to drag people out of their homes has to be led by the hand.

In Damascus there's a disciple named Ananias. (Not the Ananias from chapter 5.) The Lord calls to him in a vision and tells him to go to a house on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, who is praying.

Ananias is not excited. Lord, I've heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to Your holy people in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority to arrest all who call on Your name. In other words: Lord, are You sure You have the right address?

But the Lord says to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel." And He adds that He will show Saul how much he must suffer for His name.

So Ananias goes. He places his hands on Saul and says, "Brother Saul." The first words a Christian says to the man who came to arrest Christians are "Brother Saul." Ananias tells him that Jesus, who appeared to him on the road, has sent him so that Saul may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit. Immediately, something like scales falls from Saul's eyes, and he can see again. He gets up and is baptized, and after eating some food, he regains his strength.

Ananias appears in only this one chapter of the Bible. But without his courage, we might not have half the New Testament.

Saul spends several days with the disciples in Damascus. And at once he begins to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. Everyone is astonished. Isn't he the man who caused havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? Saul grows more and more powerful and baffles the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah.

After many days, some Jewish leaders conspire to kill him. Day and night they watch the city gates. But his followers take him by night and lower him in a basket through an opening in the wall.

When Saul comes to Jerusalem, he tries to join the disciples, but they're all afraid of him, not believing he really is a disciple. Can you blame them? But Barnabas, the son of encouragement, takes him and brings him to the apostles. He tells them how Saul saw the Lord on the road and preached fearlessly in Damascus. Barnabas vouches for him. Now Saul moves freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord, until there's a plot against his life there too, and the believers send him off to Tarsus.

Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria enjoys a time of peace. It's strengthened, encouraged by the Holy Spirit, and grows in numbers.

Luke turns back to Peter, who is traveling around the country. In Lydda, he finds a man named Aeneas, paralyzed and bedridden for eight years. Peter says, Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you. Get up and roll up your mat. Immediately he gets up. In nearby Joppa, a disciple named Tabitha, also called Dorcas, who was always doing good and helping the poor, becomes sick and dies. The believers

send for Peter. When he arrives, the widows show him the clothing she had made for them. Peter sends them all out, kneels down, prays, and says, "Tabitha, get up." She opens her eyes and sits up. Many people in Joppa believe in the Lord.

Peter stays in Joppa for some time with a tanner named Simon. Tanners worked with the skins of dead animals, which made them ceremonially unclean in the eyes of many. Peter is already crossing some lines. The next chapter will push him across a much bigger one.

KEY VERSE

But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel."

Acts 9:15 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Jesus told Saul, "Why do you persecute me?" What does it mean that Jesus takes it personally when His followers are hurt?
2. Ananias was afraid to go to Saul but went anyway. Who would be the hardest person for you to call "brother" or "sister"?
3. Barnabas vouched for Saul when no one else would. Who needs someone to stand up for them in your world?

TRY THIS *Is there someone you've written off as someone who would never follow Jesus? Pray for them by name every day this week.*

CHAPTER 10

No Favorites

Acts 10

At Caesarea, a city on the coast, there's a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. He's a Roman officer, a Gentile. But he and all his family are devout and God-fearing. He gives generously to those in need and prays to God regularly.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **God-Fearers**
>
> In many cities of the Roman Empire, some Gentiles were attracted to the Jewish faith. They worshiped the God of Israel, prayed, gave to the poor, and attended synagogue, but they didn't fully convert by being circumcised and keeping the entire law. Jewish writers sometimes called them "God-fearers." Even so, most Jews would not eat in a Gentile's home or invite Gentiles into theirs, because of food laws and concerns about ritual purity.

One afternoon at about three o'clock, Cornelius has a vision. An angel tells him that his prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. Send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter, staying with Simon the tanner by the sea. Cornelius sends two servants and a devout soldier.

About noon the following day, as they're approaching the city, Peter goes up on the roof to pray. He gets hungry and wants something to eat, and while the meal is being prepared, he falls into a trance. He

sees heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contains all kinds of four-footed animals, reptiles, and birds. Then a voice tells him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat."

Peter is horrified. "Surely not, Lord!" I have never eaten anything impure or unclean. The voice speaks to him a second time: "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." This happens three times. Three times, just like his three denials. Peter needs things repeated.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Clean and Unclean**
>
> The law of Moses divided animals into clean and unclean. Clean animals, like cows and sheep, could be eaten. Unclean animals, like pigs, camels, and many birds and reptiles, could not. These food laws were one of the main things that marked Jewish people as different from the nations around them. For a faithful Jew like Peter, eating unclean food was unthinkable. The vision wasn't only about food. It was about people.

While Peter is wondering what it means, the men from Cornelius find the house and stop at the gate. The Spirit tells Peter that three men are looking for him; go with them, and don't hesitate, for I have sent them. Peter invites them in to be his guests. The next day he goes with them.

When Peter arrives at Cornelius's house the following day, Cornelius has called together his relatives and close friends. As Peter enters, Cornelius falls at his feet in reverence. Peter makes him get up: Stand up, I am only a man myself.

Then Peter says to the gathering, You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean. He finally gets the point of the vision.

Cornelius explains his vision. Then Peter begins to speak. “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.”

He tells them the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, “who is Lord of all.” He tells how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how He went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil. They killed Him by hanging Him on a cross, but God raised Him from the dead on the third day. All the prophets testify about Him, that everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins through His name.

While Peter is still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit comes on all who hear the message.

Peter doesn’t even finish his sermon. God interrupts him. The Jewish believers who came with Peter are astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit has been poured out even on Gentiles. They hear them speaking in tongues and praising God, just like at Pentecost.

Peter says, Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have. So he orders that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

This is sometimes called the Gentile Pentecost. Jews in chapter 2, Samaritans in chapter 8, and now Gentiles in chapter 10. The wall is coming down.

KEY VERSE

I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.

Acts 10:34–35 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Peter had to be told three times before he understood. Why do you think it's so hard for people to let go of prejudices?
2. Are there people you subconsciously treat as "unclean," people you'd rather not sit with or talk to?
3. God interrupted Peter's sermon to pour out His Spirit. What does that tell you about who's really in charge of the mission?

CHAPTER 11

Called Christians

Acts 11

News travels fast. The apostles and believers throughout Judea hear that the Gentiles also have received the word of God. When Peter goes up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticize him. You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.

Notice that they don't say, How wonderful that Gentiles believed! They say, You ate with them.

Peter doesn't get defensive. He starts from the beginning and tells them everything, exactly as it happened: the vision, the sheet, the voice, the three men, the Spirit telling him to go, and the Holy Spirit coming on Cornelius's household just as on us at the beginning. Then he says, So if God gave them the same gift He gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, "who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?"

When they hear this, they have no further objections and praise God, saying, So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life.

That's how good disagreements end. Not with someone winning, but with everyone praising God.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Antioch**

Antioch in Syria was the third-largest city in the Roman Empire, after Rome and Alexandria, with perhaps a quarter million people or more. It was a crossroads of trade and cultures, with a large Jewish community and many Gentiles from all over the world. It was also known for its luxury and loose morals. Antioch would become the home base for the church's mission to the Gentiles, and the starting point for Paul's journeys.

Meanwhile, some of the believers scattered by the persecution after Stephen's death have traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. But some of them, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, go to Antioch and begin to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand is with them, and a great number of people believe and turn to the Lord.

Notice that the first major Gentile church wasn't started by an apostle. It was started by ordinary believers whose names we don't even know.

When news of this reaches the church in Jerusalem, they send Barnabas to Antioch. Good choice. When he arrives and sees what the grace of God has done, he's glad and encourages them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. Luke describes him as "a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith." And a great number of people are brought to the Lord.

Then Barnabas does something wise. The work is too big for him alone, so he goes to Tarsus to look for Saul. It had been years since Saul was sent home. When he finds him, he brings him to Antioch. For a whole year Barnabas and Saul meet with the church and teach great numbers of people.

"The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch."

BACKGROUND CHECK **"Christians"**

The word "Christian" means something like "Christ's people" or "Christ-followers." It was probably a nickname given by outsiders in Antioch, maybe even as a joke. Believers usually called themselves disciples, brothers and sisters, saints, or followers of the Way. The term "Christian" appears only three times in the New Testament: here, in Acts 26 when King Agrippa uses it, and in 1 Peter 4. A name the world used to label them became the name followers of Jesus have carried ever since.

The people of Antioch couldn't figure out what to call this new group. They weren't just a Jewish sect, because Gentiles were in it. They weren't a Greek religion either. They talked about Christ so much that the nickname stuck.

During this time, some prophets come down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them, Agabus, stands up and predicts through the Spirit that a severe famine will spread over the entire Roman world. Luke notes that it happened during the reign of Claudius. The disciples in Antioch, each according to their ability, decide to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea. They send their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

A mostly Gentile church sending money to help a Jewish church. That's what it looks like when the wall comes down.

KEY VERSE

The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.

Acts 11:26 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The Jerusalem believers' first reaction was, "You ate with them." What reactions do Christians sometimes have when unexpected people come to faith?
2. Ordinary, unnamed believers started the church in Antioch. What does that tell you about what God can do through you?
3. People in Antioch called the believers "Christians" because they talked about Christ so much. What would people call you, based on what you talk about most?

CHAPTER 12

The Prayer Meeting

Acts 12

Around this time, King Herod arrests some who belong to the church, intending to persecute them. He has James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword.

James was one of the inner three, with Peter and John. He had been at the transfiguration. He had asked Jesus for a seat at His right hand. Jesus had told him he would drink the same cup. And now he becomes the first of the twelve apostles to die for his faith. Luke tells us in one sentence.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Herod Agrippa I**
>
> This Herod is Herod Agrippa I, a grandson of Herod the Great, the king who tried to kill baby Jesus. He was a friend of the Roman emperors and ruled over a territory roughly the size of his grandfather's kingdom from AD 41 to 44. To keep the Jewish leaders happy, he cracked down on the church. The Jewish historian Josephus also describes his sudden death in Caesarea, in a way that closely matches Luke's account.

When Herod sees that this pleases the Jewish leaders, he proceeds to seize Peter also. It's during the Festival of Unleavened Bread, around Passover, the same time of year Jesus was arrested. Herod puts Peter in prison, guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. He plans to bring him out for public trial after the festival.

"So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him."

The night before his trial, Peter is sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries are standing guard at the entrance. Think about that. He's facing execution in the morning, and he's asleep. James is already dead. Peter has every reason to be awake and terrified. But he's sleeping like someone at peace.

Suddenly an angel of the Lord appears, and a light shines in the cell. The angel strikes Peter on the side to wake him up. Not a gentle tap. Quick, get up! The chains fall off Peter's wrists. The angel tells him to put on his clothes and sandals. Wrap your cloak around you and follow me.

Peter follows him out, but he has no idea that what's happening is real. He thinks he's seeing a vision. They pass the first and second guards and come to the iron gate leading to the city. It opens for them by itself. They walk the length of one street, and suddenly the angel leaves him.

Then Peter comes to himself and says, Now I know without a doubt that the Lord sent His angel and rescued me.

He goes to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark. (That's the same Mark who would later write the Gospel of Mark.) Many people have gathered there and are praying. For him. Right now.

Peter knocks at the outer entrance, and a servant girl named Rhoda comes to answer the door. When she recognizes Peter's voice, she's so overjoyed that she runs back without opening it and exclaims, "Peter is at the door!"

They tell her she's out of her mind. When she keeps insisting, they say, It must be his angel. Meanwhile, Peter keeps on knocking.

This might be the funniest scene in the Bible. The church is praying for Peter to be released. God releases Peter. Peter shows up at the prayer meeting. And they don't believe it. They leave him standing outside, knocking, while they argue with the servant girl.

When they finally open the door and see him, they're astonished. Peter motions with his hand for them to be quiet and describes how the Lord brought him out of prison. Tell James and the other brothers and sisters about this, he says, and then he leaves for another place. (This James is Jesus' brother, who had become a leader in the Jerusalem church.)

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Answered Prayer**
>
> It's encouraging that the believers' faith wasn't perfect. They prayed earnestly, but when God answered, they could hardly believe it. God answered anyway. You don't have to have flawless faith for God to hear your prayers. You just have to pray. At the same time, it's worth noticing that God didn't rescue James. Acts is honest that faithful prayer doesn't always lead to the outcome we want. Both stories are in the same chapter.

In the morning, there's no small commotion among the soldiers over what has become of Peter. Herod has a thorough search made and, when he doesn't find him, cross-examines the guards and orders their execution.

Later, in Caesarea, Herod puts on his royal robes, sits on his throne, and gives a public speech. The people shout, This is the voice of a god, not of a man! Immediately, because Herod does not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord strikes him down, and he is eaten by worms and dies.

The king who tried to destroy the church is dead. "But the word of God continued to spread and flourish."

KEY VERSE

So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.

Acts 12:5 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Peter slept the night before his trial. Where does that kind of peace come from?
2. The church prayed for Peter's release and then didn't believe it when he showed up. Have you ever prayed for something without really expecting God to answer?
3. God rescued Peter but not James. How do you hold on to faith when prayers don't turn out the way you hoped?

CHAPTER 13

Sent Out

Acts 13

In the church at Antioch there are prophets and teachers. Luke names them, and the list is a picture of the church itself: Barnabas, a Jewish Levite from Cyprus; Simeon called Niger, which means "black," probably from Africa; Lucius of Cyrene, in North Africa; Manaen, who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch; and Saul, a former Pharisee from Tarsus. Different races. Different classes. One church.

While they're worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit says, Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them. So after they have fasted and prayed, they place their hands on them and send them off.

Notice who the church sends: its two best teachers. They don't keep the best for themselves.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Paul's Journeys**
>
> Acts describes three main missionary journeys by Paul, plus his final trip to Rome as a prisoner. The first journey, in chapters 13 and 14, took him and Barnabas to the island of Cyprus and then to cities in the region of Galatia, in what is now central Turkey. They traveled by ship and on foot, often on Roman roads. A missionary journey wasn't a quick trip. The first one probably took a year or two.

They sail to Cyprus, Barnabas's home island, and travel across it, preaching in the synagogues. John Mark goes with them as their helper. At Paphos, they meet a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus, who is an attendant of the proconsul, Sergius Paulus. The proconsul wants to hear the word of God, but the sorcerer opposes them and tries to turn the proconsul from the faith.

Then Luke says, "Then Saul, who was also called Paul." From here on, Luke uses his Roman name, Paul. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Paul looks straight at the sorcerer and calls him a child of the devil and an enemy of everything right. The hand of the Lord is against you, Paul says. You're going to be blind for a time. Immediately mist and darkness come over him, and he gropes about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand.

Remember who else was struck blind and had to be led by the hand? Paul knows exactly what that's like. When the proconsul sees what happened, he believes, amazed at the teaching about the Lord.

From Paphos, Paul and his companions sail to the mainland. There, John Mark leaves them and goes back to Jerusalem. Luke doesn't say why. But it will cause a big problem later.

They come to Pisidian Antioch, a different Antioch, and on the Sabbath they go into the synagogue. After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the synagogue leaders invite them to speak. Paul stands up and gives the first sermon of his that Luke records.

Like Stephen, he walks through Israel's history: God chose their ancestors, brought them out of Egypt, gave them the land, gave them judges and kings. Then He raised up David, a man after His

own heart. From this man's descendants God has brought to Israel the Savior Jesus, as He promised.

The people of Jerusalem and their rulers didn't recognize Jesus, Paul says, and they asked Pilate to have Him executed. "But God raised him from the dead," and for many days He was seen by those who had traveled with Him. Through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through Him everyone who believes is set free from every sin, a justification you couldn't obtain under the law of Moses.

As Paul and Barnabas are leaving the synagogue, the people invite them to speak further about these things the next Sabbath. On the next Sabbath, almost the whole city gathers to hear the word of the Lord.

When the Jewish leaders see the crowds, they're filled with jealousy and heap abuse on Paul. Then Paul and Barnabas answer boldly. We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and don't consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. They quote Isaiah, the Lord's command to be a light for the Gentiles, bringing salvation to the ends of the earth.

When the Gentiles hear this, they're glad and honor the word of the Lord. And all who were appointed for eternal life believe. The word of the Lord spreads through the whole region.

But the leaders stir up the prominent women and the leading men of the city, and they stir up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, expelling them from their region. So they shake the dust off their feet as a warning and go on to Iconium. "And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit."

KEY VERSE

For this is what the Lord has commanded us: "'I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.'"

Acts 13:47 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The church in Antioch sent its two best leaders away. What would it look like for your church or group to give away its best?
2. Look at the list of leaders in Antioch. How diverse is your circle of friends? What could you learn from people who are different from you?
3. John Mark quit partway through the trip. Have you ever quit something God called you to? What happened next?

CHAPTER 14

Gods and Stones

Acts 14

At Iconium, Paul and Barnabas go into the synagogue as usual. They speak so effectively that a great number of Jews and Greeks believe. But some who refuse to believe stir up the other Gentiles and poison their minds against the believers. Paul and Barnabas stay there a considerable time, speaking boldly for the Lord, who confirms the message of His grace by enabling them to perform signs and wonders.

The city is divided. Some side with the Jewish leaders, others with the apostles. When they learn of a plot to mistreat and stone them, they flee to the cities of Lystra and Derbe.

In Lystra there's a man who is lame, who has never walked. He's been that way from birth. He listens to Paul as he's speaking. Paul looks directly at him, sees that he has faith to be healed, and calls out, "Stand up on your feet!" At that, the man jumps up and begins to walk.

Sound familiar? It's almost exactly like Peter's first miracle in Acts 3. Luke is showing that the same Spirit is working through Paul as through Peter.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Zeus and Hermes in Lystra**

Lystra was a small Roman colony in a region where people spoke a local language called Lycaonian. A local legend told of a time when Zeus, king of the Greek gods, and Hermes, his messenger, visited the region disguised as humans. Everyone turned them away except an elderly couple, who were rewarded. The rest of the people were destroyed. The people of Lystra may have been determined not to make the same mistake twice.

When the crowd sees what Paul has done, they shout in the Lycaonian language, The gods have come down to us in human form! They call Barnabas Zeus, and Paul they call Hermes, because he's the chief speaker. The priest of Zeus, whose temple is just outside the city, brings bulls and wreaths to the city gates, because he and the crowd want to offer sacrifices to them.

Paul and Barnabas don't understand the language at first. When they realize what's happening, they tear their clothes, a sign of horror, and rush out into the crowd. Friends, why are you doing this? We too are only human, like you. We're bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them.

Notice that Paul doesn't quote the Old Testament here. These people have never read it. Instead, he starts with creation. God has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons. He provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy. He meets people where they are.

Even with these words, they have difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them.

Then some Jewish opponents arrive from Antioch and Iconium and win the crowd over. The same people who wanted to worship Paul

now stone him and drag him outside the city, thinking he's dead. That's how fast a crowd can turn.

But after the disciples gather around him, he gets up and goes back into the city. The next day he and Barnabas leave for Derbe.

Years later, Paul writes to the Corinthians about being stoned once. This was that time. And it's possible that a young man in Lystra named Timothy watched this happen. In chapter 16, we'll meet Timothy, from Lystra, and he'll become one of Paul's closest companions.

They preach the gospel in Derbe and win a large number of disciples. Then they do something surprising. Instead of heading home the easy way, they turn around and go back through Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, the very cities where they'd been attacked. They go back to strengthen the new disciples and encourage them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," they say.

They don't promise the new believers an easy life. They tell them the truth. Following Jesus will be hard. It's worth it.

Paul and Barnabas appoint elders for them in each church, and with prayer and fasting, commit them to the Lord. Then they sail back to Antioch, where they had been sent out. They gather the church together and report all that God has done through them and how He has opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. And they stay there a long time with the disciples.

KEY VERSE

strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," they said.

Acts 14:22 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The crowd went from worshiping Paul to stoning him. Why is it dangerous to depend on what crowds think of you?
2. Paul started with creation when talking to people who didn't know the Bible. How could you talk about God with a friend who has never read the Bible?
3. Paul and Barnabas told new believers honestly that following Jesus would be hard. Why is it important to be honest about that?

CHAPTER 15

The Big Meeting

Acts 15

Some men come down from Judea to Antioch and start teaching the believers: Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.

That might sound like a minor rule. It wasn't. Circumcision was the sign of God's covenant with Abraham, and keeping the law of Moses was what it meant to be part of God's people. These teachers were saying that Gentiles had to become Jewish first before they could really belong to Jesus. Jesus plus the law.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Circumcision and the Law**
>
> In Genesis 17, God commanded Abraham and his male descendants to be circumcised as a sign of His covenant. For two thousand years, it marked Jewish men as belonging to God's people. Along with Sabbath-keeping and food laws, it was one of the clearest boundary markers between Jews and Gentiles. For an adult Gentile man in the ancient world, being circumcised was also painful and risky. The question in Acts 15 was whether these markers were required for salvation in Christ.

Paul and Barnabas get into a sharp dispute and debate with them. So the church sends Paul and Barnabas, along with some other believers, up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question. On the way, they tell the believers in Phoenicia and

Samaria how the Gentiles have been converted, and the news makes them very glad.

In Jerusalem, some believers who belong to the party of the Pharisees stand up and say the Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses. The apostles and elders meet to consider the question.

After much discussion, Peter gets up. He reminds them how God chose him to take the message to Cornelius's household. God, who knows the heart, showed that He accepted the Gentiles by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as He did to us. He did not discriminate between us and them, for He purified their hearts by faith. Why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentile believers a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? "No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."

Notice how he says it. Not that they are saved just as we are. We are saved just as they are. The Jewish believers don't have an advantage. Everyone comes the same way. By grace.

The whole assembly becomes silent as they listen to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.

Then James speaks. This is James, the brother of Jesus, now a leader of the Jerusalem church, the same brother who once didn't believe in Him. James quotes the prophet Amos, who foretold that God would rebuild David's fallen tent so that the rest of humanity, including all the Gentiles, might seek the Lord. So James concludes: we shouldn't make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.

But he suggests they write to the Gentile believers asking them to avoid a few things: food polluted by idols, sexual immorality, the meat of strangled animals, and blood. These weren't requirements for salvation. They were ways for Gentile believers to avoid practices that were tied to pagan temple worship or deeply offensive to their Jewish brothers and sisters, so the two groups could share a table.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Why This Meeting Matters**

The Jerusalem Council, as it's often called, may be the most important church meeting in history. If the leaders had decided that Gentiles had to become Jewish to follow Jesus, Christianity might have remained a small Jewish sect. Instead, they affirmed that salvation is by grace through faith in Jesus alone, for everyone. That's why billions of non-Jewish people around the world follow Jesus today. Paul's letter to the Galatians deals with the same issue.

The apostles and elders, with the whole church, decide to send their letter to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, along with two leaders, Judas called Barsabbas and Silas. The letter includes a remarkable phrase: "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" not to burden the Gentiles with anything beyond these requirements.

When the people in Antioch read the letter, they're glad for its encouraging message. Judas and Silas, who are prophets themselves, encourage and strengthen the believers.

Then, sadly, the chapter ends with a conflict between friends. Some time later, Paul says to Barnabas, Let's go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preached. Barnabas wants to take John Mark with them. But Paul doesn't think it's wise to take him, because Mark had deserted them on the first trip.

"They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company." Barnabas takes Mark and sails for Cyprus. Paul chooses Silas and leaves, commended by the believers to the grace of the Lord.

Luke doesn't tell us who was right. Paul had a point; the mission was dangerous, and Mark had quit before. Barnabas, true to his name, gave Mark a second chance. And here's the good news: years later, Paul writes that Mark is helpful to him in his ministry. The friendship was restored. Barnabas's second chance worked. And instead of one missionary team, there were two.

You may have noticed that verse 34 is missing in your NIV, with a footnote. Some later manuscripts add a line saying that Silas decided to stay in Antioch, probably to explain why he was still there in verse 40. The earliest manuscripts don't include it.

KEY VERSE

No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.

Acts 15:11 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The teachers from Judea added a requirement to salvation. What things do people today sometimes add to faith in Jesus?
2. The church settled a huge disagreement by listening, sharing what God had done, and searching the Scriptures. How could that help in conflicts you face?
3. Paul and Barnabas split over John Mark, but the story had a good ending. Is there a broken friendship in your life that could be restored?

CHAPTER 16

Midnight Songs

Acts 16

Paul comes to Derbe and then to Lystra, the town where he'd been stoned. A disciple named Timothy lives there. His mother is a Jewish believer, and his father is a Greek. The believers at Lystra and Iconium speak well of him. Paul wants to take him along on the journey.

Timothy was probably a teenager or in his early twenties. Years later, Paul writes to him, Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young.

Paul and his companions travel through the region of Phrygia and Galatia. They try to go into the province of Asia, but they're "kept by the Holy Spirit" from preaching there. They try to enter Bithynia, but "the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to." Closed door after closed door.

During the night, Paul has a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, Come over to Macedonia and help us. After Paul has seen the vision, Luke writes, "we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia." That's the first "we" in Acts. Luke has joined the team.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Into Europe**
>
> Macedonia was a Roman province in what is now northern Greece. When Paul crossed the Aegean Sea from Troas to Macedonia, the gospel arrived in

> Europe for the first time in Acts. Philippi was a Roman colony, settled by retired Roman soldiers, and proud of its Roman status and laws. It apparently didn't have enough Jewish men to form a synagogue, which required ten, so the few Jewish women and God-fearers met by the river to pray.

They sail to Philippi, the leading city of that district of Macedonia. On the Sabbath, they go outside the city gate to the river, where they expect to find a place of prayer. They sit down and begin to speak to the women who have gathered there.

One of them is a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She's a worshiper of God. The Lord opens her heart to respond to Paul's message. She and the members of her household are baptized, and she invites them to stay at her house. The first convert in Europe that Luke tells us about is a businesswoman.

Then they meet a very different woman. A female slave who has a spirit by which she predicts the future. She earns a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling. She follows Paul and the rest, shouting, These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved. She keeps this up for many days.

What she's saying is true, but it's coming from the wrong source. Finally Paul becomes so annoyed that he turns around and says to the spirit, In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her! At that moment the spirit leaves her.

Her owners realize their hope of making money is gone. They don't care that she's free. They care that their profits are gone. They seize Paul and Silas and drag them to the marketplace before the authorities. These men are Jews, and they're throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept.

The crowd joins the attack. The magistrates order them to be stripped and beaten with rods. After they've been severely flogged, they're thrown into prison, and the jailer is ordered to guard them carefully. He puts them in the inner cell and fastens their feet in the stocks.

Then this: "About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them."

Their backs are bleeding. Their feet are locked in the stocks. It's the middle of the night in a dark, filthy cell. And they're singing. The other prisoners are listening. Of course they are. Who sings in a place like that?

Suddenly there's such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison are shaken. At once all the prison doors fly open, and everyone's chains come loose.

The jailer wakes up, sees the prison doors open, and draws his sword to kill himself, because he thinks the prisoners have escaped. Under Roman law, a guard who lost his prisoners could face the same punishment they would have received. But Paul shouts, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!"

The jailer calls for lights, rushes in, and falls trembling before Paul and Silas. He brings them out and asks, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

They reply, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household." Then they speak the word of the Lord to him and to everyone in his house. At that hour of the night, the jailer takes them and washes their wounds. Then immediately he and all his household are baptized. He brings them into his house and sets

a meal before them, and he's filled with joy because he has come to believe in God, he and his whole household.

The man who locked their feet in the stocks is now washing their wounds and cooking them dinner.

In the morning, the magistrates send officers to release them quietly. But Paul says, They beat us publicly without a trial, even though we are Roman citizens, and threw us into prison. And now they want to get rid of us quietly? No! Let them come themselves and escort us out. Beating a Roman citizen without a trial was illegal. The magistrates are alarmed, come to apologize, and escort them out.

Paul wasn't being petty. By insisting on being publicly cleared, he protected the new believers in Philippi, who would otherwise be associated with criminals. After visiting Lydia's house and encouraging the believers, they leave.

KEY VERSE

They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household."

Acts 16:31 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The Spirit closed several doors before opening the one to Macedonia. Have you ever experienced a closed door that led somewhere better?
2. Paul and Silas sang in prison at midnight. What would it look like for you to worship God in a dark moment?
3. The jailer's whole life changed in one night. What do you think made him ask, "What must I do to be saved?"

TRY THIS *The next time you're having a bad day, put on a worship song or sing one, even quietly, and notice how it affects you.*

CHAPTER 17

The Unknown God

Acts 17

Paul and his companions travel to Thessalonica, where there's a synagogue. As his custom is, Paul goes in, and on three Sabbath days he reasons with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah, he says.

Some of the Jews are persuaded and join Paul and Silas, as do a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women. But other Jewish leaders become jealous. They round up some bad characters from the marketplace, form a mob, and start a riot in the city. Not finding Paul and Silas, they drag a believer named Jason before the city officials, shouting, "These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here."

Older translations say these men "have turned the world upside down." That's quite a reputation for a handful of traveling preachers.

That night the believers send Paul and Silas away to Berea. And the Bereans are different. They're more noble than those in Thessalonica, Luke says, because they receive the message with great eagerness "and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true."

That's what Luke praises them for. Not for accepting everything Paul said. For checking it. Eagerness plus investigation is a great combination. As a result, many of them believe.

But the troublemakers from Thessalonica follow Paul to Berea and stir up the crowds there too. The believers send Paul to the coast, and his escorts bring him to Athens.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Athens**
>
> By Paul's time, Athens was no longer a political power, but it was still the most famous center of philosophy and learning in the world. It was the city of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. It was also full of temples, statues, and altars to countless gods. The Areopagus, meaning "Hill of Ares," was both a rocky hill near the Acropolis and the name of a respected council that met to judge matters of religion and morals. Two major schools of philosophy were the Epicureans, who taught that the gods were distant and pleasure was the highest good, and the Stoics, who believed in a divine reason running through everything and valued self-control.

While Paul is waiting in Athens, he's greatly distressed to see that the city is full of idols. So he reasons in the synagogue with the Jews and God-fearers, and in the marketplace day by day with whoever happens to be there. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers begin to debate with him. Some of them ask, What is this babbler trying to say? Others say he seems to be advocating foreign gods, because Paul is preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.

They take him to a meeting of the Areopagus. May we know what this new teaching is? Luke adds a wry comment: all the Athenians and foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.

Paul stands up in the meeting. His sermon is a masterclass in talking to people who don't share your starting point.

He begins with something positive. People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. As I walked around, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship, and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.

Then he tells them about the God who made the world and everything in it, who is Lord of heaven and earth and doesn't live in temples built by human hands. He isn't served by human hands, as if He needed anything. He Himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else.

From one man He made all the nations, Paul says, and He determined their times and places. "God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us." Then Paul quotes two Greek poets the Athenians knew: In Him we live and move and have our being, and We are His offspring.

Paul doesn't quote Isaiah or Moses to people who have never read them. He quotes their own poets, then points them to the truth.

Since we're God's offspring, Paul says, we shouldn't think He's like gold or silver or stone, an image made by human design. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now He commands all people everywhere to repent. He has set a day when He will judge the world with justice by the man He has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising Him from the dead.

When they hear about the resurrection, some of them sneer. But others say, We want to hear you again on this subject. And a few

become followers of Paul and believe. Among them are Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.

It wasn't a huge revival. Some laughed. Some wanted to think more. A few believed. That's often how it goes when you talk about Jesus with skeptical, educated people. Paul did his part faithfully and left the results to God.

KEY VERSE

God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us.

Acts 17:27 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The Bereans were praised for checking Paul's teaching against Scripture. How can you be both open and careful when you hear teaching about God?
2. Paul found common ground with the Athenians before telling them about Jesus. What common ground could you find with friends who don't believe?
3. Some sneered, some wanted to hear more, and a few believed. How do you handle it when people react differently to your faith?

CHAPTER 18

Don’t Be Silent

Acts 18

Paul leaves Athens and goes to Corinth. There he meets a Jewish couple named Aquila and Priscilla, recently arrived from Italy because the emperor Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul goes to see them, and because he’s a tentmaker as they are, he stays and works with them. Every Sabbath he reasons in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Corinth**

Corinth was a busy, wealthy port city, on a narrow strip of land between two seas, which made it a hub of trade between east and west. It was famous for its temples, its athletic games, and its reputation for immorality. In fact, the Greeks used a word based on “Corinth” to mean living immorally. Archaeologists have found an inscription in Delphi that dates Gallio’s term as proconsul in Corinth to about AD 51 or 52, which helps historians date Paul’s visit and his other journeys.

Paul was the greatest missionary in the early church, and he supported himself by sewing tents. He didn’t think working a regular job was beneath him. Later, he wrote that he did it so no one could say he was preaching for money.

When Silas and Timothy come from Macedonia, Paul devotes himself exclusively to preaching, testifying that Jesus is the Messiah. When the Jewish leaders oppose him and become abusive,

Paul shakes out his clothes in protest and says, Your blood be on your own heads. From now on I will go to the Gentiles. He leaves the synagogue and goes next door to the house of Titius Justus, a worshiper of God. Crispus, the synagogue leader, and his entire household believe in the Lord. And many of the Corinthians who hear Paul believe and are baptized.

Then one night the Lord speaks to Paul in a vision. “Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city.”

Why would Paul need to hear “Do not be afraid”? Because he was afraid. He’d been beaten in Philippi, chased out of Thessalonica and Berea, and laughed at in Athens. Later he wrote to the Corinthians that he came to them “in weakness with great fear and trembling.” Even the apostle Paul got scared. God didn’t tell him he was wrong to feel afraid. He told him He was with him.

So Paul stays in Corinth for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God.

While Gallio is proconsul of Achaia, some Jewish leaders bring Paul to court. This man is persuading people to worship God in ways contrary to the law. Before Paul can even speak, Gallio dismisses the case. If this were about a crime, I’d listen. But since it involves questions about words and names and your own law, settle the matter yourselves. He refuses to be a judge of such things and has them ejected from the court.

This ruling matters. A Roman official decides that the Christian faith is an internal Jewish matter, not a crime against Rome. For a while, that gives Paul and the believers some legal protection.

Paul stays on in Corinth for some time, then sails for Syria with Priscilla and Aquila. In Ephesus, he leaves them and goes on. Then he travels back through Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples. This is the start of his third journey.

Meanwhile, a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, comes to Ephesus. He's a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. He speaks with great fervor and teaches about Jesus accurately, though he knows only the baptism of John. He begins to speak boldly in the synagogue.

When Priscilla and Aquila hear him, they invite him to their home and explain to him the way of God more adequately.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Priscilla and Aquila**
>
> Priscilla, also called Prisca, and her husband Aquila are mentioned six times in the New Testament. In four of those six mentions, Priscilla's name comes first, which was unusual in that culture and may suggest she was the more prominent of the two in ministry. They hosted churches in their homes in Ephesus and Rome, risked their lives for Paul, and together taught one of the greatest preachers of the early church. They were tentmakers and teachers, side by side.

Notice how they correct him: privately, at home, over a meal. They don't call him out in public. They don't embarrass him. They invite him in and help him understand. And Apollos, a gifted, famous speaker, is humble enough to learn from a tentmaking couple.

When Apollos wants to go to Achaia, the believers encourage him and write to the disciples there to welcome him. When he arrives, he's a great help to those who by grace had believed. He vigorously refutes his opponents in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Messiah.

KEY VERSE

One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent."

Acts 18:9 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Even Paul was afraid. What are you afraid of when it comes to talking about your faith?
2. Paul worked a regular job while doing ministry. How can you serve God through your schoolwork or job?
3. Priscilla and Aquila corrected Apollos privately and kindly. How do you respond when someone corrects you? How do you correct others?

CHAPTER 19

Riot in Ephesus

Acts 19

While Apollos is in Corinth, Paul takes the road through the interior and arrives at Ephesus. There he finds some disciples and asks them, Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed? They answer, No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.

They had been baptized with John's baptism. Paul explains that John's baptism was a baptism of repentance, and John told people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus. On hearing this, they're baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul places his hands on them, the Holy Spirit comes on them, and they speak in tongues and prophesy. There are about twelve men in all.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Ephesus**
>
> Ephesus was one of the largest cities in the Roman Empire and the most important city in the province of Asia, in what is now western Turkey. It had a huge theater that could hold about 25,000 people, and it was home to the Temple of Artemis, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. Ephesus was also known for magic. Scrolls of spells and incantations were so associated with the city that people called them "Ephesian writings."

Paul goes into the synagogue and speaks boldly there for three months. When some refuse to believe and publicly malign the Way, he leaves them and takes the disciples with him. He has discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. This goes on for two years, "so

that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord."

That's probably when churches started in cities like Colossae, Laodicea, and the other cities mentioned in the book of Revelation. Paul stayed in one place, and people who came through Ephesus took the message home with them.

God does extraordinary miracles through Paul. Even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him are taken to the sick, and their illnesses are cured.

Then some Jews who went around driving out evil spirits try to use the name of the Lord Jesus like a magic formula. In the name of the Jesus whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out. Seven sons of a Jewish chief priest named Sceva are doing this. One day the evil spirit answers them, "Jesus I know, and Paul I know about, but who are you?" Then the man with the evil spirit jumps on them and overpowers them all. They run out of the house naked and bleeding.

The name of Jesus isn't a magic word. It belongs to a person, and it's only powerful for people who actually belong to Him.

When this becomes known to everyone in Ephesus, they're all seized with fear, and the name of the Lord Jesus is held in high honor. Many of those who believe now come and openly confess what they've done. A number who had practiced sorcery bring their scrolls together and burn them publicly. When they calculate the value of the scrolls, the total comes to fifty thousand drachmas. A drachma was about a day's wage. That's more than 130 years of wages, going up in smoke.

"In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power."

Real repentance costs something. These people didn't just stop using their spell books. They burned them, so they could never go back.

After all this, Paul decides to go to Jerusalem, passing through Macedonia and Achaia. After I have been there, he says, I must visit Rome also.

About that time, there arises a great disturbance about the Way. A silversmith named Demetrius, who makes silver shrines of Artemis, brings in a lot of business for the craftsmen. He calls them together with workers in related trades. You know we get a good income from this business, he says. And you see and hear how this fellow Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus and in practically the whole province of Asia. He says that gods made by human hands are no gods at all. There's danger that our trade will lose its good name, and that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be discredited.

Notice the order of his concerns. First money. Then religion.

When they hear this, they're furious and begin shouting, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" Soon the whole city is in an uproar. The people seize two of Paul's traveling companions and rush into the theater together. Paul wants to appear before the crowd, but the disciples won't let him. Even some officials of the province, who are Paul's friends, send him a message begging him not to go into the theater.

"The assembly was in confusion: Some were shouting one thing, some another. Most of the people did not even know why they were there." For about two hours they keep shouting, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!"

That might be the most accurate description of a mob ever written. Most of them didn't even know why they were there.

Finally the city clerk quiets the crowd. Everyone knows Ephesus is the guardian of the temple of Artemis, he says, so there's no need to riot. These men haven't robbed temples or blasphemed our goddess. If Demetrius has a complaint, the courts are open. As it is, we're in danger of being charged with rioting. Then he dismisses the assembly.

KEY VERSE

In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.

Acts 19:20 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The sons of Sceva tried to use Jesus' name without knowing Him. What's the difference between using Jesus' name and actually belonging to Him?
2. The new believers burned their expensive scrolls so they couldn't go back. Is there anything in your life you need to get rid of completely?
3. Most of the mob didn't know why they were there. When have you gone along with a crowd without really knowing why?

CHAPTER 20

The Long Goodbye

Acts 20

When the uproar ends, Paul sends for the disciples, encourages them, says goodbye, and sets out for Macedonia. He travels through that area, speaking many words of encouragement, and finally arrives in Greece, where he stays three months. Because some Jewish leaders plot against him just as he's about to sail for Syria, he decides to go back through Macedonia. Luke lists seven men from different churches traveling with him. Then "we" sail from Philippi to Troas.

On the first day of the week, they come together to break bread. Paul speaks to the people, and because he intends to leave the next day, he keeps on talking until midnight.

There are many lamps in the upstairs room where they're meeting. Oil lamps make a room warm and stuffy. Seated in a window is a young man named Eutychus. He's sinking into a deep sleep as Paul talks on and on. When he's sound asleep, he falls from the third story to the ground and is picked up dead.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Eutychus**
>
> Luke calls Eutychus a "young man," and later uses a word that can mean a boy or young servant. He was probably a teenager. His name means "lucky" or "fortunate," which turns out to be appropriate. The meeting was on "the first day of the week," Sunday, which is one of the earliest signs that

> Christians were gathering for worship on the day Jesus rose from the dead. Many of them were servants or laborers who had worked all day before coming to church at night.

So if you've ever fallen asleep during a sermon, you're in biblical company. Though hopefully not in a window.

Paul goes down, throws himself on the young man, and puts his arms around him. Don't be alarmed, he says. He's alive! Then Paul goes upstairs again, breaks bread, and eats. And after talking until daylight, he leaves. The people take the young man home alive and are greatly comforted.

Paul talked until midnight, a boy died and was raised, and then Paul kept talking until sunrise. That's some church service.

Paul is in a hurry to reach Jerusalem, if possible, by the day of Pentecost. So he decides to sail past Ephesus to avoid spending time in the province of Asia. But from Miletus, he sends to Ephesus for the elders of the church.

When they arrive, he gives them a farewell speech. It's the only speech in Acts that Paul gives to Christian leaders, and it's deeply personal.

You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, he says. I served the Lord with great humility and with tears, in spite of severe testing. I didn't hesitate to preach anything that would be helpful to you, publicly and from house to house. Now, compelled by the Spirit, I'm going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me.

"However, I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me." The task of testifying to the good news of God's grace.

Then he tells them something that breaks their hearts. None of you will ever see me again.

He gives them a charge. Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which He bought with His own blood. He warns them that savage wolves will come in among them and will not spare the flock. Even from their own number, men will arise and distort the truth to draw away disciples. So be on your guard!

He reminds them that he never wanted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. He worked with his own hands to supply his own needs and the needs of his companions. In everything, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus Himself said: "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **A Saying Only in Acts**
>
> "It is more blessed to give than to receive" is one of the most famous sayings of Jesus. But it doesn't appear in any of the four Gospels. It's found only here, in Paul's speech. John wrote at the end of his Gospel that Jesus did many other things that weren't written down. This is one example of a saying of Jesus that was remembered and passed on in the early church and recorded by Luke.

When Paul has finished speaking, he kneels down with all of them and prays. They all weep as they embrace him and kiss him. What grieves them most is his statement that they will never see his face again. Then they walk with him to the ship.

KEY VERSE

However, I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace.

Acts 20:24 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Eutychus fell asleep in church and nearly lost his life. What helps you stay engaged when it's hard to pay attention?
2. Paul said his only aim was to finish the race God gave him. What would it look like for you to live with that kind of focus?
3. Jesus said it is more blessed to give than to receive. When have you found that to be true?

CHAPTER 21

Ready to Die

Acts 21

After tearing themselves away from the Ephesian elders, Paul and his companions sail along the coast. At Tyre they find disciples and stay with them seven days. Through the Spirit these disciples urge Paul not to go on to Jerusalem. When it's time to leave, all of them, including wives and children, walk with them out of the city, and they kneel on the beach to pray before saying goodbye.

They reach Caesarea and stay at the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the seven from Acts 6. He has four unmarried daughters who prophesy. Remember Joel's prophecy at Pentecost about sons and daughters prophesying? Here it is.

While they're there, a prophet named Agabus comes down from Judea. The same Agabus who predicted the famine back in chapter 11. He takes Paul's belt, ties his own hands and feet with it, and says, The Holy Spirit says, In this way the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Warnings and Guidance**

It can seem confusing that believers "through the Spirit" urged Paul not to go to Jerusalem, while Paul said he was compelled by the Spirit to go. Many Bible teachers understand it this way: the Spirit revealed to many people that suffering was waiting for Paul in Jerusalem. The believers, out of love,

> concluded that he shouldn't go. Paul understood the same warning as preparation, not prohibition. The Spirit told them what would happen; Paul chose to go anyway.

When the believers hear this, everyone, including Luke, pleads with Paul not to go. Then Paul answers, "Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." When he won't be dissuaded, they give up and say, "The Lord's will be done."

That's the prayer Jesus prayed in Gethsemane. Not My will, but Yours. Paul's friends pray it too, through their tears.

When they arrive in Jerusalem, the believers receive them warmly. The next day Paul and the others go to see James, and all the elders are present. Paul reports in detail what God has done among the Gentiles through his ministry. When they hear this, they praise God.

Then they tell Paul there's a problem. Thousands of Jewish believers here are zealous for the law, and they've been told that you teach Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, to stop circumcising their children, and to abandon Jewish customs. That wasn't true. Paul taught that Gentiles didn't need to keep the law for salvation, not that Jews had to stop.

So the elders suggest a plan. Four men among them have taken a vow. Join them in their purification rites and pay their expenses. Then everyone will know there's no truth in these reports. Paul agrees. He's willing to set aside his own freedom to keep peace and avoid giving offense. He later wrote that to the Jews he became like a Jew, to win the Jews.

When the seven days are nearly over, some Jews from the province of Asia see Paul at the temple. They stir up the whole crowd and

seize him, shouting that this is the man who teaches everyone everywhere against our people and our law and this place. And he has brought Greeks into the temple and defiled this holy place. They had seen a Gentile from Ephesus with Paul in the city earlier and assumed Paul had brought him into the temple.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Temple Warning**
>
> A low stone barrier separated the outer Court of the Gentiles from the inner courts of the temple. Signs posted along it, in Greek and Latin, warned Gentiles not to go any further on pain of death. One of these warning stones was discovered in 1871 and is now in a museum in Istanbul. Another fragment was found later. The Romans allowed the Jewish authorities to enforce this rule, even with execution. That's why the accusation against Paul was so dangerous.

The whole city is aroused, and people come running from all directions. Seizing Paul, they drag him from the temple, and immediately the gates are shut. While they're trying to kill him, news reaches the commander of the Roman troops that all Jerusalem is in an uproar. He takes some officers and soldiers and runs down to the crowd. When the rioters see the commander and his soldiers, they stop beating Paul.

The commander arrests him and orders him bound with two chains, just as Agabus predicted. The crowd is shouting so many different things that the commander can't figure out what happened. As the soldiers carry Paul up the steps to the barracks, the mob behind is shouting, "Get rid of him!"

At the top of the steps, Paul asks the commander in Greek if he can say something. The commander is surprised; he'd assumed Paul was an Egyptian rebel who had started a revolt. Paul says he's a Jew from Tarsus, a citizen of no ordinary city, and asks for permission to

speak to the people. The commander agrees, and Paul stands on the steps, motions to the crowd, and when they're all silent, he begins to speak to them in Aramaic.

Beaten, bound, bleeding, and surrounded by people who just tried to kill him, Paul asks for the microphone.

KEY VERSE

Then Paul answered, "Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus."

Acts 21:13 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul's friends loved him and begged him not to go. When is it hard to tell the difference between good advice and God's direction?
2. Paul was willing to give up some of his freedom to keep peace with other believers. When might you need to do that?
3. Paul's first move after being beaten was to ask to speak to the crowd. What does that tell you about him?

CHAPTER 22

My Story

Acts 22

Paul stands on the barracks steps and begins: Brothers and fathers, listen now to my defense. When the crowd hears him speaking in Aramaic, their own language, they become very quiet.

And Paul doesn't give them an argument. He tells them his story.

I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. I studied under Gamaliel and was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors. I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison. The high priest and the whole council can testify about me.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Telling Your Story**
>
> Acts tells the story of Paul's conversion three times: in chapter 9, when it happens; here in chapter 22, when Paul tells it to a hostile crowd in Jerusalem; and in chapter 26, when he tells it to a king. Each version emphasizes slightly different details for a different audience, the way you might tell the same story differently to your grandmother and to your friends. Paul's personal testimony was one of his most powerful tools. No one could argue with what had happened to him.

Then he tells them about the road to Damascus. About noon, a bright light from heaven flashed around me. I fell to the ground and

heard a voice saying, Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute Me? Who are You, Lord? I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.

He tells them about Ananias, whom he describes as a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there. He tells them what Ananias said: God has chosen you to know His will and to see the Righteous One. You will be His witness to all people of what you have seen and heard. “And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.”

Then he tells them something even his friends might not have known. When he returned to Jerusalem, he was praying at the temple and fell into a trance. He saw the Lord telling him to leave Jerusalem quickly, because the people there wouldn’t accept his testimony. Paul argued. Lord, they know I went from one synagogue to another to imprison and beat those who believe in You. And when the blood of Your martyr Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.

Paul is still haunted by Stephen. Decades later, he still mentions the coats.

Then the Lord said, Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles.

The crowd has been listening up to that word. Gentiles. Then they explode. They raise their voices and shout, Rid the earth of him! He’s not fit to live! They throw off their cloaks and fling dust into the air.

The commander orders Paul taken into the barracks. He directs that Paul be flogged and interrogated to find out why the people are shouting at him like this.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Roman Citizenship**
>
> Roman citizenship was a valuable legal status. A citizen had the right to a fair trial and could not be flogged or tortured without being convicted, or crucified at all, in most cases. Citizenship could be inherited, granted as a reward, or sometimes bought with a large bribe. Paul was born a citizen, probably because his father or grandfather had received it. Claiming citizenship falsely was a serious crime, so people rarely lied about it.

As they stretch Paul out to flog him, Paul says to the centurion standing there, Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who hasn't even been found guilty? The centurion goes straight to the commander. What are you going to do? This man is a Roman citizen.

The commander comes and asks Paul if it's true. Yes, Paul says. The commander says he had to pay a lot of money for his citizenship. Paul replies, "But I was born a citizen." Those who were about to interrogate him withdraw immediately. The commander himself is alarmed when he realizes he has put a Roman citizen in chains.

The next day, since he wants to find out exactly why Paul is being accused, the commander releases him and orders the chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin to assemble. Then he brings Paul and has him stand before them.

KEY VERSE

And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.

Acts 22:16 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul told his story instead of starting an argument. What's your story of how you came to know God, or where you are right now?
2. Paul still remembered holding the coats at Stephen's death. How does God's forgiveness work with memories of things we regret?
3. The crowd listened until Paul said "Gentiles." What words or ideas make people stop listening today?

CHAPTER 23

Take Courage

Acts 23

Paul looks straight at the Sanhedrin and says, My brothers, I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day. At this the high priest Ananias orders those standing near Paul to strike him on the mouth.

Paul snaps back. God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! You sit there to judge me according to the law, yet you yourself violate the law by commanding that I be struck! Those standing near Paul say, How dare you insult God's high priest? Paul replies that he didn't realize he was the high priest, and quotes the law: Do not speak evil about the ruler of your people.

Some readers think Paul had poor eyesight. Others think he was being sarcastic: I didn't recognize that someone acting like this could be the high priest. Either way, Paul was human. He lost his temper, and then he backed down.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Ananias the High Priest**
>
> This Ananias (a third man with that name in Acts) was high priest from about AD 47 to 59. The historian Josephus describes him as greedy and violent, and says he stole the tithes meant for ordinary priests. He was so hated that when the Jewish revolt against Rome broke out in AD 66, rebels killed him. Paul's prediction that God would strike him came true.

Then Paul, knowing that some of the council are Sadducees and others are Pharisees, calls out: My brothers, I am a Pharisee, descended from Pharisees. I stand on trial because of the hope of the resurrection of the dead.

It works instantly. A dispute breaks out between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly is divided. The Sadducees say there is no resurrection, no angels, and no spirits, but the Pharisees believe all these things. Some of the teachers of the law who are Pharisees stand up and argue: We find nothing wrong with this man. What if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?

It was clever, but it was also true. The resurrection of Jesus really was the heart of the whole issue.

The dispute becomes so violent that the commander is afraid Paul will be torn to pieces. He orders the troops to take him away by force and bring him into the barracks.

That night, alone in a Roman barracks, after being beaten by a mob and nearly torn apart by a council, Paul gets a visit. “The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, ‘Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.’”

Paul had said back in chapter 19 that he must visit Rome. Now Jesus confirms it. Paul is going to Rome. He just doesn’t know it’ll be in chains.

The next morning, more than forty men form a conspiracy and bind themselves with an oath not to eat or drink until they’ve killed Paul. They go to the chief priests and elders and lay out a plan: ask the commander to bring Paul before you again, on the pretext of wanting more information, and we’ll kill him on the way.

But the son of Paul's sister hears of this plot. This is the only time the Bible mentions Paul's family. His nephew goes into the barracks and tells Paul. Paul calls one of the centurions and says, Take this young man to the commander. He has something to tell him.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Paul's Nephew**

We know almost nothing about Paul's family, except that his sister had a son living in Jerusalem. Luke calls him a "young man," and the commander takes him by the hand, which may suggest he was a teenager or even younger. Somehow he overheard a plot by more than forty men, and he was brave enough to walk into a Roman barracks and report it. God used a young person, whose name we don't even know, to save the life of the greatest missionary of the early church.

The commander takes the young man by the hand, draws him aside, and asks, What is it you want to tell me? He explains the plot. The commander dismisses him with a warning: Don't tell anyone you've reported this to me.

Then the commander calls two of his centurions and orders them to get ready a detachment of two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen, and two hundred spearmen to go to Caesarea at nine that night. Provide horses for Paul so he may be taken safely to Governor Felix.

That's 470 soldiers to protect one prisoner from forty assassins. God told Paul he would testify in Rome. And He used a Roman army to make sure he got there.

The commander writes a letter to Felix explaining the situation, and the soldiers take Paul by night to Antipatris and then to Caesarea. Felix reads the letter, learns Paul is from Cilicia, and says he'll hear the case when his accusers arrive. He orders that Paul be kept under guard in Herod's palace.

KEY VERSE

The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, "Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome."

Acts 23:11 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul lost his temper and then backed down. How do you handle it when you react badly in a tense moment?
2. Jesus stood near Paul on one of his worst nights. When have you sensed God near you in a hard time?
3. Paul's nephew was young and unnamed, but brave. What could you do this week that takes courage, even if no one ever knows your name?

CHAPTER 24

The Governor Who Waited

Acts 24

Five days later, the high priest Ananias goes down to Caesarea with some of the elders and a lawyer named Tertullus. They bring their charges against Paul before the governor.

Tertullus opens with a speech full of flattery. We have enjoyed a long period of peace under you, Felix, and your foresight has brought about reforms in this nation. Everywhere and in every way, most excellent Felix, we acknowledge this with profound gratitude.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Felix**
>
> Antonius Felix was governor of Judea from about AD 52 to 59 or 60. He was a former slave who rose to power through connections in the emperor's household. The Roman historian Tacitus wrote that Felix used the power of a king with the mind of a slave. His rule was marked by violence and unrest, the opposite of the "long period of peace" Tertullus praised. His wife Drusilla was the daughter of Herod Agrippa I, the king who executed James in Acts 12.

Then the accusation. We have found this man to be a troublemaker, stirring up riots among the Jews all over the world. He's a ringleader of the Nazarene sect and even tried to desecrate the temple.

Some verses here are numbered differently than you might expect. If you look closely, you'll see the NIV has a footnote at verses 6 through 8. Some manuscripts add a few more lines to Tertullus's

speech, which became verse 7, and the earliest manuscripts don't include them. It doesn't change the story.

The governor motions for Paul to speak. Paul doesn't use flattery. He simply says he's glad to make his defense before someone who has been a judge over the nation for a number of years. Then he lays out the facts. He arrived in Jerusalem no more than twelve days ago to worship. His accusers didn't find him arguing with anyone or stirring up a crowd in the temple, the synagogues, or anywhere else in the city. They can't prove their charges.

But I admit, Paul says, that I worship the God of our ancestors as a follower of the Way, which they call a sect. He believes everything that is in accordance with the Law and the Prophets, and he has the same hope in God that they themselves have, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked. "So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man."

Then Felix, who is well acquainted with the Way, adjourns the proceedings. When the commander comes, I'll decide your case. He orders the centurion to keep Paul under guard but to give him some freedom and to let his friends take care of his needs.

Several days later, Felix comes with his wife Drusilla, who is Jewish. He sends for Paul and listens to him as he speaks about faith in Christ Jesus. And Paul doesn't play it safe. As Paul talks about righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come, Felix is afraid and says, That's enough for now! You may leave. When I find it convenient, I will send for you.

Paul talked to a corrupt governor and his wife about righteousness, self-control, and judgment. It's hard to think of three topics more

likely to make Felix uncomfortable. Felix had stolen Drusilla from her first husband. He got the point.

“When I find it convenient.” That’s one of the most dangerous phrases in the Bible. Felix felt the truth hit him, and he put it off. There’s no record that the convenient time ever came.

At the same time, he was hoping Paul would offer him a bribe, so he sent for him frequently and talked with him. Felix listened to the gospel many times. But he was listening for money, not for truth.

When two years have passed, Felix is succeeded by Porcius Festus. Because Felix wants to grant a favor to the Jewish leaders, he leaves Paul in prison.

Two years. Paul, the tireless traveler, sits in a cell in Caesarea for two years, waiting. It’s possible that Luke, who was nearby, used some of that time to research and write his Gospel. Waiting isn’t always wasted.

KEY VERSE

So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man.

Acts 24:16 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Tertullus used flattery; Paul used facts. Why is honesty more powerful than flattery in the long run?
2. Felix said, "When I find it convenient." What decision about God are you tempted to put off?
3. Paul waited in prison for two years. How do you handle long seasons when it feels like nothing is happening?

CHAPTER 25

A Dead Man Named Jesus

Acts 25

Three days after arriving in the province, Festus goes up from Caesarea to Jerusalem. The chief priests and Jewish leaders appear before him and present their charges against Paul. Two years have passed, and they still want him dead. They ask Festus to transfer Paul to Jerusalem, planning to ambush him on the way.

Festus answers that Paul is being held at Caesarea, and he himself is going there soon. Let some of your leaders come with me and press charges there.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Festus**
>
> Porcius Festus became governor of Judea around AD 59 or 60, after Felix. Not much is known about him from outside sources, but he seems to have been a more honest and efficient governor than Felix. He died in office after only about two years. Festus's main goal, like that of most Roman governors, was to keep the peace in a difficult province and stay on good terms with the local leaders.

After about ten days, Festus goes down to Caesarea. The next day he convenes the court and orders Paul brought before him. The Jewish leaders from Jerusalem stand around him, bringing many serious charges against him that they cannot prove.

Paul makes his defense. I have done nothing wrong against the Jewish law or against the temple or against Caesar.

Festus, wishing to do the leaders a favor, asks Paul, Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and stand trial before me there on these charges?

Paul knows what that means. He'd never make it there alive. So he uses his right as a Roman citizen. I'm now standing before Caesar's court, where I ought to be tried. I have not done any wrong to the Jewish leaders, as you yourself know very well. If I'm guilty of doing anything deserving death, I don't refuse to die. But if the charges are not true, no one has the right to hand me over to them. "I appeal to Caesar!"

After Festus confers with his council, he declares, You have appealed to Caesar. To Caesar you will go!

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Appealing to Caesar**
>
> A Roman citizen accused of a serious crime in a province could, in certain cases, appeal his case to be heard by the emperor in Rome. At this time the emperor was Nero, early in his reign, before he became infamous for persecuting Christians. By appealing, Paul removed his case from the local governor and the pressure of the Jerusalem leaders. It also guaranteed him a trip to Rome at government expense, the very place Jesus had told him he would testify.

A few days later, King Agrippa and Bernice arrive at Caesarea to pay their respects to Festus. Agrippa is Herod Agrippa II, great-grandson of Herod the Great, and Bernice is his sister. Since they're spending many days there, Festus discusses Paul's case with the king.

Festus explains that when the accusers got up to speak, they didn't charge Paul with any of the crimes he had expected. "Instead, they had some points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a dead man named Jesus who Paul claimed was alive."

That's how a Roman governor summarized the gospel. A dead man named Jesus whom Paul claims is alive. He meant it as a dismissive summary, but he got it exactly right. That is the whole point.

Festus admits he was at a loss how to investigate such matters. So when Paul appealed, he ordered him held until he could send him to Caesar. Agrippa says, I would like to hear this man myself. Festus replies, Tomorrow you will hear him.

The next day Agrippa and Bernice come with great pomp and enter the audience room with the high-ranking military officers and the prominent men of the city. Picture the scene: royal robes, military uniforms, the most important people in the region. And then, at the command of Festus, Paul is brought in. In chains.

Festus explains his problem. He has nothing definite to write to the emperor about Paul. He hasn't done anything deserving death, but he appealed to the emperor. I think it is unreasonable, Festus says, to send a prisoner on to Rome without specifying the charges against him. He's hoping Agrippa, who understands Jewish matters, can help him figure out what to write.

KEY VERSE

Instead, they had some points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a dead man named Jesus who Paul claimed was alive.

Acts 25:19 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul used his legal rights as a citizen. When is it right for Christians to stand up for their rights?
2. Festus summarized the gospel as a dispute about "a dead man named Jesus who Paul claimed was alive." If someone summarized your faith in one sentence, what would they say?
3. Paul was in chains in a room full of powerful people. Who do you think really had the most power in that room?

CHAPTER 26

Almost Persuaded

Acts 26

Agrippa says to Paul, You have permission to speak for yourself. So Paul motions with his hand and begins his defense.

King Agrippa, I consider myself fortunate to stand before you today, because you are well acquainted with all the Jewish customs and controversies. Paul is genuinely glad. Finally, a judge who might actually understand.

He tells his story for the third time in Acts. He grew up in Jerusalem and lived as a Pharisee, the strictest sect of our religion. And now, he says, it is because of my hope in what God promised our ancestors that I am on trial today. “Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?”

Then Paul is honest about his past. I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. He locked up many believers, cast his vote against them when they were put to death, and went from one synagogue to another to have them punished. In his obsession, he even hunted them down in foreign cities.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Agrippa II**

Herod Agrippa II was the last king from the family of Herod. He was the son of Herod Agrippa I, who executed James in Acts 12, the great-grandson of Herod

> the Great, who tried to kill baby Jesus, and the great-nephew of Herod Antipas, who executed John the Baptist. He ruled territories north and east of Galilee and had authority over the temple in Jerusalem, including appointing high priests. He knew Jewish beliefs well. Four generations of Herods had opposed Jesus and His followers. Now one of them was listening to the gospel.

Then Paul tells about the road to Damascus. This version includes a detail we haven't heard before. Jesus said to him, It is hard for you to kick against the goads. A goad was a pointed stick used to steer oxen. An ox that kicked against it only hurt itself. Saul had been fighting against God, and it was hurting him.

Paul also includes more of what Jesus said to him on the road. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness. I am sending you to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in Me.

So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven. He preached that people should repent and turn to God and demonstrate their repentance by their deeds. That's why the Jewish leaders seized him in the temple courts and tried to kill him. But God has helped him to this very day. He's saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen: that the Messiah would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, bring the message of light to His own people and to the Gentiles.

At this point Festus interrupts, shouting, You are out of your mind, Paul! Your great learning is driving you insane.

Paul answers calmly. I am not insane, most excellent Festus. What I am saying is true and reasonable. The king is familiar with these

things, and I can speak freely to him. I'm convinced none of this has escaped his notice, "because it was not done in a corner."

That's a great line. Jesus' death and resurrection weren't secret events. They happened in public, in Jerusalem, at Passover, with crowds watching. Anyone could check.

Then Paul turns directly to the king. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do.

Agrippa is cornered. If he says yes, he'll have to deal with Paul's argument. If he says no, he'll offend his Jewish subjects. So he deflects. "Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?"

Paul answers, Short time or long, I pray to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, "except for these chains."

Even in chains, Paul isn't asking to be freed. He's wishing everyone in the room could have what he has. He'd just skip the handcuffs.

The king rises, and with him the governor and Bernice and those sitting with them. After they leave the room, they begin saying to one another, This man is not doing anything that deserves death or imprisonment. Agrippa says to Festus, This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Almost**
>
> Older translations render Agrippa's words as "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian." That phrase inspired a famous hymn about the danger of being "almost persuaded." Most modern translations, including the NIV, take Agrippa's words as a sarcastic deflection rather than a sincere near-decision. Either way, as far as we know, Agrippa never became a follower of Jesus. Hearing the truth isn't the same as responding to it.

KEY VERSE

Then Agrippa said to Paul, "Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?"

Acts 26:28 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Jesus told Paul it was hard to "kick against the goads." Have you ever felt like you were fighting against God? How did it feel?
2. Paul said the events of Jesus' life were "not done in a corner." Why does it matter that Christianity is based on public, checkable events?
3. Agrippa heard the whole gospel and deflected. What are some ways people deflect when the conversation gets too close to home?

CHAPTER 27

Shipwrecked

Acts 27

When it's decided that "we" would sail for Italy, Paul and some other prisoners are handed over to a centurion named Julius, who belongs to the Imperial Regiment. Luke is with him again, along with Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica.

This chapter is one of the most detailed descriptions of an ancient sea voyage that has survived from the ancient world. Sailors and historians have studied it for centuries. Luke clearly was there, and he paid attention.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Ancient Sea Travel**
>
> Sailing on the Mediterranean was dangerous from mid-September to November and was usually avoided altogether from November to March, when storms were frequent and clouds hid the sun and stars that sailors used for navigation. Grain ships from Egypt carried wheat to Rome, which depended on these shipments to feed its huge population. These ships could be large, carrying hundreds of tons of grain and many passengers. But they had no engines and limited ability to steer in a storm.

They set out and make slow progress. At Myra, the centurion finds an Alexandrian grain ship sailing for Italy and puts them on board. Sailing gets difficult. They reach a harbor on Crete called Fair Havens. By now it's late in the season. Luke says it's after the Day of Atonement, which falls in the fall, when sailing gets dangerous.

Paul warns them: Men, I can see that our voyage is going to be disastrous and bring great loss to ship and cargo, and to our own lives also. But the centurion, instead of listening to Paul, follows the advice of the pilot and the owner of the ship. Since the harbor isn't suitable to winter in, the majority decide to sail on, hoping to reach Phoenix, a better harbor on Crete.

When a gentle south wind begins to blow, they think they've gotten what they wanted. Before very long, a wind of hurricane force, called the Northeaster, sweeps down from the island. The ship is caught by the storm and can't head into the wind, so they give way and are driven along.

The sailors pass ropes under the ship to hold it together. They lower the sea anchor. The next day, they start throwing the cargo overboard. On the third day, they throw the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands. When neither sun nor stars appear for many days and the storm keeps raging, "we finally gave up all hope of being saved."

Luke, the careful historian, includes that line about himself. Everyone gave up hope. Including the Christians.

After they've gone a long time without food, Paul stands up before them. He can't resist a small "I told you so": you should have taken my advice not to sail from Crete. But then he encourages them. Now I urge you to keep up your courage, because not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed. Last night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood beside me and said, Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar, and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you. "So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me."

On the fourteenth night, the sailors sense they're approaching land. They take soundings and find the water getting shallower. Fearing they'll be dashed against the rocks, they drop four anchors from the stern and pray for daylight.

In an attempt to escape from the ship, the sailors let the lifeboat down into the sea, pretending they're going to lower some anchors from the bow. Paul tells the centurion and the soldiers, Unless these men stay with the ship, you cannot be saved. So the soldiers cut the ropes that held the lifeboat and let it drift away.

Notice who's in charge now. The prisoner is giving orders, and the Roman soldiers are following them.

Just before dawn, Paul urges them all to eat. For the last fourteen days you've been in constant suspense and have gone without food. Now I urge you to take some food. You need it to survive. Not one of you will lose a single hair from your head. Then he takes some bread and gives thanks to God in front of them all. He breaks it and begins to eat. They're all encouraged and eat some food themselves. Altogether there are 276 people on board.

In the middle of a hurricane, on a ship about to be destroyed, Paul gives thanks for bread. And it changes the whole mood on board.

When daylight comes, they see a bay with a sandy beach and decide to run the ship aground there. But the ship strikes a sandbar and runs aground. The bow sticks fast and won't move, and the stern is broken to pieces by the pounding surf.

The soldiers plan to kill the prisoners to prevent any of them from swimming away and escaping. Roman soldiers who let prisoners escape could be punished severely. But the centurion wants to spare Paul's life and keeps them from carrying out their plan. He orders

those who can swim to jump overboard first and get to land. The rest are to get there on planks or on other pieces of the ship.

"In this way everyone reached land safely." All 276. Just as God promised.

KEY VERSE

So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me.

Acts 27:25 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The centurion listened to the experts instead of Paul. When is it hard to listen to wisdom that goes against what everyone else says?
2. Even Luke admitted they gave up hope. Have you ever felt hopeless? What helped you?
3. Paul gave thanks for bread in the middle of a storm, and it encouraged everyone. How could your attitude in a hard situation affect the people around you?

TRY THIS *This week, when you're in a stressful situation, stop and thank God for one specific thing, out loud if you can. See what it does for you and others.*

CHAPTER 28

Without Hindrance

Acts 28

Once safely on shore, they find out that the island is called Malta. The islanders show them unusual kindness. They build a fire and welcome them all because it's raining and cold.

Paul gathers a pile of brushwood. The great apostle, a prisoner who just saved everyone's life, is helping gather firewood. As he puts it on the fire, a viper, driven out by the heat, fastens itself on his hand.

When the islanders see the snake hanging from his hand, they say to each other, This man must be a murderer. Even though he escaped from the sea, the goddess Justice has not allowed him to live. But Paul shakes the snake off into the fire and suffers no ill effects.

The people expect him to swell up or suddenly fall dead. After waiting a long time and seeing nothing unusual happen to him, they change their minds and say he's a god.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Malta**
>
> Malta is a small island south of Sicily, in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea. In Paul's time it was part of the Roman Empire, and its people spoke a language descended from Phoenician. Luke calls them by a Greek word for non-Greek speakers. A bay on the island's northeast coast, traditionally called

> St. Paul's Bay, is said to be the place of the shipwreck. Paul's visit is still celebrated on Malta today.

First a murderer, then a god. Like the crowd in Lystra, the people of Malta swing from one extreme to the other. Paul is neither. He's a servant of Jesus.

Nearby is an estate belonging to Publius, the chief official of the island. He welcomes them to his home and shows them generous hospitality for three days. His father is sick in bed, suffering from fever and dysentery. Luke, the doctor, gives us the specific diagnosis. Paul goes in to see him, prays, places his hands on him, and heals him. When this happens, the rest of the sick on the island come and are cured. They honor Paul and his companions in many ways, and when they're ready to sail, they furnish them with the supplies they need.

After three months, they put out to sea in a ship that had wintered on the island. They land in Italy and travel overland toward Rome. Believers from Rome hear they are coming and travel as far as the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns to meet them, more than thirty miles. "At the sight of these people Paul thanked God and was encouraged."

Paul had written his letter to the Romans a few years earlier, saying he longed to visit them. Now he's finally here. Not the way he planned. But here.

When they get to Rome, Paul is allowed to live by himself, with a soldier to guard him. It's a kind of house arrest.

Three days later, he calls together the local Jewish leaders. He explains his situation: he has done nothing against his people or their customs, but he was arrested in Jerusalem and handed over to

the Romans. They examined him and wanted to release him, but when the Jewish leaders objected, he had to appeal to Caesar. It is because of the hope of Israel that I am bound with this chain.

They reply that they haven't received any letters from Judea about him. But they want to hear his views, because people everywhere are talking against this sect.

They arrange to meet Paul on a certain day, and they come in even larger numbers to the place where he's staying. From morning till evening he explains and declares to them the kingdom of God, trying to persuade them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets. Some are convinced by what he says, but others won't believe.

As they leave, Paul quotes Isaiah about people who are always hearing but never understanding, always seeing but never perceiving. Then he says that God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, "and they will listen!"

Your NIV will have a footnote here too. Verse 29 is missing from the earliest manuscripts. Some later manuscripts add a line saying the Jewish leaders left, arguing vigorously among themselves.

For two whole years Paul stays there in his own rented house and welcomes all who come to see him. "He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance!"

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **What Happened to Paul?**
>
> Acts ends without telling us the outcome of Paul's trial. Many scholars think Luke wrote Acts during or soon after those two years in Rome, around AD 62, which would explain why he doesn't say more. Paul's letters and early church writers suggest he may have been released, traveled further, and then been

> arrested again. According to strong early tradition, he was executed in Rome under the emperor Nero, probably in the mid-60s AD. During his house arrest, Paul likely wrote some of his letters, including Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon.

And that's it. That's the last sentence of Acts. Without hindrance.

Paul is in chains, but the word of God isn't. The gospel has gone from a room in Jerusalem with 120 people to the capital of the world. From Jerusalem, to Judea and Samaria, to the ends of the earth, just as Jesus said in chapter 1.

But notice that Acts doesn't really end. There's no final scene, no tidy wrap-up. Luke leaves the story open. That's because it isn't finished. The same Spirit is still at work. The story of what Jesus "began to do and to teach" is still going.

And now it's your turn.

KEY VERSE

He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance!

Acts 28:31 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The people of Malta called Paul a murderer, then a god. How can you keep your identity steady when people's opinions of you swing back and forth?
2. Paul made it to Rome, but not the way he expected. When has God answered a prayer in a way you didn't plan?
3. Acts ends without an ending. If chapter 29 were being written about your life, what would you want it to say?

TRY THIS *Write your own "Acts 29" paragraph: one way you'd like to see God work through you in the next year. Share it with someone you trust.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Now What? The Bottom Line

You've just walked through the whole book of Acts. You've seen the Spirit fall like fire, a lame man leap, a persecutor blinded and changed, prison doors swing open, and a prisoner in chains preach to kings. Again and again, the first Christians gave the same message: Jesus died, God raised Him from the dead, and everyone who turns to Him can be forgiven. Now that message has reached you.

Here's what the Bible says, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He's not far away.

Paul told the philosophers in Athens that God made the world and everything in it, and that He wants people to seek Him and find Him, "though he is not far from any one of us." You weren't an accident. You were made to know Him.

2 We've all turned away.

In Acts, the crowds in Jerusalem, the leaders in the council, the idol makers in Ephesus, and even a man named Saul who thought he was serving God all needed to turn back to Him. So do we. The Bible calls it sin, and it separates us from God.

> *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,* **Romans 3:23 (NIV)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. The Bible says the result of sin is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (NIV)**

4 Jesus paid it.

Every sermon in Acts comes back to the same news. Jesus was put to death on a cross, and God raised Him from the dead. Peter told the crowd that salvation is found in no one else. Jesus took our place, and His resurrection proves death has been beaten.

> *But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.* **Romans 5:8 (NIV)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

The church in Acts had a huge argument about whether new believers had to keep the whole Jewish law to be saved. Their answer was no. Peter said we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus. Salvation isn't a checklist you complete. It's a gift you receive by trusting Jesus.

> *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.* **Ephesians 2:8–9 (NIV)**

6 Turn and trust.

When a terrified jailer asked Paul and Silas what he had to do to be saved, they told him: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved." When the crowd at Pentecost asked what to do, Peter said to repent and be baptized. Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. It doesn't mean you'll never fail again. It means you belong to Him now.

> *If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* **Romans 10:9 (NIV)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. The jailer in Philippi didn't have any. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

God, I've been running my own life, and I've sinned against You. I can't fix that myself. I believe Jesus died for me and that You raised Him from the dead. I'm turning to You. Forgive me. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want to follow Him as my King. Fill me with Your Holy Spirit, make me bold, and use me to tell others about You. In Jesus' name, amen.

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. In Acts, people who believed told others almost right away. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read Acts straight through in a Bible, a chapter a day. Then read one of the letters Paul wrote to the churches you met in Acts, like Philippians or Ephesians.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. The first believers devoted themselves to teaching, fellowship, sharing meals, and prayer. Ask about being baptized. In Acts, new believers were baptized right away.

Talk to God every day. The church in Acts prayed constantly: in homes, in the temple, in prison at midnight. Be honest. He can handle it.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. King Agrippa told Paul he wasn't ready to be persuaded so quickly. The people of Berea took time to check the Scriptures for themselves. Keep asking. Keep reading. Talk to someone you trust. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because Acts ends without an ending. The story is still going. Don't stand on the sidelines watching it. Find out where you fit.

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Acts 1:8 (NIV)