

MATTHEW DEVOTIONAL

By Pastor Phil Emerson

OUR DISCIPLESHIP FLOW

At Emmanuel Church, we are passionate about living out the call to be disciples of Jesus Christ, and make it our goal to see His Kingdom come in our lives and the world in which we live. We recognise that in Biblical times, a disciple was someone who followed a teacher or rabbi, not simply to gain head knowledge to pass an examination, but to be fully immersed in the life of the rabbi, and *learn his ways*, so that they in turn could replicate this to the world around them. As Christians, we are now those who have been invited to ‘follow’ Jesus and all of His ways, and we therefore call ourselves His disciples.

“This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did.” 1 John 2:5,6

We therefore want to take seriously the words of Jesus in Matthew 28:19-20 to make disciples and also commit to an ongoing journey of teaching and discipleship together.

We all have differing personalities and learning styles. At Emmanuel, we recognise this diversity within the church body and therefore desire to support and journey together as we relate with God and each other in some of the following environments:

- **Public (20+)**

In the Bible, we see Jesus seeking to make disciples as He engaged with larger numbers of people, e.g., His interaction with the crowds (Matthew 4:25; Luke 14:25), and the 72 (Luke 10:1-24).

At Emmanuel, we want to use each of our **larger gathered environments** as an opportunity to make disciples, e.g., **Sunday services, Friday Youth/Kids’** environments, **men’s/women’s** gatherings.

- **Social (10-15)**

Jesus demonstrated the necessity for **smaller accountable relationships** as an essential part of the life of a disciple. He did this by teaching and doing life with his twelve disciples (e.g., Matthew 10).

At Emmanuel, small accountable relationships are offered through:

Lifegroup 12s

These are **gatherings of 10-15 people** who meet bi-weekly in homes or around specific interests, e.g., crafts, football.

- **Personal (2-5)**

As well as having smaller accountable relationships amongst His twelve friends, Jesus also seemed to go to even deeper levels of trust with three in particular – Peter, James and John (Matthew 17; Mark 9). At Emmanuel, we seek to do this through:

Lifegroup 3s

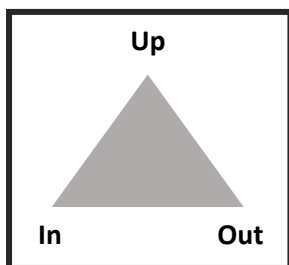
These are smaller **gatherings of 2-5 people** who are committed to transparent and accountable relationships in order to grow together in following Jesus. The aim for these groups is that after 1-2 years, each person in the group would be able to lead a smaller number of people themselves and replicate the process... **disciples making disciples!**

- **Intimate (1-1)**

Jesus regularly withdrew to spend time alone with the Father. This is the ultimate goal of discipleship, that each member of our church family would increasingly spend time alone with the Father and grow in devotion and desire to see the Kingdom come.

A TOOL TO USE

As stated previously, 1 John 2:6 makes it clear that for those of us who call ourselves disciples of Jesus, our goal should be to daily walk in the ways of Jesus, our Rabbi. As we examine the New Testament we see that Jesus lived His life based on three relationships: **Up** – with His Father; **In** – with His chosen followers; **Out** – with the hurting world around Him. This is illustrated in the following triangle:



Jesus taught and modelled out to His disciples how to live into each of these areas in life.

Up

Jesus frequently left the disciples to spend personal time with the Father (Mark 1:35; Luke 5:16). He taught them the significance of prayer, and how to pray and communicate with the Father (Luke 11:1-13). When comparisons with one another or insecurities presented themselves, He spoke into it in love and challenged them into a greater depth of living (Mark 9:33-37; Matthew 18:1-5).

In

Jesus had significant relationships with others in which He intentionally invested (12s and 3s). When He went to engage with the Father He brought the three with Him (Matthew 17:1). He taught them and modelled out the significance of Sabbath and rhythms of rest (Mark 6:31). He demonstrated with His life the significance of generosity and sacrificial love for others (John 13:1-17).

Out

Jesus personally lived a life that engaged with the crowds and the broken world around Him. He healed the sick (Matthew 8:1-4), fed the poor (Mark 6:30-44), and cast out demons (Matthew 8:28-34). But with the people who were closest to Him, He challenged them to do the same (Mark 6:37), and when they took risks themselves He critiqued and gave honest feedback to call out more for them (Luke 10:17-20).

As we spend time alone or together in this devotional, we want to help and encourage you to engage in each of these ways – UP, IN, and OUT.

HOW TO USE THE BOOK

First

If you haven't already done so, please take a second to fill in your name on the inside of the front cover. There'll be a lot of identical books floating around, and we don't want yours to get lost.

Prepare

Get ready for each session by spending some time to invite the Holy Spirit to speak to you. The Bible is a written word (logos), which becomes a living word (rhema) as the Holy Spirit breathes upon it and speaks directly to our lives through it.

Commit

Commit to the journey. Discipleship is not a commitment to a moment, but to a lifetime journey. As you personally commit to journeying with God daily, commit to others by sharing what you are learning (possibly in Lifegroup 12s or 3s), and in this way encouraging one another in what God is saying.

Reflect & Respond

Each day, as you spend personal time with God, we encourage you to ask the following two questions:

- 1) What is God saying to me?
- 2) What am I going to do about it?

This is how we become doers and not just hearers of what God is saying.

INTRODUCTION TO MATTHEW

What an interesting gospel account this proves to be. Matthew's account of Jesus' life was likely written primarily with the Jewish audience in mind. It has more references to the Old Testament than any other New Testament book and Matthew talks more about Jesus as the Messiah and King than any other gospel writer. It has been estimated that Matthew's gospel contains around a hundred references to the Hebrew Scriptures with some forty of these being actual quotations.

So, coffee ready, let's go and enjoy!

Phil

Live

Today we kick off with a list of forty-two men and five women. I love this first chapter where from the word go Matthew presents evidence that Jesus is the Messiah! While everyone expected the Messiah to be descended from David, Matthew takes us right back to Abraham and shows us a few home truths that give us hope: Abraham, that sturdy trunk of our family tree today, twice lied about his marriage to Sarah, driving her into the arms of Pharaoh and putting the whole promised seed in jeopardy. Then King David was an adulterer and murderer. Matthew's list is unusual because it includes five women; biblical genealogies usually only list males. But what's even more startling is that Matthew didn't mention women who were highly esteemed like Sarah, Rebekah, and Leah, instead, he mentioned women whom we might have kept under the radar, so to speak. Like Tamar, who committed incest (Genesis 38 tells the seedy story), Rahab the prostitute (Joshua 2:1), Ruth the foreigner (out of disaster she married Boaz and in just a few generations, God anointed one of those descendants as Israel's greatest king), and Bathsheba (the wife of Uriah the Hittite). And then there was Mary, the mother of Jesus, who was accused of a scandal, but Matthew explains that there was no scandal, rather it was laced with divine providence, wisdom, and a 'before the world' plan.

I love how Matthew sets out the birth of the Messiah. In verse 18a he says, *"This is how Jesus the Messiah was born."* What a loaded statement, one that stirs me as I read this account of Jesus' birth. I get the urge again to be more thankful, worshipful, and prayerful. I feel I need wisdom to discern the difference between the many Martha-like details that really don't matter in my world and the *"one good thing"* Jesus commended in Mary. May Jesus be my treasure and pleasure, the focus of my gaze and joy of my heart, not just the giver of good gifts, but the very centre of my existence, my everything.

Pray

Father, be the centre. Be my source, be my light. Be my hope, be my song. Be the fire in my heart, be the wind in these sails. Be the reason that I live. Be my path, be my guide. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
What is God saying to me?

REFLECT & RESPOND
What am I going to do about it?

Live

Often, as I read this story, I judge Jerusalem for missing their moment, I criticise innkeepers for gross inhospitality, and I pity Mary for the birthing room she had to endure. I moralise and sentimentalise and miss the point, the point being that everything happened in God's story just as my Father and the Holy Spirit planned. *'Doing all things well'* didn't just start happening after Jesus' resurrection. Paul writes to the Galatians in 4:4, "*When the set time had fully come...*" I am so thankful Jesus came, not a day early and not a day late. The reason that He came into the world, going from the manger to the Cross, was to do what I could never do for myself. The law demanded a perfect obedience I couldn't possibly offer, and it required a justice that would have left me eternally condemned. Because Jesus lived in our place and died in our place, we are no longer guilty, powerless slaves to sin, rather, we are beloved children of the living God enjoying the full rights thereof. We've been robed in His righteousness and sealed with the very Spirit of God, who enables us to cry out, "*Abba, Father.*"

Today I want you to think about six gifts YOU can give to HIM. They are found in verse 11. (1) They fell down. They gave HIM full surrender. (2) They worshipped HIM. True worship in spirit and truth. (3) They opened their treasures. Some of us are so closed up, maybe caused by past hurts or failures that you need to let go. We can't give anything out of a locked treasure chest. (4) When the treasure was unlocked, then came the gold. What is it that is most precious to you? Time, discipline, money, etc. Give it to HIM today. (5) Frankincense – a resin that comes from scraping the bark which allows the tree to bleed; a tear is formed and that's how they produce resin. God wants your tears, your things that haven't worked out, your pain, your regrets. Give them to HIM today. (6) Myrrh – a resin known by its dark colour. God want us to give HIM the dark stuff, the wrong thoughts and acts, our sin.

Pray

Father, today I sing, "*Jesus paid it all, all to Him I owe. Sin had left a crimson stain, but He washed it white as snow.*" In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
What is God saying to me?

REFLECT & RESPOND
What am I going to do about it?

Live

A day came when Jesus knew this would be His last day in the carpenter's shop. I'm sure He had trained some of His younger siblings in the trade to take over as provider for His mum, Mary, and the rest of the family. He brushes up for the last time and heads to Galilee, going from there to the River Jordon where we find Him in today's reading.

The forerunner, John the Baptist, was sent to prepare the way of Jesus by preaching repentance and baptising people. John's main message wasn't, *'You're a sinner, you need to repent.'* John's main message was, *'Jesus, the Messiah, the King, is coming.'* Repentance was the response to the news that the King and His kingdom were coming, indeed, were already here. Jesus walks straight up to John in the river and asks him to baptise Him. What a dilemma John is in right now, noted by his response, *"I am the one who needs baptised by You."* And then he must have been overwhelmed by Jesus' words, *"It is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness."* Jesus understood why this seemed strange to John, but it was nevertheless necessary to fulfil all righteousness. It wasn't that this one act in itself fulfilled all righteousness, but it was another important step in the overall mission of Jesus to identify with fallen and sinful man, a mission that would only finally be fulfilled at the Cross. *"The heavens were opened."* What a statement. It was important for God the Father to publicly demonstrate that Jesus' baptism was not like anyone else's, in the sense of being a display of repentance. It was not a display of repentance, it was a righteous identification with sinners motivated by love and well pleasing to the Father. The Spirit of God descending like a dove was a dramatic experience with the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God coming upon Jesus in a way that could actually be seen, similar to the coming of the Spirit of God upon the gathered disciples in Acts 2.

Pray

Father, Your Word reminds us that, *"Among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom is greater than he."* These are amazing words, Father, and I receive them. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
What is God saying to me?

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Live

Of all the things that God could have said to His Son Jesus, He said, *'You're My Son and I love You.'* With the fact of His identity, Sonship, and acceptance stamped on Him, Jesus is led out into the desert to be tempted by Satan. The destiny of His creation and humanity are at stake. Three temptations are recorded that came directly from the devil. Remember, Jesus is fully man and so this comes to Jesus through His senses, His appetite, and natural desires. Jesus had gone without food for an extended period of time, with perhaps only an occasional sip of water from a nearby stream. We certainly know that one of the greatest areas of vulnerability is our earthly, sensual appetites and desires. With us, just as it was with Jesus, the issue is clear cut – satisfy ourselves or satisfy God.

In the second temptation, the devil takes Jesus and shows Him all the kingdoms of the world in an instant. Jesus knew that one day all these kingdoms would be His, but He also knew that His journey included a Cross. The devil was offering him an easy way out, a way to short-cut the process, but this offer also had its price. He would have to compromise who He was and bow down and worship the devil. We all know about the temptation to compromise. We are conditioned to want the easy road, to follow the path of least resistance, even if it means compromising our beliefs and standards.

The third temptation was perhaps the toughest because Satan even used Scripture to suggest to Jesus another way to achieve His purpose. It is the temptation to exalt one's self and not to trust God. He was tempted to work some kind of miracle that was indisputable. If He would throw Himself off the temple, He could prove first to Himself that He was really the Son of God, then also to everyone else. Let's be on our guard today against the subtlety of the devil; if he attacked Jesus, he will attack us.

Pray

Father, thank You for how Jesus victoriously overcame in the power of the same Holy Spirit that rests and abides in me today. Fill my heart afresh with Your Holy Spirit and rekindle in me the fire of Your love. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
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Live

Today we commence what has been beautifully entitled, the Sermon on the Mount. There are oceans of wisdom and truth in this that would take an eternity to explore. In Matthew 17, when the face of Jesus was changed, the Greek word explains it as becoming 'other'. I love this. One moment He was human, then in a split second He was 'other', God-like, glorious, words fail us to describe it. Well, this teaching today is 'other'. It comes from a different dimension, from another world, if you like. If you don't think it is 'other' then try and answer some of the following questions raised from this passage...

Verse 3: do you recognise your absolute dependency upon God? Verse 4: have you ever grieved over your sin? Verse 6: do you hate every false way? Verse 7: does "*merciful*" describe the character of your soul? Verse 8: are your innermost thoughts pure? Verse 9: have you done all within your power to live peaceably? Verses 10-12: do you gripe or rejoice when persecuted? Verse 13: do you have such vital reality with God that it makes an impact on the surrounding world? Verses 14-16: does your life show forth light in the darkness of this world? Verses 21-22: are you unjustly angry? Verses 23-26: can you think of anyone who is holding something against you and you have not attempted to put it right? Verses 27-30: do you have a problem with immoral fantasies? Verses 31-32: have you broken your marriage vow? Verses 33-37: are you guilty of swearing? Verses 38-42: are you harbouring revenge? Verses 43-48: do you love your enemies?

Wow, I've been trying to wrap my head and heart around some of these questions and came up with the same thought as the apostle Paul in Romans 7:24 – "*What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?*" Yet, Jesus comes in His great love as Shepherd and causes us to rest at His feet. His thoughts and soul today are toward a people whom He knew would go through many adversities – people in need of a Shepherd.

Pray

Father, thank You that Jesus still speaks today in my heart, and for that alone I would love Him, but there are ten thousand other blessings beside. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
What is God saying to me?

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Live

This chapter records what has become known as the ‘Lord’s Prayer’. It is important to note that while it is great to pray these words, it is most likely Jesus was teaching a *pattern* for prayer, hence the little prelude, “*When you pray...*” The prayer Jesus actually prayed Himself can be found in John 17.

The Pharisees were known for strict standards, but Jesus is saying our righteousness should be better than theirs. True righteousness is internal and starts in the heart, not just external drama done to be seen. Jesus illustrates this point by denouncing religion done for show, done to make sure others could see them doing good. They received the admiration of many, but that is all they will receive, says Jesus, because they are only play-acting. Their good works were not done to serve God, but to serve public opinion and to serve self. It is the wrong attitude and God doesn’t reward it. Religious show-offs are not pleasing in God’s eyes, so we must always watch our motives. I love Jesus’ three ‘when’s’: when you pray, when you fast, when you give. It is quite interesting that Jesus doesn’t use the word ‘if’. He is taking for granted that a believer would make sure all three of these were a common practice.

As we finish off this chapter today, we see a command, “*Do not worry about tomorrow.*” Most of our worry is over things that we have absolutely no control over and is therefore foolish as well as harmful. Jesus reminds us of the importance of living for the present day. It isn’t wrong to remember the past or plan for the future, to some degree both of these are good, yet it is easy to become too focused on either the past or the future and to let the present day and its own trouble be ignored. God wants us to remember the past, plan for the future, but live in the present.

Pray

“Our Father in heaven, reveal who You are. Set the world right. Do what’s best – as above, so below. Keep us alive with three square meals. Keep us forgiven with You and forgiving others. Keep us safe from ourselves and the Devil. You’re in charge! You can do anything You want! You’re ablaze in beauty! Yes. Yes. Yes.” (Matthew 6:9-13 ‘The Message’) In Jesus’ strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
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Live

In Matthew 5, Jesus explained that true righteousness is internal, a matter of the heart, not just of behaviour. In chapter 6, He explained that our religious activities must be sincere, not performances designed to make us look good. In those chapters, Jesus addressed two problems that occur when people focus on external behaviour as the main definition of righteousness, rather than a change of heart. In today's chapter, Jesus addresses a third problem of a focus on behaviour: people who equate righteousness with behaviour tend to judge and criticise others. However, those who are quick to condemn, those who feel superior, will be condemned by God. All have sinned, and everyone needs mercy. Some people find it hard to admit that they need mercy and they find it hard to extend any mercy in return, so Jesus is warning that the way we treat other people may be the way God treats us. The more we feel our own need for mercy, the less judgmental we will be toward others. Jesus then gives a humorous, exaggerated illustration of what He means, "*Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?*" In other words, how can you complain about someone else's sin when you have a bigger one?

Today it would be good to consider how to be free from being judgemental; what are the healthy and redemptive ways of expressing disappointment, making a point, and engaging in conflict? Sometimes our need to make a point sabotages our commitment to love well and the result is never good. When we keep festering on the inside rather than resting in Him ... when we get argumentative about grace, in graceless ways ... when we inwardly curse the traffic gods in a long line of slow moving cars, while running ten minutes late for an appointment ... when we are reloading to talk rather than fully listening to the person talking ... we need mercy. Ouch, this stuff hurts!

Pray

Father, have mercy on me. When I judge more than I pray, when I launch more than I listen, when I'm more grouchy than grace-full, when I'm more self-righteous than either right or righteous, convict and cleanse me, I pray. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
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Live

Matthew 8 reports numerous healing miracles of Jesus: the man with leprosy, the Centurion's servant, Peter's mother-in-law, and many others. It also reports Jesus' warning of the cost of being His follower, the calming of a storm by Jesus, and His casting out demons from two chaps. I love this chapter which is full of action packed performances of healing; it's like a healing marathon. I think you could make a movie out of this single chapter.

Lean in today ... no sickness, storm or demon is a problem to our Jesus. I love how Jesus went about healing all those who were sick and tormented by unclean spirits. He cleansed the lepers, opened the eyes of the blind and by speaking a simple command empowered the crippled to rise up and walk. He sent forth God's life-giving power to all those in need, including those He raised from the dead. Makes me realise that the question isn't, 'Is this a day of miracles?' rather, we should know we serve a God of miracles and that our God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He never changes. We can come to Him in great need of His intervention, we can surrender our life and health into His loving hands. We can ask to receive His healing power into our heart, mind, body, soul, and spirit. We need to bind every lie of the enemy and destroy all the word curses that have been spoken against our health.

I love the very first miracle recorded in today's chapter. We are told the person who approached Jesus was a leper. Leprosy was an incurable, disastrous illness that eat the person away. Looked upon as a curse, the person had to withdraw from society and home community to a colony of others so afflicted, shouting, 'Unclean!' every time anyone ventured near. Jesus didn't stand back or become uncomfortable when this man drew near. Actually, the opposite is recorded. He reached out and touched him and He can touch you today. Always remember, we can't see redeemed and healed those who we are unwilling to touch!

Pray

Father, please draw my attention away from myself and help me focus on Your enduring love. You are the source and strength of my life and health, so show me how to proceed with Your plan for me. In Jesus' name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
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Live

Matthew 9 is another chapter containing several miracles of healing. I did a little count – thirteen miracles are recorded in chapters 8 and 9. It is essential to put Jesus' ministry of healing in proper perspective. The Messiah's role as a healer was clearly prophesied in passages like Isaiah 35:5-6, *"Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb sing. For waters shall burst forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert."* Jesus' miracles were a testimony not only to the fact that He was sent by God, but also that He was the anticipated Messiah. It is important to note, however, that Jesus' miracles were not done to draw crowds; they were done primarily to minister to the humble needs of humble, broken people. For the most part, many Jewish people of that time would have preferred much more spectacular signs, like calling down fire from heaven on a Roman Legion. I love the fact that Jesus, the Messiah, God in human form, was simply moved by the needs of people, and His supernatural power was demonstrated in acts of compassion.

Our reading finishes off with the desperate need for more workers. What is it you need today? Remember, Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever. God sent His Son into the world to set us free from the power of darkness. He embraced the violent death of the Cross to pay the penalty on our behalf. He suffered scourging at the pillar, and took the sickness of humanity upon His own flesh so we could be healed. We can now come before Him to rid us of all our sin and ask for His precious blood to wash us clean. We can place the penalty for our sinfulness, all our sickness, diseases and infirmities upon His Cross, and ask to be set free. Accept His sacrifice and receive His gift of reconciliation. Confess His Lordship over every aspect of your life, heart, mind, body, soul and spirit, and enlist for duty in His great harvest field!

Pray

Father, Jesus was wounded for my transgressions; by His stripes I have been healed. The penalty has been paid in full. I have been ransomed and redeemed, sanctified, and set free. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
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Live

Today we have Jesus sending out His twelve new followers, His disciples. We could call them His apprentices. After a list of their names, there is an intensive pep talk which blesses me, scares me, and challenges me. Verse 33 always makes me sit up, where Jesus says, *"Whosoever shall disown or deny me, I will disown before My Father."* Whosoever prefer their worldly interests to their love and duty to God set a greater value on earthly things than on heavenly things, and prefer the friendship of people to the acceptance and friendship of God. Let it be remembered that to be renounced by Christ means to not have Him for either a Mediator or a Saviour. To appear before the tribunal of God without having Christ for our Advocate, and, on the contrary, to have Him there as our Judge and a witness against us, how can anyone think of this and not tremble with horror at the very thought?

I am sure you are like me and are so grateful for all the creature comforts we enjoy in life (and are probably too dependent on). Nevertheless, our love for Him cannot be rooted in Him being a 24/7 dispenser of blessings. We love Him because He is God, and there is no other. We love Him because He first loved us and gave Jesus as a sacrifice of atonement and propitiation for our sins. We love Him because He bought us back from lostness and abandonment, He redeemed our lives from sin and death by the perfect life of Jesus. We love Him in response to His great love lavished on us, the only love that is better than life, the only love that will never let go of us. We can declare with the psalmist, *"I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety."* Indeed, there's no safer place to be than in Christ, in life or in death. Because our lives are hidden in Jesus we have the secure knowledge that He will return and take us to be with Him forever. Pretty cool or what!

Pray

Father, not a hair can fall from my head, not a breath can be taken from my lungs, and not a beat can be missed by my heart apart from Your sovereign purposes and pleasure. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
What is God saying to me?

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Live

I often wonder what was going on in John the Baptist's head as he sat in prison. His question in verse 3 is a moment of wondering, 'Have I got this right? Are You the one we've been expecting or should we keep looking for someone else?' We don't know what John was expecting Jesus to be or do, but it does appear that he was having a few doubts. Let me say this, doubt is not wrong in itself. It's what you do with it that matters, and John shows us the right thing to do – bring your doubt to Jesus.

Have you ever wondered why God allowed you to lose your job, allowed your health to deteriorate or your loved one to die? I have. And I've had to fire those questions, frustrations and bewilderments at Jesus' feet. Do you want to know what I found? A loving Father, tender and beautiful, who can handle all those questions and love me just the same. He lets me know I'm covered with His righteousness. I am completely known, accepted, and very much loved by Him, my Father God. We have been destined to become as lovely and as loving as Him, and to reign as the Bride in the new heaven and new earth. Nothing and no one can disrupt, alter or negate this glorious end to our salvation, for God has promised that we will appear with Christ in glory. There's no point in getting all wrung out and tired out at wondering, serving, and stretching. Let's just lean on our Abba Father who does all things well.

In the final section today read and re-read the last four verses from 'The Message' and then ask, 'How can I practise this?' *"Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to Me. Get away with Me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with Me and work with Me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with Me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."*

Pray

Father, You have done everything for me, and now I can trust You to do everything in me that will bring You glory, and bring me more freedom and Christlikeness. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
What is God saying to me?

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Live

Today we have discussions around the Sabbath as the disciples were accused of picking food to eat on this holy day. Jesus gives a brief overview showing that He is indeed Lord over the Sabbath, and then He totally freaks the Pharisees out by healing a man's withered hand. Leaving this bubbling pot of controversy, Jesus heads out followed by a crowd, healing as He goes. The religious leaders are enraged with jealous fury and explain His miraculous power as being demonic in nature.

Jesus then gives the little blurb that I love, a blurb that is like an action packed spiritual warfare manual for life ... We have already been rescued from the dominion of darkness and placed in the kingdom of His beloved Son, Jesus. Already, we've been blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ. Already, we're completely loved by God because of Jesus' completed work on our behalf. May the eyes of our hearts be open to see all these glorious riches more clearly that we might enjoy them more fully. We rest and rejoice in His covenant and His capacity to keep us from falling. Though we may falter in the journey, the grasp of His grace is steady and secure. When we waver in our adoration of Him, He will remain constant in His affection for us. Even when He must discipline us, it will be in love, never in disgust or regret that He has adopted us. Let's praise Him for being the perfect Father to His daughters and sons. Because of His great delight in us, we find great delight in Him. Because He rejoices over us with singing, we will sing the new song of the gospel forever.

The little portion that finishes today's reading is worthy of reflection. Jesus asks, *"Who is My mother? Who are My brothers?"* Then, with pointed finger towards His followers, He answers, *"These are My mother and My brothers."* I love this. With royal blood now running in our veins let us lift our sights to our new found mothers, brothers and sisters, loving them as such.

Pray

Father, there is surely no one like You in all this world. You make all things new in my life and in this broken, crazy world. Your story of redeeming love is old, yet ever new. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

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What am I going to do about it?

Live

We need to make sure that our description of the kingdom is compatible with the description Jesus gave. Notice that the parables in this chapter end with the Day of Judgment. When Jesus described the kingdom, He wasn't describing the world after His return, rather, He described the world in *this* age, the age in which we live now and make choices. That's why when we hear the gospel, we should respond, and even though trials come our way, we need to keep our eyes on the goal. Though this life has its worries, we should not let them distract us. Through faith, we enter the kingdom of God, and through faithfulness, we stay in the kingdom of God. We bear fruit for the kingdom through faith and faithfulness.

Of all the parables in today's reading the most time is spent on the sower. It's my favourite one. The same sun that softens the wax hardens the clay; the very same gospel message that humbles the honest heart and leads to repentance may also harden the heart of the dishonest listener. The parables of Jesus were not simply illustrations making difficult things clear to all who heard; they were a way of presenting God's message so the spiritually sensitive could understand, but the hardened would merely hear a story that wouldn't penetrate their hardened soil. They were not just stories, but profoundly theological as well. In the parable of the sower, there was never any problem with the seed; it was always rich and ready to bear fruit. The issues lay in the soil, which represents the heart of the hearer. When we see this, we begin to realise that responsibility shifts from the sower to the soil.

I think it's a joy to address God today as the Sower of the seed, the Architect and Builder of our own house. It is our joy to be restored in Him, renewed in Him, to receive His life and His love, and all the grace and mercy we so desperately need. It's to a Sower like this we can surrender every aspect and dimension of our life.

Pray

Father, search me, know me and reveal to me where You are working in my life. Grant to me the grace of Your healing and deliverance, and a deep and true repentance. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
What is God saying to me?

REFLECT & RESPOND
What am I going to do about it?

Live

Today we have the results of a rash party promise. One can only surmise the condition King Herod was in when he made such a rash promise to his step-daughter. We are told that he regretted it. John was hated by Herod's wife, Herodias, for his outspokenness concerning their adulterous marriage. This woman's vengeance bubbled within her, the plot thickened and a plan was concocted to rid the world of this so-called prophet. What they couldn't have known was that the eternal purposes of the Kingdom of heaven can never be out-witted or undermined. God was, is, and always will be in full control. Planet earth is not spinning out of control with a majestic God wondering what to do next. The opposite is true. Ecclesiastics 3:11 sums it up powerfully, *"Everything is beautiful in HIS time."* I love that, according to Ephesians 1:4, God loved me and chose me before He made the world. He is our true Father, Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer, Author, Finisher, and the true end of all things, including our life.

Then we literally jump into (excuse the pun) Peter walking on water. I love this section of Scripture and, for all Peter's shortcomings, this isn't about Matthew, John or anyone else walking on the water, it's about good old Peter. When he began to sink Jesus refers to his 'little faith'. In the Greek, Jesus actually called him by one word, 'littlefaith'. Here are a few of my observations about 'littlefaith'. Little faith is often found in places where we might expect great faith. Little faith is far too eager for signs. Little faith is too much affected by its surroundings. On the positive side, however, Peter also shows us some of the strengths of little faith. Little faith will obey the word of Jesus. Little faith may struggle to come to Jesus, but it comes. Little faith will pray when it is in trouble. Little faith is safe because Jesus is near. Think of your faith today on a scale of 0 (no faith) to 10 (great faith). I think you will find you have more than you thought.

Pray

Father, I desire to be one with You as Jesus is one with You. Thank You for proving Your love for me by sending Jesus. I receive Him and all His life and all His work, which you ordained for me. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
What is God saying to me?

REFLECT & RESPOND
What am I going to do about it?

Live

I love this chapter where Jesus starts to unpack inner purity. His challenge is about the heart because it is what's within that is of most importance. Jesus says of the Pharisees in verses 8-9, *"These people honour Me with their lips, but their hearts are far from Me. Their worship is a farce, for they teach man-made ideas as commands from God."* Oftentimes, when I feel I have let the Lord down, I say to Him, 'Lord, I know I got that wrong but You know my heart and You know I love You.' I am reminded of how man looks on the outward appearance, but we are told God looks at the heart. This confused even the great prophet Samuel. Samuel went to the house of Jesse, and seeing all the big, strapping men, thought that each was bound to be 'the one'. Eventually, when that line was exhausted, he sent to the field to bring in a shepherd boy named David. Why? Because God saw something in David's heart that He didn't see in anyone else in his family.

Good and evil do not well up from the foods that we eat, but proceed from the heart. The refuge of our bellies cannot compare with the garbage of the heart. I know it sounds a little crude but it's true. We easily dispose of the filth of our stomachs and it no longer affects us; the blackness of the heart is more persistent and also deadlier. You see, our hearts find expression in the words of our mouths, and the words of our mouths lead to the deeds of our hands. Anger is an emotion, which by the way isn't necessarily a sin unless we allow it to run out of control, but then the same can be said of any other part of us.

Pray

Father, I pray along with David from Psalm 51, *"Purify me from my sins, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. Oh, give me back my joy again; You have broken me—now let me rejoice. Don't keep looking at my sins. Remove the stain of my guilt. Create in me a clean heart, O God. Renew a loyal spirit within me. Do not banish me from Your presence, and don't take Your Holy Spirit from me."* In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
What is God saying to me?

REFLECT & RESPOND
What am I going to do about it?

Live

As we dive into chapter 16 it feels as if we have now moved into the deep end of the pool. Jesus' language seems even more loaded with kingdom stuff. It is in this very chapter He will reveal His soon approaching death only to have Peter pull Him aside and scold Him. At this point Jesus speaks directly to Satan as He looked Peter in the face, calling Peter a dangerous trap or snare. In my late forties I realised I needed glasses to read and now I need them all the time. This chapter reminds me that the eyes of my heart have need of vision correction. If my vision is blurry, if I'm only focusing on the outward appearance of people and things, I'm not seeing as God intends. My plea for us all today? Heal the eyes of our heart, Jesus, so we can see You more clearly, and as we see more of You, help us to see everything and everyone from Your perspective.

Shortly before this reprimand of Peter there is a little window into the campfire life of Jesus and His followers. It would seem they have just arrived at Caesarea Philippi, lit their campfire, and then Jesus drops a bomb, *"Who does everyone think I am?"* They reply, *"Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the other prophets."* I have a sneaking suspicion the disciples still weren't too sure who Jesus was, and this answer revealed some of their thoughts too. Then Jesus asks, *"Who do you say I am?"* Boom! I imagine an awkward silence hangs for a moment or two and then, directed by the Holy Spirit, Peter says, *"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."* It is here Jesus revealed the true will of the Godhead, to build this Kingdom, which is not from this world, on mankind. I love this passage. Jesus declares the reason for our existence on planet earth is for the purposes of the Kingdom. Beautiful indeed.

Pray

Father, sometimes when I look at all the crises and cruel stories of life, it makes me want to run and hide or deny. When overwhelming need and hard providences are staring me down, help me to see Your hand and heart at work. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
What is God saying to me?

REFLECT & RESPOND
What am I going to do about it?

Live

Today we have an amazing glimpse into life beyond, a picture of the glorified Jesus chatting with two men who are in glory, Moses and Elijah, two men who arrived in heaven by extreme circumstances handled by God Himself. It is interesting to me that God chose these two chaps and while Matthew doesn't tell us what they were chatting about, Luke does. In Luke's account they are talking about Jesus' soon coming death. Two boys who were directly handled by God to glory chatting about that very subject. Interesting!

'Transfigured' (or 'transformed'; they're the same word) means a complete change of form; it's where we get our word 'metamorphosis' from. I have to wonder, was Jesus giving us a glimpse of what a renewed mind should look like? We read in Romans 12 about not being conformed to this world but being 'transformed' ('transfigured') by the renewing of our mind. The renewed mind is a radiant exposure of Christ. Jesus didn't reflect light; He was the light. Remember Colossians 1, 'Christ in me the hope of glory.' We are not meant to be reflectors of light but rather people in whom Christ the light dwells. We are reminded in Isaiah 61 to arise and shine, not arise and reflect! You are not a moon that reflects the light of the sun. No, you are one in whom the Son dwells. To transform our mind we need to rise up out of our position into His position and radiate who He is. Our minds reveal God's glory. We have a mind that picks up God's mind and radiates it out over any given situation. That's how we rewrite stories and nations, not by strategies and systems but by having His mind in us. So, today we need begin to think more like Jesus. This is obviously what Paul was referring to in Philippians 2:5 *"Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus."* What would that be, one wonders? Jeremiah 29 tells us the mind of God, *"For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."*

Pray

Father, I want to live like Jesus, to love like Jesus, to pray like Jesus, and to think like Jesus. What beauty. What an example. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
What is God saying to me?

REFLECT & RESPOND
What am I going to do about it?

Live

Today we have a much overlooked subject in Christian society, one that has been dumbed down, so to speak – sin. Jesus uses the graphic illustration of the hand, foot, and eye. He is saying if a hand or foot causes you to sin, set it on a stump, get a hatchet and cut it off. He uses the word ‘gouge’ to remove your eye. I can almost think of getting in trouble for writing such graphic language but Jesus says it clearly. We have become so sympathetic toward our sin today, have we not? We use language like, “We’re only human,” or, “Everyone does it,” or, “No one else will know as it was done privately.” We need to get tougher on sin. There, I’ve said it.

Another huge topic today is in the area of forgiveness. Even if forgiveness is humanly impossible, with God all things are possible. I will never forget the story of Corrie ten Boom, who heard an unbelievable speech by a person in reconstructed Germany after World War II, about how God had forgiven him. He put out his hand to her after the speech and said, *“Sister, God has forgiven me.”* She recognised him as one of the guards in the concentration camp where her sister died. She said, *“I could not raise my hand to shake his, but in that awful moment I realised how much God’s mercy and grace had been extended to me. What I could not do by my own strength, I did by the strength of God.”* There is a new math that begins when we understand how much mercy and grace God has given to us, and how much we liberate ourselves and others when we extend that grace to others, even to those who don’t deserve it. The imagery at the end of today’s reading is quite vivid. Prison and torture are the two illustration points Jesus uses to describe a person with unforgiveness in their heart. I have done this job long enough to have seen this a thousand times over. Don’t let unforgiveness destroy you, rid yourself of it today.

Pray

Father, in the words of the psalmist, *“Sincerity and truth are what You require; fill my mind with Your wisdom. Remove my sin, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.”* In Jesus’ strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
What is God saying to me?

REFLECT & RESPOND
What am I going to do about it?

Live

Today we see some lessons that must be learned in the process of life. Firstly, we have the Pharisees trying to trap Jesus with questions around divorce and remarriage. Jesus gives a clear synopsis of a subject that we surround with controversy. I know divorce happens for all kinds of reasons, but it is clearly stated here by Jesus Himself that it was never what God intended. However, we need to be clear that it does happen and those involved need loved, protected and nurtured, not cast off and treated like they've committed the unforgivable sin.

Secondly, we see the rich young ruler coming to Jesus. Because He knew the priorities of the heart, Jesus did not run after the young man or try to persuade him to stay. Whatever, or whoever, we treasure the most will determine how we experience life. Irrespective of how many titles or tribulations life brings, whether much blessing or much pain, what matters most is treasuring Jesus. If He is our treasure, He'll have our heart and, therefore, everything else about us. He'll have our affection and full sway over our longings, cravings, and wanderings. He'll have our tears to show His compassion for the broken and heavy-hearted. He'll have our laughter to bring His joy and encouragement to the tired and exhausted. He'll have our fears, so we won't give in to unbelief and the whisperings of the enemy. He'll have our failures and burdens, so we won't try to self-atone, again and again. He'll have our disappointments and hurts, so we won't become preoccupied with relief or paralysed with revenge. When Peter poses the bold question to Jesus in verse 27, *"We've given up everything to follow You, what will we get?"* Jesus says that anyone who has given up for Him will receive a hundred times as much in return, plus eternal life. Sounds like a pretty good investment to me. What do you think? We could write 'first love' all over this section of reading today. God wants us to seek Him first with all our hearts.

Pray

Father, today I will make much of Jesus because He made so much of me by His life, death and resurrection. I will embrace Him in response to His embrace of everlasting love. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
What is God saying to me?

REFLECT & RESPOND
What am I going to do about it?

Live

I love this chapter that deals with the seemingly unfair reward for people who work only the last hour. But oh what a God who would reward all people the same, One who holds the right to pay as He deems fit. Prepare your hearts for the onslaught of souls that are about to come upon us, and such will be the Master's delight to reward them accordingly. Let's not get jealous in our old age, but thankful that sinners are coming to the Kingdom. When Jesus says the last will be first and the first last, our minds fail to comprehend God's grace. Grace is when He rewards and blesses us according to His will and pleasure, not necessarily according to what we deserve. The law is easy to understand; you get what you deserve. Grace is foreign to us; God deals with us according to who *He* is, not according to who *we* are. The landowner did not treat anyone unfairly, though he was more generous to some than to others. God will never be unfair to us, though He may, for His own purpose and pleasure, bestow greater blessing on someone else who seems less deserving. Thank God He doesn't give us what we truly deserve.

One thing I have been learning over my fifty plus years of following Jesus is that He didn't lay down His life for deserving friends, but for rebels, fools, and idol worshippers like me. He loves me, He freed me from my sin by His blood, and He made me to be a kingdom and priest to serve Him forever. My prayer for you today is that the Holy Spirit would make the familiar sound of these words come alive with renewed passion and fresh delight. Even as we needed grace to first respond to His love, so we need grace to stay alive to His love and to grow even deeper in our affection for Him. God's love for us is the one constant in our lives, for He loves us with everlasting, unwavering affection. Everything else changes, everything else is subject to whim and fancy, even our love for Him ebbs and flows, but not His. His stands firm.

Pray

Father, today don't let me get used to status quo, business-as-usual love for You. May this day see me return to my first love – You. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
What is God saying to me?

REFLECT & RESPOND
What am I going to do about it?

Live

This chapter challenges our perceptions. If you had been looking for a kingly entry into Jerusalem, you might have missed the Man on the donkey. If you had been looking for figs on the tree, you would have been disappointed. If you had judged the angry man in the temple as someone who got out of the wrong side of bed, you'd have missed the whole point. The people who were in the temple were pious and polluted and while they thought they had a right to be there, their only motive was corrupt and selfish. What always amazes me in the gospels is that when the religious people were missing the point, blind, lame, sinners and prostitutes were seeing and experiencing the real Jesus.

Today is a good day to do a religious check and make sure we are not just going through the motions and missing the real thing. It also seems ironic that the people who are hailing Jesus' entry into the city are the very people who will soon be incited to turn and cry against Him, *"Crucify Him, crucify Him, we won't have this man to reign over us."* I'm sure the disciples wondered why His kingly entrance was not one of more prestige and power, why He didn't lead a charge on a white stallion wielding a golden sword. But then He was the Servant King, the One who thought it not robbery to be equal with God, yet humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a Cross. I love what Spurgeon writes about this, *"In one way, this crowd was glorious. It is a mark of Christ's presence when the church becomes enthusiastic. We sometimes hear complaints about revivals being too exciting, perhaps the censure is deserved, but I would like to see a little of the fault. This age does not generally sin in the direction of being too excited concerning divine things. We have erred so long on the other side that, perhaps, a little excess in the direction of fervour might not be the worst of all calamities; at any rate, I would not fear to try it."*

Pray

Father, forgive me today for sometimes being like the fig tree, all foliage and no fruit. Help me to be the fruit bearer that You have called me to be. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
What is God saying to me?

REFLECT & RESPOND
What am I going to do about it?

Live

This chapter today contains another set of traps for Jesus. After Jesus told the story of the great feast, it seems that the Pharisees and Sadducees were out to get Him and trick Him at every point. They tried in the area of paying taxes (which, by the way, Jesus said was important to do). They tried in the area of resurrection with their fanciful story of a lady marrying her deceased husband's brothers. When all that failed they tried 'the most important commandment' trick. This was a pretty devious one as there were probably 613 commandments that the Pharisees and Sadducees were well versed in.

The religious leaders were missing it big style, while others were flocking to Jesus. If only they had listened to the story Jesus had told about the wedding feast. God's calling or invitation is not a light matter. It's why the garment, or lack of one, was such an issue for the king in Jesus' parable. The meaning of the garment is important to understand. The attitude of the guest in not wearing the garment is also important. The Bible uses clothing as an analogy to show how we 'put on' behaviour that is pleasing to God. Character can be altered but it requires a deep desire to change and along with that desire we must have commitment to follow through. By having no wedding garment, the man in the parable was defiantly opposing the king and all the king represented, also opposing everything the marriage feast represented. He was aligning himself with the opposition, those who had initially refused to accept the invitation. When confronted by the king, he had nothing to say as he knew the consequences of violating the dress code. In this parable the king represents God the Father and the king's son is, of course, Jesus. Those invited to the marriage feast are those God invites in this lifetime to prepare for His Kingdom, which will be established on the earth when Christ returns. The Pharisees missed the whole point of this story, blinded by their misconceptions, rage, jealousy, and of course, by the enemy.

Pray

Father, today please help me to keep my eyes open to Your Word, my ears open to Your whispers, and my heart open to Your wonders. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
What is God saying to me?

REFLECT & RESPOND
What am I going to do about it?

Live

Today's reading is all red letter, Jesus' words. He speaks about hypocrisy, which causes me to pause, driving me to the resources of the Word. Idolatry and hypocrisy are everywhere. There's no such thing as a non-worshiper. Someone once said that all of us are hypocritical about something, and that is the truth. Sometimes the praise, or disdain, of people has more sway over our heart than what God thinks about us. Sometimes our need to be right is more compelling to us than being righteous in Christ. Sometimes our desire to be in control of people and circumstances claims more of our time and energy than seeking His face, savouring His grace, and serving our true King. These are just a few of the marks of hypocrisy in our hearts.

Is it any wonder when we come to the end section we find a grieving Saviour, broken over the desolation of His world? Luke's rendering of this passage tells us what Matthew doesn't, that Jesus wept as He looked over the city of Jerusalem and thought about its coming judgment. We have only two times recorded when Jesus wept, here, at the pain of knowing what would befall those who reject Him, and also at the tomb of Lazarus, weeping at the power and pain of death. Jesus didn't hate these people whom He rebuked so strongly, His heart broke for them. When we sin, God does not hate us, He genuinely sorrows for us, knowing that our sin and rebellion only destroys our life. We should hope to share God's sorrow for lost humanity. Look through this passage again and tell me, does Jesus get emotional? What gets you angry today? I mean the righteous type of anger. Is it slavery? Child prostitution? Civil injustices? What makes you weep like Jesus wept for His people? Take it to God today with all the emotion you can muster up. May God have mercy on us and free our foolish hearts from giving anything or anyone the attention, allegiance, affection, and adoration He alone deserves. May He make Jesus so beautiful and the love of Christ so compelling to us that our struggle with hypocrisy will diminish in intensity for good.

Pray

Father, may the gospel of Your grace relentlessly expose and dethrone all empty nothings from my heart. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
What is God saying to me?

REFLECT & RESPOND
What am I going to do about it?

Live

Today we have an insight into the future, our future. I am so glad my times are in God's hands, not in the hands of the world's politicians or the famous and the rich. What an incredible chapter this is, and it would be a great time to thank God for your salvation. When I read this, I am so pleased (and somewhat surprised) that God chose me. Read Ephesians 1:4 and rejoice today; you were chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world. You did not choose Him, but He chose you. Read John 15:16 and go, find somewhere to shout praise to the King of kings.

The disciples likely assumed that the destruction of the temple and the end of the world would occur at the same time. Jesus was correcting that by first discussing the invasion of Rome in verses 4-34. That's what He means by this generation not passing until these things happen. Jesus gave a series of nine clues which could be used by first-century saints to determine when Judaism's fall would happen. False messiahs would arise. There would be numerous military encounters. Famines and earthquakes would occur. Disciples would be persecuted. Some would stumble and depart from the faith. False prophets would rise up. Decreasing spiritual levels of some saints would be evident. However, those who endured would be delivered, and the gospel would be published far and wide during these four decades. All of these were fulfilled by the time the nation fell.

The final section of today's reading, verses 35-51, calls us to live with sincere hope in the fact that Jesus will return. We should all live with this in mind. Jesus talks about His final coming to usher in the end (or the beginning, depending on how one looks at it). I love the fact that God is in full control from the Garden to the tomb, from the tomb to the throne, and now from the throne to the new heaven and new earth. Beautiful mysteries unfolded today.

Pray

Father, in light of Your plans for my destiny and eternal home, help me to steward my words, body language, and love for others in a more godly way. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
What is God saying to me?

REFLECT & RESPOND
What am I going to do about it?

Live

Today we have three stories: the ten virgins, the talents, and the final Judgement. The first story tells of a wedding. There were three stages to a Jewish wedding in that day. The first was engagement, a formal agreement made by the fathers. The second was betrothal, the ceremony where mutual promises were made. The third was marriage, around one year later the bridegroom came at an unexpected time for his bride. The moral of the story is that there was a shed load of time to get ready for the wedding.

The second story is about talents being entrusted to three servants. Again, this was a familiar Jewish custom that all the listeners would have understood. The first two servants used their talents wisely, gaining interest, while the third was lazy and didn't even try. When the master returned, he handed out blessing, affirmation and reward, but not to servant number three. The moral of this story is two-fold. Firstly, every person has been given talents and gifts to use for God and everyone will give an account to God for how we used them. Secondly, faithful service leads to increased responsibilities in the Kingdom of heaven and to eternal joy in the presence of the Master. Unfaithful service leads to condemnation and the removal of one's stewardship. This parable is a message of eternal significance.

In the final story, theologians differ greatly as to what this judgement is, but the moral of this story is that people's indifference seals their doom. Throughout this chapter, one point has been emphasised: the price of indifference is too high to pay. There are several things we cannot afford to be indifferent towards: Jesus and His return; the Holy Spirit who makes us ready for the return of Jesus; the resources that God gives us; the needy people all around us; lost humanity that will stand in judgment. We should note carefully the outcome of faithful service and unfaithful service in these stories and ask God to enlighten our hearts.

Pray

Father, again today as I read this chapter I am so grateful for salvation. I am glad I am Your child. This is my heart's desire, Father, amid all my faults and failures, I want to love You more. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
What is God saying to me?

REFLECT & RESPOND
What am I going to do about it?

Live

I find it difficult to read this chapter and remain unemotional. In it, we see a flow from the plot to kill Jesus, to Judas' betrayal, to Gethsemane, to Jesus' arrest, to His appearance before council, to Peter's denial. Jesus, who knew the end from the beginning, now enters into the final stages of His life on earth ... while running parallel is the completion of eternal destinies for all God's people chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world. How amazing is our God who brings beauty out of chaos and suffering.

We have the story of Jesus being anointed by a woman. John 12 tells us her name, Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus. A complaint of the waste of money arises and it is John again who tells us the name of the complainer – Judas. Interesting that what he calls 'a waste', Jesus calls 'a beautiful thing'. Her extravagant, reckless giving for Jesus would be remembered as long as the gospel was preached. Mary's act was something that the disciples didn't do. She gave Jesus the love and attention He deserved before His suffering and death. She understood more because she was in the place of greatest understanding, at the feet of Jesus. The aroma of such extravagance flooded the room. I have a little saying, "When you're abiding, there is no hiding." It fills the room, the environment you live in, work in, school in.

Jesus then instituted the remembrance feast that we love, bread and a cup that would be taken in memory of Him and the finished work He was now about to accomplish. We have the betrayal by Judas and then Peter's emphatic denial of Jesus. The final verse of this incredible chapter always touches me. 'The Message' says, "*Peter went out and wept and wept and wept.*" Why such tears? Peter had just done something he never intended to do, nor thought he would ever do. When he declared his undying allegiance to Jesus earlier in the chapter, he meant it, but, alas, how weak is our flesh. Have you ever done something you never thought you would do? Look to Jesus today, the Forgiver and Sustainer of life.

Pray

Father, I need to stay close to You. Life and stuff have a way of crowding You out, but today I widen my margins for You to write on. In Jesus' name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
What is God saying to me?

REFLECT & RESPOND
What am I going to do about it?

Live

We start today with the power of a conscience, something we would do well never to ignore. Thank God for it; when it becomes attuned to the Holy Spirit, it can be pretty powerful. Judas, realising the results of his betrayal, tries to retract and when that fails, hangs himself in a tragic final act of a life spent on self-gratification. Then we have the trial of Jesus before Pilate, the mocking and flogging, and then the horrific crucifixion and death of the Saviour of the world. I love this quote, *“He gave up His life because He willed it, when He willed it, and as He willed it.”* (Augustine) One of the greatest passages in Scripture is in verse 50, *“He released His Spirit.”* Other versions say He ‘yielded’ or ‘gave up’ His Spirit. No one took Jesus’ life from Him. Jesus, in a manner unlike any other man, released His spirit. Death had no righteous hold over the sinless Son of God. He stood in the place of sinners, but never was or became a sinner Himself, therefore, He could not die unless He released His spirit Himself. Beautiful indeed!

I have often play-acted in my mind how Joseph and Nicodemus would have taken the lifeless body of Jesus from the Cross, how God observed their tenderness to the human corpse of His lovely Son. They would have extracted the nails from feet and hands while trying to support the body, and then, maybe over their shoulder, coming down to lay Him on the ground. They would have washed and covered with dignity this Saviour now dead. How’s your handling of Him? Is it with dignity or is it defiantly? Today, as we pray, we need to realise that we can only do so because Jesus bore the burden of the law’s demands and judgment, only because He steadfastly says to us, *“Cast all your care upon Me, for I care for you,”* only because He constantly calls to us, *“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”* What a price He had to pay; heaven’s richest treasure hung on a Cross between heaven and earth, and all for us. Some praise is due I think!

Pray

Father, today I want to be aware of my limits, but even more aware of Your limitless mercy, grace, power, and peace, which were made evident at Calvary. In Jesus’ strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
What is God saying to me?

REFLECT & RESPOND
What am I going to do about it?

Live

Today we start with the little thought, “A new day was dawning,” and what a day it was going to be. Is it any wonder Matthew records an earthquake and a celestial visitor in verse 2! The beautiful Son of God has died to settle all and now this morning rises from the dead to prove that all was settled in the eternal courts of heaven. The death was the purchase, the resurrection the receipt. Some debate about whether the earthquake or the angel rolled the stone away, which I personally think is a pointless conversation. Jesus has conquered death, He burst its bands asunder. If anything, the earthquake and angel were there to stop the stone from going into outer space where people couldn’t find it! I am reminded of a song I learned in Sunday school: *“Living, He loved me. Dying, He saved me. Buried, He carried my sins far away. Rising, He justified, freely forever. One day He’s coming, oh glorious day.”*

Matthew now takes us straight to the ascension of Jesus at a mountain of His choosing. Even then, while they worshipped Him, some still doubted (which, by the way, Jesus didn’t seem to think important enough to address. He still said ‘GO!’) It is at this point of exit when Jesus gives what has become known as ‘The Great Commission’, and boy, is that understated. It was certainly great in every way, in its generosity, in its authority, and in its clarity to the disciples – those present then and everyone since then, to you and I today. I love reading this amazing chapter which has all the hallmarks of victory and accomplishment written all over it. The Great Commission is Jesus giving back to mankind the authority to go and make disciples. Who could you phone or call on right now to encourage and disciple? You say, “Who, me?” But remember Peter, strong-willed and hasty; Philip, who was puzzled by the Godhead; James and John, who wanted to call down fire from heaven; Thomas, who doubted and wanted to put his finger into the print of the nails for proof. So, yes – YOU!

Pray

Father, it is all because of Jesus that I stand saved with destiny sealed. Thank You, Father, for all You have given and done. In Jesus’ strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
What is God saying to me?

REFLECT & RESPOND
What am I going to do about it?

