

Bible Lessons



For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, Teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world. —Titus 2:11-12

Volume 57, No. 1
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Quarterly Bible Lessons for Adults and Young People

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Publishing Bible truths in the interest of Jesus Christ and His Church.

In this issue, Reflections are contributed by: S. Herron, M. Moles, T. Browne, D. Doolittle, R. Cole, P. Phillips, E.E. Gracey, E. Doolittle, F. Matthews, M. Busbee, D. Clay, and J. Booher.

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If you would like printed copies mailed to you, please contact
Bro. Kevin Sorrell, 5722 S Sooner Rd, Guthrie, OK 73044
Phone (405)-414-8646

Bro. Clifford Cole, Editor
Phone: (417) 621-1965

THEME FOR BIBLE LESSONS FOR THE 1st QUARTER, 2025

PEOPLE IN JESUS' LIFE

What would it have been like to know Jesus as He grew to manhood, ministered to the people for three and a half years, faced the wrath of the religious Jewish rulers, died on the cross, and then rose from the dead? Many people knew Jesus—some from a distance and a few much more intimately. One thing everyone had in common was that no one was the same after meeting Jesus.

By the Lord's help, we will look at the life, character, and thinking of a few people who encountered Jesus in the flesh. While you and I do not live in the era of Jesus' earthly walk, we will all "meet Jesus" through the dealings of the Holy Spirit and make decisions that will affect us for eternity.

For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ; who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works (Titus 2:11-14).

—Bro. Clifford Cole

JANUARY 5, 2025

MARY

Luke 1:26 And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth,

27 To a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name *was* Mary.

28 And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, *thou that art* highly favoured, the Lord *is* with thee: blessed *art* thou among women.

29 And when she saw *him*, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be.

30 And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God.

31 And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS.

32 He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David:

33 And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end.

34 Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?

35 And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.

36 And, behold, thy cousin Elisabeth, she hath also conceived a son in her old age: and this is the sixth month with her, who was called barren.

37 For with God nothing shall be impossible.

38 And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word. And the angel departed from her.

Luke 2:4 And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:)

5 To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.

6 And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.

7 And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

Luke 2:17 And when they had seen *it*, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child.

18 And all they that heard *it* wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds.

19 But Mary kept all these things, and pondered *them* in her heart.

Luke 2:34 And Simeon blessed them, and said unto Mary his mother, Behold, this *child* is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against;

35 (Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also,) that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.

Luke 2:46 And it came to pass, that after three days they found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them, and asking them questions.

47 And all that heard him were astonished at his understanding and answers.

48 And when they saw him, they were amazed: and his mother said unto him, Son, why hast thou thus dealt with us? behold, thy father and I have sought thee sorrowing.

49 And he said unto them, How is it that ye sought me? wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?

50 And they understood not the saying which he spake unto them.

51 And he went down with them, and came to Nazareth, and was subject unto them: but his mother kept all these sayings in her heart.

MEMORY VERSE: But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart. —**Luke 2:19**

CENTRAL THOUGHT: Mary did not always understand everything that came her way, but she never cast from her what she could not immediately fully comprehend. From a young age she developed the valuable habit of keeping important information and pondering it in her heart.

WORD DEFINITIONS

Luke 2:19 **“Kept”**: to conserve from ruin; to remember and obey, to observe, to preserve (*Strong’s*).

Luke 2:19 **“Ponder”**: to throw or bring together in one’s mind.

LESSON BACKGROUND

Mary and Joseph (the man she was soon to marry) were both of the house and lineage of David. The prophecies proclaimed that the Messiah was to be born to a virgin of the house of David, so it would have only been natural for every young girl of that lineage, including Mary, to wonder if she would be the chosen one. *“Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear*

a son, and shall call his name Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14). “Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will raise unto David a righteous Branch, and a King shall reign and prosper, and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth. In his days Judah shall be saved, and Israel shall dwell safely: and this is his name whereby he shall be called, THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS” (Jeremiah 23:5-6).

DISCUSSION:

1. When Gabriel relayed the message to Mary that she would be the mother of the Messiah, what was her immediate reaction?
2. What does Mary’s first reaction reflect of her character and state of mind?
3. How could Mary have behaved herself when she first heard the news, but did not?
4. What could Mary have thought, after a difficult journey, as she realized Jesus would be born in a stable and laid in a manger – because there was no room for them in the inn?
5. The shepherds told Mary and Joseph about the wonderful visitation of angels while keeping their flocks. Mary “kept all these things and pondered them in her heart.” What might some of her musings have been?
6. When Simeon blessed them, he prophesied to Mary that “a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also, that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.” How did this come to pass, and why was it necessary?
7. When Joseph and Mary finally found Jesus in the temple talking with the priests, Jesus reminded them that He must be about His Father’s business. Why was this difficult for Joseph and Mary to understand at that time?
8. Mary “kept all these sayings in her heart.” What does it really mean to keep in our heart that which we do not yet understand? How can this habit prove to be important?

COMMENTS AND APPLICATION

“You may not completely understand what I’m about to tell you today, but it will all come together later.” This advice was often repeated by my math teachers in high school as they brought out

new concepts in math classes. Their best advice was to pay attention, take good notes, and not be too stressed if the material presented did not at first make perfect sense.

They were right, fortunately. By paying attention, taking notes, and taking heed to what was taught, new ways of looking at numbers began to make more and more sense to me. It took time, because the information presented was complicated.

Spiritually speaking, the concepts and principles our Heavenly Father teach us take time to fully comprehend. By design, none of us truly “arrive” at the fullest spiritual depths God has for us until we cross over to the other side. We go “from faith to faith.” What we learn in one spiritual battle and victory prepares us for what must be learned in the next. Just as Abraham’s faith was exercised in his many battles and struggles—until he became known by his great faith—so our faith will be built up and increased over time as we exercise faith in our own spiritual battles.

Will we always understand why we face the giant that threatens to snuff out our very life? Absolutely not! However, if we refuse to give up the fight, we will come out on the other side a victor through Jesus’ blood and by the empowering strength of the Holy Spirit. We will remember what we learned in the hard-fought battle, and it will be of great benefit in the next struggle. Furthermore, by gradually learning and growing in our battles, we will be able to help our brothers and sisters with the encouraging words, “God helped me in a battle similar to what you are facing; He will help you!”

“Dear Lord, help me keep in my heart that which I do not immediately understand. I trust you to bring me out on the other side of my spiritual battle with victory. Amen!”

REFLECTIONS

History books are full of the names of influential and powerful men: Alexander the Great, Napoleon, and Julius Caesar, just to name a few. If you’re looking for women of great influence in world history, you’ll not find as many. Even in Biblical history, there weren’t many influential women, but there were some that played pivotal roles; from Eve, “the mother of all living,” to Sarah, “the mother of Israel,” from Deborah, who was the only woman to judge Israel, and to Esther, who was brought to the throne “for such a time as this.” Each

woman played a part in the grand design of God to bring about the plan of salvation. These women didn't seek to elevate or promote themselves. They were "clothed with humility" and "adorned with a meek and a quiet spirit," and God placed these women on the pages of history.

The lists that I found of influential people in world history culminated with Jesus. But for there to be a "Jesus" there had to be a "Mary." She was just a simple girl, not looking to promote herself, but willing for the God of Heaven to use her in His plan. The world would have passed her by as not having any influence on history, but The Father saw a pure vessel that would bear His Son. The Word was made flesh—and so turned the course of the whole world.

—Sis. Sarah Herron

JANUARY 12, 2025

JOSEPH

Matthew 1:18 Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost.

19 Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a publick example, was minded to put her away privily.

20 But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost.

21 And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins.

22 Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying,

23 Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us.

24 Then Joseph being raised from sleep did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife:

25 And knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son: and he called his name JESUS.

Matthew 2:13 And when they were departed, behold, the angel of the Lord appeareth to Joseph in a dream, saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt, and be thou there until I bring thee word: for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him.

14 When he arose, he took the young child and his mother by night, and departed into Egypt:

15 And was there until the death of Herod: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Out of Egypt have I called my son.

Matthew 2:19 But when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeareth in a dream to Joseph in Egypt,

20 Saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and go into the land of Israel: for they are dead which sought the young child's life.

21 And he arose, and took the young child and his mother, and came into the land of Israel.

22 But when he heard that Archelaus did reign in Judaea in the room of his father Herod, he was afraid to go thither: notwithstanding, being warned of God in a dream, he turned aside into the parts of Galilee:

23 And he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, He shall be called a Nazarene.

MEMORY VERSE: Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a publick example, was minded to put her away privily. —**Matthew 1:19**

CENTRAL THOUGHT: Joseph was not an impulsive man; he contemplated important decisions for as long as it took to get the proper understanding necessary to do the right thing. When God gave Joseph the clarity he needed, he was prompt in executing his part.

WORD DEFINITIONS

Matthew 1:19 **“Just”:** equitable, innocent, holy, righteous (Strong’s); observing divine laws, virtuous, acceptable of God.

Matthew 1:19 **“Publick example”**: to show alongside, to expose to infamy, put to an open shame; to expose to public disgrace.

Matthew 1:19 **“Minded to put her away privily”**: Joseph contemplated putting Mary, his betrothed wife-to-be, away privately “without any cause” so that her life might be spared.

LESSON BACKGROUND

Joseph was mature in his thinking, of honorable character, and God-fearing. It was also to Joseph’s credit that he chose such a sensible young woman to be his wife. God knew He could trust Joseph and Mary to raise His Son from infancy.

Luke 1:39 and 56 tell us that Mary went for a three-month visit to her cousin Elizabeth’s house soon after the angel of the Lord told her she was to be the mother of the Son of God. Apparently, Mary did not tell Joseph of her heavenly visitor before she left. Upon her return, Joseph found out that his betrothed wife-to-be was with child. He was no doubt shocked, and Scripture says he “was minded to put her away privily.”

Joseph did not act immediately, however. “While he thought on these things,” he had a dream wherein an angel told Joseph plainly that Mary’s child was the Son of God. Upon hearing this, Joseph immediately took Mary as his wife rather than putting her away.

Joseph simply let people believe what they chose to believe, his betrothed having been gone three months and returning “with child,” realizing many would never know, much less comprehend the truth.

About six months later, a decree from Rome went out that everyone must journey to the city of their lineage to be taxed and counted in a census. When Mary’s labor pains started, Joseph did his best to find a suitable place for the mother and child. Upon finding no room in the inn, but offered a stable, Joseph immediately prepared as best he could. He probably wondered why the Son of God must be born away from the comforts of home—in a stable!

The angel of the Lord came to Joseph a total of four times, as recorded in Scripture. Each dream was for a specific purpose and came at just the right time. God did not reveal more than was necessary for Joseph to take appropriate action for that time, and Joseph was always acted in obedience.

DISCUSSION:

1. What thoughts must have run through Joseph's mind as he realized Mary would have a child?
2. Since Joseph considered putting Mary away privately, how much of Mary's explanation did Joseph initially comprehend?
3. Joseph "thought on these things." How important is it to prayerfully ponder and consider important decisions before acting on them, even when the evidence immediately seems clear about what we should do?
4. Joseph had "evidence" that allowed him to have Mary put to death publicly. Why didn't he immediately do so?
5. God did not reveal His plan to Joseph as soon as He did to Mary. Why does God sometimes work this way?
6. After the dream, Joseph immediately took Mary as his wife. What did Joseph consecrate to with his decision?
7. How faithful was God to give Joseph exact instructions through dreams when he needed them? How faithful is God to guide all who call upon Him?

COMMENTS AND APPLICATION

Bro. Mart Samons, as a young sailor in WWII, had his occasional turn at the wheel of the ship. Although he could not see where he was going, the captain of the ship gave steering instructions to whoever was steering the ship via a speaking tube near the ear of the sailor at the wheel. The captain might say, "Ten degrees starboard," or "twelve degrees to port." The captain had all of the necessary information for their overall course and would relay that information just in time for the sailor to make the necessary adjustments.

As might be expected, the captain usually had an overall plan in mind on where the ship was headed. The sailors might not have any idea at all where they were going, or at most, might have only been given a general area. It wasn't necessary for everyone on board to know the whole scope of the operation they were involved in at that time; they just needed to carry out their duties as their orders were given.

It happened to be Bro. Samons' time at the wheel when a hurricane started pounding their ship. As the ship endured the

onslaught of the storm, the captain's reassuring voice came down through the tube, "Steady as you go!" The steering instructions kept coming when a course adjustment was needed, along with the phrase to remind the sailor to "keep it steady."

We can't see what our Captain sees, and it is often unclear exactly what our next steps should be. Isaiah 30:21 tells us, "And thine ears shall hear a word behind thee, saying, this is the way, walk ye in it, when ye turn to the right hand, and when ye turn to the left."

The Lord protected Bro. Samons through many dangers in WWII. Sometime after the war, God saved him from a life of sin and misery. God had a job for him to do, just as He has specific tasks for you and me. It is up to us to hear His voice, and to obey when we hear it.

"Heavenly Father, thank you that your Holy Spirit brings your Word to my mind when I need it. Thank you for your willingness and ability to guide my steps to Heaven. Help me to hear your still, small voice in the storms of life that keeps me steady. Amen!"

REFLECTIONS

"And Jesus himself began to be about thirty years of age, being (as was supposed) the son of Joseph" (Luke 3:23). This scripture expresses an uncertainty that Joseph was Jesus' father. To those who know Jesus as the Son of God, this is encouraging, but to the unbeliever this is a reproach against Joseph's name. Joseph suffered for the sake of calling Jesus his son, but I believe he gained a great deal more than he "lost." He had an intimate knowledge of Jesus that no other would experience. This close knowledge of Jesus did not come by observation from others, but it was more like a deep secret Joseph was allowed to be in on as Jesus grew up in his home. I don't suppose he was able to see all the miraculous things Jesus would later do in his life; therefore, he never got to enjoy the fruit of his sacrifice. Yet, Joseph was inspiringly granted the opportunity to be an integral part of God's plan to save the world.

We may have to suffer some things for the sake of Christ. The fruit of our labor may go unnoticed by those looking on, but there is a huge blessing in being a part of the plan of God. Our sacrifices afford us the opportunity to have an intimate relationship with the Lord that would not be gained otherwise.

—Bro. Marvin Moles

JANUARY 19, 2025

ZACHARIAS

Luke 1:5 There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judaea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abia: and his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elisabeth.

6 And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless.

7 And they had no child, because that Elisabeth was barren, and they both were now well stricken in years.

8 And it came to pass, that while he executed the priest's office before God in the order of his course,

9 According to the custom of the priest's office, his lot was to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord.

10 And the whole multitude of the people were praying without at the time of incense.

11 And there appeared unto him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense.

12 And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him.

13 But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John.

14 And thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth.

15 For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb.

16 And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God.

17 And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

18 And Zacharias said unto the angel, Whereby shall I know this? for I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years.

19 And the angel answering said unto him, I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God; and am sent to speak unto thee, and to

shew thee these glad tidings.

20 And, behold, thou shalt be dumb, and not able to speak, until the day that these things shall be performed, because thou believest not my words, which shall be fulfilled in their season.

Luke 1:57 Now Elisabeth's full time came that she should be delivered; and she brought forth a son.

59 And it came to pass, that on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child; and they called him Zacharias, after the name of his father.

60 And his mother answered and said, Not so; but he shall be called John.

61 And they said unto her, There is none of thy kindred that is called by this name.

62 And they made signs to his father, how he would have him called.

63 And he asked for a writing table, and wrote, saying, His name is John. And they marvelled all.

64 And his mouth was opened immediately, and his tongue loosed, and he spake, and praised God.

65 And fear came on all that dwelt round about them: and all these sayings were noised abroad throughout all the hill country of Judaea.

66 And all they that heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, What manner of child shall this be! And the hand of the Lord was with him.

67 And his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Ghost, and prophesied.

MEMORY VERSE: But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John. —**Luke 1:13**

CENTRAL THOUGHT: Zacharias, a faithful Levite priest, followed all of God's commandments blamelessly. When God sent an angel to give him the wonderful news that his prayer had been heard and that he and his aged wife would have a son, Zacharias was overcome with disbelief and questioned the plausibility of the angel's news. Because of his unbelief, the angel told him he would be unable to speak until after the birth of their son.

WORD DEFINITIONS

Luke 1:6 **“And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless”**:

Zacharias and Elisabeth walked before both God and man in such a way that no one could put a finger on any fault (*Clarke*).

Luke 1:9 **“According to the custom of the priest's office, his lot was to burn incense”**: The priests were divided into 24 courses, and shared the temple services for a week each, the work of each priest being decided by lot (*Thayer*).

Luke 1:10 **“The time of incense”**: The people gathered for prayer at the temple every morning and evening (*Clarke*).

Luke 1:13 **“Thou shalt call his name John”**: meaning “God’s gracious gift” (*Thayer*).

LESSON BACKGROUND

God heard Zacharias’ prayers as one, long, continuous prayer—and answered it. Because of the advancing age of he and his wife, Zacharias became increasingly convinced that it was impossible for them to have children. He was so convinced in the “evidence” that when the angel of the LORD appeared and plainly told him that they would have a son, he doubted.

DISCUSSION:

1. Why did Zacharias keep praying, even after losing hope that his prayer for children would be answered?
2. How powerful is an earnest and honest prayer?
3. When is it time to quit praying for a need or burden?
4. Why did the angel say Zacharias did not believe his words?
5. Zacharias was “blameless” in his walk with God. Why did the angel rebuke his unbelief when the rest of his life was above reproach?
6. How did Zacharias’ reaction at his prayer being answered cross over the line to unbelief?
7. Why is unbelief offensive to God?

COMMENTS AND APPLICATION

The Bible records several instances of unbelief and God's great displeasure in it. Abraham struggled with it at times and suffered the consequences. David finally lost hope that he would be spared from King Saul's wrath and joined up with the king of Gath. The folks who gathered to pray when Peter was imprisoned simply could not believe it when they heard he was at the door—even though they were praying for his release.

Unbelief is a natural part of our humanity, but it displeases God greatly. However, He is gracious and deals with us in our times of unbelief, so that He is not hindered in working further in our lives. Matthew 13:58 tells us, "And he did not many mighty works there because of their unbelief." How many times do we miss out on a great blessing simply because of our unbelief?

Jesus taught in Matthew 18:23, "Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven." A child's nature is to trust those who love them, especially their parents and grandparents. We have seen or heard of young children jumping off of something rather tall, fully expecting their father or grandfather to catch them. Children are capable of a love that crowds out all fear.

God delights in our complete trust and absence of unbelief; it enables Him to do wonderful things for us and through us. Peter was enabled to walk on water simply because of his complete confidence in Jesus' love for him. Only after Peter allowed his gaze to wander from Jesus' face and looked at the "evidence" around him did he begin to sink. It is the same with you and me. God can and will do great things for us when we love and trust Him so fully that unbelief is crowded out.

"Dear Lord, thank you for your patience with me when I am tempted with unbelief. Help me to love you more and more so that unbelief is driven from me. Amen!"

REFLECTIONS

It is human nature to become discouraged when God does not answer our prayer within the time frame that we desire. This delay does not mean we should stop praying. The song writer encourages

us to “pray on ‘til the answer comes.” We need God’s help to maintain hope that He is hearing us and will answer our prayer. We should pray with expectation. As mentioned in the *Central Thought*, Zacharias and Elizabeth had given up hope of ever having a child; yet God in His love and mercy answered Zacharias’ prayer in HIS time. Zacharias was shocked at the presence of the angel, but it was his unbelief that caused God to punish him for a period of time.

Was it too hard for Zacharias to fathom the power of all-mighty God to change the course of nature (*old age*) for a child to be conceived? It seems unlikely that he would not have heard about what God had done in times past for Abraham and Sarah. “Is any thing too hard for the LORD?” (Genesis 18:14).

We have a special privilege to learn from those that have gone the way before us. I surmise such was the case for the father of the child that was possessed with an evil spirit. He cried out to the Lord with tears; Lord, “I believe; help thou mine unbelief” (Mark 9:24). He did not allow his natural eyes to have a greater influence than his spiritual eyes. Times and circumstances change, but God remains the same. “My cry shall be till time shall cease, O blessed Lord, my faith increase” (ELS #284 – verse 4).

—Bro. Tavis Browne

JANUARY 26, 2025

ELISABETH

Luke 1:24 And after those days his wife Elisabeth conceived, and hid herself five months, saying,

25 Thus hath the Lord dealt with me in the days wherein he looked on me, to take away my reproach among men.

36 And, behold, thy cousin Elisabeth, she hath also conceived a son in her old age: and this is the sixth month with her, who was called barren.

37 For with God nothing shall be impossible.

39 And Mary arose in those days, and went into the hill country with haste, into a city of Juda;

40 And entered into the house of Zacharias, and saluted Elisabeth.

41 And it came to pass, that, when Elisabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost:

42 And she spake out with a loud voice, and said, Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb.

43 And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?

44 For, lo, as soon as the voice of thy salutation sounded in mine ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy.

45 And blessed is she that believed: for there shall be a performance of those things which were told her from the Lord.

57 Now Elisabeth's full time came that she should be delivered; and she brought forth a son.

58 And her neighbours and her cousins heard how the Lord had shewed great mercy upon her; and they rejoiced with her.

59 And it came to pass, that on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child; and they called him Zacharias, after the name of his father.

60 And his mother answered and said, Not so; but he shall be called John.

1 Corinthians 1:26 For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called:

27 But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty;

28 And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are:

29 That no flesh should glory in his presence.

MEMORY VERSE: And it came to pass, that, when Elisabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost. —**Luke 1:41**

CENTRAL THOUGHT: Elisabeth was quite elderly when she realized she would finally have a child. By this time her friends and neighbors had grown used to the fact she was childless, but it was

ever fresh on her mind. To her, the prospect of finally having a child erased the many years of shame she put upon herself.

Imagine the surprise Elisabeth felt when her child leaped in her womb upon hearing the voice of Mary! At that instant, Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost, who inspired her with the revelation that Mary was the mother of the long awaited-Messiah.

WORD DEFINITIONS

Luke 1:41 **“The babe leaped in her womb”**: made a forceful movement quite different than any other movement she had felt before, so much so that it instantly became a sure sign from Heaven that she was beholding the face of the mother of Jesus.

Luke 1:41 **“Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost”**: It was prophesied that Elisabeth’s son would be filled with the Holy Ghost from the womb. It is possible that both mother and child received the Holy Ghost about the same time, judging from the fact that she instantly proclaimed the most wonderful truth in a bold manner.

LESSON BACKGROUND

There are several instances in the Old Testament where the Spirit of God would enable people to do extraordinary feats, or to be filled with a spirit of prophecy. Bezaleel, in Exodus 31:1-6, was “filled with the Spirit of God,” giving him the ability to create the masterpieces for the tabernacle. God also blessed others to help Bezaleel. They had a specific task to do, and God blessed them to perform it. There were times when “the Spirit of the LORD came mightily” upon Samson. A few examples of this are as follows: a lion was “rent as a kid,” three hundred foxes were caught and released with firebrands tied between each pair to burn down the enemy’s harvest, a city gate was taken down and carried up a hill, a thousand enemy soldiers were killed with the jawbone of an ass, and many other exploits.

When the Spirit of the LORD enables or inspires someone, wonderful things happen; this is not limited to feats and accomplishments, but to prophecy in various forms.

Elisabeth may not have had any idea she would be filled with the Holy Ghost that day, but when it happened, she was instantly blessed with the understanding she was in the presence of the mother of her

Redeemer. The prophetic words Elisabeth was inspired with were no doubt a great blessing to Mary, who would face special difficulties in the near future and in the years ahead.

DISCUSSION:

1. Elisabeth “was called barren,” marking her with a stigma that brought her grief. What are some of the other “labels” people can suffer under?
2. While Elisabeth was called barren by her friends, neighbors, and family, how did God regard her?
3. Why did God choose a woman who had all but given up hope of having a son to be the mother of John the Baptist?
4. We all have a special calling in life. What is God looking for in our lives so He can bless us in that calling?
5. Immediately after Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost, how much of her response centered around herself? What was the main theme of her discourse?
6. How accurate is a divine revelation?

COMMENTS AND APPLICATION

Thinking back over the many instances I have either witnessed or heard of the Holy Spirit inspiring or enabling people, so many times the inspired or enabled individuals were not of high or noble status in the world’s eyes, as alluded to in the verses in I Corinthians 1.

When David’s older brothers passed before the prophet Samuel to see who would be anointed the next king of Israel, God kept telling Samuel, “No, not this one either!” I Samuel 16:7 says, “But the LORD said unto Samuel, Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature; because I have refused him: for the LORD seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart.”

Who then does the Lord bless in the manner He blessed Elisabeth? Isaiah 66:2b tells us, “...but to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word.”

“Heavenly Father, thank you for remembering those whom the world often passes over. Thank you for regarding the poor in spirit and giving them your Holy Spirit! Amen!”

REFLECTIONS

Through the revelation of the Holy Spirit, Elisabeth was the first to recognize Jesus as the Messiah. If she met Jesus, it's likely it was only in his early childhood years. She was estimated to be about eighty-eight when John was born and is said to have died by the time John the Baptist was about twenty-eight. This would have been a couple of years before Jesus began his ministry.

If there was any correspondence between Elisabeth and Mary, I can imagine Mary sharing significant moments. Even if she never met him, one has to imagine she eagerly listened for stories about him. One such moment may have been when Jesus was twelve in the temple, going “about my Father's business.” Moments such as these would have been a quiet confirmation of her prophecy.

Elisabeth was a woman, “righteous before God.” Her Holy Spirit inspired words, “For with God nothing shall be impossible” and “there shall be a performance of those things which were told her from the Lord,” while spoken in faith, were realized by the seeing of her eyes. And so, it shall be with us when we have a recognition of Jesus in our lives. If we continue to live righteously before Him, our faith will be lost in sight.

—Sis. Diane Doolittle

FEBRUARY 2, 2025

THE SHEPHERDS

Luke 2:8 And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

9 And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.

10 And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.

11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.

12 And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying,

14 Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

15 And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.

16 And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger.

17 And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child.

18 And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds.

19 But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart.

20 And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.

MEMORY VERSE: And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. —**Luke 2:18**

CENTRAL THOUGHT: The lowly shepherds, faithfully keeping watch over their flocks by night, were the first to receive the glorious news of Jesus' birth. The angel of the Lord appeared to them—not to the high priest, King Herod, or even Simeon and Anna. Upon hearing the tidings from the angel, and upon hearing the multitude of angels singing the good news, the shepherds immediately set out to find the Christ Child. Later, when the shepherds spread the word abroad about Jesus' birth, all that heard it “wondered.” The populace around Bethlehem not only missed out on the angels' visit to the shepherds, but it seems they could not grasp the message the shepherds tried so hard to convey.

WORD DEFINITIONS

Luke 1: 9 “**The angel of the Lord**”: Most likely this was Gabriel, the same angel that spoke to Daniel, to Zacharias, and to Mary. Gabriel seems to be the heavenly messenger that brought special messages.

Luke 1:17 **“They made known abroad the saying which was told them”**: These first evangelizers spread the good news the angels told them, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men” (*Condensed from Matthew Henry*).

LESSON BACKGROUND

Abel, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and David were all shepherds. Is it any wonder that shepherds were among the first to hear the news of Jesus’ birth heralded by angels?

According to many sources, shepherds, at the time of Jesus’ birth, were considered to be “unclean” because of their occupation; thus, they were not allowed inside the temple, even though it was the sheep they shepherded that were offered as sacrifices

Living for God is often regarded as “simple and unsophisticated” in the eyes of the world. The prophets of old and the preachers of righteousness today have something in common: Elisha endured ridicule at the hands of the little children in 2 Kings 2:23 when they came out of the city and cried, “Go up, thou bald head: go up, thou bald head.” These children had heard the recent account of Elijah riding to heaven in a fiery chariot and made a mockery of it. In the next verse, two she-bears came out of the woods and “tare forty and two children of them.”

So shall it be at the end of the world. All who scorn the “simple gospel message from the mouth of those despised by the world” will suffer the same fate as the little children that made fun of Elijah’s ascent to heaven, and of Elisha who became prophet in his stead.

DISCUSSION:

1. Did God regard the shepherds to whom He sent the angel of the Lord to as faithful men? Why or why not?
2. Looking back through history at the times an angel appeared with good news, how many of the individuals they visited were considered faithful by God?
3. If you had to choose, would you rather be lifted up in the eyes of the world or receive a special visit from heaven?
4. Judging by the reaction of the shepherds, how did they regard the angel’s news?

5. What did the general populace think about what the shepherds tried to tell them?
6. How much of the gospel message today is “hidden” from those who are not ready to receive it?

COMMENTS AND APPLICATION

“Jonathan” is a man most people do not give much more than a passing glance. His usual attire consists of work boots, work clothes, an occasionally-shaved face, sunglasses, and a burr haircut. Jonathan is not someone that stands out in a crowd. His older, white work truck is not anything to brag about. Jonathan is very quiet. When he does talk, it is always to the point with very little “small talk.”

What is striking about Jonathan is his work “behind the scenes.” Jonathan contributed beef to a local gospel tent meeting held on our property several years ago. Afterward, he asked if I would like to help him locate folks that needed help with food; it was then that he shared that he has a steer butchered regularly to share with those who do not have enough otherwise. My suspicion, knowing Jonathan, is that he does not give out his name when sending beef to those who need it. He probably lets others deliver the food and keeps his name out of it.

In the same way, when we share the good news of the gospel, we should not be concerned that people “see us” but, rather, that they see Jesus! The gospel of far, far more value than good food for a hungry body—it is nourishment and salvation for never-dying souls. God sees best that much of what we do for the kingdom of God is not done on a stage for all the world to see; the goal is to bring the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ to a lost and dying world.

When the shepherds went about praising God and sharing what they had witnessed to all they encountered, they did not say, “We are special! We saw angels!” No, the news they spread had nothing to do with themselves but had everything to do with Jesus!

“Dear Lord, help me spread the glorious news of your gospel to all who will hear it. Help me to be hid behind your cross. Help me to be faithful, even when your message of peace, love, and hope sometimes seems to fall on deaf ears. Amen!”

REFLECTIONS

I'm so glad that the beautiful story of the shepherds receiving the news of Jesus' birth is recorded in the Bible.

Why did God choose to first reveal this glorious and long-awaited news to the "insignificant" shepherds? Was it because they were the only ones still awake when Jesus was born? Possibly. Yet God could have just as easily had Jesus' birth to be earlier in the day when more people were awake.

I believe the real reason may be that God once again wanted to show that He was "no respecter of persons" (Acts 10:34b). God also chose a poor young couple in lowly Nazareth to be Jesus' parents! He looked beyond their low station in life and saw that they would accept their important roles and become proper parents for this special child. God loves everyone!

Looking forward, God also had plans for Gentiles (including you and me) to become partakers in His wonderful plan of salvation. I am so encouraged by God's love and openness to ALL. "In every nation he that feareth [God], and worketh righteousness, is accepted with Him" (Acts 10:35); this gives me hope in knowing that "wherever" you or I find ourselves at in life—even at the end of a dark and dead-end road, when we look up to God with an humble and contrite heart, He will be found of us. Jesus proved this to the thief on the cross in his final moments, and He wants to prove it true to others too!

—Bro. Ron Cole

FEBRUARY 9, 2025

THE THREE WISE MEN

Matthew 2:1 Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem,

2 Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.

3 When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

4 And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born.

5 And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet,

6 And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel.

7 Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared.

8 And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also.

9 When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was.

10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.

11 And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.

12 And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.

MEMORY VERSE: But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting. —**Micah 5:2**

CENTRAL THOUGHT: Three wise men from the East saw what they believed to be a special star that signified the long-awaited birth of the Messiah. They journeyed westward on their quest to see Him. God continually guided them by the star, which finally stood precisely over where Jesus was. After worshiping Him, they presented Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

WORD DEFINITIONS

Matthew 2:1 **“Wise men from the east”**: The Jews believed that there were prophets in the kingdom of Saba and Arabia, who were of the posterity of Abraham by Keturah [Abraham’s wife after Sarah died]; and that they taught in the name of God, what they had received in tradition from the mouth of Abraham (*Adam Clarke quoting Whitby*).

Matthew 2:2 **“His star in the east”**: The wise men, or prophets, believed the luminous body, or bright light west of them, to be the star spoken of by Balaam in Numbers 24:17: “I shall see him, but not now: I shall behold him, but not nigh: there shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel, and shall smite the corners of Moab, and destroy all the children of Sheth (*Adam Clarke & Matthew Henry*).

LESSON BACKGROUND

As mentioned in the *Word Definitions*, most Bible scholars believe the wise men from the east were descendants of Abraham through his wife Keturah. “1 Then again Abraham took a wife, and her name was Keturah. 5 And Abraham gave all that he had unto Isaac. 6 But unto the sons of the concubines, which Abraham had, Abraham gave gifts, and sent them away from Isaac his son, while he yet lived, eastward, unto the east country.” (See Genesis 25:1-7) All the children of Keturah and of Abraham’s concubines were sent eastward before his death. The descendants of Abraham in the East grew to a vast number. Judges 6:5 speaks one of Keturah’s sons—Midian’s descents: “For they came up with their cattle and their tents, and they came as grasshoppers for multitude; for both they and their camels were without number.”

Though most of the children of the east did not worship God, there were a few that did—such as the three wise men that made their way to Bethlehem. There have always been a few who chose to go against the popular culture they lived in to worship God, such as Abraham, Rahab, and Ruth. Abraham was told to leave his home country. Rahab believed God, along with her family, and was spared the destruction the rest of Jericho suffered. Ruth left her home, country, and family to cast her lot with God’s people.

DISCUSSION:

1. Who inspired the three wise men that the star they saw in the west represented the birth of the “King of the Jews,” Jesus?
2. What would have happened if each wise man had “picked their own star” in their effort to find Jesus?
3. How does the fact that three wise men successfully followed the same star to one desired destination represent true unity of Spirit?
4. King Herod was unable to help the wise men locate Jesus. How much help are earthly kingdoms today in pointing the way to Christ?
5. After their unsuccessful inquiry at the palace of Herod, how did the wise men finally find Jesus?
6. When the star stopped, or stood still, the wise men concluded that Jesus must be directly below the star. Why did the wise men rejoice “with exceeding great joy” before even seeing the proof that Jesus was there?
7. Why can we rejoice the same way today when our faith takes in one of God’s promises?
8. How faithful is God today to all sincere seekers of truth?

COMMENTS AND APPLICATION

The wise men, aptly named, felt it was important enough to see the Saviour of the world with their own eyes that they embarked on a long journey. Perhaps detractors doubted the success of their mission, but they wanted to go, just in case they were right! They could not afford to miss their opportunity to see the long-awaited Messiah!

In 1980, Lee Strobel, an atheist investigative reporter, started reading the Bible to prove it false. His wife got saved in late 1979 and that bothered Lee immensely. He believed his wife had joined a cult. Lee not only read the Bible, he began to interview experts in archeology, history, biology, and law, as well as theologians. Being an investigative reporter with the Chicago Tribune gave Lee an inside track to just about anyone he called upon, and it granted him access to about any research material he could think of.

Believing his “search for the truth” would only take a weekend of investigation, Lee soon found out that the harder he searched and the more he learned, the more evidence began to mount up that, indeed, God is real and that Jesus did die on the cross and rise the third day! Jesus’ death and resurrection, in Lee’s mind, was the cornerstone of the Christian faith. Unable to prove these two events false but, rather, becoming convinced of their truth, Lee came to believe that there really was something to the Christian faith.

On November 8, 1981, a Sunday afternoon, Lee gathered all the evidence he had amassed in his two-year investigation. After summarizing his discoveries in his search for truth, Lee realized his atheism was wrong—and Jesus was right! In Lee’s words, “It took more faith to maintain my atheism than to become a Christian.”

Lee realized that intellectually believing that Jesus died on the cross and rose the third day was not enough. He read John 1:12, which clinched it for him: “But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name.” Lee knew that he needed to confess his sins, ask for God’s forgiveness, and accept Jesus’ blood to cover his sins. Kneeling down at his chair, Lee poured out his heart with bitter tears. Jesus saved Lee that day.

Rising from prayer, Lee knew he had to tell his wife. Upon hearing Lee’s good news, Lee’s wife cried and told him of the time she confided in an older lady that she did not believe her husband would ever turn from his ways. The lady, putting her arm around her shoulder, said, “God promised to take away our stony heart and give us a heart of flesh!” Lee’s wife began to pray that day for God to take Lee’s stony heart away and give him a soft heart. God answered her prayers!

Lee’s five-year-old daughter watched her father’s transformation with wonder. She could hardly believe that her once angry father could change so drastically. Instead of kicking holes in the wall in fits of anger, her father became what every little child wants—a godly man! Before long, the little girl went to her mother and said, “I want to have what daddy has!” Lee’s son followed in his older sister’s footsteps and also got saved at a very young age.

(Summarization of an April 12, 2017 interview by Stephen O’Doherty on Open House Interviews)

“Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for the birth, death, and resurrection of your Son, Jesus Christ! Thank you that ‘wise men still seek Him!’ Please help me seek you with my whole heart! Amen.”

REFLECTIONS

The quest of the wise men established some very important principles that must be pursued in one’s Christian life today. Their effort and experience embody the results that all Christians should encounter. By their example we can view a number of things:

1. The importance of reading and understanding God’s word.
2. The active aspect of faith in believing and acting on those beliefs. Such action moved the wise men to seek for Christ and trek many miles to see Him. Some have estimated that these men traveled a distance of 400 to 700 miles, taking as long as four months, traveling one way, to see the Christ. The preparation for such a trip, the expenses for the group, and the probable hardships did not deter them from traveling until they saw the “King of the Jews” and worshipped Him.
3. Befitting of a king, they brought gifts to Christ; a gift of gold, symbolizing his kingship. Frankincense was given, symbolizing his holiness, righteousness, and role as a high priest for us all. Lastly, they presented him with a gift of myrrh, more valuable some say than gold, symbolizing his embalming, suffering, and affliction.
4. These men realized the value of finding Christ and, upon doing so, they humbly worshipped him showing acknowledgement of the true Messiah.
5. In their effort to find Christ, they followed the star until they reached their destination.
6. After being led by the star, God warned them to not return to Herod, so they returned to their country going another way.

It is a wonderful opportunity to read about the wise men seeking Jesus. Will we seek for Him as they did? They left us a pristine example of what we should do in valuing the opportunity to seek Christ and realizing the blessing of finding Him. We, too, can return to our Father, going another way.

—Bro. Paul Phillips

FEBRUARY 16, 2025

SIMEON AND ANNA

Luke 2:22 And when the days of her [*Mary's*] purification according to the law of Moses were accomplished, they [*Mary and Joseph*] brought him [*Jesus*] to Jerusalem, to present him to the Lord;

25 And, behold, there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon; and the same man was just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel: and the Holy Ghost was upon him.

26 And it was revealed unto him by the Holy Ghost, that he should not see death, before he had seen the Lord's Christ.

27 And he came by the Spirit into the temple: and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him after the custom of the law,

28 Then took he him up in his arms, and blessed God, and said,

29 Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word:

30 For mine eyes have seen thy salvation,

31 Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people;

32 A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.

33 And Joseph and his mother marvelled at those things which were spoken of him.

34 And Simeon blessed them, and said unto Mary his mother, Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against;

35 (Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also,) that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.

36 And there was one Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Aser: she was of a great age, and had lived with an husband seven years from her virginity;

37 And she was a widow of about fourscore and four years, which departed not from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day.

38 And she coming in that instant gave thanks likewise unto the Lord, and spake of him to all them that looked for redemption in Jerusalem.

MEMORY VERSE: The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined. —**Isaiah 9:2**

CENTRAL THOUGHT: Simeon, a just and devout man, had been waiting for the Messiah to come. God honored his desire and allowed him to be among the first to see Jesus as an infant. In addition to Joseph and Mary, Zacharias and Elisabeth, the shepherds, the wise men, and Simeon, the only other person recorded as recognizing Jesus the Messiah as an infant was Anna. When she came upon the scene of Simeon blessing Jesus, Joseph, and Mary, she instantly recognized Jesus and told anyone who would listen.

WORD DEFINITIONS

Luke 2:25 **“Waiting for the consolation of Israel”**: waiting for the Messiah, because He was to be the redemption of Israel .

Luke 2:34 **“This child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel”**: Many in Israel were looking for the coming Messiah to deliver them from Roman rule in a military style rebellion. They would be sorely disappointed! A few in Israel, however, looked for the coming of the Messiah to deliver them from the bondage of sin—they would eventually have their hearts’ desire more than met (*Condensed from Barnes and Clarke*).

Luke 2:35 **“A sword shall pierce through thy own soul also”**: Mary would see Jesus crucified.

Luke 2:35 **“That the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed”**: Difficulties are necessary to reveal the true character of mankind. Some of the suffering we encounter is not only for our own benefit but is designed to help others see their need also.

LESSON BACKGROUND

Some scholars speculate that Simeon was a son of Hillel, a respected teacher in Jerusalem, and president of the Sanhedrin. Hillel was one of the most well-known and honored men known among the Jews since Moses. Whether or not Simeon was Hillel’s son is not known for certain, but it can be imagined that Simeon’s father was also a pious man and had raised his son well.

At the time of Jesus' birth, there was a certain Simeon who was the Ab, or president, of the Grand Sanhedrin, which his father, Hillel founded. This Simeon was given the title of Rabban, the highest title given to the doctors of the Jewish law; only a total of seven men ever held the title.

Jewish history states that Simeon, the son of Hillel, was blessed with a prophetic spirit. He was turned out of his place of authority and respect because he witnessed against the common opinion of the Jews concerning the temporal, or earthly, kingdom of the Messiah. Simeon believed that the coming Messiah would not deliver the Jews from the Romans but would come as the king of a heavenly kingdom! Simeon is not listed or mentioned in the Jewish book of Mishna, or book of traditions, which indicates that he was not a partaker of the common Jewish belief the coming Messiah would come according to their expectations.

Again, we do not know with absolute certainty that the Simeon referenced in Matthew 2 is the same Simeon who was at first honored so highly but eventually discarded because of his belief of who Jesus really was. It is not difficult, however, to think that the two Simeon's discussed here were the same man. (*Summarized from Clarke, Barnes, Henry, and Meyer*)

Anna, a widow of great age, was regarded as a prophetess among the Jews. Some believe she had an apartment among the out-buildings of the temple. Irrespective of where she lived, she frequented the temple, serving God day and night with prayers and fasting—much more than the common person. It is interesting to note that she was of the tribe of Asher of Galilee. This point refutes the common saying of the time, "Out of Galilee ariseth no prophet" (See John 7:52).

Perhaps it was due to being widowed at such a young age that Anna devoted her life wholly to serving God; or it may have been that she simply felt a special call of God. Regardless of the reason, Anna spent so much of her time praying and serving God, she was rewarded by seeing the Savior of the world before she departed this life.

DISCUSSION:

1. How special was the coming of the Messiah to Simeon and Anna?
2. To whom did they understand Jesus came to bless?
3. How could Simeon and Anna be sure that Jesus was the promised Messiah?
4. Simeon prophesied that Mary would suffer intensely, along with Jesus, for the sake of others. Why does God work through suffering in this manner?
5. Anna “spoke of him to all them that looked for redemption in Jerusalem.” What were the two types of redemption possible, and which one did Anna understand Jesus came for?

COMMENTS AND APPLICATION

At the time of Jesus’ birth, most of the Jews were looking for the coming Messiah to deliver them from Roman rule, not from their bondage of sin and carnality. Jesus did not fit their mold. Sadly, the religious elite eventually demanded Jesus’ crucifixion, rather than give up their grip of power over the people.

Today, people anticipate many things—often with avid interest: Who will win the next ball game or election? When and where will the next concert be? What will happen next in their favorite show?

For every ball game played, about half the crowd is overjoyed, while the other half is sorely disappointed. The results of elections are similar. Some voters are excited when their candidate wins, while the other voters are dejected.

Another aspect to consider about competition is that no matter how smart, strong, or powerful an individual or group is, they are eventually replaced by someone smarter, stronger, or more powerful.

There remains yet today one pursuit that leaves no one disappointed—Christ. When you and I run our spiritual race, it is not one person against another, but everyone against their own appetites and pride. We can all win this race because we are not in competition one with the other.

“Dear Lord, help me remember that all earthly pursuits and ambitions fade away. Help me anticipate and pursue my eternal home in Heaven above all else! Amen.”

REFLECTIONS

One of my earliest school memories was studying American history. I remember the illustration of the Liberty Bell on a work sheet as we learned about all the events that birthed the United States. The Liberty Bell got its name from the scripture that was cast on it from Leviticus 25:10, "Proclaim LIBERTY..." It hung in Independence Hall in Philadelphia and was probably rung at the first reading of the Declaration of Independence. Over the years it became an iconic symbol of freedom. In 1915, the bell was taken by railway to San Francisco to be displayed at an exposition. Nearly ten million people saw the Liberty Bell on its route and nearly two million people kissed it at the fair. In 1976, the bell was moved into a glass pavilion where it could be viewed by the millions of visitors that come to Philadelphia to see this symbol of freedom and liberty.

Several years ago, we spent some time in the Philadelphia area. One of the highlights of the trip was seeing the Liberty Bell. The tour guide gave a brief history of the bell and then we were told we could touch it. It was an amazing moment for me to touch this piece of American history. I had heard and read about it and had seen pictures of it; now I could read the words cast on it, see the infamous crack that ran across its surface, and feel the cold, hard metal. History came alive!

This same kind of experience is what happened for Anna and Simeon, but in a more profound way. They had heard all the prophecies and promises of the coming Messiah, how He was the Hope of Israel and of the world. Simeon even had a promise that he would see the Christ before he died. And then...they beheld Him! They touched Him and held Him in their arms. The Promise of the ages was fulfilled. He was real. He was alive!

Jesus is still alive today, and by faith we can have our own personal experience of that reality.

—Sis. Sarah Herron

FEBRUARY 23, 2025

JOHN THE BAPTIST

Luke 3:1 Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judaea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of Ituraea and of the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias the tetrarch of Abilene,

2 Annas and Caiaphas being the high priests, the word of God came unto John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness.

3 And he came into all the country about Jordan, preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins;

12 Then came also publicans to be baptized, and said unto him, Master, what shall we do?

13 And he said unto them, Exact no more than that which is appointed you.

14 And the soldiers likewise demanded of him, saying, And what shall we do? And he said unto them, Do violence to no man, neither accuse any falsely; and be content with your wages.

15 And as the people were in expectation, and all men mused in their hearts of John, whether he were the Christ, or not;

16 John answered, saying unto them all, I indeed baptize you with water; but one mightier than I cometh, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire:

17 Whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and will gather the wheat into his garner; but the chaff he will burn with fire unquenchable.

18 And many other things in his exhortation preached he unto the people.

19 But Herod the tetrarch, being reprov'd by him for Herodias his brother Philip's wife, and for all the evils which Herod had done,

20 Added yet this above all, that he shut up John in prison.

Luke 7:19 And John calling unto him two of his disciples sent them to Jesus, saying, Art thou he that should come? or look we for another?

20 When the men were come unto him, they said, John Baptist hath sent us unto thee, saying, Art thou he that should come? or look we for another?

21 And in that same hour he cured many of their infirmities and plagues, and of evil spirits; and unto many that were blind he gave sight.

22 Then Jesus answering said unto them, Go your way, and tell John what things ye have seen and heard; how that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, to the poor the gospel is preached.

23 And blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me.

24 And when the messengers of John were departed, he began to speak unto the people concerning John, What went ye out into the wilderness for to see? A reed shaken with the wind?

25 But what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? Behold, they which are gorgeously apparelled, and live delicately, are in kings' courts.

26 But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? Yea, I say unto you, and much more than a prophet.

27 This is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee.

28 For I say unto you, Among those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist: but he that is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.

MEMORY VERSE: And blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me. —**Luke 7:23**

CENTRAL THOUGHT: John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus Christ, was sent to prepare the way for Jesus' ministry. Those with an honest heart repented of their ways and were baptized by John. When John was cast into prison for reproving Herod's indiscretions, he struggled for a time, wondering if Jesus was the Messiah. Jesus sent word back to John calling attention to the current miracles that he was not able to witness. He also reminded John of the blessing and reward that comes when one does not allow themselves to be offended because they can't see or understand how God is working.

WORD DEFINITIONS

Luke 7:23 "**Offended**": from skandalizō – to "scandalize"; to entrap or trip up; to stumble, or entice to sin, apostasy, or displeasure.

LESSON BACKGROUND

John lived in the wilderness until it was time for him to prepare the way for Jesus. Matthew 3:4 tells us: “John had his raiment of camel's hair, and a leather girdle about his loins; and his meat was locusts and wild honey.” The austerity of John’s life before and during his short ministry paralleled, in many ways, Elijah’s life many years before, thus fulfilling the prophecy in Isaiah 40:3-5, “The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it.” These words are paralleled in Luke 3:4-6.

Malachi 3:1 says, “Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come, saith the LORD of hosts.”

The last two verses in the Old Testament, Malachi 4:5-6 state, “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD: And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse.”

John the Baptist’s ministry marked the end of about four hundred years of prophetic silence on the earth. Praise God for sending John the Baptist to announce the coming of Jesus Christ, the Redeemer for all mankind!

DISCUSSION:

1. What was John’s advice to those who asked him what they should do?
2. How does a person begin to “bring forth fruits worthy of repentance”?
3. What was John’s response when he realized some people thought he might be the Messiah?
4. After being cast into prison for condemning Herod for taking his brother’s wife, how did John begin to feel?

5. How did Jesus respond when John sent messengers to inquire if He was the Messiah?
6. Why didn't Jesus condemn John for feeling discouraged?
7. How does God deal with us when we feel overwhelmed by difficulties?

COMMENTS AND APPLICATION

It is not pleasant to “feel forgotten.” Abraham struggled with doubts that God would give him the son He promised. Job could not “find” God for a period of time. Elijah was convinced he was the only one left who served and feared God. There are many other faithful men and women that faced the challenge of feeling forsaken by God.

All the above-mentioned people enjoyed times of close communion with God before their difficult times. Abraham had wonderful visits from the LORD. Job enjoyed God's blessings to the extent that the devil accused God of putting a hedge around him. Elijah witnessed fire coming down from Heaven that not only consumed the sacrifice he had prepared, but also consumed the water in the trenches.

Great difficulty is not without purpose. Navy Seal trainees are bound with their hands tied behind their backs, their feet tied together, and then told to hop into a nine-foot deep pool where they must perform twenty deep dives, a summersault under water, swim to the far edge of the pool and back, float for five minutes, and then retrieve a face mask from the deep end of the pool. The instructors push them away from the edge of the pool if they try to rest against the edge. Many of the trainees beg to be taken out before the exercise is over. Sadly, a few trainees have died during this phase of training because their instructors were unable to revive them from drowning.

The Seals endure many other difficulties during the course of their training. It is deemed in their best interests, however, to be put through strenuous testing. The instructors know they will face extreme odds when they encounter the real enemy, and they do everything they can to prepare the men to withstand extreme pressure without breaking. (<https://www.stephentemplin.com/blog/seal-training-9-drownproofing#:~:text=On%20one%20of%20my%20trips,he%20had%20enough%20of%20training.>)

“Heavenly Father, thank you for understanding me when I feel alone. Help me to trust you in those times. Amen.”

REFLECTIONS

John the Baptist was a very peculiar preacher. He came forth preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sin. It was a different message. I know of no other preacher before him that preached it, yet it lined up directly with what Christ preached. John the Baptist got his message from God. We find in a time of weakness he said, “Art thou he that should come, or look we for another?” May God help us that in our time of weakness we will yet hold true to God.

– E. E. Gracey

MARCH 2, 2025

JESUS’ BROTHERS AND SISTERS

Matthew 12:46 While he yet talked to the people, behold, his mother and his brethren stood without, desiring to speak with him.

47 Then one said unto him, Behold, thy mother and thy brethren stand without, desiring to speak with thee.

48 But he answered and said unto him that told him, Who is my mother? and who are my brethren?

49 And he stretched forth his hand toward his disciples, and said, Behold my mother and my brethren!

50 For whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother.

Matthew 13:53 And it came to pass, that when Jesus had finished these parables, he departed thence.

54 And when he was come into his own country, he taught them in their synagogue, insomuch that they were astonished, and said, Whence hath this man this wisdom, and these mighty works?

55 Is not this the carpenter's son? is not his mother called Mary? and his brethren, James, and Joses, and Simon, and Judas?

56 And his sisters, are they not all with us? Whence then hath this man all these things?

57 And they were offended in him. But Jesus said unto them, A prophet is not without honour, save in his own country, and in his own house.

58 And he did not many mighty works there because of their unbelief.

John 7:1 After these things Jesus walked in Galilee: for he would not walk in Jewry, because the Jews sought to kill him.

2 Now the Jews' feast of tabernacles was at hand.

3 His brethren therefore said unto him, Depart hence, and go into Judaea, that thy disciples also may see the works that thou doest.

4 For there is no man that doeth any thing in secret, and he himself seeketh to be known openly. If thou do these things, shew thyself to the world.

5 For neither did his brethren believe in him.

6 Then Jesus said unto them, My time is not yet come: but your time is alway ready.

7 The world cannot hate you; but me it hateth, because I testify of it, that the works thereof are evil.

8 Go ye up unto this feast: I go not up yet unto this feast; for my time is not yet full come.

9 When he had said these words unto them, he abode still in Galilee.

10 But when his brethren were gone up, then went he also up unto the feast, not openly, but as it were in secret.

Acts 1:12 Then returned they unto Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is from Jerusalem a sabbath day's journey.

13 And when they were come in, they went up into an upper room, where abode both Peter, and James, and John, and Andrew, Philip, and Thomas, Bartholomew, and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon Zelotes, and Judas the brother of James.

14 These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren.

Galatians 1:15 But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb, and called me by his grace,

16 To reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the heathen; immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood:

17 Neither went I up to Jerusalem to them which were apostles

before me; but I went into Arabia, and returned again unto Damascus.

18 Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and abode with him fifteen days.

19 But other of the apostles saw I none, save James the Lord's brother.

MEMORY VERSE: For whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother.

—**Matthew 12:50**

CENTRAL THOUGHT: Jesus had four brothers and at least two sisters. They did not at first believe that Jesus was the Son of God but regarded Him only as their oldest brother. After Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension back to Heaven, His brothers—and most likely His sisters—believed.

WORD DEFINITIONS

Galatians 1:19 "**James the Lord's brother**": According to Bible scholars, this particular James was either Jesus' half brother or cousin (*Clarke and Barnes*).

LESSON BACKGROUND

Luke 2:41-51 tells us that Jesus "tarried behind in Jerusalem; and Joseph and His mother knew not of it." Jesus was twelve years old by this time, and it is possible that most—if not all—of his brothers and sisters were in the family by that time. Their household would have been a very busy one with up to six young children to look after, being especially busy on their annual trip to the Passover feast.

Joseph and Mary assumed Jesus was with friends or other family during their first day of travel back home. Their reasoning points to the probability that it would not have been uncommon had Jesus been in company of friends and extended family. Jesus was no doubt a joy to be around wherever He went.

It is remarkable that Jesus, after three days of frantic searching, was finally found talking to and listening to the doctors of the law. Normally, these older men would have ushered Jesus promptly out of their midst—but something about Jesus restrained them from doing

so. Instead of dismissing Him, they were drawn to His words and manner. Evidently, they had been talking with Jesus for untold hours by the time Joseph and Mary found Him. It seems that time stood still for these aged men during the time they had with Jesus. If only they had kept that same interest eighteen years later when Jesus began His ministry!

DISCUSSION:

1. Jesus no doubt loved His mother, brothers, and sisters, but why did He make the comment, “For whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother”?
2. When Jesus first began His ministry, people in His hometown insisted on referring to Him as “the carpenter’s son.” How did this affect their thinking of Jesus?
3. How can long-held perceptions affect people regarding spiritual matters?
4. The concluding thought of those who kept their former perceptions of Jesus was, “I’m offended in Him!” Why were they offended?
5. In John 7:1-5, we find that Jesus’ brothers did not believe He was the Messiah. How could growing up with Jesus have made it difficult to comprehend the call of His Heavenly Father on Him?
6. How can it still be true that “a prophet is not without honour, save in his own country, and in his own house”?
7. After Jesus ascended to Heaven, the disciples, Jesus’ mother, Jesus’ brothers, and several others, gathered together with one accord until the day of Pentecost. What does the Bible say about Jesus reproving His brothers for their former lack of belief?

COMMENTS AND APPLICATION

Tim Cook, the CEO of Apple, shared in a recent interview with the Wall Street Journal that the trait he admired most about Steve Jobs was his ability to change his mind almost in an instant when presented with sufficient facts. This adaptability is a rare gift that escapes a lot of people, even many leaders. The article went on to

say it is so easy to “be married to our opinions,” especially those opinions which were formed emotionally.

Jesus’ brothers formed opinions of their oldest brother in the most natural way—at home, and during their formative growing up years. Their opinions were naturally emotionally-based from the start. It took a drastic series of events to shake them from their biased thinking: Jesus died on the cross, rose from the dead, and then ascended back to Heaven.

Most of our memories are rooted in emotions and the five senses. Smells can trigger certain memories, as well as taste, touch, hearing, and sight. Our opinions, left to their natural tendencies, are also based on our emotions. It is no wonder that Jesus’ brothers had a difficult time believing their brother was the Son of God! Since the Jews considered anyone claiming to be divine as slanderous, it could have further cemented their great reluctance in accepting Jesus as the Messiah.

“Dear Lord, please help me to accept the truths from your Word. Help me to listen to your Holy Spirit. Help me to consider carefully and prayerfully what your ministers preach and teach, despite the natural human tendency to hold to my own opinions. Amen.”

REFLECTIONS

There is a saying in the world that familiarity breeds contempt. In one of the mentions of Jesus’ siblings early in His ministry, we see thinly-veiled contempt in the comments they made toward their brother. I have no doubt that having Jesus for a brother may have caused difficulties for them in the community. The aspersions cast against Jesus regarding the circumstances of his birth most likely were also cast at his brothers and sisters, potentially with slighting comments about their mother. That alone could have caused a rift in the feelings. Their brother whom they knew and possibly defended initially, was the same one that maybe they found themselves wanting to distance themselves from as they got older and the insults became sharper.

And then their brother begins His ministry. He begins clearly speaking out about His special birth, His godly heritage. Imagine the additional torment, comments, and strife that it brought to the family from the community. The contempt, because He wasn’t trying

to live quietly and modestly, but was making statements that drew attention, caused many to question even more who He was and the seemingly questionable circumstances around His birth and His life.

Yes, He had done miracles. Yes, He had spoken mighty sermons. But remember as His siblings, they had no doubt grown up with Him being the one who was always “the smartest” regarding the scriptures and holy teachings. That fact also could cause contempt.

And then the day of calvary came. No doubt they saw their brother die, maybe not up close and in person, but they knew what was happening. They no doubt heard the sobs of Mary that evening and watched as the women gathered spices to rebury Him properly, after the sabbath. And then the news—the tomb is empty. They hear the stories of the soldiers. Maybe the “official” story first, but then the real story whispered by those keeping watch. And next hearing of His after-death appearances, and then finally maybe even meeting Him alive and well themselves.

The old and familiar would have become new and unknown. Contempt gave way to contemplation, just as Mary had been doing Jesus’ whole life. And with honest contemplation of His teaching dawned a true understanding of who their brother was. They could no longer easily reject Him as the “strange one,” the “different one.” They now understood who His father truly was and had a choice to make. And we have the blessed record that it seems they humbled themselves and recognized their brother in the fulness of His glory.

—Bro. Eric Doolittle

MARCH 9, 2025

JESUS’ DISCIPLES—THEIR CALLING AND CHARACTER

Matthew 4:18 And Jesus, walking by the sea of Galilee, saw two brethren, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea: for they were fishers.

19 And he saith unto them, Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men. (Read also Matthew 4:20-22.)

Matthew 9:9 And as Jesus passed forth from thence, he saw a man, named Matthew, sitting at the receipt of custom: and he saith unto him, Follow me. And he arose, and followed him.

John 1:43 The day following Jesus would go forth into Galilee, and findeth Philip, and saith unto him, Follow me.

47 Jesus saw Nathanael coming to him, and saith of him, Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!

48 Nathanael saith unto him, Whence knowest thou me? Jesus answered and said unto him, Before that Philip called thee, when thou wast under the fig tree, I saw thee.

49 Nathanael answered and saith unto him, Rabbi, thou art the Son of God; thou art the King of Israel.

50 Jesus answered and said unto him, Because I said unto thee, I saw thee under the fig tree, believest thou? thou shalt see greater things than these. *(For full account, read John 1:43-51.)*

Matthew 10:1 And when he had called unto him his twelve disciples, he gave them power against unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal all manner of sickness and all manner of disease.

2 Now the names of the twelve apostles are these; The first, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother; James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother;

3 Philip, and Bartholomew; Thomas, and Matthew the publican; James the son of Alphaeus, and Lebbaeus, whose surname was Thaddaeus;

4 Simon the Canaanite, and Judas Iscariot, who also betrayed him.

Matthew 14:26 And when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, It is a spirit; and they cried out for fear.

27 But straightway Jesus spake unto them, saying, Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid.

28 And Peter answered him and said, Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee on the water.

29 And he said, Come. And when Peter was come down out of the ship, he walked on the water, to go to Jesus.

30 But when he saw the wind boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink, he cried, saying, Lord, save me.

31 And immediately Jesus stretched forth his hand, and caught him, and said unto him, O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?

John 11:11 These things said he: and after that he saith unto them, Our friend Lazarus sleepeth; but I go, that I may awake him out of sleep.

13 Howbeit Jesus spake of his death: but they thought that he had spoken of taking of rest in sleep.

14 Then said Jesus unto them plainly, Lazarus is dead.

15 And I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, to the intent ye may believe; nevertheless let us go unto him.

16 Then said Thomas, which is called Didymus, unto his fellow disciples, Let us also go, that we may die with him.

Matthew 26:14 Then one of the twelve, called Judas Iscariot, went unto the chief priests,

15 And said unto them, What will ye give me, and I will deliver him unto you? And they covenanted with him for thirty pieces of silver.

16 And from that time he sought opportunity to betray him.

John 21:2 (*Shortly after Jesus had risen from the dead, but only appearing to the disciples occasionally*) There were together Simon Peter, and Thomas called Didymus, and Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, and the sons of Zebedee, and two other of his disciples.

3 Simon Peter saith unto them, I go a fishing. They say unto him, We also go with thee. They went forth, and entered into a ship immediately; and that night they caught nothing.

4 But when the morning was now come, Jesus stood on the shore: but the disciples knew not that it was Jesus.

5 Then Jesus saith unto them, Children, have ye any meat? They answered him, No.

6 And he said unto them, Cast the net on the right side of the ship, and ye shall find. They cast therefore, and now they were not able to draw it for the multitude of fishes.

7 Therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved saith unto Peter, It is the Lord. Now when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he girt his fisher's coat unto him, (for he was naked,) and did cast himself into the sea.

MEMORY VERSE: And he saith unto them, Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men. —**Matthew 4:19**

CENTRAL THOUGHT: Jesus called His disciples from many walks of life. Several were fishermen and one was a tax collector. The characters of the disciples varied widely. Peter was impulsive, John was loving, Thomas preferred hard evidence, Nathaniel was guileless and contemplative, and Judas Iscariot loved money.

WORD DEFINITIONS

Matthew 4:19a **“Follow me”**: receive my doctrines and imitate me in my conduct (*Adam Clarke*).

Matthew 4:19b **“Fishers of men”**: to be admitted into a partnership of His ministry (*Adam Clarke*).

LESSON BACKGROUND

Jesus chose His twelve disciples soon after being “led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil,” where He “fasted forty days and forty nights.”

In John 1:35-42, two of John the Baptist’s disciples, Andrew, Peter’s brother, and most likely John, started following Jesus. Andrew immediately spoke of Jesus to Peter and then introduced Peter to Jesus. In Matthew 4:18-20, Jesus again called Peter and Andrew, his brother, to follow Him. Jesus then called James and John to follow Him. Jesus chose the rest of His disciples soon after, but the Bible is not clear on the exact order.

Jesus’ disciples were not “learned men.” Let’s consider the outcome if it had been left up to the ruling religious elite to choose Jesus’ disciples. Even if the rulers had accepted Jesus as the promised Messiah, His disciples would have probably been composed entirely of their own number. Likely, a big tumult would have arisen in establishing which of them was “the greatest” among them. The disciples Jesus chose had enough trouble with pride and emulation even though they were from less respected backgrounds. What would it have been like if they had been used to being looked up to?

DISCUSSION:

1. When Jesus told His first disciples He would make them fishers of men, what challenges and rewards awaited them?
2. What was required of those who obeyed Jesus' call, "Follow me"?
3. Since Jesus is no longer here in the flesh, what does it now mean to follow Him?
4. What did Nathaniel think when Jesus told him "I saw you under the fig tree"?
5. How and why does Jesus know each one of us so well?
6. Peter, after looking at the waves, started to sink as he walked to Jesus on the water. How can we identify with Peter in his plight?
7. How must Peter and the other disciples have felt when they decided to go back to fishing?

COMMENTS AND APPLICATION

Tim Cook, the current CEO of Apple, joined Apple in 1998 despite warnings from his friends to stay away from the nearly bankrupt company. Tim, however, felt drawn to Steve Jobs' vision of making simple-to-use, quality products for the general public. In contrast, many of the other tech companies of that era targeted big corporations rather than the average citizen.

After the advent of the *Apple I* computer, the first desktop computer, other companies realized the value of pursuing the private market and started introducing their own versions of personal computers. When Apple introduced the first iPhone, other tech companies again realized they needed to follow suit.

The doctrine of truth Jesus taught was totally foreign to the general populous. However, there were a few people who glimpsed something of its real worth, and they left everything to follow Jesus and His doctrine. Matthew, a tax collector for Rome, quit his steady job with the government of Rome to follow Jesus; in so doing, it left him with no discernable means of income for the foreseeable future. Matthew's decision proved to be the pivotal point in his life.

"Dear Heavenly Father, help me to hear and obey your call whenever you bid me follow you in paths I do not understand. Amen."

REFLECTIONS

Simon, whom Jesus called "Cephas" or "Peter," and who often served as the de facto spokesman for the twelve, was often impulsive, crude, and frankly, not well-learned. He was also bold, adventurous, and willing to defend his Lord. Andrew, his brother, and Philip, were the ambassadors of the group. Andrew introduced Peter to Jesus, and Philip introduced Nathanael, who was without guile and a quick believer. They also brought others to Jesus, such as the little lad with the lunch and the Greeks who wanted to see Jesus. James and John, the sons of Zebedee, nicknamed the "sons of thunder" by their Lord, were close to Him (part of the "inner three"), but were also ambitious and sometimes petty (they wanted to call down fire on those that rejected them)!

Thomas, surnamed "Didymus," or twin, is often referenced as "Doubting Thomas" because he didn't believe easily and was often pessimistic (e.g. "...let us also go, that we may die with him..."); yet he was loyal. Matthew, or Levi, was likely considered a traitor for collecting taxes for the Romans and most likely would have been diametrically opposed by Simon, the Canaanite, or "zealot," who was probably a religious fanatic opposed to Roman rule. Might Jesus have put these two together when sending out the seventy? Not much is said about the sons of Alphaeus, James and Judas, also called Thaddaeus, except a reference in John's gospel that Judas didn't quite understand Jesus' meaning about His Kingdom to come. Finally, there was Judas Iscariot, a lover of money, called a "thief" by John because he stole what was donated to their group. His love for money led to his betrayal of his Lord, and Judas took his own life when he saw his plotting had gone awry.

No matter their original character, each of the surviving disciples were changed by following Jesus, and after receiving the Holy Spirit, they gave the remainder of their lives, most as martyrs, to spreading the Gospel to all the world!

—Bro. Fari Matthews

MARCH 16, 2025

JESUS' DEALINGS WITH HIS DISCIPLES

Mark 8:31 And he began to teach them, that the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected of the elders, and of the chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.

32 And he spake that saying openly. And Peter took him, and began to rebuke him.

33 But when he had turned about and looked on his disciples, he rebuked Peter, saying, Get thee behind me, Satan: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but the things that be of men.

Matthew 18:1 At the same time came the disciples unto Jesus, saying, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?

2 And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them,

3 And said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.

4 Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

Mark 10:35 And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, come unto him, saying, Master, we would that thou shouldest do for us whatsoever we shall desire.

36 And he said unto them, What would ye that I should do for you?

37 They said unto him, Grant unto us that we may sit, one on thy right hand, and the other on thy left hand, in thy glory.

38 But Jesus said unto them, Ye know not what ye ask: can ye drink of the cup that I drink of? and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?

39 And they said unto him, We can. And Jesus said unto them, Ye shall indeed drink of the cup that I drink of; and with the baptism that I am baptized withal shall ye be baptized:

40 But to sit on my right hand and on my left hand is not mine to give; but it shall be given to them for whom it is prepared.

41 And when the ten heard it, they began to be much displeased with James and John.

Luke 9:51 And it came to pass, when the time was come that he should be received up, he stedfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem,

52 And sent messengers before his face: and they went, and entered into a village of the Samaritans, to make ready for him.

53 And they did not receive him, because his face was as though he would go to Jerusalem.

54 And when his disciples James and John saw this, they said, Lord, wilt thou that we command fire to come down from heaven, and consume them, even as Elias did?

55 But he turned, and rebuked them, and said, Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of.

56 For the Son of man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them. And they went to another village.

John 20:24 But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came.

25 The other disciples therefore said unto him, We have seen the Lord. But he said unto them, Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe.

26 And after eight days again his disciples were within, and Thomas with them: then came Jesus, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, Peace be unto you.

27 Then saith he to Thomas, Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing.

28 And Thomas answered and said unto him, My Lord and my God.

29 Jesus saith unto him, Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed.

John 21:15 So when they had dined, Jesus saith to Simon Peter, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my lambs.

16 He saith to him again the second time, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my sheep.

17 He saith unto him the third time, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me? Peter was grieved because he said unto him the third time,

Lovest thou me? And he said unto him, Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee. Jesus saith unto him, Feed my sheep.

18 Verily, verily, I say unto thee, When thou wast young, thou girdedst thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldest: but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldest not.

19 This spake he, signifying by what death he should glorify God. And when he had spoken this, he saith unto him, Follow me.

MEMORY VERSE: For the Son of man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them. —**Luke 9:56a**

CENTRAL THOUGHT: Jesus' disciples carried a lot of their past with them. Patiently, Jesus taught them that the pain and disappointment that had shaped their characters was not pleasing to God. Their brokenness would only bring more pain to themselves and everyone else. Jesus came to usher in a better way—one filled with charity, long-suffering, forgiveness, and humility.

WORD DEFINITIONS

Mark 8:33 **“Savour”**: to exercise the mind in a certain direction; to entertain an opinion with intensity (*Strong's*).

Luke 9:53 **“And they did not receive him, because his face was as though he would go to Jerusalem.”**: There was a long-standing dispute between the Samaritans and the Jews regarding the proper place to worship. When the Samaritans discerned that Jesus was on His way to the feast in Jerusalem, it angered them. They had hoped that since He had performed miracles among them in the past He would agree with them and say that men ought to worship in Samaria (*Albert Barnes*).

LESSON BACKGROUND

When Jesus' disciples started following Him, they believed He would set up an earthly kingdom and they would take up positions of authority with Him. This erroneous belief fostered contention for power. Naturally, each one wanted to have a “chief” seat next to Jesus.

When Jesus told His disciples He would be crucified, it shocked and angered them. Peter spoke what was on all their minds, “It shall not be!” Jesus rebuked Peter for his unbelief and pride. Peter’s unbelief centered around his inability to comprehend that “good” things can come out of “bad.” Peter’s pride was rooted in his perception of right and wrong being threatened. Jesus knew Peter loved Him and didn’t want to see Him die—but He also knew that Peter still had ambitions of an earthly kingdom!

DISCUSSION:

1. Why was it so difficult for Jesus’ disciples to grasp the concept of His crucifixion?
2. How was the disciples’ inability to comprehend Jesus’ impending crucifixion tied to their desire for position?
3. Why did Jesus use a little child to illustrate who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?
4. How does mankind generally determine “greatness”?
5. What difficulties arise when the human definition of greatness is used in spiritual matters?
6. Why were the other disciples displeased when they heard that James and John had requested prominent positions next to Jesus?
7. Why did Jesus not want fire called down from heaven to consume the Samaritans?
8. How easy is it to “defend” someone, or defend an ideology to the extent of wishing harm on those who appear to be in opposition?

COMMENTS AND APPLICATION

At the time of this writing, votes are being cast to determine the next president of the United States, as well as many other national, state, and locally-elected officials. Several amendments are on state ballots. When each race and ballot issue is determined, there will be many elated with the results and many bitterly disappointed.

The Kingdom of Heaven is infinitely superior to mankind’s best intentions and aspirations. It does not constitute the “will of the people,” nor does it pit one against another. Praise God, our peace is not dependent on the outcome of elections.

“Dear Lord, thank you for your Heavenly Kingdom! Thank you for holding all of creation in the palm of your hand and carrying the weight of your church on your shoulder. Amen.”

REFLECTIONS

Jesus said, “If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed. (But) whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple. And they overcame... and they loved not their lives unto the death. (John 8:31; Luke 14:27; Revelation 12:11)

This is a personal testimony how God worked with me a number of years ago in my ministry.

Most all my life, Monark was like my New Year, and I would receive renewal that would carry me through to the next meeting. This particular year was different; I didn’t seem to get that refreshing. I went home feeling a great need. One morning, as I was crying unto the Lord, the Lord put these words in my mouth as I prayed: “Lord, I want you to try me!” A chill passed over me, as I knew I was asking for something hard. But, it seemed at the same time, the Lord would be pleased if I willingly prayed this way; therefore, I chose to make this my daily prayer, knowing the possible cost. Time passed and a trying period started. I realized when it did, but I said to myself, “Oh! I can bear this.” But the trial escalated, and I found the test was having a profound effect.

I found myself longing for the comfort of other ministers. I had tried to encourage others when I knew they were in difficult places. I cried unto the Lord, and the Lord responded with this: “I told the ministers to not call you. I wanted you to get your help from ME.”

For three months I was sorely tempted with an imaginary line and with these words spoken in my ears: “Just step across the line—you will never have to preach again.” I bore this with much weeping and prayer! Then one day, the Lord caused me to turn and see a “city set on a hill,” and the power of this trial was broken. I turned and ran for my life! God had been faithful to me once again.

—Sis. Maxine Busbee

MARCH 23, 2025

LAZARUS, MARTHA, AND MARY

Luke 10:38 Now it came to pass, as they went, that he entered into a certain village: and a certain woman named Martha received him into her house.

39 And she had a sister called Mary, which also sat at Jesus' feet, and heard his word.

40 But Martha was cumbered about much serving, and came to him, and said, Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? bid her therefore that she help me.

41 And Jesus answered and said unto her, Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things:

42 But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her.

John 11:1 Now a certain man was sick, named Lazarus, of Bethany, the town of Mary and her sister Martha.

2 (It was that Mary which anointed the Lord with ointment, and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick.)

3 Therefore his sisters sent unto him, saying, Lord, behold, he whom thou lovest is sick.

4 When Jesus heard that, he said, This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby.

5 Now Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus.

6 When he had heard therefore that he was sick, he abode two days still in the same place where he was.

7 Then after that saith he to his disciples, Let us go into Judaea again.

17 Then when Jesus came, he found that he had lain in the grave four days already.

20 Then Martha, as soon as she heard that Jesus was coming, went and met him: but Mary sat still in the house.

21 Then said Martha unto Jesus, Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died.

22 But I know, that even now, whatsoever thou wilt ask of God, God will give it thee.

23 Jesus saith unto her, Thy brother shall rise again.

24 Martha saith unto him, I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day.

25 Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live:

26 And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believest thou this?

27 She saith unto him, Yea, Lord: I believe that thou art the Christ, the Son of God, which should come into the world.

28 And when she had so said, she went her way, and called Mary her sister secretly, saying, The Master is come, and calleth for thee.

29 As soon as she heard that, she arose quickly, and came unto him.

32 Then when Mary was come where Jesus was, and saw him, she fell down at his feet, saying unto him, Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died.

33 When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews also weeping which came with her, he groaned in the spirit, and was troubled,

34 And said, Where have ye laid him? They said unto him, Lord, come and see.

35 Jesus wept.

36 Then said the Jews, Behold how he loved him!

37 And some of them said, Could not this man, which opened the eyes of the blind, have caused that even this man should not have died?

38 Jesus therefore again groaning in himself cometh to the grave. It was a cave, and a stone lay upon it.

39 Jesus said, Take ye away the stone. Martha, the sister of him that was dead, saith unto him, Lord, by this time he stinketh: for he hath been dead four days.

40 Jesus saith unto her, Said I not unto thee, that, if thou wouldest believe, thou shouldest see the glory of God?

41 Then they took away the stone from the place where the dead was laid. And Jesus lifted up his eyes, and said, Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me.

42 And I knew that thou hearest me always: but because of the people which stand by I said it, that they may believe that thou hast sent me.

43 And when he thus had spoken, he cried with a loud voice, Lazarus, come forth.

44 And he that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with graveclothes: and his face was bound about with a napkin. Jesus saith unto them, Loose him, and let him go.

45 Then many of the Jews which came to Mary, and had seen the things which Jesus did, believed on him.

MEMORY VERSE: Jesus wept. —**John 11:35**

CENTRAL THOUGHT: Lazarus, Mary, and Martha were some of Jesus' closest friends. They faced challenges, however, just like you and I do. Being close friends with Jesus did not automatically change their personality nor did it shield them from all pain. Jesus helped them through their difficulties, and they learned through the hard times how much He cared for them.

WORD DEFINITIONS

Luke 10:41 "**Careful**": anxious; to seek to promote one's interests (*Thayer*); to take thought (*Strong's*).

Luke 10:41 "**Troubled**": to make turbid, that is to disturb (*Strong's*); disquieted (*Thayer*).

John 11:17 "**Lain in the grave four days**": Adam Clarke noted that the Jews sometimes embalmed their dead, yet God caused Lazarus to not be embalmed so that his resurrection from the dead might be more glorious.

LESSON BACKGROUND

Bethany, the town where Lazarus, Mary, and Martha lived, is on the eastern side of Jerusalem. Jesus did not have a home during His ministry, but was always welcome at the home of His three friends.

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, riding on the donkey colt, was from Bethany. Lazarus was raised from the dead in Bethany. The Garden of Gethsemane is at the base of the Mount of Olives in Bethany. Jesus' ascension into Heaven was from the Mount of Olives.

The Arabic name for Bethany is Al-'Ayzariyyah, which means Lazarus. Today, Bethany is in the city limits of Al-'Eizariya, taken from the original spelling. It is interesting that the Arabic culture today still recognizes the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead.

DISCUSSION:

1. What compelled Martha to be “cumbered about much serving”?
2. Why did Mary choose to sit at Jesus feet instead of helping her sister serve?
3. How can siblings be so different in their personalities and outlook on life?
4. Regarding the two sisters, who did Jesus say He loved more? (Consider Luke 10:38-42 and John 11:5.) How does this help us today in our relationships with one another?
5. What difficulties did Martha have with Mary’s decisions?
6. What difficulties could Mary have had with Martha?
7. How did Jesus feel when He saw the grief of Martha and Mary?
8. Why did Jesus allow His friends to suffer the loss of their brother when He knew He would raise him from the dead?
9. How does the shortest verse in the Bible, John 11:35, affect us?
10. How can human reasoning, as pointed out in John 11:37, hinder faith today?

COMMENTS AND APPLICATION

The story in Luke 10:38-42 illustrates so well the diversity God created in humankind. These differences can be both a blessing and a challenge. The old question, “What would the world be like if everyone was just like me?” is something to ponder.

There can be two siblings in a family, or there can be twelve, but most of the time the siblings will have differences. My wife is blond-haired and blue-eyed. Her sister has dark hair and brown eyes. Their personalities differ also, even though they grew up in the same household.

Another saying, “opposites attract” is so true in courtship and marriage. People are often drawn to someone with qualities they admire and feel they are lacking personally. While some couples may find that they both love to talk a lot, that is usually not the case. Most of the time, one likes to listen more than talk. When couples value and celebrate their differences rather than quarrel over them, the end result is delightful.

Jesus loved Martha, Mary, and Lazarus—shortcomings and strong points included. Martha served Jesus with her hospitality and food.

Mary “anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair.” Jesus appreciated both forms of service.

When Lazarus died, Martha and Mary shared deep grief. Their response to the news that Jesus had come to visit them was remarkably different. Martha, “as soon as she heard that Jesus was coming, went and met him: but Mary sat still in the house.” Jesus understood Martha’s promptness and courtesy, and accepted Mary’s reflective nature for what it was.

“Heavenly Father, thank you for making each one of us different! Help me to recognize, accept, and appreciate the differences of my brothers and sisters in Christ. Amen.”

REFLECTIONS

When musing on the relationship of Jesus with His friends, Lazarus, Martha and Mary, we find a tender love that shows His divine love as a human being and as their Savior!

There is so much we can learn as we study how Jesus interacted with them. He showed genuine care and compassion for them as individuals and responded to their emotional needs, as well as their spiritual needs. Their needs were different, yet Jesus loved each of them. We can take comfort in knowing that He cares for us in the same way.

When we meditate on the relationship He had with them, we discover that He hurt when they hurt, and He grieved when they grieved; but, He was able to transcend the human aspect to give the spiritual guidance that was needed.

When we look at how Jesus responded to Martha when she complained of Mary not helping her prepare for the guests, we see Him administering to her emotional and spiritual needs.

In spite of Jesus’ human feelings for the loss of His dear friend, He had to tarry and not rush to Lazarus’ aid while he was sick, for the glory of God. We see the grief He felt during that time because the scriptures say that, “He groaned in the spirit” and that “Jesus wept.”

We can benefit from Jesus’ example of genuine love and compassion for others. The effectual way to win people is to become a loving friend.

—Sis. Doris Clay

MARCH 30, 2025

SIMON THE CYRENIAN AND JOSEPH OF ARIMATHAEA

Mark 15:21 And they compel one Simon a Cyrenian, who passed by, coming out of the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to bear his cross.

(See also Matthew 27:32 and Luke 23:26. It is believed that Acts 19:33-34 and Romans 16:13 speak of Simon's sons)

Acts 19:33 And they drew Alexander out of the multitude, the Jews putting him forward. And Alexander beckoned with the hand, and would have made his defence unto the people.

34 But when they knew that he was a Jew, all with one voice about the space of two hours cried out, Great is Diana of the Ephesians.

Romans 16:13 Salute Rufus chosen in the Lord, and his mother and mine.

Matthew 27:57 When the even was come, there came a rich man of Arimathaea, named Joseph, who also himself was Jesus' disciple:

58 He went to Pilate, and begged the body of Jesus. Then Pilate commanded the body to be delivered.

59 And when Joseph had taken the body, he wrapped it in a clean linen cloth,

60 And laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn out in the rock: and he rolled a great stone to the door of the sepulchre, and departed.

Mark 15:43 Joseph of Arimathaea, an honourable counsellor, which also waited for the kingdom of God, came, and went in boldly unto Pilate, and craved the body of Jesus.

44 And Pilate marvelled if he were already dead: and calling unto him the centurion, he asked him whether he had been any while dead.

45 And when he knew it of the centurion, he gave the body to Joseph.

46 And he bought fine linen, and took him down, and wrapped him in the linen, and laid him in a sepulchre which was hewn out of a rock, and rolled a stone unto the door of the sepulchre.

Luke 23:50 And, behold, there was a man named Joseph, a counsellor; and he was a good man, and a just:

51 (The same had not consented to the counsel and deed of them;) he was of Arimathaea, a city of the Jews: who also himself waited for the kingdom of God.

52 This man went unto Pilate, and begged the body of Jesus.

53 And he took it down, and wrapped it in linen, and laid it in a sepulchre that was hewn in stone, wherein never man before was laid.

John 19:38 And after this Joseph of Arimathaea, being a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, besought Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus: and Pilate gave him leave. He came therefore, and took the body of Jesus.

39 And there came also Nicodemus, which at the first came to Jesus by night, and brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about an hundred pound weight.

40 Then took they the body of Jesus, and wound it in linen clothes with the spices, as the manner of the Jews is to bury.

41 Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden; and in the garden a new sepulchre, wherein was never man yet laid.

42 There laid they Jesus therefore because of the Jews' preparation day; for the sepulchre was nigh at hand.

MEMORY VERSE: She hath done what she could: she is come aforehand to anoint my body to the burying. —**Mark 14:8**

CENTRAL THOUGHT: Simon the Cyrenian is mentioned in the first three gospels. He carried the cross for Jesus when Jesus was physically no longer able to carry it.

Joseph of Arimathaea, a member of the Sanhedrin and a secret disciple of Jesus, obtained permission from Pilate to bury Jesus in his own tomb. Nicodemus, also a member of the Sanhedrin, helped Joseph in his act of love and service.

The memory verse is most likely referring to Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. Her act of love and devotion is worthy to be mentioned here, alongside Simon the Cyrenian, Joseph of Arimathaea, and Nicodemus.

WORD DEFINITIONS

Matthew 27:32 “**Cyrene**”: A city in Northern Libya, one of the northernmost cities of the African continent. Many Jews lived there who often visited Jerusalem.

Mark 15:21 “**Simon... the father of Alexander and Rufus**”: Since Alexander and Rufus appear to be well-known among the believers, it is possible that they are the ones mentioned in Acts 19:33 and Romans 16:13 (*Clarke*).

Acts 19:33 “**Alexander**”: Evidently a Jewish leader in Ephesus where the uproar concerning the goddess Diana of the Ephesians took place. He may have been a son of Simon the Cyrenian. It does not appear he was a believer since the Jewish leaders, who were against Paul and the gospel, set him forward to make a defense. The local Jews did not want to be blamed for the uproar resulting from Paul’s preaching (*Barnes, Clarke, and Henry*).

Romans 16:13 “**Rufus**”: Possibly a son of Simon the Cyrenian, but certainly held in high regard by Paul and the rest of the believers.

Matthew 27:57 “**Arimathaea**”: Some Bible scholars place Arimathaea approximately eight miles north of Jerusalem. Another name for Arimathaea is Ramah, where Samuel was born.

LESSON BACKGROUND

Simon the Cyrenian most likely came to Jerusalem for the Passover feast. As he “came out of the country,” perhaps on his way toward Jerusalem for the feast, he happened to be at the right place at the right time. The soldiers overseeing Jesus’ execution ordered him to take up the cross Jesus was no longer able to carry.

It may seem strange that Jesus, the Son of God, would ever be incapable of carrying something—yet He was unable. John 19:17 states that Jesus bore His cross, while the other three gospels say that Simon carried it for Him. It is possible that Jesus bore His cross for part of the way, then was relieved of His burden when the soldiers saw He was unable to continue. Jesus chose to allow Himself to be humanly and physically weak for our sakes. He understands our weakness in time of great distress.

Joseph of Arimathaea was a wealthy counsellor of the Great Sanhedrin, yet he was considered by all who knew him to be

honorable, good, and just. He was also a secret disciple of Jesus, keeping his discipleship private for “fear of the Jews.” After Jesus’ death, when everyone had lost all hope, Joseph threw off the burden of public opinion and “went in boldly unto Pilate, and craved the body of Jesus.” It mattered not what others thought of him now!

DISCUSSION:

1. Like Simon of Cyrene, how often do we set out with one thing in mind but find our purpose redirected by God?
2. If Simon helped Jesus by carrying His cross, how important is it that we help our fellow man when the opportunity presents itself?
3. Jesus came to the end of His physical strength and was unable to continue carrying His cross. What does this tell us about our limitations and the understanding Jesus has of our weaknesses?
4. Simon helped Jesus by carrying His cross—but he could not take Jesus’ place on the cross. What are our limitations in bearing the burden for our brothers and sisters in Christ?
5. If Alexander mentioned in Acts 19:33, and Rufus referred to in Romans 16:13, were both sons of Simon of Cyrene, how could one refuse to believe in Jesus and the other accept Him?
6. Joseph of Arimathaea was rich, had great status among his peers and the Jews, was honorable, good, and just. Why did he not make public his decision to follow Christ until after Jesus’ death?
7. What about Jesus’ death affected Joseph to the extent he would “boldly” ask Pilate to bury the body of Jesus?
8. Joseph buried Jesus in “his own new tomb.” Like Joseph, how might our plans and preparations need to be altered in order to serve Jesus?
9. Jesus had need of Joseph’s tomb for a short time. What does Jesus need of me?

COMMENTS AND APPLICATION

Simon was probably unaware of Jesus’ arrest, sham trial, and imminent crucifixion since he was “coming out of the country.” His long journey to Jerusalem neared completion in time for the

Passover feast. (Sidenote: The Passover started at twilight, or 6 pm, on the fourteenth day of Nisan. Jewish families were required to sacrifice a lamb in the temple on the afternoon of the fourteenth, which coincided with the time of Jesus' death on the cross.)

Simon may have been at the temple when Jesus breathed His last breath, and he may have heard about the veil which separated the most holy place from the holy place, rending from top to bottom. Simon may also have stayed to watch Jesus' crucifixion and death. It is certain that Simon witnessed the sky grow dark and felt the earthquake that opened some of the tombs. He could have seen some of the dead that rose from the graves and walked the streets of Jerusalem. Wherever Simon was during this time, he was impacted for life! Some Bible scholars believe Simon became a disciple of Jesus and later carried the gospel to Egypt. Tradition places his martyrdom around 100 A.D.

The Roman soldiers that "laid hold upon Simon" and "compelled him" to carry Jesus' cross indicate an initial reluctance on the part of Simon to participate in the proceedings surrounding Jesus' crucifixion. What changed him from an unwilling bystander to a willing disciple of Jesus who later helped spread the gospel? Only God knows. What matters is that God will use every circumstance in life to affect as many souls as possible to choose to live for Him!

After Jesus' death on the cross, another man was also deeply affected—Joseph of Arimathaea. Formerly too afraid to openly support Jesus, something "snapped" in his thinking, and he became bold for the cause of Jesus. It may have seemed too little, too late in Joseph's mind to be bold for Christ after His death, but he could not help himself—he had to do something for his Master, even if it were only to put the body of Jesus in the tomb he had recently constructed for his own use.

Both of these men allowed the events surrounding the death of Jesus to win them to the gospel. They could have hardened their hearts, as some did among the religious elite. Those who chose to persevere in their former thinking missed out on so much! The question for you and I today is, "What will I do with Christ?"

"Dear Lord, thank you for dying on the cross in my stead! Thank you for dealing with every soul. I am grateful for every soul that yields to you. Amen."

REFLECTIONS

We, like Joseph, who are the richest in earthly goods, positions, and abilities not only have the most to lose of these temporal assets for Christ, but also have the greatest opportunity to advance the kingdom of God when fully yielded to His will. Like Joseph, we will have to bravely move forward to minister to our Lord, despite it making us vulnerable to injuries by others. We know that our Lord will reward us now and throughout eternity with His sweet abiding presence.

Joseph and Nicodemus, unlike their fellow Sanhedrin members, earnestly desired a righteous, heart-centered kingdom of God that Christ and John the Baptist advanced versus a political kingdom that advanced the carnal ambitions of the people. After boldly begging Christ's body from the world empire's regional governor, Joseph laid it in his own new tomb, fulfilling the prophecy that the despised, sinless, penniless, and homeless Messiah would make His grave with the rich.

Each of us would feel greatly honored to assist our suffering Lord, as did Simon, in carrying the weight of the cross that His weakened body could no longer bear. Today, can Christ and the world find a "Simon" in us, who, at a moment's notice will joyfully bear ridicule for Christ's highway of holiness?

In an account by Voice of the Martyrs, "Amber," an unmarried female foreign missionary to Tibet, was being beaten and abused by five Chinese policemen inside Tibet in 2013 for spreading the gospel. Jesus dispelled her fears with His presence and this question: "The only way for these men to learn about me is through persecuting you. It's me they are persecuting; will you lend me your body?"

Let's lend and yield Jesus our bodies to be abused, even as the three Hebrew boys did because, "His approval shall be our reward." As Christ's followers, let's say, "yes" when we are given the honor to both drink of and rejoice in the cup of suffering with Him.

—Bro. Jeremy Booher

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