

Walking through Holy Week with Jesus



**Jack County Cowboy Church
Pastor JD Ezzell
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This Book is Dedicated to my Bible Study Group
that I have had the privilege of teaching for
several years.

Thank You!

The Week of Easter, Sunday to Sunday

The Entry into Jerusalem – Matthew 21:1-11 – Morning

Clearing the temple – Matthew 21:12-16 – Noon **Day 1**

Jesus Curses a Fig Tree – Matthew 21:18-22 – Evening

The Authority of Jesus Questioned – Matthew 21:23-27 - Morning

The Parable of the Tenants – Matthew 21:33-46 – Noon **Day 2**

The Parable of the Wedding Banquet – Matthew 22:1-14 - Evening

Paying the Imperial Tax to Caesar – Matthew 22:15-22 – Morning

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The Greatest Commandment – Matthew 22:34-40 – Evening

The Day and Hour Unknown – Matthew 24:36-44 – Morning

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The Sheep and the Goats – Matthew 25:31-46 – Evening

The Last Supper – Matthew 26:17-39 – Morning

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Jesus Washes Disciples Feet – John 13:1-17 – Evening

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The Crucifixion of Jesus – Matthew 27:32-44 – Evening

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The Disciples, what now – John 20:19 – Evening

Jesus Has Risen – Matthew 28:1-10 – Morning

The Great Commission – Matthew 28:16-20 – Evening **Day 8**

Devotional #1 – Morning of the First day

Matthew 21:1-11

1 As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, 2 saying to them, “Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. 3 If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away.” 4 This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: 5 “Say to Daughter Zion, ‘See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’ ” 6 The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. 7 They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. 8 A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. 9 The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” “Hosanna in the highest heaven!” 10 When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, “Who is this?” 11 The crowds answered, “This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.”

Study Notes:

This morning, I want to talk about two of the symbols we associate with Palm Sunday. The donkey and the palm branches. Now, you get what these have to do with Palm Sunday, right? Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, and the people cut palm branches from the trees and spread them on the road. But there’s actually more to these two details to this story than you might have realized, and so I want to look at each of them.

First, the donkey.

Verse 1 says that Jesus and His disciples “drew near to Jerusalem and came to Bethphage.” This was a little village on the mount of Olives, a little over half a mile from the Temple Mount.

Jesus instructs two of his disciples to go into Bethphage and borrow a donkey and a colt. Which couldn’t have been a great assignment. They were supposed to just say “The Lord needs them” if anyone questioned them about why they were stealing these animals. But they do, and verse 7 says that Jesus sat on “them,” which has caused problems for commentators ever since, not to mention artists and movie makers, because nobody can figure out how Jesus sat on a donkey and a colt at the same time. One commentary I read suggested that Jesus used the adult donkey for the steep descent down the Mount of Olives, and then switched to the colt to go into the city. This makes sense to me. But, “Man—I feel sorry for that donkey!”

But why a donkey in the first place? This is the first record we have of Jesus not walking. So why would he choose a donkey? The top Roman soldiers of Jesus’s day rode on fancy, majestic horses—now those were a show of power and position. Those said power, strength, authority. The donkey? Not so much. I mean, this is supposed to be the **Triumphal** Entry, right? Not the meek and mild entry.

But no, the meaning of Jesus riding on the donkey went above and beyond the immediate or the practical. Even this detail and this lowly animal was part of God’s bigger plan.

Way back in **Zechariah 9:9**, in the Old Testament, there was a prophecy that the Messiah would come riding on a young donkey. In verse 5, Matthew quotes Zechariah.

Jesus knew the Bible. So He specifically wanted a donkey because He needed to fulfill the prophecy of **Zechariah 9:9**. What might seem to us like a “plan B” practical solution to the immediate situation was actually a specific fulfillment of thousands of years of promise.

So while the donkey can represent the humility of Jesus, the ironic twist of the story is that by riding on this donkey, Jesus was also proclaiming that He was the Messiah, the King! The dedicated Jews gathering in Jerusalem at this time for the celebration of the Passover feast would have known this Old Testament prophecy. So this simple act demonstrated a connection to the past by fulfilling the prophecy. And it also pointed to the future of Jesus as king—not an earthly king as some imagined, but as the true King who would reign forever in God’s story of love, forgiveness, grace, and redemption. The Messiah, whom the Jews had been waiting for throughout the centuries.

There’s another link to the Old Testament. Notice that the crowds are shouting out, “Hosanna to the Son of David” in verse 9. In **1 Kings 1**, you have the story of Solomon, the son of David, being crowned as the King of Israel. Now, David had already determined that Solomon would succeed him as king. But one of David’s other sons, Adonijah, had put himself on the throne instead. And he did it with a lot of pomp and ceremony. In **1 Kings 1:5-6**, we read that, ⁵ Now Adonijah the son of Haggith exalted himself, saying, “I will be king.” And he prepared for himself chariots and horsemen, and fifty men to run before him. Verse 6 goes on to say that Adonijah was a very good looking man. He *looked* like a king. His older brother Absalom was already dead, so he just figured he was next in line.

So look how *he* entered Jerusalem. Chariots! Horsemen! Fifty men running in front of him!

The only problem was, he was not who God had in mind to be king. God had already determined that Solomon would succeed David as king. So no matter how impressive Adonijah looked, no matter how many horses and chariots and footmen paraded in front of him to announce his coronation, he wasn’t the rightful king. Solomon was.

So David instructed Zadok, the high priest, and Nathan, the chief prophet of Israel, to take Solomon down to Gihon springs, right outside the walls of Jerusalem, **set him on David’s own donkey**, and have him ride into Jerusalem.

Then Zadok anointed him king, of Israel. **1 Kings 1:39-40** says that, Then they blew the trumpet, and all the people said, “Long live King Solomon!” ⁴⁰ And all the people went up after him, playing on pipes, and rejoicing with great joy, so that the earth was split by their noise.

Now let’s pause and think about this question: is there someone else seated on the throne of your life? Maybe you’ve put yourself there, like Adonijah did. Or maybe you’ve placed your trust in political power, or military might, or celebrity status. Listen, the one who has the right to sit on the throne did not have any form or majesty that people would be drawn to him because of the way he looked. **Isaiah 53:2** says, He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.

He didn’t come forcing us to bow down to Him, announcing His arrival with a lot of fanfare.

Jesus comes into someone's life the way He came into Jerusalem that day, gentle and humbly. He rode on a beast of burden because He came to bear our burdens. He bore our burden of sin all the way from the Mount of Olives to the Mount of calvary.

Now back to Matthew, and let's talk about those palm branches. Go back to verse 8:

⁸ Most of the crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.

Why did they wave palm branches? Well, palm branches were a symbol of victory. From about 400 BC onward, a palm branch was awarded to the victor in athletic contests.

The palm became so closely associated with victory in ancient Roman culture that the Latin word *palma* could be used as a synonym for victory itself. A lawyer who won his case in the forum would decorate his front door with palm leaves.

When Julius Caesar secured his rise to sole power with, a palm tree supposedly sprung up miraculously at the Temple of Nike, the Greek goddess of Victory.

So the people cut down palm branches and wave them while they shouted out Hosanna, which comes from a Hebrew phrase meaning, "Save us, we pray." This was a deliberate challenge to the Roman empire, which at that time occupied Jerusalem and all Israel. The Jews hated the Roman occupation. They longed for freedom from Roman rule. And so, here comes Jesus. They'd heard about His miracles, His teaching, His authority over demons, His calming the storm. His walking on water. And so they thought, "This is the one we've been waiting for!"

They could almost taste their freedom. Finally, finally! their Messiah, their rescuer, had come. Finally, He was going to kick some Roman tail and overthrow their oppressors and set up the perfect kingdom for the Jews. Right?

Let me try an illustration, and see if it helps you.

Imagine that for weeks your kids have been talking non stop about wanting to go to the Six Flags park. They are obsessed with it. Every day, they're whining, Mom, Dad, we wanna go to the Six Flags park."

And so one day, you get in the car, and you start driving toward Six Flags park. And your kids are sooooo excited. But instead of turning in to Six Flags park, you keep right on going past it. You get on the Interstate. You go to DFW airport. You fly to Orlando, and you surprise your kids with tickets to Disney World!

In other words, you've taken their heart's desire, and you've responded to it with more than they could ever ask or imagine!

That's the difference between what the people wanted and what Jesus came to give them. Jesus wasn't here to set up an earthly, political kingdom. Instead, He went above and beyond what the people imagined. He was a spiritual king, not an earthly one. And His victory—the ultimate victory over sin and death—would be more than freedom from their current oppression. It would be the victory that restored all of creation and made a way for every person to have a right relationship with God. He would throw off and defeat the oppression of their souls.

But none of them understood the magnitude of what Jesus was preparing to do. Even Jesus's disciples didn't get it. John told us in his account of the triumphal entry story in **John 12:16**, At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him and that these things had been done to him.

And maybe this explains why the crowds were so quick to turn on Him. Only days later the same crowd that was shouting "Hosanna" would shout "Crucify Him."

Turns out they would rather have the Six Flags park than the Magic Kingdom. When Jesus didn't swoop into town and kick the Romans out, they rejected him. They didn't want an eternal kingdom. They wanted to set up their own kingdom.

And, oh, how often do we do the same thing? How often are we more interested in building our kingdom and asking Jesus to be a part of it, instead of truly and wholeheartedly saying to Jesus, "Thy kingdom come! Thy will be done!" We want Jesus to join us in what we are doing, instead of saying, Lord, show me what you are doing, and let me join you there!

Jesus's purpose was to offer the ultimate sacrifice, His own life, so that everyone and all of creation could worship God in new freedom and truth. Whether the people approved or disapproved, recognized or had no idea what was going on, Jesus's purpose never changed.

Jesus's life purpose was to bring God's love and life to the world. His love bridged the gap and provided a way for us to cross over into the holy presence of the God of the universe, to know Him and relate with Him.

If you are reading this today wondering what this journey of Holy Week means for you, don't miss God's invitation. He loves each one of us and invites us on the journey through Holy Week and into relationship with Him.

Jesus came into Jerusalem humbly and gently, riding on a donkey. And in the same way, He doesn't force Himself into our lives. **Matthew 11:28-30** shows us how Jesus enters into a relationship with us:

Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

Just as Jesus entered that city to the shouts of "Hosanna, Pray, save us," let's invite Him to enter our hearts and lives. Let us shout Pray Save Us to the one who came as a gentle humble servant, yet won the ultimate victory.

Devotional #2 – Noon of the First day

Matthew 21:12-16

12 Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. 13 “It is written,” he said to them, “ ‘My house will be called a house of prayer,’ but you are making it ‘a den of robbers.’ ” 14 The blind and the lame came to him at the temple, and he healed them. 15 But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the temple courts, “Hosanna to the Son of David,” they were indignant. 16 “Do you hear what these children are saying?” they asked him. “Yes,” replied Jesus, “have you never read, “ ‘From the lips of children and infants you, Lord, have called forth your praise’ ?”

Study Notes:

When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the temple was the first place that Jesus is recorded as going to. If you will remember when He was only 12 years old He stayed there when His family left the city and said that they should know He wanted to be at His Father’s house. The temple was the spiritual center of the nation. Thus it was the perfect place to go to teach people and minister to the spiritually hungry.

Notice that Jesus entered the temple courts. The temple courts represented the very outer part of the temple. The largest temple court was the Court of the Gentiles. It was about 35 acres. It was largely a social area where even Gentiles and pilgrims from other nations could enter. However, they were forbidden with warnings on many stones under penalty of death not to enter the holy parts of the temple. The next court was the Court of Women. Even Jewish women were not allowed to proceed past this court unless they were offering a sacrifice. So many women congregated there to worship. While the passage does not specify, it is likely that Jesus was in the Court of the Gentiles when He started driving out the animal sellers and money changers.

At this point in time, it was socially accepted to have these types of businesses in the outer courts. But notice that even though society and the religious leaders accepted it, Jesus did not. According to Jesus, the problem was that the temple was supposed to be a place of prayer, a place to draw close to God, but instead it had become business oriented.

This is one of the things I have a problem with in the church today. The selling of merchandise. Even though we are the real church, the people, the building to me is a place of worship just as the temple was to the Jews. So, I do not believe in selling something in the church for profit.

Perhaps at one point in time it made sense to allow the purchase of sacrifices. As travelers came from far away, maybe a kind soul began offering animals as a sort of service to lower the burden on those who had to come from a long distance. Perhaps individuals were sometimes willing to exchange money to help travelers do the business they needed to do. But what may have started as a rather innocent or helpful enterprise, had clearly degenerated.

And it has done the same thing in the church today. I’ve seen in some churches as you enter the main doors, table setup on each side with items such as Devotional books, Music CD’s, Bibles, and personal items. These things are for sale to pay for something the church wants or needs. But as I said, what may

have started as a rather innocent or helpful enterprise, had clearly degenerated. Selling in the church I don't think should be done.

Okay moving on, this is the second time that Jesus cleansed the temple, the first taking place early in His ministry and being shown in **John 2:15-17**. 15 So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. 16 To those who sold doves he said, "Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a market!" 17 His disciples remembered that it is written: "Zeal for your house will consume me."

If something is important enough to do once, it is likely important enough to do twice!

Jesus quoted **Jeremiah 7:2** and said that His Father's house was being turned into a den of thieves. The word "thieves" is a strong word. It clearly shows us that the motivation of the sellers in the courts was a selfless concern for the well-being of others. They were not calm and dignified and offering a social service. Rather a rabble had been attracted. These people took advantage of the good nature of the temple pilgrims and exploited them by overcharging and outright cheating them.

Clearly allowing businesses here distracted people from their mission of coming to the Lord. God was clearly not pleased and Jesus clearly expressed this frustration. Why was it allowed.

The leaders were not being led by the spirit. Perhaps they were receiving kickbacks. Perhaps they only allowed their own relatives the best locations. We don't know exactly, but clearly they were not making decisions for the spiritual well-being of the people.

What lessons do we learn from this? Religion often attracts wolves in sheep's clothes. Throughout the whole history of organized religion, many people have seen it as a way to make money. Subtly sneaking in, they exploit the sheep for money. Perhaps they pursue ministry as a vocation to earn money. Perhaps they hawk wares on television. Maybe they promise miracles in exchange for money. Often their own opulent and extravagant lifestyle give them away.

I have always felt if you are doing something for the Lord, such as music, speaking, etc., it should be done on a love offering. If it is truly a ministry, and you are following God's lead, He will provide.

I remember one of the fifth Sunday Bands we used now and again back when we first started. That is until I found out he was not paying his band members. We would setup a love offering bucket and give each person so much for coming but he would keep it all. I confronted him about it, and I never ask them to come back. He was not in it for God, just to make a living.

If we see a so called "man of God" becoming rich from the flock, It should make us think. Does he own expensive homes and luxury cars? Does he fly around in a private jet? Their could occasionally be a good reason for these types of things, but in almost all cases they should be loud warning bells. God often wants us to have nice things, but luxuriant living with donations or love offerings is quite another thing altogether.

We must be careful that we are not misled or exploited by such people. Secondly, be alert to the love of money and be sure to maintain a clear conscience in how you use it before God and man. Thirdly, if you see these types of abuses taking place in your church, you may need to do something about it, especially if you are a elder.

The first cleansing of the temple did not result in real life change. Though they had grudgingly followed along when Jesus stopped them the first time, they went right back at it when Jesus left. They acted one way in front of Jesus and another way when He was not around. Guilt, shame, or peer pressure was guiding their actions rather than a pure love of God. Maybe they struggled with their consciences for a while. Finally greed won out and they went right back at it after Jesus left town.

There is a time and place for everything. The temple was a place to worship God, not for making business deals. Church is a place for worshiping God. It is not a social club. It is not a business market. It is not a place to network or market our latest products.

Sometimes we go to church out of habit. It is a ritual many have done their entire lives. Are you really drawing near to God? Are you really going to worship? Or are we just going because that is what we do on Sunday?

It is possible to go to church or fellowship every week without truly worshiping God! Many people have the exact same problem today. Evangelists, pastors, and missionaries get on TV, radio, or in front of the church and beg for money. They offer products like prayer cloths, holy water, and even prayer of blessings over any product you send them. Many years ago a certain denomination also sold papers saying that the person who bought it would have their sins forgiven! Scandal after scandal has broken out where these have been proved to be fake. Duh! The bad reputation of these evangelist money-grabbers has tarnished the reputation of much of the church.

However, this thought process has tinkled down to mass numbers of church-goers. Most of these probably wouldn't admit to going to church for personal gain, but many do nonetheless. You can see it when people ask what they will get because they follow God. Will they be able to pass their coming exam or having a better job? What physical benefits could we get from following God. To some, the spiritual side don't count for much if anything at all. So what kinds of reasons to people go to "worship" on Sundays?

People go to church because that is where their friends are. Church is not meant to be a club to meet your friends! Are you going to church to worship God and grow or to be with your friends?

Many others go to church for the feeling of safety that it provides. It makes them feel they are doing well spiritually. Basically they get their assurance of salvation from going to church rather than from faith in God. In this category can be included people who do church so that they won't feel guilty. Are you going to church because it makes you feel close to God?

Another category go to church because their parents or friends put pressure on them to go. They are the ones who go because they "have to." Are you going to church because you have to?

Another very common reason for going to church is that it has become an ingrained ritual. We go because "we have always gone" or it's "what we do on Sundays". In a way this is good to set a habit. We should not choose not to go to church because we don't feel like it on a given Sunday. However, we need to be careful not to fall into the trap of letting church become an impersonal ritual. Are you going to church because that is what you do on Sundays?

So what is the solution for us to avoid these church-traps? There is no magic trick. We need to have the right attitude and motivation. When you go to church focus on worshiping. Focus on listening to the sermon and growing spiritually. Go to worship, learn, grow, and encourage others.

Going back to Jesus in the temple grounds. It is possible to be angry and not sin. It certainly appears that Jesus was angry in this passage and Jesus was without sin. But this was not an out-of-control raging anger. Anger is not always sin. Sometimes righteous anger is called for. If we never have righteous anger, it is probably because we lack empathy and we just don't care about people around us. Jesus did care. He wept for Jerusalem. He cared that many sheep were being misled by these money centered practices.

Jesus showed us what true authority is. While leaders for the Lord are to be humble and practice servant leadership, they are not to be timid and passive. Just as a shepherd reacts quickly and decisively when the flock is attacked so the spiritual leaders of the church should act decisively to deal with problems or people who are misleading or exploiting the sheep.

In **Mark 11:18** we learn that the religious leaders wanted to kill Jesus for upsetting the status-quo which they were likely getting rich off of. When leaders step up to deal with wrongdoers it is likely their will be a backlash. Don't be surprised or caught off guard. But also don't let a potential backlash stop you from doing what you know must be done.

After Jesus deals with the temple grounds and the merchants, He does an about face. Jesus heals the blind and lame. Here we can see quite a contrast. Jesus goes from a forceful disciplinarian driving out hordes of merchants and animals one moment to a kind and compassionate healer the next moment. Serving God requires many different attitudes and character qualities so do not get locked in to one.

Strict and tough people may get locked in to that type of personality. Perhaps such a person needs to deal with misbehaving or naughty children or sheep. If you need to be firm then be so. But be ready to change in a moment. Often gentleness and compassion are required. Use each one as a tool at the proper and fitting time.

I once saw an old television show. A couple visited a very small town and found a road side inn. After talking to the innkeeper they asked where they could find the sheriff and he referred them to the other side of the room. He proceeded to change his hat and help them as sheriff. Later he put on his fireman's hat. And so on. He was able to quickly change roles and demeanor depending on the circumstance. A leader in the church is like this too.

We must be ready and willing to change to meet what ever arises!

Devotional #3 – Evening of the First day

Matthew 21:18-22

18 Early in the morning, as Jesus was on his way back to the city, he was hungry. 19 Seeing a fig tree by the road, he went up to it but found nothing on it except leaves. Then he said to it, “May you never bear fruit again!” Immediately the tree withered. 20 When the disciples saw this, they were amazed. “How did the fig tree wither so quickly?” they asked. 21 Jesus replied, “Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and it will be done. 22 If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.”

Study Notes:

The incident recorded here took place during the week leading up to Jesus’ crucifixion. He was commuting each day from Bethany to Jerusalem. And this account took place along the road on his way to Jerusalem. According to **Mark 11**, it actually happened over two consecutive mornings, but Matthew rolled it up into a single day.

Here is what **Mark 11:12-14, 19-25** says, 12 The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. 13 Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. 14 Then he said to the tree, “May no one ever eat fruit from you again.” And his disciples heard him say it.

19 When evening came, they went out of the city. 20 In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots. 21 Peter remembered and said to Jesus, “Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!” 22 “Have faith in God,” Jesus answered. 23 “I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him. 24 Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. 25 And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.

This cursing of the fig tree can appear very strange today. It does not seem to serve any real purpose other than to teach us that Jesus is cranky when he gets hungry. But I’m pretty sure that is not the point that is being made here.

When trying to understand the significance of this story, it is important to understand the context. Matthew intentionally organized his material in a way to teach us specific lessons. He does not include this random event just because he thought it interesting. Rather it is a part of a larger lesson that he is presenting.

The context of this passage is important. It will help us to understand why Matthew included it. And what he is telling us through it. This passage is preceded and followed by accounts of conflict. On one side is the cleansing of the temple and the praise of the little children. On the other side, it concerns his authority to do what he was doing; healing and teaching.

So the context is one of conflict. The Jewish religious leaders are indignant with Jesus and challenge his authority. They have rejected him as their Messiah. And were trying to discredit him and turn the

people's hearts away from him. We need to bear that in mind when we look at what happens to the fig tree and Jesus' teaching concerning it.

One other note on context that Matthew does not record. In **Mark 11:13** we are told that it was not the season for figs. So it would not appear to be reasonable for Jesus to actually expect the tree to have figs. So it would seem that there is more to this story than Jesus' disappointment in not having figs for breakfast.

Several times in the Old Testament prophets there are references to fig trees and their fruit. Not just as fig-trees, but reflective of the health of Israel.

Micah 7:1 says, What misery is mine! I am like one who gathers summer fruit at the gleaning of the vineyard; there is no cluster of grapes to eat, none of the early figs that I crave.

Micah pictures God as looking for the early figs that he craves but finding none. Israel is not producing the fruit that God wanted from them.

This sounds very much like what is happening in the account of Jesus cursing the fig tree. He is craving figs, even though it is not the season for figs. It would seem, like God in Micah, that he is looking for early figs but does not find them.

Jeremiah 8:13 says, "I will take away their harvest, declares the LORD. There will be no grapes on the vine. There will be no figs on the tree, and their leaves will wither. What I have given them will be taken from them."

Jeremiah builds on what Micah said, this time making clear the judgment that was coming because of Israel's unfaithfulness. There will be no figs on the tree. And the tree will wither. Again, this sounds very much like Jesus' encounter with the fig tree.

One of Jesus' primary teaching tools was the use of parables. Telling a simple story that had a spiritual point. It would seem that is what Jesus is doing here, telling a parable, but without words. You might think of it as an object lesson.

But clearly, this lesson was initially a mystery to his disciples and us also. Their response indicated that they had no idea what Jesus was illustrating with the fig tree. They were amazed, not understanding how it all happened so quickly. And likely not understanding why Jesus had cursed the poor tree in the first place.

Jesus then tells them the point of this object lesson. A point that we all too often take out of context today.

One of the major Points of the Story are that verses 21 and 22 are often used as a stand-alone passage about faith. If we have faith and do not doubt, then we can even cast a mountain into the sea. And while I agree that faith is important in the life of the believer, I do not believe that is what Jesus was telling his disciples here.

Remember that these two verses come in the context of the cursing of the fig tree, and directly in answer to his disciple's question about it. And the larger context of conflict with the Jewish religious

leaders. Unless we want to accuse Matthew of a random insertion, we need to interpret this passage in light of that context.

Another point that we often overlook concerns the mountain we might cast into the sea. Jesus does not say 'a mountain'. Rather he says 'this mountain'. He is talking about a specific mountain that might be cast into the sea.

Matthew does not specify what mountain Jesus might have been referring to. But given his location on the road from Bethany to Jerusalem, it would be most natural to assume a mountain that he could point to. And the most logical mountain would be the one on which Jerusalem is built. Or maybe even the temple mount.

But that does not seem to solve the problem of casting a mountain into the sea. Even knowing that Jesus was referring to a specific mountain, rather than just an inconvenient mountain that might be in your way.

In Jesus' response to his disciples, he connects the fig tree and the mountain together. If they have faith, they can do what was done to the fig tree, or cast a mountain into the sea. So what are these objects he is referring to?

Based on the similarity between Jesus' encounter with the fig tree and the message of Micah and Jeremiah, I would think that the fig tree represents Israel. And more specifically, an Israel that has turned away from God's intent for them.

And the mountain would seem to represent Jerusalem, the center of Jewish life and religious practice. This mountain that they could cast into the sea was likely not the literal mountain Jerusalem was built on. But represented all that Israel had become.

I don't believe that Jesus is referring to literally casting Jerusalem's mountain, or any mountain for that matter, into the sea. Nor is he telling us that we can curse a fig tree and have it wither. So, then, just what is he saying to us in this passage.

I believe it has to do with rejecting the old way of the Law with all of the baggage associated with it. And instead, by faith, turning to Christ for salvation. It is by grace we are saved, through faith. By faith, we can cast off the old shackles that imprisoned us. And we can experience the newness of knowing Christ in his fullness.

We will have conflict in this world. The world does not accept Jesus as the promised redeemer and Messiah. And neither will they accept those who are his. But, in faith, we can overcome them.

Like Jerusalem, we are given so many opportunities to be fruitful, to show our faith and faithfulness to the Lord, and to live a life that blesses others to the Father's glory. But opportunities are not forever. God calls us to reflect his character and grace. When we don't, God will give us opportunities to repent and change our actions even if this refusal and neglect become habitual. But there comes a time when we must change or judgment comes.

If we are truly connected to Jesus, if we are truly his disciples, we will bear fruit that reflects his character. The Spirit will help make sure that we bear this fruit. Our love for the Savior will call us to

do so. Our friends in Christ will encourage us to do so. But ultimately, we must decide that Jesus is Lord and is worthy of our life's commitment and service to him!

Devotional #4 – Morning of the Second day

Matthew 21:23-27

23 Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. “By what authority are you doing these things?” they asked. “And who gave you this authority?” 24 Jesus replied, “I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. 25 John’s baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or of human origin?” They discussed it among themselves and said, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will ask, ‘Then why didn’t you believe him?’ 26 But if we say, ‘Of human origin’—we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet.” 27 So they answered Jesus, “We don’t know.” Then he said, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

Study Notes:

The chief priests and elders are on their home court. The seat of their power. The temple. And they have Jesus in their cross-hairs. It’s been almost three years and they have not trapped him in anything up to this point. But it wasn’t for the lack of trying. So here they see Jesus teaching in the temple courts. An opportunity has arose for them to test Jesus again, so they began with questions again.

What are they hoping to do with their question about authority? Are they seeking information? Are they searching for the truth? Are they open-minded about what they might hear? We know the answers to those questions. No, they aren’t seeking the truth. No, they aren’t trying to better understand Jesus and his teaching. No, they are not open-minded. All they are trying to do is to give Jesus just enough rope to hang himself. They are building a case to support their own preconceived commitments.

They don’t care about Jesus. They don’t care about what he has to say. They only care about protecting their power, their positions, their prestige.

Even if you give them the benefit of the doubt and assume that they are well intentioned, seeking only to do their jobs, you still come to the simple conclusion that they were stone cold wrong about Jesus. He was only a threat to them.

Jesus answers their question with a question. Their internal arguments betray them. They don’t want to be exposed for what they really are. They aren’t interested in God or the people. They aren’t seeking truth, they are just protecting themselves. So they evade. And Jesus refuses to answer their question on their terms.

How many times do we try to do something for God and someone else questions our ability. Those who are in authority almost always feel they are being threaten.

He knew the intentions of these Jewish leaders. And he was refusing to play their game. They failed to see that they were standing not in judgment of him. He was standing in judgment of them. Nothing is hidden from him, including our secret thoughts. We, as we pray and realize we’re not and never are hiding anything from God. He knows everything about us. That’s the beauty, right? He knows everything about us and yet he loves us.

Jesus seldom directly answers provocative questions put to him, and in this case, as he does elsewhere, he answers with a question of his own. If they will answer his question, he will answer theirs.

Immediately, his questioners are in a dilemma. If they answer “from heaven”, they will be further asked why they did not receive John’s baptism. We know that when John was baptizing, they came to observe, but they themselves clearly felt no need to be baptized themselves. To do so would have been to put themselves on the same level as the sinful and the unclean.

If they were to answer “human”, then they would run the risk of offending the people who had no doubts about the matter. They all held that “John was a prophet”. Lamely they answer, “We do not know.” So Jesus refuses to reply to their question.

Ultimately the leaders were being accused of a stubborn blindness, unable and unwilling to see the hand of God either in the mission of Jesus or of John. They could not see that the authority with which Jesus spoke clearly resided in himself. He was not just the bearer of a message, he was himself the source of the message.

Perhaps a word about “authority” may be relevant here. The word comes from the Latin *auctoritas*, which is itself an abstract noun from the verb *augere*. *Augere* means “to increase, make bigger”. We find the same verb in the word “author”.

Jesus did not wield coercive authority. He invited people to follow him and he came to serve, not be served. He came to lead people into the full development of all they could be and were meant to be.

He did this dramatically when he got down on his knees and washed the feet of his disciples. This was an act of authority, the authority of outreaching love. It is up to each one to decide whether to follow the way of love or to go one’s own way.

Perhaps each one of us could examine how we exercise authority in our own lives, as parents, teachers, employers, or in any capacity where we have some responsibility with regard to others. Very few of us have no authority at all.

Later in Matthew Jesus will be quite clear about his authority. “And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.’” This is an authority rooted in creation itself. God is the author of life, continually writing the story of our existence. Jesus is the central character because Jesus, in the flesh, reveals the loving character of God.

What does Jesus do with his authority? He heals the sick. He feeds the hungry. He touches the possessed and the dispossessed. He doesn’t seek the adulation of the crowds or the attention of the chief priests and elders. He does what he came to do. To exemplify love.

When he finally speaks of his own authority, to his disciples on that mountain in the last chapter of Matthew, he tells them to go and continue doing what they saw him do. To go. To make disciples. To baptize and to teach. And he concludes with a promise, “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Devotional #5 – Noon of the Second day

Matthew 21:33-46

33 “Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place. 34 When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit. 35 “The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. 36 Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. 37 Last of all, he sent his son to them. ‘They will respect my son,’ he said. 38 “But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, ‘This is the heir. Come, let’s kill him and take his inheritance.’ 39 So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. 40 “Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” 41 “He will bring those wretches to a wretched end,” they replied, “and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time.” 42 Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures: “ ‘The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes’ ? 43 “Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. 44 Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed.” 45 When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus’ parables, they knew he was talking about them. 46 They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet.

Study Notes:

Jesus told this parable in response to the authorities questioning Jesus. There is a clear implication in this parable that as the Son of the Landowner (God), Jesus has authority over this who were merely workers in the vineyard. But more than this, Jesus is turning the tables on them. While they are doubting Jesus’ authority, He is letting them know how dangerously close they are to incurring God’s wrath. They had not yet killed His Son so in some sense this parable is also a prophecy, warning them of the consequences of the dangerous choice they were even now contemplating.

In this parable the landowner represents God while the vineyard represents His people Israel. The tenants were workers who were supposed to take care of the vineyard and help it grow, namely the spiritual leaders of the country. They include the priests, scribes, and Pharisees and anyone who claimed to be working for God in His vineyard. Interestingly, these people could both be described as a tenant/farmer/worker and as the vine itself. In the same way believers are sometimes called a vine and sometimes called a worker.

Listen to **John 15:5**, “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

We have different roles. For example a pastor may shepherd others, but he also has the need to be shepherded himself. Finally the servants of the landowner represent the prophets of the Lord whom He sent with His message to the people of Israel and its spiritual leaders.

The wall, wine press, and watchtower likely do not represent anything specific, although they are mentioned in **Isaiah 5:2**. It says, He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well. Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit.

Instead they are representative of the care and energy the landowner put into His vineyard. He created it and then took care of it. He had a personal investment in it. It belonged to Him. Based on the amount of love and care He put into it, He expected that it would have a return to Him.

We too are like a vine, a garden, of the Lord. Our life is His handiwork. Just as He cared for Israel, He cares for us. He first planted the seed in our heart. He waters it. He sends people into our lives to care for us. He watches us grow. All of this is to bring about the plan He has for us, which is to bear fruit for Him. God is our gardener. We must let Him remove the hard stones in our heart and till the hard soil of our minds so that it can become soft and good for growing fruit for Him.

When harvest time approached, the landowner naturally had an expectation of a “return on His investment.” He had a right to receive a return. The vineyard and everything in it was His. But the tenants did not give Him what was rightfully His.

This situation reminds me of the reason Jesus cleansed the temple. The leaders allowed buying and selling on the temple grounds, likely for personal profit. People were coming to worship God and pray, to give Him thanks. This was the type of return He was looking for. But the priests instead were selling stuff and making money, in essence stealing from the Lord. They were personally seeking benefit from people coming who wanted to serve God.

In these verses we see the history of God’s dealings with Israel. He sent His prophets to them taking the message of repentance and salvation. But these prophets were largely rejected. Moses was the most famous and popular prophet. But he was not popular during his day. The people constantly grumbled against his leadership and would not listen to his pleadings with them to be obedient to the Lord. Samuel’s advice on anointing a king was rejected. Jeremiah was thrown into a pit. Isaiah was likely sawed in two. John the Baptist was beheaded. We can see in **Hebrews 11:36-38** for a longer list of what reception the prophets received. Finally, the son of the landowner, Jesus, the Son of God, was killed.

In these verses we see the nature of people. Rebellious. Sinful. Depraved. Ungrateful. Selfish. Disloyal. And what do we learn about God?

On one hand, we learn that God is amazingly patient. He waited, and still waits, a long time to punish those who act so rebellious and scornful toward His good plans for them. Even hanging on the cross, Jesus said, “Father, forgive them.” God’s mercy is vast and His patience is great. But these also have a limit. We also see God’s justice here. His patience will not last forever. One day He will come and punish all these rebellious people who reject Him and His good gifts.

God is both merciful and just. You can pick which one you receive. Which will you pick? What must you do to receive His mercy? What must you do to receive His justice?

Jesus closed with a question. His parables were not just mental exercises. Instead He wanted His audience to think about and apply them. Without obedience and life change they would not be useful to

their ears. Amazingly, the leaders gave the right answer. And they understood that Jesus was talking about them. Unfortunately instead of repenting, they doubled down on their position and sought to kill Him. They were set on wickedness. The warning from Jesus about their mortal danger of incurring God's wrath in the end did not shock them awake, but actually served to make them more angry and take further steps to bring it about. It confirms that their hearts were hard, just like Pharaoh's in the book of Exodus long before.

When we teach others, leave them with a question to think about. Try to make the Bible sharing practical and useful. Give them a decision to make. Encourage a response just as Jesus did.

God's offer of salvation was not forever. **2 Corinthians 6:2** says, For he says, "In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you." I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation.

Today is the day of salvation. When the Lord extends an offer of salvation He does not promise it for tomorrow. If you will believe, you can do so and receive salvation now. But tomorrow is not guaranteed. Maybe He will extend the offer again tomorrow, but then again maybe tomorrow will be too late. It is flirting with danger to put off receiving salvation until the future.

God wants us to bear fruit. We should respond to His love and care for us by believing, thanking, and praising Him and by telling others about Him. Are you giving Him the place He deserves in your life?

In verse 44 we see some characteristics of this stone, Jesus. He shatters those who don't believe. It could be that someone looks at that stone and throws himself on it to cause injury to it. This is what happened when Jesus was crucified. They believed Jesus was weak and pathetic and easy prey. However, they would be shattered. Jesus as the Judge would finally pour out justice and punish those who wrongfully treated Him so. Finally He will crush those who don't believe.

The religious leaders did not repent. But they became more firm in their resolve to kill Jesus.

God wants us to have humble and repentant hearts. Is there anything you need to change today in order to have more fruit? Is there anything you need to prune or cut out of your life so that you will be a healthier and more fruitful tree? If there is something in your life that you know is not right, do not keep doing it like the Jewish leaders did. It is extremely dangerous and may lead in disaster. Instead confess it and change while there is still time.

Devotional #6 – Evening of the Second day

Matthew 22:1-14

Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying: 2 “The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. 3 He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come. 4 “Then he sent some more servants and said, ‘Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner: My oxen and fattened cattle have been butchered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet.’ 5 “But they paid no attention and went off—one to his field, another to his business. 6 The rest seized his servants, mistreated them and killed them. 7 The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city. 8 “Then he said to his servants, ‘The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. 9 So go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.’ 10 So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, the bad as well as the good, and the wedding hall was filled with guests. 11 “But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. 12 He asked, ‘How did you get in here without wedding clothes, friend?’ The man was speechless. 13 “Then the king told the attendants, ‘Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ 14 “For many are invited, but few are chosen.”

Study Notes:

Jesus uses the parable of the wedding feast to illustrate that God's kingdom is open to everyone, not just those initially invited, and that many are called but few are chosen, emphasizing the importance of responding to God's invitation.

I typically hate the idea of choosing. When I was younger, I remember seeing kids picking on the playground. It was a depressing thing. Somebody has to be picked last, and most of the time a few people would go unpicked. I remember not being picked a few times, and I remember the sadness of it all.

Throughout scriptures, we hear the phrase chosen a lot. What does it mean? Who is chosen? Does God choose arbitrarily as some believe? Is there a rationale to his choosing? If you have studied the book of Matthew, you already know the answer to this question. God chooses the humble and despised. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, etc.” God has made his criteria evident. But that still becomes difficult. How do we know that we can meet those qualifications?

In this parable it deals with the idea of God calling and choosing. This is a topic we keep coming back to because it is a topic that Jesus keeps coming back to. There is tremendous grace available but also tremendous judgment. Not all who are called are chosen.

We saw that Jesus told them a parable about a vineyard where the tenants refused to give the master his fruit. He has been trying to show us that God is not finding any glory in Jerusalem. The people are too busy seeking glory for themselves to give God what he deserves.

Now, we see Jesus comparing the kingdom of heaven to a king throwing a wedding party.

A wedding feast would typically be a seven-day event full of joy, but this is no ordinary feast. The king is throwing a feast to celebrate the wedding of his son. This is sure to be the most fantastic wedding feast they have ever seen. This is why the Jews were excited about the kingdom of heaven. They knew that God had promised great blessings when the new kingdom is established. Everyone wanted to be a part of that. But in the last parable, we learned that the kingdom would be taken away from the Jews and given to someone else. As a result, they would not enjoy the blessings that they were looking forward to. Why? Jesus will explain in further detail.

In an odd turn of events, those who are invited to this great feast refuse to come. There is no reason given at first. It just says that they won't come. So the king has his servants go out and command them to come. He tells those invited that all the preparations have been made to come and enjoy the feast. Yet, they still won't come. This time, we find out why. First, he tells us that they completely ignore the servants. They pay no attention to the servants. They don't care anything about the marriage feast that they have been invited to. Then, they say, "I have a farm to get to, or I have a business to get to." Their focus is on the wrong things. They are invited to the most incredible feast of their lives, and all they care about is work and themselves. So they are not ready to go to the feast. They seized the servants, treated them shamefully, and they killed them. That is totally uncalled for. Why would anyone do that when they are being invited to a great feast?

This killing of the servants is likely referring to the typical Jewish response to the prophets of God. The prophets condemned the practice of the people while inviting them to enjoy God's blessings, but they didn't listen. Instead, they were so focused on what they wanted to do that they refused to hear what God wanted them to do. They were trying to get for themselves the very thing that God was trying to give them, and they killed God's messengers so they could keep working for what was already theirs.

Can you imagine someone doing this to the servants of a king? This seems like a terrible idea. It reminds us of the last parable where the vineyard tenants killed the servants of the master. It didn't go over well for them. Notice that it won't go well for these people either.

The king musters his army and sends them out to destroy those who have committed murder. Then, he burns down their cities. The king is not going to let the guilty go free of punishments. All of their work that they are so focused on will be for nothing. They cannot stand against an army of the king. What foolish decisions they have made.

But then, he has his servants go out into the city and find all who will come to the feast. He doesn't care if they are good or bad. All are invited to enjoy the feast he has prepared. This is a tremendous blessing to people who do not deserve it. This king is willing to help those who were not invited in the first place to come to his incredible feast.

Then, we read in verse 10 that many were gathered to the feast. It says that the wedding hall was filled with guests. These people had no idea that they would receive this opportunity, but they jumped on it

when available. They could see the tremendous opportunity that has been afforded to them, and they were hoping to enjoy it. This king has plenty of food for all to eat.

Then, something very odd happens. It's odd to us, but probably not odd for those days. One man shows up without wearing the proper attire. The king sees him and asks him why he isn't wearing a wedding garment. The man has nothing to say for himself. So he is thrown out into the outer darkness. He says, "In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Can you imagine being in a sumptuous feast like that and being called out for failing to wear the proper clothing? How embarrassing would that be? That's like our worst nightmare.

Think about this for a moment. What is the implication for us today?

The king was willing to invite anyone and everyone to the feast, but that does not mean that he will allow people who choose to dress inappropriately. The king has not loosened all etiquette. Those who come to a wedding feast knew what the proper attire was. There should be gratitude that provokes them to change clothes before they come. They should care about honoring the king and his son. That's like knowing that you are going to meet the president of the United States at a formal banquet and showing up in your pajamas. It is disrespectful, and the man knows it. That's why he is speechless when he is confronted. He knows he is without excuse.

The last words of the parable are the words that are probably the most difficult for many people. But they make perfect sense in this context. Jesus says, "For many are called, but few are chosen." What does this mean? In the parable, those who were invited were called to come to the feast. But the king did not choose them because they rejected the king. They did not value the king and his son enough to glorify him.

Then, we read about someone who accepted the invite but showed up wearing the wrong clothing. Again, this person was called but not chosen. The king rejected them because they failed to honor the king and change clothes as they were supposed to.

So many are called, but few are chosen because few give the king the honor and glory that he deserves. Many seek their own glory, and many don't care enough about honoring the king to change. They also fail to see the tremendous opportunity they have been given, and they fail to take advantage of it. So they aren't chosen by the king. They have been invited, and they have accepted the invitation. But they just show up for the food. They don't care about the king. They don't want to be a part of the festivities. They just want to be served.

As we read through this parable, there are several essential ideas in it. First, we see that the king is God, and the kingdom of heaven is a kingdom of rejoicing and joy. It's like a king's wedding feast. But it is only for those who are chosen. So, the question is, "Who is chosen?" Is it the ones initially invited? Many of them are called, but most refuse to come. Is it the righteous and good? They are invited, but the bad are as well. The interesting thing is that not all will come even though they are invited, and even those who come may not get to stay. It all depends on their willingness to honor the king and glorify him by changing clothes.

His son is Jesus. There should be praise and rejoicing over Jesus in Jerusalem, but instead, the leaders are trying to find something wrong with him so that everyone will reject him. They don't want him to

be who he says he is. If Jesus is the son, they don't want anything to do with the marriage feast that God is throwing for him. They don't care about that. They are focused on their work and their glory. Jesus' exaltation doesn't fit into their plans or schedules. So they are invited, but they reject the invitation.

Have you ever known anyone who heard that life is found in Jesus, and it just didn't fit into what they wanted in their lives? That's probably one of the most common responses today. People just have too much going on in their lives to consider making Jesus and a relationship with God a big deal. They can't be expected to drop everything and come to the wedding feast. Who has time for that? If you were to remind them that they are missing out on a great opportunity, they wouldn't care. They don't even care when they hear about the terrible judgment that waits for them if they refuse to submit. They are too busy doing their own thing.

He invites all to come right now. You don't have to be a part of the original Jewish people. They rejected God, and now the doors are open for you to come to the feast. Don't give God an excuse. Don't wait. Clothe yourself with Christ and enjoy the feast.

The second big application point in this text is that those who think they can enjoy God's blessings without becoming more like him are mistaken. God's grace toward us should create gratitude and a willingness to change.

There has been a lot of speculation about what is meant by the man wearing the wrong clothing, but I think the answer is obvious. Those who accept the invitation were good and bad, but you have to fit the part to be a part of the feast. You have to become worthy of entering the wedding hall and sharing the company of the king. Now, I know that this sounds like a tall order. We might wonder how we could dress ourselves in the proper garments to enter a feast with God. What could we put on that would make us worthy? We need to somehow put on righteousness and holiness so that we are worthy to come into fellowship with God. Where would we ever find a righteousness that's not our own? The point of the New Testament is that God clothes us in righteousness through the sacrifice of Jesus. Will we accept his gift of sanctification?

Devotional #7 – Morning of the Third day

Matthew 22:15-22

Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. 16 They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. "Teacher," they said, "we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are. 17 Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?" 18 But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, "You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? 19 Show me the coin used for paying the tax." They brought him a denarius, 20 and he asked them, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?" 21 "Caesar's," they replied. Then he said to them, "So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." 22 When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away.

Study Notes:

Today we will be looking at a question Jesus was asked and seeing how he responds. If we go back and consider the context, Matthew makes it sound like all of the conversations of Jesus are taking place on the same day that Jesus caused the fig tree to wither in 21:18. Imagine being the disciples who witnessed the fig tree wither and then watching Jesus demonstrate that there is no fruit in Jerusalem. He has done this with three parables---the two sons, the vineyard, and the wedding feast. Now there will be three questions.

The Pharisees are a religious group that has been after Jesus for a long time now. They have tested him and sought to discredit him on multiple occasions. Now, they try to send their disciples to him to "entangle him in his words." Notice that the Pharisees don't just send their disciples. They send the Herodians along with them. We don't really know who the Herodians are, but we can gather from their name that they are supporters of Herod.

The first words that come out of the disciples' mouths sound great! They recognize that Jesus is the "Teacher" or "Master." They point out that he is true, he teaches the way of God truthfully, and he doesn't care about anyone's opinion. Interestingly, they say that Jesus is not "swayed by appearances." This very statement should tell them that this is a bad idea. But did you hear these words of flattery? They are trying to give Jesus the impression that they are on his side. This is how evil people work. They deceive and manipulate so that people will lower their guard and give them what they want. All of the things they say about Jesus are true. He is the true teacher who sees right through the Pharisees' hypocrisy. It's fascinating how these words seem to give Jesus glory, but they are given under falsehood. They don't really mean what they say. They aren't seeking to glorify Jesus. They want to tear down his image.

After all of this build-up, they ask if it is lawful for them to pay taxes to Caesar or not. We need to know the motivation behind this question. Why are they asking this?

The Jewish people have lived for the better part of a thousand years under oppression from a foreign government. They paid tribute in the past, but now they are restored on their land that God has

promised them. They shouldn't have to pay tribute anymore because God has promised them a kingdom like David's. They believe that paying tribute to a ruling monarchy or empire is a failure to trust God. After all, they are in a covenant relationship with God. So many of them hate paying taxes, even though they enjoy the benefits of Rome's infrastructure. Many Jews have stirred up a rebellion against paying taxes. So, it is likely that the Jews want Herod and the Romans to take care of Jesus for them.

The response of Jesus shows that he understands what they are doing. He sees the trap they are setting and addresses it perfectly. Matthew tells us that he was aware of their malice. Consider that no one else probably was aware of this. This might have looked like an honest question to the crowds and disciples. They might have believed that Jesus was about to steal some of the Pharisee disciples away from them. But his words cut right through the flattery. He says, "Why put me to the test, you hypocrites!" These are harsh words, but they don't seem to mind. The word hypocrite means actor, so they act like they are genuinely interested in Jesus' response. The truth is that they want him to be entangled so that he will be killed. They are acting righteous while being full of malice in their hearts.

After calling them that, he asks for a denarius. This would be a common coin to the people, representing a day's wage. Then, he asks them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" Everyone knows that Caesar's image is on the coin. Caesar wanted the people to worship him, so it was only fitting for him to put his face on their money. But to the Jews, graven images were evil. They had been destroyed for worshiping idols. It was considered evil to carry around something with a graven image. However, they needed that money to pay for things. Jesus has the coin brought before them, and we can imagine everyone considers the evil of it. The Pharisees are probably beaming. They probably think that they have him cornered. Jesus will speak out against Roman oppression and be put to death. But the following words of Jesus come as a shock to everyone.

Jesus tells them to give to Caesar what belongs to him. If those coins bear his image, they belong to him. Jesus says, "Don't hold on to them. Don't seek to keep as many of them as you can. Give them back!" The Pharisees have a significant heart issue when it comes to money. They love money and want to keep as much of it for themselves as they can.

They want to be subject to no one, but they fail to recognize that the reason they are subject to Rome is that God has subjected them to them. It is not as though God has somehow lost control. He always provides a foreign force to keep his people humble and prevent them from persisting in sin. These words also show that Jesus has no desire to get their money. He is not concerned with becoming rich off of the people. He is not concerned about receiving the fruit and glory for himself. He doesn't want to steal it away from the government. Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's. Then, he says something profound. He says, "Render to God the things that are God's."

Think about this? What belongs to God? Our initial response is to say, "Everything belongs to God. That is true. But what bears the inscription and image of God explicitly? We do. In Genesis 1:26-27, God created man in his image. Jesus wants us to see ourselves as belonging to God. We are his image-bearers. As kings would have paintings, statues, and monuments that reflect their image, we were created to reflect God's glory. As Caesar expects to receive back what is his, God expects to receive back his. God wants the glory due him! When the Jews heard this, they marveled.

Verse 22 says, When they heard it, they marveled. And they left him and went away.

They won't change their ways, but they marveled at the wisdom and truth of his words. There is no arguing against him.

When we read this text in the context, it makes complete sense. Jesus is trying to get the Jews to give glory to God and stop seeking glory for themselves. Why is this so hard for them to wrap their minds around? God blessed the Jews with so much, and now he expects them to turn to God and give him the glory he deserves. But this text shows us that the Jews aren't happy with what God has given to them. They feel oppressed and cheated as though God has not given them the proper restoration they deserve. Jesus wants them to see that they are living under Roman control because God ordained it. He is in power and has control over the Romans, so it makes no sense to rebel against Rome. They want to rebel against Rome because they want more money for themselves.

But Jesus shows us that God wants them to let go of their money and give back to their government what they want. He doesn't want them to use the government as an excuse for not giving God what he deserves, or vice versa. So they need to stop being greedy.

It's easy to look at this story and judge the Pharisees for such a question. We all know that we ought to pay our taxes. It's morally good to do so. However, this question touches on much deeper issues than paying taxes.

This text addresses our response to government action. We ought to be people who submit to the governing authorities. **Romans 13:1** says, Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.

Jesus wants us to see that our mission is to give and not to keep. This might open up several questions in our minds. What about the very actions that made us a country? Should we blindly obey everything the government tells us to do? What about the immoral way the government uses our taxes? In some ways, these questions are seeking to justify radical, rebellious behavior. Was Rome any different? But these are valid questions. The events leading up to this country are fascinating, and I don't claim to have all the answers as to whether men's actions were morally good or evil.

But this text, much of the Old Testament, and Romans 13, shows us that God works in the kingdoms of men for our good. If they ever try to force us to do something immoral or go against what God wants us to be, we must resist respectfully. If the choice is between worshiping and serving God and submitting to the government, we always choose God. Even if it means we lose our lives, we choose God. But that's not ideal. We want to serve God while submitting to the government and by submitting to the government. It's always wrong to rebel against your parents when they command you to clean your room. That is not unjust oppression. It is just something we don't want to do as children, and we have to get over it because God says so.

We should feel very blessed to live in a benevolent society. Historically, governments have tried to combine church and state to create a tyrannical and oppressive system. Our country, at this point, allows religious liberty. But there have been numerous attempts to combine religious ideology and legislature. This leads to all kinds of problems. Some laws are needed to maintain order and have peace, but trying to legislate morality creates oppression without adding any real value. You cannot

legislate a heart change. So we should respond with respect and honor those in authority as though they are appointed by God.

This leads to the second application point. What does our heart look like when we consider our stuff? We have to escape the common misconception that everything is mine to enjoy as I please. We like to act like we are the masters of our possessions when we are actually stewards. This is dangerous thinking. What do we have that we have not received? Even the abilities that we have which earn us money are not our own. The air we breathe is not our own. Why do we act like we have not received everything from God?

What would it look like for us to give to God what is his? How do we give God glory and fruit?

Jesus is pointing out throughout this section, the first step in giving God glory is recognizing that we are made to bear his image. Second, it is implied that we must recognize who Jesus is and accept him as the Messiah. That confession and submission to Jesus is a recognition of all the work that God has done for us.

But once we recognize that, how should we feel, and what should we do? God calls us to be his beloved children through Jesus. We must live like God and Jesus. To be God's image-bearers does not mean that we are superior to others. It means that we submit to others with humility and love. God is expecting us to live holy and upright lives full of honesty, integrity, and love. God expects us to build up the body of Christ so that we show the world how great Jesus was on the earth. God expects us to call others into this blessing. We don't make excuses to rebel. We don't try to keep all of our money and stuff for ourselves. We see it all as belonging to God, and as we evangelize, we must not turn people away by being evil or hateful. If they turn away, it should be because they refuse to give God glory like these Jews.

The final application point I want to make is considering the Pharisees and their attitude toward Jesus. Is that you? Do you resist believing in him and giving him your all? Are you looking for a reason not to believe in him? Give God the glory he deserves. There is no doubt that he created you in his image. Your life has a purpose. That purpose is being to the praise of his glory. We all must be transformed to be like him. I know God is asking a lot of you. He is asking you to give more than just a few hours a week. He is asking you to give him everything, heart, soul, mind, and strength. But he is the one who gives you everything to enjoy, and he is worthy of tremendous praise, adoration, and worship. Don't resist because you want some level of satisfaction in this world. Don't be greedy for glory and fruit that's not yours. Enjoy what God gives you, but give glory and fruit back to God with a thankful heart.

Devotional #8 – Noon of the Third day

Matthew 22:23-33

23 That same day the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him with a question. 24 “Teacher,” they said, “Moses told us that if a man dies without having children, his brother must marry the widow and have children for him. 25 Now there were seven brothers among us. The first one married and died, and since he had no children, he left his wife to his brother. 26 The same thing happened to the second and third brother, right on down to the seventh. 27 Finally, the woman died. 28 Now then, at the resurrection, whose wife will she be of the seven, since all of them were married to her?” 29 Jesus replied, “You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God. 30 At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven. 31 But about the resurrection of the dead—have you not read what God said to you, 32 ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not the God of the dead but of the living.” 33 When the crowds heard this, they were astonished at his teaching.

Study Notes:

How important is the resurrection? If you stop to think about it, resurrection is the single most important teaching that we are given in this life. Saying that there is a resurrection means that we are not just living for the here and now, and it opens up a realm full of possibilities for our futures.

Up until this point, we have seen the scribes and Pharisees repeatedly work against Jesus, but now we will be looking at the religious group known as the Sadducees. These men are known for being well-educated, upper-class Jews who are part of the priesthood. They were typically very political and very wealthy. They are also known for resistance to all things supernatural. They did not believe in anything in the spiritual realm except for God. Look at Luke's description in **Acts 23:8**. For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all.

This group is totally opposite to the Pharisees. They tend to view the Bible differently. They hold up the Pentateuch, the first five books written by Moses, as the literal revelation from God. All other books are just commenting on those books. As a result, they don't believe the prophets who foretell the resurrection of the dead.

This leads these men to be very self-focused and earthly. They are living for all that this world has to offer. As long as they do what is good and in keeping with God's law, they believe that he will bless them. But their focus is on being blessed, so they make all kinds of unethical decisions to make their lives better. They don't really keep the law, but they would be very slippery and hard to pin down for their sin if you asked them about it. These are the religious liberals of Jesus' day. As I said, they are the opposite of the Pharisees, who were very strict and more middle class.

Why would they want to challenge Jesus? The Pharisees hate him, so why not make him their ally? Consider the work of Jesus in Jerusalem. He has come into the temple area and overturned tables. Cleaning out the temple costs them a lot of money! Not to mention the fact that they too would have feared a revolt led by Jesus. If the Romans come in and discipline the Jews, the Sadducees would have much to lose. So they want Jesus taken care of before that happens.

But their question points to a pet doctrine that the Sadducees hold. Jesus teaches that there will be eternal life for those who believe in him. Many are claiming that he has just resurrected Lazarus from the dead. He has also told his disciples that he will rise from the dead on the third day. This is a doctrine that they have based their whole lives on. If there is a resurrection from the dead, they must shift their whole way of thinking about the supernatural.

Their question is based on the law of God in **Deuteronomy 25:5-10**. This text tells the Israelite's to marry the widow of their brothers if that widow doesn't have any children. This was a law created to pass on the inheritance of the first man to children in the same family. It was also created as a way to care for the widows in the land. Widows who have not borne any children were not sought after in those days. So the law would help widows to be taken care of.

The Sadducee's use that law to say that resurrection is an absurd idea. This is their go-to reasoning to argue against the resurrection. Their question ask, if a woman is with seven men even in a lawful way, whose wife will she be in the resurrection? She can't be all of their wives. Men can have multiple wives, but women can't have multiple husbands. This is a question that is based entirely on their logic. It's a question because if he agrees with them on how ridiculous that situation sounds, Jesus will lose his conservative followers. If he tells them that the first husband is the husband or the last, he will lose more liberal followers.

Jesus responds to them with a straightforward and stern statement. He says, "You are wrong." Jesus tells them like it is. He cuts to the chase. Then he says, "You know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God." These men are the priests. How do they not know the Scriptures? They are taught to memorize the scriptures, and they are leaders over the people. They are leading people to believe that there is no resurrection. Do we see how this could cause harm to their teaching? They are convincing everyone to live for this world. It's the result of the Sadducees refusing to believe all of the Old Testament.

This happens when we follow the pattern handed to us by our forefathers without open minds. This happens when we read scriptures and use logic to prove our views instead of letting scriptures challenge our views. We are wrong, but we are fully convinced that we are right. Why? Because we use scriptures the way we want to. In other words, we take it out of context. They don't know the scriptures. They know how to use scriptures to justify their beliefs. This is something we must be cautious about.

Next, Jesus says that they do not know the power of God. God has demonstrated his power in many ways throughout history, but they don't believe in it because they haven't seen it. God has even raised the dead in the past through Elijah and Elisha. The prophets talk about resurrection many times, such as in **Daniel 12 and Ezekiel 37**, etc, etc. Earlier Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead. They don't care. To them, resurrection is a dumb idea. God can't do that. Once we die, we die.

This would be as Paul said in **1 Corinthians 15:32**, "If the dead are not raised, 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.'"

The words that follow these condemning words are fascinating. Jesus answers their question by giving us insight into what life will be like after this life. He says, "For in the resurrection, they neither marry nor are they given in marriage, but are like angels." Jesus tells them that they don't know what they don't know. They are so proud of their ability to interpret and think logically, but they have no clue

what they are talking about. Jesus tells us something that no one on earth knew. He tells us that there is no longer a need for marriage in the resurrection.

This is where a thousand questions from people come in!

What? No marriage? What if I love my spouse and want to be with her for eternity? Would God take her away from me? People who respond in this way fail to see what marriage is. Marriage is the joining of two people into one flesh for life on earth. God created it to meet men's emotional and physical needs initially. Now, it is how God wants us to learn his connection to us. God uses the marriage relationship multiple times in the Old Testament to demonstrate his love and faithfulness to Israel. So marriage is a taste of the relationship that we will share with God after this life is over. Paul even says at one point in **1 Corinthians 7:35**, that it is better not to marry so we can go ahead and begin being totally devoted to the Lord.

After this body wears out, we will be given a new eternal body that does not procreate. This new body is totally different.

1 Corinthians 15:40-44 it says, There are also heavenly bodies and there are earthly bodies; but the splendor of the heavenly bodies is one kind, and the splendor of the earthly bodies is another. The sun has one kind of splendor, the moon another and the stars another; and star differs from star in splendor. So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.

It's not that we lose something when we transition into the immortal body. We gain a tremendous relationship with God and a love like nothing we have ever experienced. We need to be careful not to love our spouse more than we love our God. That doesn't mean that we use God as an excuse to shirk our responsibilities toward our spouse. It just means that we have to love our spouse because we love God. I'm confident that we will see each other, know each other, and have relationships that are deeper than ever in the resurrection. But our covenant is only until death. The only eternal covenant is with the Lord. He is the one we love with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. He is the one who loves us faithfully for eternity and promises to fulfill our deepest needs in a way we have never imagined.

As I said, Jesus points out the fact that they don't know the scriptures. But what he says shows us how easy it is to read the word and fail to look deep enough. Jesus points to Exodus, a text they would recognize, and he reminds them of God's words to Moses, "I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Then he says, "He is not God of the dead, but of the living. " What does this mean? When God spoke these words to Moses, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were buried in a tomb in Canaan. But God is speaking about them as though they are still alive. He does not say, "I was the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." If God loves you and he is your God, he will not let you die and go away from his presence. God doesn't talk about Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as though they are gone. He talks about them as though they are currently alive with God.

From a larger perspective, this text shows us that Jesus will not join a camp. He will not be labeled or side with anyone in their proud misunderstandings of scripture. It's not that he was offensive to be

offensive or that he was just trying to be different. His goal is to speak what is true and to hold on to the truth at all costs. What a tremendous example that is for us.

The Sadducees reject the scriptures because they are arrogant in their wisdom and knowledge. They care more about winning arguments than seeking what is true. After Jesus answers their questions, they go away astonished. It doesn't say they repented and followed Jesus. Wouldn't it be better to admit to being a fool and change your point of view?

They remind me of our political leaders and the whole political system of our day. It's an us against them mentality. You are like us, or you are like them. Jesus wasn't like either the Pharisees or the Sadducees. He wasn't like them or trying to walk some middle ground between them. He doesn't let their feelings or opinions influence his beliefs because he cares more about what is true. Of course, they crucify him for doing that.

We also learn from this text that there will definitely be a resurrection. Those who have died before us with faith in Jesus are not dead. They live with God and Christ. There are so many other texts that back this up. But this text shows us that God is the God of the living. He does not have a relationship with dead people.

Finally, we see that our tendency may be to stop studying or to doubt God's ability. We have to be people who look deeper and deeper into God's word to know the truth. We have to refine our beliefs, and in the process, we should come to a deeper level of faith that the supernatural realm exists. Not the supernatural that our world wants us to believe exists, but the spiritual realm God shows us. The realm where our spirits are given an eternal body that is like angels. In **1 John 3:2-3**, John tells us our body will be like Jesus' body. There is a supernatural realm where we get to be with God for eternity and enjoy a relationship unlike anything we have ever experienced in life on earth.

We should be people who rejoice in the truth of the resurrection. We should be people who mold our lives around that belief. We don't live for here and now. We live for the eternal life to come. Jesus promises us that it exists, and he promises to make it ours if we submit to Him and be transformed in our thinking. We must learn to love God with all our hearts, souls, minds, and strength. We must learn to love our neighbor as God has loved us.

Closing with one of my favorite scriptures, **1 Corinthians 13:1-8**, If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.

Devotional #9 – Evening of the Third day

Matthew 22:34-40

34 Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. 35 One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: 36 “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” 37 Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ 40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

Study Notes:

I thought I’d begin by saying, “As I get older;” but then I remembered my wife told me, “You’re not getting older. You’re just old.” So I decided not to say that.

From the perspective of my advanced years, it seems to me that one of the most unfortunate characteristics of many religious people is that they spend so much time talking about religious rules and regulations. They seem mostly concerned about who’s “in” and who’s “out,” who’s saved and who’s not, who’ll make it to heaven and who won’t. It gets very complicated and sometimes very nasty.

In this evening’s scripture, Jesus was surrounded by exactly the same kind of religious arguments. The folks around him were arguing about whether or not it is right for religious people to pay taxes to the government, and who’s going to be married to whom in the resurrection. Then one of the religious men, in an effort to pin Jesus to the wall, asked him what may have been the toughest question of all: “What is the most important of all the commandments in our religious laws?”

Jesus never hesitated. Perhaps he was relieved that someone had finally asked a question that had some substance to it. This was his immediate reply, Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.

According to Jesus, what’s absolutely essential is loving God, and loving our neighbors as we love ourselves. Those three relationships, with God, with our neighbors, and with ourselves, sum up everything that’s ever been said or written about God’s will for the world.

So what does it mean to love God? What does it mean to love anyone? One of the most important things I’ve learned in the many years I’ve lived is that love is not basically an emotion. There are, of course, emotions, very strong emotions, connected with loving; but, at its core, love is not basically an emotion. If love were based on emotions, what would happen when we find ourselves, as we often do, vexed or even angry with our husbands or wives or kids, the ones we have promised to love, the ones whom we keep saying we do love? Our way of treating them would then go up and down like the ocean’s tides. If love were primarily an emotion there would be no dependability to our relationships on how we treat those whom we love would depend on our mood at any given moment.

But love is **not** primarily an emotion. Love is a decision we make, and have to re-make again and again. Love is a choice we make about whom and what we will allow to be important to us. Based on those decisions, our love then becomes something we do.

I closed Devotional #8 with 1 Corinthians 13. It is sometimes called the Love chapter. In verses 4 through 8 it says, Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.

To love is to choose to pay attention to those whom we love, allowing who they are and what they think and say, to be important to us. One of the most important parts of paying attention is to listen.

Maybe you know that. You've probably noticed when people really listen to you. They listen intently so it registers with you that who you are and what you think are important. You know when you experience it, to be paid attention to, to be listened to, is to be loved.

What if we used that understanding of love to guide us in what it means to love God? What if loving God with all our hearts and souls and minds were to mean giving careful and personal attention to what is important to God, to listen to him? What if we allowed God's thoughts to be the important truths as we seek to understand life and how we should live it, even on the days when we're feeling lousy or sad? On that foundation, our decision to love God would then become an action, doing what God calls us to do. Jesus says we show our love for God by loving our neighbors.

I believe that if I did that, I'd be loving God with all my heart, soul, and mind, letting his revealed truth be more important to me than anything else, more than the latest fads or the prevailing political correctness or my own changing emotional dispositions. Loving God means choosing to listen to what he says and then doing it, loving my fellow human beings.

Jesus says that the second of the greatest commandments is like the first. We are to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. That's the heart of what God wants. That's why God put his creation together. That's why we're here. God wants a world in which all of his human creatures receive and trust his love and then share that love with each other.

Most of the time most of us do love our neighbors as we love ourselves. The problem is that much of the time we don't love ourselves all that much or as we should. Just think about it. Think about those times when you've been ugly or unkind to the people around you, even people in your own family, how were you feeling about yourself at that moment?

So we have to go back to the beginning: the first step in loving God is to listen to him, to trust what he says, and Jesus central message is that God loves us! And not just the religious people. "For God so loved the world."

When we trust that we are loved, then it follows that loving our neighbors as we love ourselves will create the kind of world God wants. When that happens, we have a glimpse of what it means for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. This is the basic message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, what God wants is a world in which the people he loves go on to love each other, living together in communities of love.

We are to love our neighbors as ourselves, but, you might ask, "Just who is my neighbor?" Well, on another occasion, in the midst of another series of religious debates in which Jesus' adversaries were

trying to trap him, that very question was asked, and Jesus answered it by telling the parable of the Good Samaritan. The conclusion of that parable is that the “neighbor” is, by definition, the one who shows mercy. Being a neighbor has nothing to do with nationality, religion, color, or class. Being a neighbor means sharing the mercy God gives to us with whomever we happen to encounter who needs mercy.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus consistently put his emphasis on listening to what God says and then doing it.

It’s not, finally, a question of who repeats the most religious cliches or recites the most correct creeds. We’re not called to spend our time arguing about who’s going to heaven and who isn’t. All that strikes me as mostly a lot of rationalization to allow us to feel secure that we’ve got life’s mysteries all figured out and wrapped up in a neat little religious package, a package that proves that I and my beliefs are “in” and whoever disagrees with me is “out.”

I will never, in this world, understand all the mysteries of life. But what God calls me to do is very simple to understand, not at all simple to do, but simple to understand. What matters, finally, is that we hear what God is saying to us in Jesus Christ and DO it. We are called to DO something, to love God and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves.

James went as far to say in **James 4:17**, If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn’t do it, it is sin for them.

That’s it. Jesus says that life’s not about rules; it’s about loving relationships.

Devotional #10 – Morning of the Fourth day

Matthew 24:36-44

36 “But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 37 As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. 38 For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; 39 and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. 40 Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. 41 Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left. 42 “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. 43 But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. 44 So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.

Study Notes:

Can it be possible that being faithful to our Lord in our everyday routines demonstrates holy watchfulness for his return? Is being an honest office manager, a careful school bus driver, an ethical attorney, a thoughtful housewife or househusband really a sign that we are aware that Jesus is coming back? Yes, it is. And if you doubt that, look at the lives of those who do not share an awareness that there is a cosmic Lord named Jesus.

Look at all the ethical and moral shortcuts that are available and that many people in our society take all the time. Things like company Scandals, using company equipment for personal use, One night stands with easy abortion just in case. Whatever the scenario, people all over the place live like there is no tomorrow and as though no one who cares is watching them anyway.

The days of Noah are our inevitable context, and according to Jesus this will remain even in the church’s context right up until the end. But within that setting we display our watchfulness by living as fine of lives for our great God in Christ as we can. In big things and small ones, at work and at home, in what we do with our body parts as well as what we do with our income, we do everything in the context of a God-infused world. True, no one will ever write a best-selling novel about ordinary Christians going through typical days and being faithful in preparing dinners and putting in an honest day’s work, but when history’s curtain at long last rings down, the first thing our Lord will talk to us about will be the days of Noah and how we experienced and displayed our Lord’s grace during all that time.

We may not live to see our Lord’s return. But as we go through our routines in these days of Noah, we certainly want it to be true that as people look at the shape of our lives, they can say of also us, “Those Christians never give up hope. We can tell.”

In verse 43 Jesus says that if someone knew at what hour a burglar was going to come to rob the house, he would keep watch. Yes, he would. Yes, so would we all.

It reminds me of that scene from the movie Home Alone in which the little boy Kevin, accidentally left behind when his family took a trip to Paris, is peering out an open second-story bedroom window. As

he looks down, he sees and then overhears two cat burglars saying that they'd be coming back to rob Kevin's house around 9pm that night. Now Kevin knows when they are coming and so he spends the rest of the day setting up one booby trap after the next to foil the thieves who, indeed, show up promptly at 9pm.

If you know when a burglar is coming, you get ready and watch, Jesus says. True enough.

But then in the very next verse Jesus encourages our own readiness and watchfulness on account of the fact that we do not know when he will return. Knowing when something is going to happen makes you watchful. But not knowing makes us less vigilant, less able to watch when we are supposed to? Or is the point that we have to assume that the burglar could come any night and so we have to sit up in the living room with a baseball bat every single night for the rest of our lives?

If you tell me burglars are coming next Wednesday around 1:30am to smash through my kitchen window, I am going to be there and be ready. This is useful information. But if you tell me that my house is going to be robbed, at some point in the dead of night, sometime in the next 15 years, I am going to start to wish you had never told me because I wonder if I will ever sleep again.

Jesus' return will be a profoundly good thing and so living with an awareness that this is going to happen need not make us nervous or sleepless but it is intended to make us simply faithful. We don't need to perform heroics, walking humbly with our God will do. We don't need to spend our days calculating time charts for when the Lord will return, as some do, living with the hope of the New Creation will do. We don't need to quit our jobs in order to devote ourselves 24/7 to praying, faithfulness in our callings as a witness to the kingdom will do.

In this sense, Jesus' telling us that this is going to happen, even if the when is unspecified, is perhaps like telling a desperately lonely person, "I cannot tell you when but I can assure you that you are going to meet someone very special one day. You will be married, you will have children, and you will be very happy." Knowing that will not erase the loneliness that will continue until that happens, but it will prevent the loneliness from having the last word.

Can you be surprised even when expecting something? Of course! Just ask many women who have had children. A common phrase to refer to a woman's pregnancy is that "she is expecting." Indeed she is. She is expecting the child and makes many preparations to be ready. A nursery is created. Baby showers are given at which lots of useful items are collected: strollers, toys, clothing, baby monitors, car seats. It's no secret the baby is coming.

Yet it is not at all unusual to hear a story that goes like this: "Boy were we in for a surprise! There we were, nearly 3 weeks out from our due date, stuck in traffic during a terrific thunderstorm on I-75 just outside Dallas. Out of nowhere I went into labor! I ended up having the baby in the backseat of the car with two police officers assisting while my husband was about going berserk!! We sure never expected anything like that!"

They had been expecting. But they had not "expected" it just then and in just that way. Surprises can come even when we know what's coming. And so, Jesus said, it will be when the Son of Man returns. True believers won't be surprised that it happened but they will almost certainly be shocked when it does even so! But as with the birth of a child, because what we had been expecting was a good and

joyous thing, once the surprise of just when and how it happened wears off, we'll be left with just the joy.

So let's talk about how we are to keep watch or be watchful for Jesus second coming.

To "keep watch" for Jesus' second coming means, focus on living a life of faith, obedience, and service, remaining spiritually alert and ready, and actively seeking to do God's will. Live a life of faith and obedience.

Jesus pending return should motivate us to live a life pleasing to God, characterized by faith and obedience to His teachings. Be spiritually alert. Stay vigilant and avoid spiritual apathy, recognizing the importance of being prepared for the Lord's return.

Another thing is engage in God's work. Focus on serving others and fulfilling the tasks God has given us, rather than waiting passively for His return.

Study the Bible. Familiarize yourself with scriptures related to the second coming and the signs that may precede it. Encourage and support others. Share your faith and encourage fellow believers to stay strong in their faith and to be ready for the Lord's return.

Live as if today is the day. Recognize the possibility of Jesus' return at any moment and live accordingly, making every day count for God. Be discerning. Be aware of false teachings and spiritual deception, and remain grounded in the truth of God's word. Cultivate strong faith in God's goodness. Trust in God's promises and His unwavering love, even in the face of uncertainty. Remember the signs: While the exact timing of Jesus' return is unknown, studying the signs mentioned in the Bible can help us to be aware of the times we are living in.

Devotional #11 – Noon of the Fourth day

Matthew 25:1-13

1 “At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. 2 Five of them were foolish and five were wise. 3 The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. 4 The wise, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. 5 The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep. 6 “At midnight the cry rang out: ‘Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!’ 7 “Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. 8 The foolish ones said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.’ 9 “‘No,’ they replied, ‘there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.’ 10 “But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut. 11 “Later the others also came. ‘Sir! Sir!’ they said. ‘Open the door for us!’ 12 “But he replied, ‘I tell you the truth, I don’t know you.’ 13 “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.

Study Notes:

Are you a planner and preparer, or do you tend to fly by the seat of your pants? Do you write down every on paper or a calendar in your kitchen, or do you assume you can keep it all in your head? Both are ways of preparing, but one is likely more manageable than the other. But, if you can give yourself enough time and remember to do what you need to do, then everyone’s own system serves the purpose.

The problem comes when you don’t keep track of it all. Something slips your mind, you didn’t write something down on your list, or you neglected to look at your list one last time to remind yourself what needs to be done, and then you’re stuck.

I’ll make a grocery list, before I go to the store. That way I don’t forget anything or add a bunch of stuff I don’t need. I get to the store, reach for my list, and realize it is laying on my desk at the house. That’s when I try to remember everything on it. As I pay out, I look at the cashier and say, I’ll be back because I know I forgot something, and usually I did!

Being unprepared can lead to some difficult situations and awkward moments.

In our verses Jesus is talking about preparation, but not simply about earthly things; he’s zeroing us in on being prepared spiritually. He is reminding us that right now is our time to prepare for eternity. So we know we should be prepared, but how?

Jesus uses a parable with ten virgin attendants at a wedding celebration. They needed to be ready to receive the bridegroom and enter the celebration whenever he arrived. And while one might assume that he would come at any moment, all ten women bring oil lamps to light the darkness if it got late. But only five thought ahead and brought extra oil, while the other five brought just what was in the lamp itself. That meant their lamps were out when the bridegroom was returning. Because they were unprepared and off buying more oil when he came back, they missed the entry into the wedding celebration, and when they arrived late, the answer from the bridegroom was stark, I tell you the truth, I don’t know you.

Jesus says this is all a picture of the kingdom of heaven, and while we might automatically think of eternal life itself when we hear that phrase, far more often, Jesus is speaking about his rule in our hearts by faith right now rather than eternal life. Certainly, saving faith leads to eternal life, but Jesus focuses on us in the here and now so that we are prepared for the eternal.

So, spiritually, we want to have enough oil in our lamps. What does that mean? How do we now prepare for eternal life? We don't know when we will face eternity because we do not know when we will die, nor do we know when Jesus will return. Jesus was clear, you do not know the day or the hour. Even if someone guesses when the end of the world will be, it's just a guess and almost assuredly a wrong guess. Many have been doing it for a long time.

So, since we don't know if Jesus is returning today or 1,000 years from now, and we don't know if our life has many years or months or even just hours left, it means that we want and need to be prepared now. How do we prepare for Jesus' return? How do we prepare for our deaths? How do we prepare for eternity?

So, how do we ensure that our lamps are full of oil and have plenty in reserve? How do we ensure we are prepared for whenever we enter into eternity? The answer is still right here. Through his Word, God gives and strengthens faith, the oil in Jesus' parable. So, first and foremost, to be prepared, we want to surround ourselves with the means that God uses to create and sustain faith.

That means gathering with your fellow Christians for worship regularly. That likely also means having the Word in your home through devotions or a Bible reading plan to allow God's flawless and powerful Word to work deep into our hearts not just once a week but daily.

What does a prepared heart look like? It's a heart that knows that you can do nothing to save yourself. It's a heart that knows that you are a sinner and deserve hell for that sin. It's a heart that trusts that Jesus did everything you needed him to do to rescue you when he lived a perfect life in your place and died on the cross to pay for every single sin you and everyone else has ever committed. It's a heart that trusts that Jesus will return and open the door to that wedding banquet, and you will be brought in because of his love and mercy for you.

All of that is internal. Are there external ways to see this preparation? While we cannot do anything to earn God's love, forgiveness, or eternal life, the way we live our life reflects the preparation, that faith, in us. The way you treat others is a reflection of your preparation. How you respect the leaders God has placed over you in your home, church, and government reflects your preparation. The way you think of sin in general, whether as something to be sought after or something to be avoided, is a reflection of your preparation. Your faith should affect your life; your time in God's Word should affect what you do and why you do it. Your faith brings forth a life of good works in thanksgiving to God because he's forgiven your sin and given you eternal life.

Tending to your faith with God's Word and letting that produce a real, ongoing change in our lives is what it means to be prepared. Ever focused on Jesus as our one and only Savior and living our lives in thanksgiving to him for rescuing us from sin, death, and hell is how we keep our lamps lit and continue to ensure we have plenty of oil to last. That is precisely what Isaiah meant in **Isaiah 52:1**, when he urged us to "Awake, awake!" Likewise, this is what Paul meant in **1 Thessalonians 5:6** when he urged

the Thessalonians and us, So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober.

As I look at my life, I see so many times when I have not remained spiritually alert and sober. I have drifted to sleep in complacency and apathy. I have been drunk on my sin and my desires, caring little for what others, including God, wanted. I have been selfish and thoughtless. I had no oil in my lamp.

And while it is easy to let guilt for those times be crushing, God would have us see a different way forward. Rather than seeing all those times as reasons I am unprepared, I can look at those times and see God's grace and forgiveness that wipe out those sins. I can see his love for me as preparing me for eternity when I, on my own, was wholly unprepared. Paul's words to the Thessalonians resonate loudly in the picture Jesus paints with his parable.

Consider **1 Thessalonians 5:9-11**, For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

There, Paul sums up everything we want to remember as we look forward to our time entering eternity: God has given us complete salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, even for all of those times when we weren't preparing for eternity as we should have. Whether alive in this life or with him, we are safe because of his death and resurrection. And while we are here, let us encourage one another to be the wise with oil to spare. Let's encourage each other in this deeply personal yet communal task of preparing for the end because that's why God has given us to each other.

Devotional #12 – Evening of the Fourth day

Matthew 25:31-46

31 “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. 32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. 33 He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. 34 “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. 35 For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, 36 I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’ 37 “Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? 38 When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? 39 When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ 40 “The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’ 41 “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. 42 For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43 I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’ 44 “They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’ 45 “He will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’ 46 “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life. ”

Study Notes:

Today, Jesus speaks about something that will happen when He return's. It's like a kind of sneak peek, a kind of glimpse, a kind of preview as to what is going to take place when He comes to rule and reign on earth. It says when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. Now we've already said that Jesus would come in a background of great darkness, the sun, the moon, the stars would fail to shine it's light or their light. And then Jesus on that black canvas comes in blazing glory, He's going to come with His angels. We noticed that there will be a shout of the archangel, the blaring of the trumpet. And then we are told He will sit on his glorious throne.

So here we are given a picture of a kingdom, a King ruling on His throne. This is a picture of authority, and He is now going to preside over a judgment. So the scene before us is a King pronouncing a judgment upon some people and these people are categorized as sheep and goats. Now, this is a very familiar imagery of sheep and goats, you might have heard it in your life, even if you're not a Christian. These are two similar looking animals that are actually quite different. But on that day, when Jesus comes, people, categorized as sheep and goats will face a judgment. So this is a passage that talks about that separation of sheep and goats.

This is a passage that also talks about the sentencing that will be given to the sheep and goats. And then

this is a passage that tells us about the surprise of the sheep and goats. So in a very simple way, we're going to look at this passage, some 16 verses, but it will be simple, it'll be straightforward. I hope it will be a blessing to you. So we're going to see the separation, the sentencing, and then the surprise. So first of all, the separation before Him, before Jesus, before the Son of Man returning in His glory, will be gathered all the nations and He will separate people, one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.

So there will be a gathering of all the nations, gathering of all the people who are the sheep and the goats. Now this is not an unfamiliar imagery or picture. The sheep and goats can actually be part of the same flock in shepherding culture. They are different but their needs can be quite similar. So they are gathered together in the same flock, but they will not stay long together, because there will now be the separation. The sheep will be separated to be on the right, and the goats will be on the left.

Now most people are right handed, and the right hand is the preferred hand, that favorite hand. And so it is in Jewish culture and in biblical culture, that the right hand is a symbol of privilege, of favor, of preference, of honor. You recall how Jacob wanted to bless his younger grandson, Ephraim by reaching his right hand to place it on his head.

You will also remember how Jesus is said, to be ascended to be raised to sit at the right hand of the throne of God, the place of honor and privilege. So this is the simple point, the sheep, whoever they are, we are going to look at that later, they will be on the right hand because they are the preferred ones, the favored ones, the ones who will receive honor, and then the goats will be on the left.

Number two, moving from the separation, we now see the sentencing. So Jesus, the King will now say to those on His right, who are they? The sheep. Come, you who are blessed by My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. What joy, what privilege, what honor that these sheep will be called the blessed ones, they have been blessed by God. They are the chosen ones of God. They are the favorite ones of God and they will inherit the kingdom prepared for them.

Now the kingdom, the eternal, joyous, righteous Kingdom of God is prepared for them. It speaks of a realm, of a place, of a time of great privilege and honor and notice this is intentionally prepared for them from the foundation of the world. This is not an afterthought, this is something that God has always intended to. He has designed it to show His favor upon His sheep. Now who are the people who are categorized as sheep? What would their life like be on earth? Well, in verse 35 and in verse 36, we read, "For I was hungry and you gave Me food. I was thirsty and you gave Me drink. You welcomed Me, you clothed Me, you visited Me, you came to Me." So the sheep are the privileged ones who have been doing these things whilst they were on earth.

Now, if you are watching a movie, the music should now change from jubilant celebration here to one that is very somber next, Because the King will now pronounce His sentence for the people who are gathered on His left, the goats. So He says to those on His left, depart from Me, you cursed into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

Now this is a scary verse. This is a scary sentencing. It is reserved for the goats. Jesus says to them, depart from Me, you will be banished forever from My loving presence. Depart from Me, why? Because you will be cursed, you are cursed, and you will be thrown into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels, you will enter a place of eternal torment and suffering.

Now there is a very subtle but important difference for you to note. When we read about the kingdom, it was prepared specifically for the sheep. But when we read about the eternal fire, it is not prepared for the goats. The eternal fire was prepared for the devil and his angels, the demons. So this is I think, subtle. God's love has always been set upon those who are His sheep. But the goats enter the place of judgment because they follow after the similitude of Satan and his demons. It was not God's will to damn them in that sense, but that they sinned, and they followed after the sins or the similitude of the devil and his demons and therefore they are now judged in a place that was prepared for the devil and his demons. By the way, this verse also tells us that there is no such thing as universalism. You say, what in the world is that? Just universal-ism. There is no such thing as universalism. What is this teaching about?

Well, biblically speaking, or spiritually speaking, this is a kind of teaching, a wrong teaching that people have, that says God will save everyone. They believe that God is too loving, too kind, too merciful to let anyone suffer in hell with the devil and his demons. So they say, God is obliged by His love to save everyone in the universe, none excepted, universalism. But this verse clearly tells us, God does send unbelievers, people who are cursed, people who don't have a relationship with Jesus, into this eternal fire. You see, people teach about universalism, because they might be imbalanced in their theology. They are so focused on the love of God that they forget about the wrath of God, the holiness of God, the justice of God, the righteousness of God.

There are two sets of Scriptures I would like to insert here. One is from the Psalm. **Psalm 1:5** says, the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.

The wicked it says will not stand in the judgment, why? Because they are already judged. They have never received Jesus as Lord and Savior so they are judging themselves.

John 3:18 says, Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

But then in **Matthew 7:21-23** Jesus says, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'"

So I have a question here at this point. How non-believing people would say 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?'

Now I know there are a few denominations who believe the Sheep and the Goats are Believers and unbelievers. They also believe everyone is going to make it to heaven. All you have to do is get your ticket so to speak, believe in Jesus, then live the way you want too.

If we go back to **Matthew 7:23**, Jesus said, Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’

What does it mean to know someone? I mean to really know someone?

Someone might say, Well I know someone down at the grocery store. His name is Jim. Works in the meat market.

That would be like when Jesus found the two demon possessed men in **Matthew 8:29**, the demons ask Jesus, “What do you want with us, Son of God?” they shouted. “Have you come here to torture us before the appointed time?” So they knew Jesus, and who he was. But there was no relationship there.

So are you acting like a sheep or a goat? That may be a strange question to ask, but do you want to take that chance?

Towards the end of the Gospel According to Matthew, Jesus spent much of His time teaching His disciples about the end times, when the great tribulation will come, and when He would return, which no one knows the day or hour. Jesus taught about the faithful servant who would be working for the Master, faithfully using the resources of the Master, and who would be ready when the Bridegroom returned. Then, Jesus taught this passage to His disciples about the final judgment when He will separate the sheep from the goats.

Everyone is separated from God by sin. However, the righteous will be reconciled to God and enter eternal life that has been prepared for them. The unrighteous, the goats, will continue in their separation to God, and will be further separated from God and the righteous by going into eternal punishment. Both fates are eternal, and both fates are prepared. There are two interesting differences, though. The fire was not prepared for the goats, but rather for the rebellious angels. Neither is the fire prepared “from the creation of the world”. One could read this to mean that no one needs to join with the demons in their punishment. No one needs to be a goat and be cast into hell; unfortunately, some will choose hell by rejecting a relationship with Christ.

Which have you chosen, to go with the sheep into eternal life, or to go with the goats into eternal punishment?

Devotional #13 – Morning of the Fifth day

Matthew 26:17-30

17 On the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread, the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Where do you want us to make preparations for you to eat the Passover?” 18 He replied, “Go into the city to a certain man and tell him, ‘The Teacher says: My appointed time is near. I am going to celebrate the Passover with my disciples at your house.’ ” 19 So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them and prepared the Passover. 20 When evening came, Jesus was reclining at the table with the Twelve. 21 And while they were eating, he said, “Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me.” 22 They were very sad and began to say to him one after the other, “Surely you don’t mean me, Lord?” 23 Jesus replied, “The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. 24 The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born.” 25 Then Judas, the one who would betray him, said, “Surely you don’t mean me, Rabbi?” Jesus answered, “You have said so.” 26 While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, “Take and eat; this is my body.” 27 Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you. 28 This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. 29 I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.” 30 When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

Study Notes:

Matthew tells us that it is the first day of Unleavened Bread. The Feast of Unleavened Bread was a feast prescribed by God to Moses to give to the people of Israel.

Exodus 13:3 says, Then Moses said to the people, “Remember this day in which you came out from Egypt, out of the house of slavery, for by a strong hand the LORD brought you out from this place. No leavened bread shall be eaten.”

The reason for the feast was to remember how God set his people free from slavery by a strong hand. This annual feast was to remember the power of God to release his people and give them liberation. This seven day memorial was to be kicked off with the Passover feast. This is why we read the disciples asking Jesus about making preparations for the Passover meal in verse 17. What I want us to see and what Matthew is wanting us to see as the backdrop for the events we are reading is the Passover meal and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Remembering God’s strong delivering hand in the exodus is what the people were to be thinking about and celebrating at this time. What Matthew has also done in this gospel is told us that he has sped the account to the last day of Jesus’ life. Passover is about to start. The leaven, any rising agent in dough, was to be removed from their homes.

When we look at verse 18 we see that Jesus has already made preparations for the Passover. Jesus is ready for the Passover. Jesus is ready for this memorial. He tells his disciples to go into the city and find this certain man. But notice what they are to tell this certain man with whom Jesus has made preparations. “My time is near. I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples.” Notice Jesus does not merely say that they are coming. He does not merely say to have the Passover ready because

he and his disciples are coming. Jesus also says that this is it. My time has come. His time is near. His time is now. The Passover Lamb is prepared for what is about to happen to him this very night.

Now it is evening and I want us to think about what this meal is supposed to be about. This meal is supposed to be a celebration of God's deliverance of his people. This meal is to remember how they were slaves and God powerfully brought them out of slavery. But notice what Jesus says while he is eating with his twelve disciples. Verse 21, Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me.

Please imagine this. Jesus is telling them that his time is near. Jesus told them that he would be handed over and crucified at the Passover. Now Jesus says that one of you twelve is the reason why. Jesus just dropped shocking news on them. One of you is the betrayer. One of you will put these events into motion. One of you is handing me over.

So the disciples were very sorrowful when they heard these words. You can easily imagine what is happening in the minds of the disciples. You can imagine them looking around at each other and speculating in their hearts who they think would do such a thing. Yet I want you to notice the denials that happen. In verse 22 we see that each disciple asks, "Is it I, Lord?" By asking this, they are saying to Jesus that they would never do such a thing. Please notice that each disciple said this, even Judas. But notice that when Judas said it, Jesus confirmed it. Looking at verse 25, Jesus tells him, "You have said so." Jesus tells him that he knows what he is doing. So he has offered a warning of woe in verse 24. The death of Christ is what was written about him. This is God's eternal plan. But woe to the man that has betrayed him. Jesus is trying to penetrate Judas' heart. But Judas' will is set and he will betray Jesus.

So it is the weight of this betrayal and the backdrop of the celebration of their freedom from slavery in the Passover meal that Jesus prepares a memorial for himself. In verse 26 Jesus takes bread. Now since it is the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, then we know that this bread would have been unleavened bread. Jesus takes this bread, gives thanks, broke it, and gave it to his disciples.

This is also why we offer a prayer of thanksgiving before we take the bread during the memorial. Please understand that we do not need to ask God to bless the bread. I don't even know what that would mean. To bless something in the scriptures is to offer a prayer of praise and thanksgiving. So we are praising God and thanking God when we have the bread and are ready to eat.

Notice what Jesus tells his disciples to do. He tells them to take the bread and eat it. "This is my body." Now in the Passover meal, the bread represented the bread of affliction according to **Deuteronomy 16:3**. The bread reminded the people of their suffering while in Egyptian slavery. Jesus takes this bread and now says, "This is my body." Now the bread will not represent your suffering. Now the bread will represent Jesus' suffering. When we take the bread we are remembering the body of Jesus that was given for us. We are remembering the horrors of what Jesus must endure. We are remembering that he will go through mocking and scourging. We are remembering the crown of thorns pressed into his head. We are remembering the nails that were driven through his hands and feet. We are remembering Jesus being lifted up and crucified. We are remembering his suffering and affliction. Jesus is telling us to never forget what he did.

Jesus knows our problem of forgetfulness. We forget even important events in our lives. So Jesus tells us that we need to remember him. We need to remember his body in the bread and all that he went through. He gave up his body for us.

But Jesus was not done with this memorial that he was establishing for his disciples. Jesus then took a cup. We know from verse 29 that the cup contained the fruit of the vine. This is another way of saying the juice that comes from a grape. So this is why we have grape juice in the cup because the cup would have contained the fruit of the vine. Jesus takes the cup and Jesus gives thanks again. So again it is important for us that when we take the cup we also give a prayer of praise and thanksgiving just as we did before we took the bread. I want to emphasize that our prayers need to center on Jesus. This is not the time for prayers about us. We have other prayers in our worship for that. These prayers are giving praising and thanks to God for Jesus' sacrifice.

When Jesus finished praying, he took the cup and gave it to his disciples, telling them to drink it. Notice what he says about the cup. Jesus says to drink it, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

Notice that Jesus did not say that the cup represents his body. Rather, the cup represents Jesus' blood of the covenant. The cup represents the effect of Jesus' sacrifice. Jesus said to remember his body when we take the bread. Then Jesus said to remember the covenant established through his death when we take the cup. Notice that Jesus speaks to the effect of the blood of the covenant in verse 28. Jesus' blood to establish this covenant was poured out for the forgiveness of sins.

Now I want us to think about the tension that the Lord's Supper has on our hearts each Lord's day. Think about how sometimes we can be so sorrowful because we are focusing on the body. We think about all that Jesus experienced for us. We think about the shame and suffering that came through the cross. But then sometimes we spend our time thinking about what the cross means for us. We have been set free from our sins because of this covenant established through Christ's blood. We have been forgiven through this covenant given through Jesus' death. We have been brought into a relationship with our Father because Jesus gave his life so that we can have a new covenant that draws us close to him.

Here is what I want us to see in summary. The Passover had a tension in its celebration. They remembered their bread of affliction but how God rescued them with a powerful hand. Jesus has the same tension in the room as he institutes the Lord's Supper. It was the time of the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread which was to be a celebration. But at the same time he has announced to the table that one of his own disciples would betray him, causing all the disciples to be deeply sorrowful.

Now we come to the table. First, we take the bread and we offer a prayer of thanksgiving for the body of Jesus. As we think about the body of Jesus we are moved to sorrow and grief. We think about the suffering. We think about the shame. We think about the rejection and betrayal. We think about the pain. We center our minds firmly on the cross of Jesus and it brings our hearts low. But then we come back to the table and we are given a cup. But Jesus says now he wants us to remember the covenant that was established through his blood. Friends, there is nothing sorrowful when we think of the covenant. We move from sorrow to joy as we remember how we have been delivered from our slavery to sin by God's mighty hand. Through this covenant we have been forgiven and reconciled. Through

this covenant we have hope. Through this covenant we have life. Through this covenant we can be with our Lord for all eternity. In the cup we are remembering what Jesus accomplished for us through his death and we celebrate and praise God that his loving kindness made this possible for sinners like us. Let us now come to the table and take the bread and take the cup with these concepts in our hearts and minds.

As we conclude our lesson I want to come back to one very subtle but important point that Jesus makes in verse 29. Jesus did not want this memorial to be like the memorial of a fallen hero. Jesus does not say that he is going to die and you need to remember me after I die. No, look carefully at verse 29. Jesus says that there is a day when he will drink this cup new with you in his Father's kingdom. Jesus is looking forward to a messianic banquet that he will enjoy with all of his disciples.

Here is the point: Jesus will not stay dead! You are not remembering a fallen hero. You are remembering a risen hero! You are remembering the one who has the power to lay down his life and take it back up again! He did not merely die so that you can have eternal life. No, he died and rose from the dead so that you will die to your old life and rise to a new life so that you can have eternal life with Jesus. We will be with Jesus again. The bread makes us sorrowful and the cup makes us rejoice. The death of Jesus makes us sorrowful and the resurrection makes us rejoice. Our death makes us sorrowful but because of Jesus we will be raised and in this we rejoice.

Devotional #14 – Noon of the Fifth day

Matthew 26:31-35

31 Then Jesus told them, “This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written: “ ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.’ 32 But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee.” 33 Peter replied, “Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will.” 34 “Truly I tell you,” Jesus answered, “this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times.” 35 But Peter declared, “Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.” And all the other disciples said the same.

Study Notes:

Failure. None of wants to apply that word to our life. We live in a society that rewards success and achievement. And we are not the only society to have done so.

One of the hardest things I found with a things not going right was accepting that sense of failure. No one goes into marriage expecting to fail. Likewise, no one heads to school thinking about failing. No one starts a business planning to go bankrupt. No one has children with the thought that one of their children will choose to renounce everything the family believes leading them to feel like they must have failed. No one takes on a task believing it is something they cannot handle. No one joins a church thinking they will drift away and fail in the vows they made before the congregation. And no one embraces Christ as Savior and Lord anticipating they will ever turn against Him.

This is the issue we face today. Jesus has been with His disciples for better than three years. He taught them, ministered to them, and lived with them. He poured His life into these guys. They have all grown to love each other. Unfortunately, Jesus knows Judas will not be the only one who turns his back on Him. He knows all the disciples are going to turn away from Him to one degree or another.

Jesus has already told the disciples that one of them would betray Him. Now he tells them all of them are going to desert him. He quoted the Old Testament as evidence that God knew all along this would happen.

Zechariah 13:7 says, “Awake, sword, against my shepherd, against the man who is close to me!” declares the Lord Almighty. “Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered, and I will turn my hand against the little ones.

The disciples were offended. They were confident of their love for Jesus. They were loyal and dedicated to their Master. Their intention was to be loyal. What they did not realize was their desire for self-preservation was stronger than their love for Jesus. When they had to choose between standing with Christ or preserving themselves, they chose to protect themselves. It is likely we would be very tempted to do the same.

I have told many of you in church that if that decision was to come up, we would have to make a choice. That choice might be, Live or Die! Many do it every day across this world we live in.

Peter, whose birth name was Simon, was one of the leaders of the disciples, he was know for being outspoken and impulsive. He spoke up and said, in essence, “Lord, I don’t know about these other

guys, he may have had his reservations about some of the other guys, but what I do know is this: I would NEVER desert you.”

To drive home the point, Jesus was very specific. He told Peter that he would specifically deny Him three times before morning came. What Peter probably should have said was, “No, Lord, give me strength so I will not do this!” But what He said was: “I would die with you before I would deny you.” Every other disciple said the same thing! Peter is known as the disciple who denied Jesus . . . But all of them deserted Him. We are only told Peter’s story.

Think about that just for a second. All of them ran and scattered. That is the same as saying, I don’t want to be caught as one of his followers. That is denying Jesus any way you look at it.

We will see that when they were all in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus warned them again that the spirit was willing but the flesh was weak. He urged them to pray and to pray fervently. They instead fell asleep.

What we see here is a glaring example of overconfidence. It is like the person who says, I can handle it, I would never do that! I would never betray my friend, I would never deny my Lord!

We have supreme confidence in our strength. But we are all much weaker than we think we are. The sinful nature is strong. We do not see clearly how deeply stained we are.

We get a greater detailed conversation when we look at Luke’s account. He records the words of Jesus in **Luke 22:31-32** as, “Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift each of you like wheat. But I have pleaded in prayer for you, Simon, that your faith should not fail. So when you have repented and turned to me again, strengthen your brothers.”

The passage raises a bunch of questions. However, the biggest question for us is very difficult, If Satan has to ask permission to test us, why does God say “Yes?” That gives you something to think about doesn’t it?

The same issue is raised by the book of Job. God told Satan how proud he was of Job and Satan responded, “He’s loyal because you are giving him everything he wants. It is easy to be loyal when life is easy.” God then allowed Satan to attack Job viciously. Why would God do this? It makes it look like God is just playing a game and we are the pieces.

To be honest, the only thing I can wrap my head around is God allows the assaults because He knows we need trials to deepen our roots and our relationship with Him. As long as things are easy, we are quite content to just drift along. We go to church, pick up our Bible now and again, and hang out with others who call themselves Christians. We consider ourselves strong, mature, and a prize among God’s saints. However, our roots are actually shallow. Unless we are tested, they will remain shallow.

If you talk to people who have been through great trials they will often tell you how much their faith grew during that time. When they were at their weakest point they had to trust most fully. And that is when they found the Lord to be most faithful. That has certainly been my experience. I’m not sure that answers all my or your questions but that’s all I have for now.

When you combine these two accounts in Matthew and Luke we learn, or are reminded, of several things. We are in a Spiritual Battle.

In **Ephesians 6:12** Paul writes, For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places.

In 2 Corinthians 4:4 Paul also wrote, Satan, who is the god of this world, has blinded the minds of those who don't believe. They are unable to see the glorious light of the Good News. They don't understand this message about the glory of Christ, who is the exact likeness of God.

Jesus several times called Satan the ruler of this world, especially in the book of John. Such as John 12:23, John 14:30, and John 16:11. He frequently cast out demons that were attacking people. The point is there is a spiritual war going on and we are a part of that war even though we do not see it.

We are in a fight we cannot fight on our own. We need HELP! In Ephesians 6 Paul tells us to put on the full Armor of God. He summons us to use the tools God has given us. Only a fool goes arrogantly into this battle.

Let's note again that Satan had to ask permission to test the disciples. We are confused as to why God allowed this but, don't miss the significance of Satan having to ask permission. God and Satan are not two equals! This is the King battling one of His princes. This King is All-powerful, the Prince is not. The King is all-knowing, the prince is not. There is a spiritual battle going on but there is no doubt as to who is going to win the battle!

Our job is to stay close to the Lord. The closer we are to Him the more secure we will be. Satan may have permission to test us and push us to the limit, which God uses to help us grow, but He does not have permission to defeat us. This is a truth we can and should hang on to when we are going through a time of testing.

God does not leave us to fend for ourselves. He has given us the tools we need, the Word of God, the power of the Holy Spirit, the intercession of Christ, and the fellowship of the Christian community. But we must use the tools He has given!

In **Luke 22:32** Jesus told Peter, But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.

Romans 8:26 tells us, And the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. For example, we don't know what God wants us to pray for. But the Holy Spirit prays for us with groanings that cannot be expressed in words."

Hebrews 7:24-25 tells us, because Jesus lives forever, his priesthood lasts forever. Therefore he is able, once and forever, to save those who come to God through him. He lives forever to intercede with God on their behalf.

The Lord is actively monitoring our lives. He is interceding for us. I don't know exactly what that means but I know the Lord gets what He asks for. No matter what the test, we do not face it alone.

We still have a question, if Jesus was praying, and He always is successful in His intercession, why did the disciples still desert the Lord? The answer is, we must learn what He desires us to learn. Sometimes we learn the easy way by doing what He says and sometimes we learn the hard way by trying to do things in our own strength.

In Luke, Jesus talked about when Peter “repented”. In Matthew, the Lord says they will all desert Him but, after the resurrection He was going to meet them in Galilee. Don’t miss this! The desertion of the disciples will not be final. They will not lose their place in the Kingdom because they stubbed their toe. The Lord would see them through. They would be better because of their experience.

Do you wonder if this whole experience made the disciples a little more tolerant of those who struggled in their faith? I suspect it humbled them. Humility is necessary to serve God in a bold and effective way.

The trial you may be going through will not defeat you if you belong to Him. Hold on tight. Continue to trust Him like the Biblical examples did. He will not disappoint you. Even if you stumble it is not the end of the story. We can learn from our failures just like we learn from our victories.

Let me draw some conclusions from this text in closing. What should we take away from this historical narrative? We must be humble and aware of our weakness. The disciples walked and talked with Jesus. They witnessed everything first hand and still they denied Him! That reminds us of our own weakness in the flesh. The believer is given the Holy Spirit, but His power will work in us only when we stop fighting in our own strength and choose to fight in His.

Paul talks to us about training. It tells us we must be in a constant state of readiness. Complacency is deadly. The lazy believer is the vulnerable believer. Our adversary is very competent. He will exploit our weaknesses. He will attack the area where we think we “can handle things”. We must continue to work at being clothed in the righteousness of Christ. It is in HIS strength that we can stand.

The thing you notice about the great people of the Bible is the way they held on in trust even in the times of great trial. Abraham believed God even though it seemed there was no way he and Sarah could have a baby. Joseph continued to serve and honor God even though all the circumstances seemed to be going against Him. Job continued to trust the goodness and justice of God even though he lost everything and his friends attacked him. Daniel along with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego all stood their ground even though they were threatened with death. Jeremiah proclaimed God’s faithfulness even as he wandered through the wreckage of Jerusalem. Paul praised the Lord in jail, when stoned, beaten, shipwrecked or sick and incapacitated.

We could of course continue the list on through the Reformation and through times of persecution in our present day. People have given their lives confident that NOTHING will separate us from His love.

If we trust in circumstances, if we choose what is easy, if we rely on our feelings, we are falling right into the hands of our enemy.

Perhaps you, like the disciples, have failed miserably. Don’t forget the rest of the story! Jesus forgave these men. They learned from their failures and became powerful servants of that same Lord they deserted. They grew from their failures. They stopped trusting their own wisdom and ability and instead learned to trust Him. All but one of those men, tradition said John died a natural death exiled on an island, gave their lives for their master. They did not desert Him again.

So, if you have failed, admit your failure. Seek His forgiveness. Then learn your lesson, dust yourself off, and rely on His strength as you fight with the Lord against the Devil and the powers of darkness. If

you belong to Him, you may get knocked down, but you cannot be defeated. Satan is strong. The Lord is stronger, much much stronger. Thanks be to God!

Devotional #15 – Evening of the Fifth day

John 13:1-17

1 It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. 2 The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus. 3 Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; 4 so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. 5 After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him. 6 He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" 7 Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand." 8 "No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me." 9 "Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!" 10 Jesus answered, "Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you." 11 For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean. 12 When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. 13 "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. 14 Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. 15 I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. 16 Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. 17 Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

Study Notes:

One of the fun aspects of John's gospel is that there are so many familiar passages, and we find ourselves in another one. Interestingly, only the gospel of John records Jesus washing his disciples' feet.

Which certainly tells you that it left a lasting impression on John! At the end of chapter 12, Jesus continued to reach out particularly to the Jewish people. No doubt, Jesus' ministry was one of service. He was always thinking about others, and of course this passage highlights that in a powerful way.

Through the simple act of washing His disciples' feet, Jesus demonstrated humble servant hood which should point us to three things: first, we see the depth of Christ's love, second, we're reminded of our need to be washed by him, and lastly, we're instructed to wash each other's feet as well.

There's quite a bit of scholarly debate around the exact chronology of events here. However, I believe that John is talking about what has been historically referred to as Maundy Thursday.

It's also my opinion that Jesus washed the disciples' feet prior to breaking bread together. The NIV says at the beginning of verse 2, that all of this took place "During supper," which suggests they were eating and Jesus suddenly got up to wash everyone's feet; however, it can also be translated "At the Supper."

But of course, I don't want to get ahead of myself, because we cannot overlook an incredibly important

detail, that everything we just read about Jesus washing his disciples' feet is driven by his incredible love.

Everything that we read in this passage is motivated by his great love. Look at the verse one:

"...Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.."

And it sounds a lot like what Jesus says in his high priestly prayer in just a few chapters. Jesus says in John 17, "I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours."

Jesus' love is set upon those whom he came to save, and guess what? Those whom he came to save he accomplished redemption for. Love spurs him on to wash his disciples feet in the shadow of the cross.

I do a lot of project around our place. Some my wife comes up with, others are my ideas. Knowing what to do in a project is easy, even starting that project is easy. The hardest part is following through. Setting out and completing the project, that's the hardest part.

But you never really have to worry about that with Jesus. Those whom Jesus loves, he saves. He will finish what he started. Or as John put it, "he loved them to the end." You should find a tremendous level of comfort in that. Jesus didn't begin redemption and then say, "eh, they can finish the rest." It's not like Jesus redeemed you 99% of the way and now it's up to you to get the job done.

No, the redemption that Jesus accomplished is paid in full. He got it 100% done. What Jesus accomplished on the cross isn't like the projects we start but can't ever finish. If your faith is in Jesus Christ he has accomplished your redemption. It's glorious news!

But what did redemption require of Jesus? Well, it obviously required his life, but it also required him to humble himself.

Look at what John tells us beginning with verse 2. It sets the stage for what is going on. All the disciples are present for this particular meal including of course, Judas Iscariot, the one who would betray Jesus is also there.

Just imagine what's going on for a second. The supper is totally prepared. The dishes are out, steam is rolling off of the food, everyone is hungry, but ritually speaking there is one thing that needs to be done before they can eat, they need to wash up. Or rather, someone needed to wash them up.

Just a little history so you will understand my meaning about washing up. In first century Israel they did not eat at a table like we have today. As long as everyone washes their hands we could care less about their feet. But early Israel was different. The best way to imagine the picture is, picture a long coffee table like we have today around sixteen inches high. Now picture all the pillows my wife has in our home on the floor around that table. Everyone comes in to eat and will lay around on those pillows. Remember they either wear sandals or no shoes at all. Just picture your children barefoot playing outside all day. Now I have a question to make a point. Do you want all them feet near the table. Okay your getting the picture now.

This is why in Israel they had a custom of washing the feet of anyone who come into the room to eat. Usually a servant would wash the guest feet or the home owner if no servants.

Because washing someone's feet was a nasty job, especially when you consider that everyone wore sandals and walked everywhere. Camels and all sorts of animals walking on the roads as well, you can only imagine the sort of stuff that people would walk through. Their feet would be disgusting.

And so, again, you can imagine the scene, they're all ready to eat, but the disciples are looking at that washbasin, thinking to themselves, "not me. I have too much self-respect. I'm not going to debase myself like that."

But not only were ancient peoples' feet generally nasty, they're insulting too. That's why it was reserved for the lowliest of servants.

But what does Jesus do? He takes off his clothes, and is only clothed in a loin cloth and washes his disciples feet. The one man you'd expect to never to grab the wash basin is in fact, the man who grabs the wash basin.

Jesus takes off the sandals of his followers in order to wash their feet. The irony is palpable isn't it? He shouldn't be doing that. One of the disciples should have picked up the wash basin.

Which is why what John says in verse 3 is so important: "Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God ..."

In other words, John is saying, the eternal Son of God, who was God of God, begotten not made, being of one substance with the Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, it was him that washed his disciples' feet.

Jesus is certainly demonstrating a posture and attitude of humility, but he was also conveying something much deeper, he was willing to go to the lowest level in order to demonstrate his love. He was willing to assume the attire and duties of a servant.

And of course, here's the important thing that we cannot miss, Jesus wasn't sitting in the upper room, thinking about himself. Down to the last minute of his life he was thinking about other people.

Isn't that what we see here, the Son of God washing the feet of sinners.

One of the fun things about reading through the gospels is that you're always holding your breath whenever Peter speaks. In many ways, it makes him one of the most relatable disciples, because every family has a Peter. And if you don't think your family has a Peter, that probably means your Peter. The moment he begins to talk you're nervous, because either he's going to say something incredibly embarrassing or quite profound. There's no middle ground, it's one or the other.

And here in this passage, he simply speaks out of ignorance, because he doesn't really understand why Jesus is doing what he's doing. Because in Peter's mind, Jesus is debasing himself. He's humiliating himself. This man that he's been following around for years, who's taught like no one else and performed all these incredible miracles is now performing the duties of a slave. Peter couldn't stand the sight! Jesus needed to have some self-respect!

But obviously, he was missing the point. Because Jesus accomplished redemption and salvation, not through brute force or power, but through humiliation. He humbled himself to the point of death, even death on a cross. And of course, this helps us understand the exchange that happens between Peter and Jesus in verses 6-7.

There's miscommunication going on here, because Peter is thinking externally, physically, worldly while Jesus is thinking spiritually and theologically.

If you've been washed by Christ then you're clean and conversely, if you haven't been washed by Jesus Christ then you're not clean. You have no share with him.

Peter didn't understand that, which is why he said, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!"

Which is why Jesus said, "The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean."

Because one little touch of the cleansing power of Jesus Christ and, boom, you're totally clean. Your sins are forgiven. You're white as snow! Essentially Jesus was saying to Peter, "When I wash your feet, I make you clean all over." One touch of the cleansing power of Christ cleanses us from all sin."

You see, the foot washing was clearly a demonstration of Jesus' humility, no doubt about it, but it also served as an object lesson. And that lesson is, Jesus has to cleanse you. He has to do it.

Because we're constantly told that we can do anything, human autonomy is our guiding principle, Jesus stands in stark contrast. In a world that teaches that you can achieve greatness on your own, Jesus reminds us all that we can do nothing apart from him. You need him to wash you.

And just as the Lord humbled himself, so you must humble yourself. I must humble myself. After all, the Lord Jesus came to serve not to be served. It's in these final few verses Jesus explains why he washed their feet.

Jesus is saying there, that if he, the very Son of God, has lowered himself to the point where he has deliberately washed the feet of his disciples, then they should wash each other's feet. And some take this literally, as in, Jesus is instituting a sacrament for the church.

However, Jesus made it clear that he was setting an example. Husbands, you're off the hook, you don't necessarily have to go home and wash your wife's feet. But you can if you really want to, I'm sure she won't stop you.

Obviously the point that Jesus is trying to instill in his disciples is one of humility and service. He's calling on his followers to adopt the same attitude of humility and service towards others. That's the thrust of his argument! If I'm willing to humble myself then you should too.

Blessing and happiness are the result of humble service. And we all have experienced this at some point or another, haven't we? We've all experienced fulfillment, joy, and happiness through humble service. It's the lens through which we see the world. It's what should characterize our lives.

Is that not what we see in Jesus? He washed his disciples' feet hours prior to his crucifixion. Just think about that for a second. The foot washing captured the essence of his life.

This is what Jesus teaches us, loving, humble service. But we must always remember that in order to give loving, humble service, you must first receive humble loving service. In other words, before you can go out and wash someone else's feet, Jesus must first wash yours.

May we all humble ourselves before the Lord and to one another.

Devotional #16 – Morning of the Sixth day

Matthew 26:36-46

36 Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” 37 He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. 38 Then he said to them, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.” 39 Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.” 40 Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. “Couldn’t you men keep watch with me for one hour?” he asked Peter. 41 “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” 42 He went away a second time and prayed, “My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.” 43 When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. 44 So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing. 45 Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour has come, and the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners. 46 Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!”

Study Notes:

The disciples are about to go through an intense trial, and they will fail. Before that happened, Jesus tried to prepare them for it. They don’t know what is about to happen or what they need to do to prepare for it, so he shows a few of them. Wouldn’t that be great? Can you imagine if Jesus came down and showed us what to do so that we could be ready for the trial we are about to go through? The text we read today is for our training. Jesus trains the disciples, and he will train us if we let him.

Everything has been done to prepare for Jesus’ betrayal except one thing. Before Jesus is betrayed, he wants to go to God in prayer. This will be the last time Jesus would withdraw to pray before being arrested. In this text, we see a different side of Jesus than we have ever seen before.

In this text, we read about our Lord facing sorrow. He struggled with the pain and agony of betrayal, arrest, humiliation, and suffering on a cross. How did he choose to fight against his sorrow? He had time to escape. He could have prepared to fight. But he chose instead to pray.

Once Jesus and all of the disciples made it to Gethsemane, he told his disciples to stay in one location while he, Peter, James, and John went a bit farther. Then, Jesus showed his three closest disciples what was on his heart. In this text, it appears that Jesus lets go of the restraints on his sorrow. He was distressed, anxious, and in agony over what would happen to him and his disciples.

I’m tempted to think that the author got it wrong when I read this. Jesus wasn’t the upset type. He knew everything that would happen before it happened, and he was always ready for anything. But knowing what was about to happen was the worst part in this case. Knowing that he would be mocked and humiliated, knowing that those he loves will fall away “because of him,” and knowing that it would all end with torture on a cross is having its effect on Jesus’ body and soul. Some things are outside of the control of a human being. Sometimes the body has a mind of its own, and it is debilitating. Jesus shows all of this to his disciples to know that he is human and he has struggles that are beyond him.

Hebrews 5:7-10 says, In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek.

This text displays what Jesus was doing. He offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to God. Jesus, who healed thousands and won every argument against religious leaders, cried loudly over what he was about to go through.

What a tremendous example this is for us. How often do we face a trial that debilitates us? So often, we are sorrowful and troubled about things that might never happen, but Jesus knows what is about to happen to him. Can you imagine? If we knew what would happen, we might put on a show in front of our friends and family to keep them from getting worried, but Jesus shows us that we don't have to put on a show in front of God. We can let God see our deepest concerns and struggles. Jesus exemplifies that for us. He wanted his disciples to know that he understood what that was like.

When we compare this to the disciples, we see that they aren't sorrowful. They are asleep. They aren't concerned about the huge trial and test they will face. Can we relate to that? Did you ever stop to think about why they aren't concerned? They don't believe in the spiritual warfare that is taking place. Jesus told them it's about to happen, but they can't see it, so they don't believe it. Often, I think Satan wants us to be like these disciples. He wants us to live carefree because that makes us easy targets. Jesus shows us that we need a deep concern over the spiritual trials and tests that we are about to face. Then, he takes those concerns to God and asks for strength.

There is another attribute of Jesus I want us to notice. Think about his reverence.

First, Jesus tells his disciples that his soul is sorrowful, even to death. But, as he prays to God, he remains reverent. He does not become demanding or harsh toward God. He is not losing his grip on the faithfulness demonstrated through his ministry.

He says, "If it be possible." In Mark's account, Mark 14:36 he says, "Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will." We see in Jesus the glory he gives to God. He calls him "My Father" in Matthew's account and "Abba" in Mark's account, the word meaning daddy. The first part of what Jesus says is so respectful and full of praise. God is given the honor by Jesus, saying that he is a good Father who knows what is best and can do anything. He speaks this way toward God, who will allow him and his friends to suffer.

So often, the world around us uses their suffering as justification for blaspheming God's name or talking about him like he is evil. They claim that God doesn't care about them because they suffer.

Notice that Jesus shows us how wrong that is. God is not letting Jesus suffer because he doesn't care. He is letting him suffer because he cares so much. How do you think a father would feel when his child suffers? It's not something that the Father wants to witness. In some ways, it hurts the father more than the child. But a good Father lets the child suffer when it is for their good. In this case, Jesus is going to learn obedience and be made perfect or complete. Through this suffering, Jesus shows his belief that God is still good all the time.

People who stop revering God don't believe God is good. They think that God wants to hurt them instead of serving them. We do the same thing. We don't believe that suffering leads us to glory, so we don't revere God. We should also have this attitude of reverence toward God. We should hope in his goodness. We should hope in his power and strength. We should believe that he is our loving heavenly Father no matter what we face.

Notice that God heard Jesus because of his reverence. Also, notice that God plans to make Jesus perfect and the source of salvation for all of us. Aren't you glad God wanted Jesus to suffer? It resulted in our benefit!

In thinking about Jesus' prayer to God, it's hard not to notice his submission. Jesus knew that his suffering had a purpose. He wanted God's will to be accomplished, but he asked God to find another way. He recognizes that God is over him, and he tells God not to do what he wants but whatever God wants. These words are at the heart of what it means to be a follower of Christ. Being a Christian means that you love God so much that you would rather him let you die than compromise his plans to glorify himself through you.

Wow! This is such an excellent example for us. Jesus doesn't want to die, but he is willing to die for God's glory.

What About Us?

How does this affect our prayer lives and our view of suffering? When we see Jesus being so submissive, we need to ask ourselves, "Why don't we have a submissive heart like Jesus?" First, notice that the disciples didn't want to believe in God's will. They wanted to believe that God wouldn't let Jesus die because that's what they had imagined in their head. They worship a God who follows their rules and doesn't let anyone suffer. That's not the God of the Bible.

Have you ever imagined a perfect picture in your head of the way things should go? What if God's word contradicts that ideal? It's easy for us to dismiss God's word and hold on to our ideal. That's what the disciples did. But that's not what Jesus did. He changed his ideal to include what he knew God wanted. Jesus doesn't assume that God's will is different, nor does he demand God change his will to match his ideal, like what many people do today. Jesus asks God to make his will happen differently, but he ultimately submits to whatever God wants.

Jesus shows us how to pray in trials. We need to believe trials and tests will come. We need to believe God still cares for us and works for our good when we suffer. We need to submit to whatever God's will is for our lives. Jesus recognizes this, he asks God to take away the suffering, recognizing that nothing is impossible for God, but he knows that God knows best. Sometimes we need God to say "No" to our prayers. God doesn't want to say no. He wants to give us what we want as a loving Father would.

Matthew 7:7-11 says, Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. "Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!

God wants to say “Yes” to our prayers, and we should expect him to if we ask for things that we think are good. God wants us to use our imaginations and believe that God can do exceedingly, abundantly, above all we ask or think. But we also need to understand that he knows more than we do about it. He knows how to work things out in a better way than anything we could even imagine.

So being okay with God saying, “No,” does not mean that we shouldn’t pray. It means we should pray more often. There is a spiritual battle that we are too weak to fight independently. We should pray all the time with our best understanding of what is good. However, we should have a reverence and respect for our Father’s wisdom like Jesus, and we should determine in ourselves to be obedient no matter what the answer is.

In the second prayer, Jesus no longer says, “If it’s possible.” He says, “If this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.” We get the sense that he has accepted it. He is growing stronger in his prayer and more resolute to follow through with God’s mission for him.

In this event, the disciples are spiritually asleep and unprepared for what will happen to them. When the trial comes upon them, they haven’t prayed as they should. They lack the strength to stand for what’s right and glorify God because they haven’t understood how difficult this trial will be. That’s the disciples’ problem, and that is our problem.

This a problem many people face today. Instead of praying and running towards God when trials come, they run away from God thinking they can out run the trials. And most the time it doesn’t work out so well for them. The trials seem worse but that is because we hold God at a distance.

But this is not the end of their story, nor is it the end of ours. There is spiritual growth in their lives, and there can be spiritual growth for us. Incredibly, we will read about these same men being beaten and rejoicing over it. How were they able to do that? Acts tells us that they were devoting themselves to fasting, prayer, and the study of the word. We need to go to God in prayer for strength with reverence and submission. We would rejoice over the opportunity to serve Christ in that way. We need the spiritual awareness to know when our trials are coming and to pray before they get here so that we can stand firm for Christ.

Jesus endured tremendous suffering for us. What will we give to him? Do we see our weakness, and are we praying for strength to be faithful to God’s will in the trials?

Devotional #17 – Noon of the Sixth day

Matthew 26:69-75

69 Now Peter was sitting out in the courtyard, and a servant girl came to him. “You also were with Jesus of Galilee,” she said. 70 But he denied it before them all. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said. 71 Then he went out to the gateway, where another servant girl saw him and said to the people there, “This fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth.” 72 He denied it again, with an oath: “I don’t know the man!” 73 After a little while, those standing there went up to Peter and said, “Surely you are one of them; your accent gives you away.” 74 Then he began to call down curses, and he swore to them, “I don’t know the man!” Immediately a rooster crowed. 75 Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken: “Before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times.” And he went outside and wept bitterly.

Study Notes:

We all love Peter in the Bible because we all can identify with Peter so much. No disciple loved Jesus so much as Peter, and no disciple failed Jesus so much as Peter. Peter received both the highest commendations from Jesus as well as the sternest of rebukes, sometimes all in the same day! But the lowest point of Peter’s life certainly takes place in today’s passage when he denied Jesus three times the night before Jesus went to the cross.

There are different ways of denying Christ, some outright, some more subtle. But anytime we hold back on speaking up for Christ out of a sense of embarrassment or shame, we have in some way denied Christ, and like Peter we need to seek forgiveness and restoration.

Denial of Jesus will always lead to bitter regret, and so we need to learn how to avoid that denial. We also need to learn how to deal with the regret that we will invariably experience when we, like Peter, deny knowing our Lord.

If you remember we see Peter’s pride earlier in the evening when he boasts that he would never fall away from Christ. **Matthew 26:33-34**, Peter replied, “Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will.” “I tell you the truth,” Jesus answered, “this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times.”

This is the pride of saying, “That could never happen to me!” Peter is overconfident here. Of course, it’s easy to be confident before the time of trial comes. Jesus said, “All of you will fall away on account of me.” Peter said, “No, maybe all the others, but not me.” Peter thought he was better than the other disciples. Peter thought he knew better than Jesus.

The Bible tells us in **Proverbs 16:18**, pride goes before a fall, and Peter was never more proud than when he said, “Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will.” Never say never. We are all capable of falling into great sin. Instead of saying, “That could never happen to me,” we should say, “I pray by the grace of God, it won’t happen to me.” Peter’s pride was his first step down the slippery slope to denial.

His next step was spiritual sluggishness. This took place a little later in the evening when Jesus asked his disciples to watch and pray with him in the Garden of Gethsemane.

How quickly Peter went from declaring, “I am ready to die with you,” to falling asleep in the garden. When you lose your spiritual zeal or sharpness, when you grow weary or sluggish in the faith, you are standing on dangerous, slippery ground. Peter was on the slippery slope to denial, and he didn’t even know it. You could even say he was in denial about his denial!

Peter’s third step down the slippery slope was following Jesus from a distance. Peter had boasted he was ready to die with Jesus, but now he follows from a safe distance. He quietly makes his way into the courtyard and sits down with the guards of all people. Peter goes from failing to watch and pray with Jesus in the garden to sitting with Jesus’ enemies in the courtyard.

It’s a slippery slope. Peter’s pride led to spiritual sluggishness which led to following Jesus from a distance. We need to guard against the same slippery slope in our own lives lest we end up denying the Lord.

We now come to Peter’s three denials. Matthew now moves from the trial of Jesus in the courtroom to what we might call Peter’s trial in the courtyard. And we are meant to see the contrast between the two. While Jesus makes the good confession before his accusers, Peter denies Jesus before his accusers. Jesus confesses that he is the Messiah. Peter, who had earlier confessed that Jesus is the Messiah, now denies even knowing him.

We already looked at the slippery slope leading up to Peter’s denials. Now we see a further regression with each of Peter’s successive denials. So, let’s take a closer look at each of the three denials.

In the **first denial** Peter simply says: “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

This was a pretty mild accusation, nothing like what Jesus was going through in his trial. This girl doesn’t accuse him of blasphemy or any crime. She simply says, “You were with him.” The accusation even comes from a non-threatening person – not from a man, but from a woman; not from an older woman, but a girl; not even a free girl but a servant. Peter is a grown man, and here he is feeling threatened by a servant girl. The gospel of John tells us she was the doorkeeper, so she would have seen him when he entered the courtyard with John, **John 18:16-17**. Now she approaches him and says, “You also were with Jesus of Galilee.”

This first trial caught Peter off guard. Perhaps he was preparing himself to stand up for Jesus in some grand way before the temple guards or the Sanhedrin. Instead, he was caught off guard by the simple statement of a servant girl. Don’t we do the same sometimes? We say, “I am ready to die for you Jesus! I would never deny you!” But then we get tripped up by a simple opportunity to speak a word for Jesus during the day.

We need to be ready to speak a word for Jesus at all times. Notice Peter doesn’t come right out and deny Jesus here, but he doesn’t speak up for Jesus either. He is deliberately evasive in his answer. How often are we evasive in our answers about Jesus?

The first denial leads to the second denial which is much worse. In the first denial Peter simply says: “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” In the second denial he denies knowing Christ with an oath!

The gospel of Mark tells us in **Mark 14:69**, that this girl was also a servant girl. This second accusation is a little more forceful than the first. It's the same accusation, but instead of addressing Peter directly she directs the accusation to the people around him. Pointing Peter out to them, she says, "This fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth." That steps up the game a bit.

Unfortunately, Peter also steps up his denial. This time he not only denies being with Jesus; he denies even knowing him, and he does so with an oath. Once again look at the contrast between Jesus at his trial and Peter in the courtyard. Jesus has just taken a solemn oath before Caiaphas the high priest affirming that he is indeed the Christ, the Son of God. Here Peter denies Jesus with an oath: "I don't know the man."

Peter is slipping quickly down the slippery slope. He has moved from a simple lie in the first denial to perjury in the second. He has gone from saying, "I don't know what you're talking about," to saying "I don't know Jesus."

And then the third denial is even worse. Peter denies knowing Jesus again, but this time with curses.

Matthew tells us this took place after a little while. The gospel of Luke says it was about an hour in **Luke 22:59**, which was plenty of time for Peter to reflect on what he had done, to confess his sin, to ask God for help and to ask God for the strength to make a better choice the next time around. But Peter is on the slippery slope of denial, and he continues the slide downward.

The third time the accusation is even more intimidating. This time a whole group approaches Peter. They say, "Surely you are one of them." They are no longer simply questioning him about his association with Jesus; they are stating it with certainty. They point to his Galilean accent as evidence that he is one of Jesus' followers. Jesus was from Galilee, so it makes sense that Peter is part of his band of disciples. Interestingly, the gospel of **John 18:26** it tells us that the spokesman of this group was a relative of Malchus, the man whose ear Peter had sliced off in the garden with his sword.

Here the accusation is not simply that Peter was with Jesus but that he is one of Jesus' followers. This is yet another way we can deny Christ – when we deny that we are a Christian or hide the fact that we go to church or belong to the body of believers. This can happen when someone says something to us like, "So, you're one of those Christians, aren't you!" or when someone is criticizing Christianity or the church and we remain silent. We are the body of Christ. So, when we deny each other, we also deny him.

When this group accuses Peter, Peter starts denying Jesus all over again. Poor Peter. The more he talks, the more he gives himself away! His accent makes it plain that he's from Galilee. The first law of holes is to stop digging! But Peter can't seem to stop. The more he speaks against Christ, the deeper the hole he digs for himself.

Peter's reaction is even stronger this time. He calls down curses on himself as well as swearing a second oath. He is most likely calling on God to punish him if what he says is not true. It is by grace that God did not strike him down where he stood, but that Jesus would lovingly forgive and restore him instead.

We have looked at the slippery slope leading up to Peter's denials. We have looked at the three denials themselves. Finally, we come to Peter's bitter regret following his denial of Christ.

The rooster crows, and so, Jesus' prophecy is fulfilled. Notice the irony here once again. While Peter is in the courtyard denying Jesus, the soldiers inside have been striking Jesus in the face and mockingly telling him to prophesy. Here his earlier prophecy of Peter denying him comes true.

The crowing of the rooster brings Peter back to his senses. He remembers what Jesus told him about the three denials. The gospel of Luke adds another detail. Luke tells us in Luke 22:71, that just as the rooster crowed, Jesus, who was apparently being brought out at that time, turned and looked straight at Peter. The rooster crows, Jesus looks directly at Peter, they lock eyes, and Peter remembers. Peter had been so confident that he would never deny his Lord, and now he has done it three times, just as Jesus foretold.

And so, Peter goes outside the courtyard and weeps bitterly. The combination of his three denials, the crowing of the rooster, Jesus looking straight at him, his remembering of Jesus' words, these are all too much for him.

We know from the other gospels that these are tears of repentance and regret. Peter is truly sorry for his sin, and he is truly sorry that he has denied his Lord whom he loves so much.

Peter's tears also show his true love for Jesus. He wept bitterly because he loved the Lord and he had denied the Lord.

Do you love Jesus? Do you weep when you have failed your Lord?

We shouldn't be too hard on Peter. Remember, Peter did not have the Holy Spirit as we do because the Spirit had not been given yet.

This is the last time Peter is mentioned by name in Matthew's gospel. But we know from the other gospels that Jesus met privately with him and restored him to service and leadership. And so, Peter's fall really stands as a lesson for all of us, to guard against sin in our lives, to repent when we do sin, and to know that God stands ready to forgive and restore us when we repent.

No one ever denies Christ in a vacuum. Nobody who is following Jesus ever wakes up one morning and decides they will deny Jesus that day. There is always a progression, or we should really say, a regression. There is a slippery slope we follow on the way to denial. We can trace it in Peter's life, and we can trace it in the life of everyone who has ever denied Christ.

Let me close the message with three applications for all of us here today, three ways we can guard against this happening in our own life.

First, Guard against pride. **1 Corinthians 10:12** says, So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! Remember, pride was Peter's first step down the slippery slope. Pride goes before a fall, so guard against pride in your life.

Secondly, never lack in zeal. Remember, spiritual sluggishness was Peter's second step down the slippery slope. We are zealous for so many things in life, politics, hobbies, sports, fair treatment, the list goes on. But how zealous are you for God? **Romans 12:11** says: "Never be lacking in zeal, but keep

your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.” Don’t grow sluggish when it comes to spiritual things but keep your passion for God and Christ fervent and alive.

And then thirdly, walk closely with God. That was Peter’s final mistake right before he denied Christ. He followed Jesus at a distance. **James 4:8** says: “Come near to God and he will come near to you.” There’s an old saying, “If God seems far away, guess who moved?”

The people in the courtyard accused Peter of being with Jesus, and Peter denied it. We should want to be known as people who are with Jesus! If someone asks you, “Are you a Christian? Are you with Jesus,” tell them, “Yes, I am with Jesus! And Jesus is with me!”

So those are three things you can do to avoid the slippery slope that leads to denial. Guard against pride; Never lack in zeal; and Walk closely with God.

Denial of Jesus will always lead to bitter regret. Some people will experience that regret in this lifetime. Others will not experience it until Christ returns or their life is over. You will never regret standing up for Jesus. But oh, how bitterly you will regret being ashamed of your Savior in any way.

I pray that as a result of today’s message you now understand the slippery slope that leads to denial and how you can guard against it in your life. I pray you understand there is forgiveness, even for those who have denied Christ. I pray that you will confess your sin and take your regrets to the Lord. And I pray that you will commit yourself to speaking up for Jesus at every opportunity so you may avoid the bitter regret of denying Jesus ever again.

Devotional #18 – Evening of the Sixth day

Matthew 27:32-44

32 As they were going out, they met a man from Cyrene, named Simon, and they forced him to carry the cross. 33 They came to a place called Golgotha (which means “the place of the skull”). 34 There they offered Jesus wine to drink, mixed with gall; but after tasting it, he refused to drink it. 35 When they had crucified him, they divided up his clothes by casting lots. 36 And sitting down, they kept watch over him there. 37 Above his head they placed the written charge against him: THIS IS JESUS, THE KING OF THE JEWS. 38 Two rebels were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. 39 Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads 40 and saying, “You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!” 41 In the same way the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. 42 “He saved others,” they said, “but he can’t save himself! He’s the king of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. 43 He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’” 44 In the same way the rebels who were crucified with him also heaped insults on him.

Study Notes:

Together we have been following Jesus’ last days to the cross. Today we arrive at our destination. Today we arrive at the cross of Jesus Christ.

This is an especially sacred portion of Scripture, a Holy of Holies if you will. Jesus, the perfect Son of God, suffers and dies on the cross. This was his purpose in coming. Jesus was born to die, and his whole life was oriented to the cross. He lived his whole life in obedience to the Father, and when it was time to go to the cross, he did not turn back. He continued determined and resolute in his actions, “Father, lead me to the cross.”

No one suffered more than Jesus did at the cross. Other men had died; other men had been crucified; but no one suffered more than Jesus did at the cross. This is all the more striking because Jesus was an innocent man. He lived a perfect life. He never harmed anyone. He had done no wrong.

And when you look at Jesus’ suffering at the cross, you have to ask the question, “Why?” Why did Jesus have to suffer so much? Why did they do it to him, and why did he do it for us? Once you fully grasp the answer to those two questions, your life will never be the same.

I want to look at Jesus’ sufferings at the cross in four sections. Jesus bore the full pain of the cross. Jesus bore the full shame of the cross. Jesus bore the full insult of the cross. And then finally, Jesus bore the full penalty for sin at the cross.

So we begin with Jesus bore the full pain of the cross. And here we are talking about physical suffering, the physical pain Jesus experienced at the cross.

The first thing we learn from our text is that Jesus used up all his strength on his way to the cross. At first you might think just the opposite. You might think Jesus didn’t use up all his strength on the way to the cross because someone else carried the cross for him. But that’s not what’s happening here. The

reason the soldiers forced Simon to carry the cross was because Jesus couldn't carry it any further. He had used up all his strength.

Remember, Jesus has been up all night. He hasn't slept. He was taken violently in the middle of the night, shuttled from court to court, and tried unjustly before both Caiaphas and Pilate. Jesus has been beaten, clubbed, scourged and had a crown of thorns pushed down into his head.

Not only that, Jesus has already carried his cross quite a distance. The Romans made the condemned person carry their own cross to the place of crucifixion. The upright section of the cross would already be in the ground waiting for you, but you would carry the crossbar section yourself through the city.

Oh, and you did not take the direct route. They wanted to make a public example of you, so you took the long way as they led you around the city streets so as many people as possible could see you on the way to your own execution.

You were supposed to carry your cross all the way to the end, and there is only one reason these soldiers would have forced someone else to carry the cross for Jesus. Jesus had used up all his strength. I imagine he had stumbled several times going through the city, and each time they forced him to keep going. But Jesus finally reached a breaking point. No matter how much they yelled at him or whipped him or kicked him, he could not carry the cross a single inch further. He had used up every ounce of strength, so they forced Simon to carry the cross for him.

Not only did Jesus use up all his strength. He refused to dull the pain. The cross inflicted such excruciating pain that the condemned prisoner was often given a mixture of wine to drink to help deaden the pain. When they arrived at Golgotha, which means The Place of the Skull, either because it resembled a skull or simply because it was a place of execution, they offered Jesus this mixture, but he refused to drink it. When you or I just get a headache, we take an aspirin to deaden the pain. Jesus went to the cross with all of his senses fully alert, with all of his nerve endings fully functional.

Jesus also bore the full shame of the cross, that is, emotional suffering. We experience many negative emotions in life, but perhaps none is so devastating as the emotion of shame. Have you ever felt shame, real shame? Shame cuts right to the core of your identity and self-worth. It is a horrible, stifling, crippling feeling. If you have ever felt shame, take heart. Jesus knows all about shame. Jesus died to take away your shame. The cross was a shameful death, and Jesus bore the full shame of the cross.

First of all, they took his clothing. Private shame is bad enough, but public shame is the most crippling of all. Jesus' death was a public, humiliating death. When they took away his clothing, they took away his dignity. They exposed his nakedness for all to see. They divided up his clothes by casting lots, and then they sat down to keep watch over him on the cross.

Secondly, they mocked his true identity. Above his head they placed the written charge against him: THIS IS JESUS, THE KING OF THE JEWS. This was the written charge, the reason why Jesus was condemned. The Romans would first hang this charge around the person's neck while he carried his cross through the city streets. Then they would nail it to the cross above his head so that everyone could see why he was being crucified. This exposed his crime and served as a warning to others. The ironic thing about this is that he actually was the King of the Jews. He was the Messiah. He had come to save his people. The sign was a cruel mockery of his true identity.

Not only that, but they crucified him between two thieves. This is the shame of false accusation and association. Have you ever been falsely accused or had your reputation smeared? Jesus was an innocent man. He had done no wrong. He did not deserve to die. And yet they crucified him between two thieves as though he were a common criminal himself.

Jesus bore the full shame of the cross. They took his clothing. They mocked his true identity. They crucified him between two thieves.

Jesus bore the full pain of the cross, that's physical suffering. He bore the full shame of the cross, that's emotional suffering. And thirdly, he bore the full insult of the cross, that's relational suffering. Physical and emotional sufferings are bad enough. But when you are completely abandoned by your friends, when you are cut off from all comfort or support and subjected to the taunts of your enemies, the wounds only cut that much deeper. Matthew tells us there were three groups of people who insulted Jesus at the cross.

First, those who passed by insulted him. Remember, Jesus' death was a public execution, and so the people came out to watch him die. The charge about destroying the temple came up at Jesus' trial, and apparently word had leaked out. It was a bogus charge then, and it was a bogus charge now. Jesus never said he was going to destroy the temple. He had been speaking of his body which would be broken on the cross, that which was in fact happening right now.

The people cried out, "Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God."

Satan used the same line of attack when he tempted Jesus in the wilderness. "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." in **Matthew 4:4**. And in **Matthew 4:6**, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from the temple."

It didn't work then, and it didn't work now. Jesus was the Son of God. He could have turned the stones to bread. He could have jumped from the temple and been protected. And he could have come down from the cross if he so chose.

The religious leaders also mocked him. They said, "He saved others, but he cannot save himself." The words were meant as an insult, but they were actually a testimony to Jesus' saving love. Jesus had indeed come to save others, but he could only save others by not saving himself.

"He's the King of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him." Once again, the words were spoken as an insult, but they contained truth. Jesus was the King of Israel. And yes, they probably would have believed in him if he came down from the cross. But then Jesus could not have saved them.

And while we're talking about Jesus' relational suffering at the cross, notice that even the thieves insulted him!

You would think if anyone would have sympathy for Jesus on the cross, it would be the two thieves who were crucified with him. Misery loves company, and there is solidarity in suffering. But even the thieves insulted him.

Jesus bore the full insult of the cross. Those who passed by hurled insults at him. The religious leaders mocked him. Even the thieves heaped insults on him.

Jesus bore the full pain of the cross, that's physical suffering. Jesus bore the full shame of the cross, that's emotional suffering. Jesus bore the full insult of the cross, that's relational suffering. And finally, Jesus bore the full penalty for sin at the cross. That is spiritual suffering.

From the sixth hour until the ninth hour was twelve noon to three o'clock, the brightest part of the day. And for three hours darkness came over all the land. The darkness was a visible sign of God's judgment and wrath against sin being poured out on Jesus at the cross. All the other sufferings were merely preliminary. Jesus' real suffering began now in earnest. For three hours Jesus suffered the wrath of God for the sins of man. In just three hours Jesus suffered an eternity of punishment for our sins. The depth of Jesus' spiritual suffering is reflected in his cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

This was the suffering Jesus foretold to his disciples. This was the suffering Jesus dreaded in the Garden of Gethsemane. But this was the suffering for which Jesus came. And this was why Jesus stayed on the cross even when his enemies taunted him to come down.

The Bible tells us that Jesus paid the full price for all our sins. Jesus paid the full price for all our sins when he suffered and died at the cross. Jesus is the infinite God-man, and his sacrifice was more than sufficient to cover every sin of every man and woman who ever lived. Jesus bore the full penalty for sin at the cross.

And of course this is the answer to the question with which we began today, Why did Jesus have to suffer so much? The answer is clear. The greatest suffering occurred at the cross because the greatest price was paid at the cross. Jesus paid for all our sin.

Jesus' suffering at the cross shows you how much God loves you. It shows you the great love of God the Father who sent his Son to suffer and die in your place. It shows you the great love of Jesus the Son who came to suffer and die in your place.

It was your sins and my sins that put Jesus on the cross. And so Jesus' suffering demands a response of repentance and faith from all who hear about the amazing sacrifice he made for you and for me.

He paid a debt he did not owe
I owed a debt I could not pay
I needed someone to wash my sins away.
And now I sing a brand new song – Amazing Grace!
Christ Jesus paid the debt that I could never pay.

Devotional #19 – Morning of the Seventh day

Matthew 27:45-56

From noon until three in the afternoon darkness came over all the land. 46 About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?*” (which means “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”). 47 When some of those standing there heard this, they said, “He’s calling Elijah.” 48 Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a staff, and offered it to Jesus to drink. 49 The rest said, “Now leave him alone. Let’s see if Elijah comes to save him.” 50 And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. 51 At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook, the rocks split 52 and the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. 53 They came out of the tombs after Jesus’ resurrection and went into the holy city and appeared to many people. 54 When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, “Surely he was the Son of God!” 55 Many women were there, watching from a distance. They had followed Jesus from Galilee to care for his needs. 56 Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of Zebedee’s sons.

Study Notes:

We are in the midst of a horrifying scene. Jesus has been crucified and now hangs from the cross, suspended in the air by nails in his hands and feet. He has been crucified between two other criminals. The scene before us is a scene of shame and mockery. People are passing by on their way in and out of the city of Jerusalem. As the people walk by, they are hurling insults and shaking their heads at Jesus. The scribes, elders, and chief priests are also mocking Jesus. I want us to remember that each of these events, and even the very words these insulters are proclaiming, are all recorded prophetically in Psalm 22. **Psalm 22:1** says, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish? It is worth the read to see the shockingly accurately. We are seeing Psalm 22 unfold before our eyes.

Then something fantastic occurs. We are told in verse 45 that from the sixth hour (noon) to the ninth hour (three in the afternoon), darkness fell over the whole land. Even if we know nothing about the scriptures or about its symbolism, we would know that darkness in the middle of the day, lasting for three hours, is quite ominous. No one would think about darkness falling in the middle of the day as a good thing. The scriptures consistently use darkness as a picture of God’s judgment.

Some of the reference to darkness over the land occur in, **Amos 8:9; Isaiah 59:9-10; Joel 2:2, 10, 31; Zephaniah 1:15.**

One of the more notable instance of darkness falling over the land occurred during Israel’s exodus from Egypt and the ten plagues. **Exodus 10:21-23** says the ninth plague was darkness. Please consider that when the darkness fell in Egypt, it was a picture of God’s judgment on Egypt and the Egyptian leadership, particularly Pharaoh. Now darkness falls over the land of Israel and it is a picture of God’s judgment on Israel and the leadership of Israel. They have crucified the Son of God. They have rejected

God's anointed. What Israel has done is worthy of judgment, which is what the apostles will directly proclaim throughout the book of Acts.

Jesus has been on the cross for hours as it is now three in the afternoon. The darkness has persisted for three hours. But now Jesus has something to say. You will notice that what Jesus says is not in a whisper. Jesus does not give a quiet prayer to his Father. Rather, we are told that Jesus cried out in a loud voice. Jesus shouts with whatever strength he has while he hangs by nails in the air for all to hear him. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" This leaves everyone who reads this with many questions. Did Jesus not know what was happening? Is Jesus confused in this moment and praying to his God for answers? What is happening and why is Jesus saying this?

Now it is important that we take care when we explain what Jesus is doing and what God is doing in this moment. We do not want to understate or overstate what is happening. Nor do we want to make up what is happening and go beyond what the scriptures teach here. I want us to think carefully about what Jesus said. Jesus regularly called God his Father. Jesus must have a reason for calling God, "My God," and not, "My Father" as he always said before. The reason becomes obvious because we quickly recognize that what Jesus said is what David wrote at the beginning of Psalm 22. Therefore, as we do with any New Testament quotation of Old Testament prophecy, we must allow the prophecy to inform the moment we are reading about. So we must let Psalm 22 inform this moment in Jesus' final hours.

I keep talking about Psalm 22, so let's read it verses 1-31. It long but it is worth it.

1 My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish? 2 My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, but I find no rest. 3 Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One; you are the one Israel praises. 4 In you our ancestors put their trust; they trusted and you delivered them. 5 To you they cried out and were saved; in you they trusted and were not put to shame. 6 But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by everyone, despised by the people. 7 All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads. 8 "He trusts in the LORD," they say, "let the LORD rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him." 9 Yet you brought me out of the womb; you made me trust in you, even at my mother's breast. 10 From birth I was cast on you; from my mother's womb you have been my God. 11 Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help. 12 Many bulls surround me; strong bulls of Bashan encircle me. 13 Roaring lions that tear their prey open their mouths wide against me. 14 I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. My heart has turned to wax; it has melted within me. 15 My mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; you lay me in the dust of death. 16 Dogs surround me, a pack of villains encircles me; they pierce my hands and my feet. 17 All my bones are on display; people stare and gloat over me. 18 They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment. 19 But you, LORD, do not be far from me. You are my strength; come quickly to help me. 20 Deliver me from the sword, my precious life from the power of the dogs. 21 Rescue me from the mouth of the lions; save me from the horns of the wild oxen. 22 I will declare your name to my people; in the assembly I will praise you. 23 You who fear the LORD, praise him! All you descendants of Jacob, honor him! Revere him, all you descendants of Israel! 24 For he has not despised or scorned the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help. 25 From you comes the theme of my praise in the great assembly; before those who fear you I will fulfill my vows. 26 The poor will eat and be satisfied; those who seek the LORD will praise him—

may your hearts live forever! 27 All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations will bow down before him, 28 for dominion belongs to the LORD and he rules over the nations. 29 All the rich of the earth will feast and worship; all who go down to the dust will kneel before him—those who cannot keep themselves alive. 30 Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord. 31 They will proclaim his righteousness, declaring to a people yet unborn: He has done it!

Notice that David starts this psalm with the same words. **“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”** Notice what David means by these words in the rest of verse 1. **“Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning?”** Verse 2 gives the idea further. David is crying out day and night, but he is not finding any rest and not seeing God answer. God is not giving him rest or relief in his situation. In short, his salvation will not be right now in this moment. Now remember what insults the leaders are hurling at him right now. They are saying that if he truly trusts in the Lord, then let God save him now and they will believe. The psalm cries for the same rescue and salvation, but it is not happening now. But **Psalm 22:3-5** reveal that though David is not experiencing salvation right now, he still trusts in the Lord just as those in the past trusted in the Lord and were rescued. But while David trusts in God, he is experiencing insults. You will notice that what David says in **Psalm 22:6-8** is exactly what is happening with Jesus. They are saying the same insulting words and shaking their heads at Jesus as they pass by on the road. But David is still trusting (**Psalm 22:9-11**). David says he has trusted from the very beginning of his life and he is still trusting now. We could say the same thing about Jesus’ life. He trusted in God from the start and is still trusting now, even though God is far from saving him.

Psalm 22:12-18 now record the excruciating suffering to the point of death. The enemies are surrounding him. His strength is gone, his bones are put out of joint, and he is about to lay down in the dust of death. Evildoers are around him. His hands and his feet are pierced. People stare and gloat over him. His clothes are divided and lots are cast. We have seen all of these moments happen in Matthew 27. Yet David is not giving up on God. He is still crying out for God to be near him and to come to his rescue. Rescue me from these evildoers! Rescue me from the sword! Come quickly and help!

But then something happens in David’s life. **Psalm 22:21-24** show that God did rescue him. In verse 21 David says that God did answer him and he will praise God’s name before all the people. He will praise God to everyone because God did not despise him or abhor him. Look carefully at the rest of verse 24. **“He has not hidden his face from him, but has heard, when he cried to him.”** So Psalm 22 is David expressing how he felt forsaken and he felt that God was far from him. He was surrounded by his enemies, insulted, and pierced. Yet David continued trusting in God in spite of his circumstances and he was rescued. God heard his cries and delivered him.

Think about appropriate Psalm 22 is to the situation that Jesus is going through while on the cross. The people have rejected him. They are mocking him as he goes through his anguish. But Jesus is still trusting in God. Perhaps Jesus shouts these words to get the people to think about the message of Psalm 22 since even the words his enemies are saying were prophetically recorded in this psalm. The enemies are saying that God has rejected him, but Jesus is still expecting deliverance. It looks like God has rejected him. It feels like God is far from him. But Jesus is not letting go of God and continues to hold on to him, regardless of what the people say about him or what the people do to him.

So what is the response to Jesus' cry? Rather than hearing Psalm 22 and considering what is happening and what they are doing, they misunderstand Jesus further. They think that Jesus is calling for Elijah. This misunderstanding is revealed when we see the Aramaic wording in verse 46. Rather than hearing "my God, my God," they are hearing Jesus call for Elijah. No one says, "Hey, that's David's words!" No one says, "He is speaking the scriptures." No, they think he is crying out for himself that Elijah would come. Someone brings a sponge filled with sour wine, puts it on a reed, and offers it to Jesus to drink. This also continues to fulfill the scriptures, this event recorded in **Psalm 69:21**. Every moment that is happening was predicted by the prophets in the scriptures. But the mockery continues as some say to wait and see if Elijah will come and save him. They are making fun of him even more. But with these events complete, Jesus cries out with a loud voice and gives up his spirit. Jesus gives his life. Was Jesus wrong to trust in God to hear him and rescue him? Was the crowd vindicated when Jesus died, showing that he was rejected by God and that God did not desire him?

Matthew wants to answer these things quickly. Look at what happens when Jesus gave up his spirit as recorded in **Matthew 27:51-53**. First, in the temple of God the curtain was torn from top to bottom. The curtain was blocking access into the presence of God. But the curtain is torn, indicating that access into the presence of God was available for all. Second, the earth shook. Earthquakes were also symbolic of God's judgment in the scriptures. This time the earth shook, the rocks were split open, and the tombs were opened. It is like creation exploded with the Son of God died. Third, when Jesus rose from the dead three days later, he was not the only one. You will notice that **Matthew 27:53** records that the tombs were opened and, after Jesus' resurrection, those who were in the tombs came out and walked into Jerusalem and many people saw them. Can you imagine this event? What a three day event! A great earthquake happens. The rocks are exploding. The curtain in the temple is torn. The tombs are opened. Then three days later, the dead are made alive and walk into Jerusalem. There is only one conclusion that can possibly be drawn.

Look at the conclusion that must be drawn in verse 54. "Truly this was the Son of God!" Unfortunately, it is not the religious leaders who understand this. It is not the Jewish people of Jerusalem who draw this conclusion. It is a Roman centurion who was watching all of these events. He draws the correct and necessary conclusion. Jesus was definitely the Son of God. He was who he said he was. He was not rejected by God. Jesus was not wrong to put his trust in God. God had not turned his face or abhorred him but rescued him three days later. This fits exactly what Jesus taught while he walked on the earth. Listen to what Jesus taught.

John 16:32 says, A time is coming and in fact has come when you will be scattered, each to your own home. You will leave me all alone. Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me.

And in **John 8:28-29**, So Jesus said, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me. The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him."

Jesus said that God was with him and he was proven correct. So what is the message for us?

Here is our major message of hope. You can feel forsaken by God and look abandoned by God. But that does not mean that God is not near or that God will not rescue you. God is not far despite what we feel. We can feel so far from God. We can feel like God has turned his back on us. We can feel like God is

not listening to us. We can feel like our prayers are falling on deaf ears. We can be insulted and rejected for trusting in God. We can be persecuted for our faith. But God is not far from us even when we are going through such difficult circumstances and times of suffering.

So when God feels far, keep trusting God. You will not be disappointed. You will not be put to shame. Your faith will not be found to be empty or worthless. Keep trusting God and keep looking for his answer in your life. Keep trusting God and keep looking for the reversal to come. This is exactly what David said and what David did in Psalm 22. He cried out for help. It did not look like God was going to answer and it looked like his enemies were right. But then God rescued him. God did not despise his servant but gave him deliverance. This is exactly what Jesus said and what Jesus did. He cried out for help. It did not look like God was going to answer and it looked like his enemies were right.

But we will see later God rescued him. God did not despise his servant but gave him deliverance, raising him from the dead three days later. So we cry for help. It may not look like God will answer and it can look like our enemies are right. But God will answer and God will help us in our time of need.

Hebrews 4:16 says, Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

God has not turned his back on you. Keep trusting and look for God to answer at just the right time. God is never late. God is always there at the right time.

Devotional #20 – Noon of the Seventh day

Matthew 27:57-61

57 As evening approached, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who had himself become a disciple of Jesus. 58 Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus' body, and Pilate ordered that it be given to him. 59 Joseph took the body, wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, 60 and placed it in his own new tomb that he had cut out of the rock. He rolled a big stone in front of the entrance to the tomb and went away. 61 Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sitting there opposite the tomb.

Study Notes:

This is the first and only time we meet Joseph in the Scriptures. He appears briefly at the end of each of the gospel accounts in relation to Jesus' burial, and then we never hear about him again. We know from **Mark 15:43**, that he was a member of the Council that voted to put Jesus to death, from **Luke 23:50-51**, that he was a good and upright man who did not agree with the Council's decision, and that he was a follower of Jesus, but secretly, because he feared the Jews in **John 19:38**.

But the main point Matthew emphasizes for us about Joseph is that he was wealthy. And why is it important that he was wealthy? In order to fulfill prophecy. Throughout Matthew's gospel we have seen how Jesus fulfilled Old Testament prophecy again and again. He fulfilled Old Testament prophecy at his birth, he fulfilled Old Testament prophecy throughout his life, he fulfilled Old Testament prophecy at his death, and now he even fulfills Old Testament prophecy at his burial.

Isaiah 53 is the great prophetic chapter in the Old Testament that tells us about Christ's suffering and death on the cross. What a lot of people don't know is that it also tells us about Christ's burial verse 9 and resurrection in verse 11. And what does it say about his burial? We read in **Isaiah 53:9**, "He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth."

That first part about being assigned a grave with the wicked is a reference to Jesus being crucified between the two thieves. But that second part has to do with Joseph. Jesus wasn't a wealthy man. He owned nothing but the clothes on his back and they even took those. So how was he going to be assigned a grave with the rich in his death?

Enter Joseph of Arimathea, a wealthy man who had secretly become a disciple of Jesus who now boldly approaches Pilate and asks for Jesus' body. And Pilate gives it to him! This all happened in accordance with God's sovereign plan and in order to fulfill the prophecy of **Isaiah 53**.

So that's the first reason Jesus was buried in a rich man's tomb. Every prophecy of Jesus must be fulfilled. Jesus was buried in a rich man's tomb first of all to fulfill prophecy.

Secondly, Jesus was buried in a rich man's tomb to show that he really died.

The gospel of Mark tells us in **Mark 15:44-45**, that Pilate was surprised to hear that Jesus had already died, and so he confirmed with the centurion to make sure that Jesus was really dead before granting Joseph permission. After seeking and receiving permission from Pilate, Joseph takes Jesus' body and

carefully prepares him for burial. The gospel of John tells us that he was accompanied and assisted by Nicodemus. Nicodemus is the Pharisee who earlier had visited Jesus by night we read in **John 19:39**. So here we have a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin taking Jesus' body and preparing it for burial.

Before we talk of the burial, I would like to make a comment here about the Pharisee and the Sanhedrin. Both were rich and if you remember from scripture both groups were mad at Jesus because he was interfering with their money flow. But here we see God at work.

This camel found a way! Or better yet, God found a way for this camel to get through the eye of a needle! **Matthew 19:24** says, Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

We normally don't think of many of the followers of Jesus as rich. There surely weren't many who were rich; at least, there weren't many who were openly his followers. But a few were. Not only was Joseph rich; he also had access to the Roman governor. But, what is amazing here is that Joseph picks the absolutely worst time to show his allegiance to Jesus! Joseph is identifying himself with one who was now viewed as the scum of the earth, a man apparently cursed by God, a supposed criminal executed by Rome, and a Jew condemned to death by the religious ruling council and the high priest. There is nothing to gain by his identifying himself with Jesus, at least nothing apparent. But that didn't stop Joseph! He was a follower, and he was willing to follow Jesus all the way through the cross. He was willing to become unclean for Passover by handling the dead body of Jesus. Joseph did for Jesus what was decent, loving, tender, and right. And he did it when there appeared to be nothing to gain in doing so.

I don't know about you, but I want to be like Joseph. While there is so much talk about the apostles, their power and their authority, Joseph did what none of them did, and what none of them had the financial resources to do. I'd surely like to believe that I would do the same!

Okay, let's move on to the burial.

First, they wrap the body in clean linen. The gospel of **John 19:39-40** tells us that: "Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds. Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs."

After wrapping Jesus' body in the linen, Joseph places Jesus' body in his own new tomb cut out of rock. Then he rolls a big stone in front of the entrance to the tomb and goes away. And that's the last we ever hear about Joseph of Arimathea in our Bible.

The story is told that both men were expelled out of their respected sects, and harassed.

Matthew also tells us that the two Mary's, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, Mary the mother of James, were sitting there opposite the tomb, closely observing where Jesus was buried.

Once again, why are all these details so important? In order to show that Jesus really died. Imagine if Jesus had resurrected from the cross instead of the tomb. Imagine if immediately after he had given up his spirit, right after God had worked all the miraculous signs in connection with his death and the

centurion had proclaimed that surely this was the Son of God, imagine if Jesus had resurrected from the dead then. There would be a lot of people who would question whether he had actually died at all.

No, Jesus' body was examined by Roman soldiers trained to recognize death, he was pierced through with a sword, he was taken down from the cross, he was wrapped in seventy-five pounds of linen, he was placed in Joseph's own tomb and a large stone was rolled in front of the entrance. Jesus lay dead and buried in that tomb for 3 days until Sunday morning before he rose from the dead. Why? To show that he had really died.

You see, in order for Jesus to take our death, he needed to die the same death that we experience when we die. When we die, what happens? Our spirits are separated from our bodies for a period of time. Our bodies lie in the grave awaiting resurrection. When Jesus returns, our bodies will be raised from the grave and reunited with our spirits.

If Jesus had died and then immediately resurrected, he would not have experienced the full passage of death that we experience. He would not truly have conquered sin and death and the grave.

And so, the next day the religious leaders come to Pilate with a request of their own. They remember Jesus said something about rising again after three days. Perhaps they are thinking of the time Jesus spoke to them about the sign of Jonah as recorded in **Matthew 12:40**, "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."

Anyways, they are not so much afraid of Jesus rising again as they are of the disciples coming and stealing the body and then making believe that Jesus rose again. They tell Pilate, "This last deception will be worse than the first." In other words, the worst thing that can happen for the religious leaders is if Jesus' tomb somehow turns up empty on Sunday morning. Imagine that! So, they ask him to make the tomb secure until the third day to guard against this happening.

Pilate agrees to their request. Matthew 27:65-66 says, "Take a guard," Pilate answered. "Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how." So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard.

There is an irony in Pilate's words, "Go, make the tomb secure as you know how." But that's what they do. They put a seal on the stone and post a guard. The purpose of the stone is to prevent anyone from entering the tomb to remove the body. The purpose of the guards is to prevent anyone from moving the stone. The purpose of the seal is to prevent anyone from moving the stone without leaving evidence that the stone had been moved, for example, perhaps if someone bribed the guards to move the stone for them.

So, they go and make the tomb as secure as they know how. But they think they are just guarding against an attempted theft by the disciples. They are certainly not prepared for another miraculous earthquake, similar to the one that took place on Friday at the time of Jesus' death, which as you recall split the rocks and opened the tombs. They are certainly not prepared for a shining angel of the Lord to come down from heaven and roll away the stone as easily as if it were a soccer ball. Yes, they are prepared for the disciples, but they are definitely not prepared for divine resurrection.

And so, it was a futile request, and Pilate's response was a futile response. What is even more ironic about all this is that all their actions only served to further confirm Jesus' resurrection. If they hadn't taken all these actions, then maybe they could have gotten away with blaming the disciples. But by making the tomb secure, the only explanation for the empty tomb on Sunday morning was that Jesus really did rise from the dead on the third day, just as he said.

And so that's the third reason Jesus was buried in a rich man's tomb – not only to show that he really died, but also to show that he really resurrected. If Joseph hadn't buried Jesus in his own tomb, Jesus would most likely have been buried in a common grave along with the other two thieves, and we would not have the testimony of the empty tomb. The religious leaders take every precaution, but God's sovereign plan goes forth regardless.

Jesus was buried in a rich man's tomb: to fulfill prophecy; to show that he really died; to show that he really resurrected; and finally, Jesus was buried in a rich man's tomb so that through his poverty you and I may become rich.

There are actually two rich men in this story. When we speak of the rich man's tomb, we naturally think first of Joseph of Arimathea. He was a rich man, and it was his tomb after all. But it was also Jesus' tomb, Jesus, who was the wealthiest of all, Jesus, who gave up his riches in heaven and came to earth to be our Savior.

Here on earth, he lived a life of poverty. He was born in a manger. He never accumulated earthly goods. Matthew Henry's commentary writes: "As he had not a house of his own, wherein to lay his head while he lived, so he had not a grave of his own, wherein to lay his body when he was dead." He rode into Jerusalem on a borrowed donkey, and he was buried in a borrowed tomb. Fortunately, he didn't need it for very long. Just a couple of days, and Joseph could have it right back again!

And why did Jesus do all this? Why did Jesus give up the riches of heaven to live and die in poverty on earth? We read in **2 Corinthians 8:9**, For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich. Jesus was buried in a rich man's tomb so that through his poverty we may become rich.

And so, when it comes to the rich man's tomb, now there are three people we need to consider. First there's Joseph of Arimathea – he was a rich man, and it was his tomb. Then it became Jesus' tomb – Jesus, who though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor. But then as we are united with Christ by faith, it becomes our tomb also, for we are buried with Christ through baptism and thus share in his death, burial and resurrection.

We read in **Romans 6:4-5**, "We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection." In other words, when Jesus died, you died with him. When Jesus was buried, you were buried with him. And just as Jesus rose from the dead, your body will surely rise one day as well.

You have been buried through baptism with Jesus, the one who owned it all and gave it all so you could be saved. The Bible says in **2 Timothy 2:11**, If we died with him, we will also live with him and **Romans 8:17** that we are heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in

order that we may also share in his glory. That's the fourth reason Jesus was buried in a rich man's tomb, so that through his poverty you and I may become rich.

And so, we find that Jesus' burial is just as important as his death and resurrection. **1 Corinthians 15:3-4** says, For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.

Devotional #21 – Evening of the Seventh day

John 20:19

19 On the evening of that first day of the week (Sunday), when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders.

Study Notes:

For a couple of minutes I want you to relax, close your eyes and I want you to imagine a scene of peace. Close your eyes and imagine it, describe it to yourself as fully as you can in your mind, enter into it deeply enough to feel its glow.

Some may have picture yourself dozing in the warm sunshine whilst in your garden listening to the birds, some may have seen themselves in a peaceful landscape empty of people, some may have seen a field full of grain gently waving in a breeze, or a scene when you are lay on an empty beach listening to the waves gently lapping onto the beach or what about sitting and resting beside a stream in the woods with the water making music as it runs over and around the stones as it flows on its way.

Whatever the picture you have made and entered into the chances are it was not like the kind of scene we find in our gospel text today.

The text speaks of locked doors, secret meetings by night and of fear. None of these things makes a person normally think about peace.

It seems clear however that the verse from John wants us to see the disciples in the upper room terrified and in fear that the Jewish leaders or even the Romans will hunt them down to kill them.

The disciples of Jesus were on lock down but not because of an order from a governmental official. They were hiding in fear. Their leader had been crucified. They remembered Jesus' predictions of his suffering, but seemed to forget the promise of a resurrection three days later. It was like the media these days, all the good news is buried under an avalanche of worst-case scenarios.

What a terrible way to live! But their world was about to suddenly change. I do have a certain amount of empathy here. The disciples were in a strange place, they believed that Jesus was the Son of God but they had no idea of what was to happen next.

All they knew was that they were not at the top of the most popular people list to the Jewish leaders. Their leaders had successfully, they believed, got rid of the ring leader, in their eyes, this "insurgent" movement so what was to stop them getting rid of his supporters, in fact it made sense.

So, they were gathered together, confused, afraid, questioning if what they had been doing was right. Wondering if they had just wasted three years of their life or their businesses that they had let go of to follow Jesus.

This is the testimony of many today. They find Jesus, start going to church, doing bible studies and praying. They think it is all going the right way, when all of a sudden, trials come that turn their world upside down. They don't see a way out. They are people who have almost given up on life, and give up on church and Jesus.

Instead of running toward Jesus, they run away from him.

This is what the disciples were doing in a sense. They were running away. They were hiding because of fear. The disciples of Jesus Christ were in a state of utmost fear and despair following His crucifixion. Despite having spent three years under Jesus' guidance, witnessing His miracles, and receiving His teachings, the disciples were overwhelmed with anxiety and uncertainty.

In 1st-century Palestine, the Roman Empire held absolute power, and any perceived threat to their authority was met with brutal force. The disciples, being closely associated with Jesus, who had been deemed a threat to Roman power, were naturally fearful of persecution. Additionally, the Jewish religious leaders, who had orchestrated Jesus' crucifixion, may have also sought to eliminate Jesus' followers. The disciples' fear was exacerbated by the knowledge that they were vulnerable to arrest, torture, and execution.

The disciples had witnessed Jesus' brutal crucifixion, an experience that would have left them traumatized. They had also seen Jesus' body placed in a tomb, and the reality of His death had sunk in. The disciples' sense of security and identity had been deeply rooted in Jesus, and His death left them feeling lost and abandoned. Furthermore, Peter's denial of Jesus and the disciples' abandonment of Him during His arrest would have added to their feelings of guilt, shame, and fear.

Jesus' death had significant implications for the disciples. They had believed Jesus to be the Messiah, the Son of God, and His death seemed to contradict these beliefs. The disciples may have wondered if they had been misled, if Jesus' teachings were false, and if their own lives had been wasted. Moreover, Jesus' death raised questions about their own safety and the future of the movement. Would they be next to face persecution and death?

The disciples' fear after Jesus' death was a natural response to the traumatic events they had witnessed. The historical context, their personal experiences, and the implications of Jesus' death all contributed to their state of fear and uncertainty.

However, as we know from the New Testament accounts, which will be the next devotional, the disciples' fear would eventually give way to courage and confidence. The resurrection of Jesus would vindicate their faith, and they would go on to become bold witnesses to the Gospel, changing the course of history forever.

Devotional #22 – Morning of the Eighth day

Matthew 28:1-10

1 After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. 2 There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. 3 His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. 4 The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men. 5 The angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. 6 He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. 7 Then go quickly and tell his disciples: ‘He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.’ Now I have told you.” 8 So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. 9 Suddenly Jesus met them. “Greetings,” he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. 10 Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

Study Notes:

The early disciples witnessed the resurrection of Jesus Christ. They could not forget the open tomb and His pierced hands, and wounded side. The living Christ had a powerful and profound effect on them. The people who went to the tomb on that first Easter morning testify to the power of the resurrection. They were in awe and wonder.

What do you think it would have been like to observe the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the grave? What if some entrepreneur had understood when Jesus said that he would rise from the dead? What if he sought an opportunity to make some money off this spectacular event? What if he set some bleachers in front of the tomb and charged people admission for watching? What if he advertised in the Jerusalem Chronicle and a huge crowd showed up to watch?

My guess is that people would have arrived cynical, casual, and callused. But then, a resplendent light followed by momentary silence before a deafening noise, Jesus would have stepped forth from the grave alive. Upon seeing Jesus come back alive from the grave, I suspect that the onlookers' eyes would have been as big as saucers. Their jaws would have dropped. A sense of wonder and ecstasy would have filled everyone watching. The feelings would never be forgotten.

I remember years ago my wife and I were with a group who went to a passion play in Hot Spring Arkansas. It was a wonderful experience. But when Jesus come out of the tomb, it was unreal. The whole place seem to shake with the sound of an earthquake, along with the Angel standing on top of the tomb. Smoke was all around, but then as it cleared, Jesus was standing in front of the tomb. As I looked around, seems everyone's jaw dropped. It was an amazing experience. I'm sure it was pretty close to the real thing.

The resurrection of Jesus itself is never described anywhere in Scripture, presumably because no one saw Jesus exit the tomb. Not a single person beheld the moment when Jesus burst forth from the grave on that first Easter morning. No one witnessed the resurrection, but many have experienced it. No one can explain the resurrection, but many feel its effects.

Suddenly there was a violent earthquake. It shook. It reeled and rocked. The ground quaked. The rocks erupted. The earth cracked. The olive trees in the garden waved their twisted limbs. Nature was aroused. The earth trembled in sorrow at the crucifixion, but it leaped for joy at the resurrection. The quake attests to the cosmic significance of the event.

I'm sure what we seen in Arkansas was pretty close because of the awe we all had!

". . . an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and approached [the tomb]. He rolled back the stone and was sitting on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his robe was as white as snow". Like an action hero on a Saturday-morning cartoon, shafts of lightning blazed from the angel with its clothes shimmering like new-fallen snow. He rolled away the stone not to let Jesus out, but to let the women in. The angel sat on the rock that had been rolled away indicating the triumph of the completed work.

It says, "The guards were so shaken from fear of him that they became like dead men". They stood as corpses. They shook, in their sandals, longer than the ground. The ones keeping watch over the dead became as dead. They were scared stiff.

Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to view the tomb. They came to anoint Jesus' body with spices to give him a more appropriate embalming. En route they were concerned about who would move the stone for them. On seeing the stone rolled way from the opening of the tomb and hearing the angel proclaim that Jesus was not here, that He had been raised, they were filled with wonder and joy. The good news of His resurrection became their message to share.

Everyone present that day felt the effect of the resurrection. What effect does the resurrection have on you?

Can we celebrate Easter and not be moved? Many people can! We want to come to church on Easter, sing some soul-stirring hymns, eat lunch with our family and friends later, hunt for eggs with our children, but yet still have our world unrocked by the resurrection. We are amazingly well adjusted to the same old world. This is the world that most people see every Easter.

I think that is why Matthew reminds us that the whole earth shook on that first Easter morning. Luke records Easter as a meal on Sunday evening with the risen Christ. John has the resurrected Jesus encountering Mary Magdalene in the garden. But what about Matthew? What is significant in his story? "Suddenly there was a violent earthquake, because an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and approached the tomb. He rolled back the stone and was sitting on it. Easter is an earthquake with a stone rolled away from the tomb and a dead person walking the streets, with an imprudent angel sitting on the stone. It was a ruckus.

I've been in an earthquake. It wasn't a big one, but it was an earthquake, all right. While working at the Jack County Sheriff's Office, I was sitting in my office, when everything shook on my desk. Not violently, but it definitely shook. And believe me when a whole building shakes, you feel it. It had our attention. We didn't know what had happened at first, so we walked outside to see if we could

determine what caused the building to tremble. Later we learned of an earthquake in Oklahoma near Norman. But we felt it in Jacksboro Texas.

Easter is an earthquake that shook the whole world. It got everyone's attention.

On the cross, the world did all it could to Jesus. At Easter, God did all he could to the world. And the earth shook. You don't explain that. You experience it. You feel it. It goes right through you.

In the 1950s there was a devastating earthquake in China. As a result of the quake, a huge boulder was dislodged from a mountain, thus exposing a great cache of wonderful artifacts from a thousand years ago. A new world became visible.

When the stone was rolled away that entombed Jesus, and the earth shook, we got our first glimpse of a new world. It is a world where death doesn't have the last word, where injustice is made right, and innocent suffering is vindicated by the intrusion of a powerful God.

The soldiers shook, and not because the ground was rumbling. The angel plopped himself down on the stone in one final act of impudent defiance of death. He said to the women, "Don't be afraid. You're looking for Jesus? He isn't here." Nobody went back the same way they came. Easter has that kind of moving effect on people.

Does it have that effect on you? If not, maybe you need to check your spiritual pulse. Maybe you have been living too long in the in-between-time of Good Friday and Easter. Maybe it is time to see and feel the resurrection of Jesus all over again. Maybe it is time to let God shake your world. Maybe it is time to allow God to roll the stone away from your cold and hardened heart to feel the love and power of Jesus Christ.

Easter not only moves us, it touches something deep down inside of us. We encounter God's wonder, that feeling of surprise and awe aroused by something strange and unexpected. It's what Mary Magdalene and the other Mary felt when they learned that Jesus had risen. They departed "quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy". They were astonished. They went to the tomb expecting to find a dead man in need of embalming. Instead they found an empty tomb. Jesus was alive. That fact, while strange and unexpected, was wonderful and exciting.

One can't experience Easter without wonder. The trouble is that we don't feel wonder anymore. Wonder is rare, especially as we grow older. The catch phrase of our culture is, "Been there. Done that." We are spiritually and emotionally obtuse. We are a people saturated with analysis, explanations, and experiences, but void of wonder. It is that wonder and mystery of the resurrection that we want. And once we experienced it the most lavish purchase or the most thrilling experience can never substitute for it. For when God touches you, you know it. You can't explain it. You experience it. You feel it. It goes right through you.

How do we revive this sense of wonder? Wonder begins in the presence of Jesus. Regardless of our geography or status or age, where the Lord is present, that place is alive with wonder. As we become more aware of God's presence we become more filled with wonder. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary felt it. When they saw Jesus their only response was to fall at his feet in worship.

When you and I encounter the living Christ, our only response is to celebrate his presence. That's Easter. It is the presence of Jesus that moves us and touches us deeply. It is the rocking experience of Jesus' triumph and the relational experience of Jesus' presence. It becomes an experience to imagine that God will be present in our lives to roll the stone away from our hearts. Easter makes us want to fall at Jesus' feet in gratitude and praise for what he has done. That, my dear friends, is something you don't explain and never forget. You experience it. You feel it. It goes right through you.

All sermon's on this day should propel the assembly to leave worship with both awe and celebratory power, eager to see where and how the risen one will meet them in their neighbors and friends, their prayer, their advocacy for what is good and just, and in their own gratitude for life and resurrection.

So, How does Easter effect you? Do you stand in awe or is it just another day?

Devotional #23 – Evening of the Eighth day

Matthew 28:16-20

16 Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. 17 When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. 18 Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Study Notes:

Today, we finally come to the end of our Devotional’s in the gospel of Matthew and John. God’s providence in Jesus’ torture and persecution. God’s providence in Jesus’ death, His burial and now in His resurrection. Even in that context we saw God’s sovereignty in vindicating His Son. And so we marveled at how God’s providence has been displayed.

But here we come in Matthew 28, verses 16 through 20 to the very final words of the gospel. And Matthew leaves us several very vivid pictures, one particularly of the disciples themselves, another of the Lord Jesus’ Christ and His own directives for the church.

Now as we say, this passage is so familiar to all of us. It would be easy, I mean very easy to read it simply through the lens of what we have known about it in the past. And so I want to suggest as we come to it today that you do two things. First, think about the fact that it is good for every church from time to time to pause and reflect and ask itself are we obeying the great commission? Have we remembered our marching orders?

These are the last words that Matthew records of Jesus in His gospel. And so they are the abiding directive that He wants us to have on our minds as we finish His gospel and it’s wholly appropriate that the church pause and ask are we fulfilling this great commission? Is the focus of our ministry somehow related to what Jesus has told us in terms of our focus of ministry. Do they look like His commands? Does our ministry look like His commands in the great commission?

Secondly, as we come to this passage, I think it’s good to purpose to bring no preconceptions about what the great commission says, and to determine to simply listen to what Jesus says and commands, lest we think that we already know what He is saying and miss what He in fact does say. If we do that, we may be surprised what we find here. In fact, today I am going to propose to you that this passage is primarily about discipleship. I could make a case if I had the time to show you that this passage is primarily about discipleship. I could make a case if I had the time to show you that much of the gospel of Matthew is devoted to providing a manual of study for Christian disciples.

And there is a tremendous theme running throughout the gospel of Matthew about Christian discipleship. And I want to propose to you that this great commission that we’re going to see today is first and foremost about discipleship. It tells us about the priority of discipleship, that is the primacy of discipleship in the mission of the church, and it also tells us about the practice of discipleship. That is, how you’re supposed to do it.

With that as introduction, let me suggest that we look at two parts in this passage today. I was very tempted after studying this to do an eight-part series. It's that rich. It really is. But I'm not going to torture you that way. We're going to look at two parts in this passage. The first two verses, verses 16 and 17 form the first section of this passage. There you're going to see a description of the disciples obediently going to Galilee, but you're also interestingly, going to be left by Matthew with a picture of the disciples still struggling in their faith. That's going to be the first part of the passage that we look at. Then, if you look at verses 18 through 20 you're going to see Jesus declaring His authority, you're going to see Jesus giving a command, and then you're going to see Jesus issuing a comforting encouragement and promise to the disciples. And so I'd like to look at those two parts of the passage with you today.

I want to speak of the disciples' obedience and continuing doubt. And as we look at verses 16 and 17 think of this as the overarching theme of those verses. The last picture that Matthew gives us of the church in his gospel, the very last picture that Matthew gives us of the church in his gospel emphasizes the mission to the Gentiles, the worship of Christ and the weakness of the disciples. Think of it. Look at the first part of verse 16. There we're told that the eleven disciples obediently made their way to Galilee. You should remember that Jesus, long before the events of the crucifixion and the burial and the resurrection had occurred, Jesus told His disciples that after those things had occurred, they were to go and meet Him in Galilee.

And then you should remember, that one of the things that the angels said to the female disciples at the tomb was that they were to go back to the disciples, the eleven disciples of Jesus' especially, and tell them to go to Galilee just like He had told them to do. And then Jesus Himself told them after He had risen that they are to meet He in Galilee just as He told them to do many, many days ago. And so the disciples make their way to Galilee. It was where their ministry had begun in Galilee of the Gentiles, and by calling them back to Galilee I want to suggest to you that even in that action, Jesus is emphasizing the worldwide mission that He's calling them to. He's calling them to a mission to the Gentiles. They're not simply to minister to the Jews.

And then if you look at the beginning of verse 17 you see the disciples' response. When they see Jesus, they instinctively worship. Now Matthew uses this term over and over beginning in Matthew, chapter 2 and by this word "worship" Matthew means that His disciples fell down to their knees and then down on their faces and prostrated themselves before the Lord Jesus Christ in loving and humble adoration and homage. They worshiped Him with all their being.

Now Matthew is telling you something there. These are good, intelligent, well-versed in the scripture, orthodox Jews. And they know above all else this one principle of religion, You don't worship anything that's not God. You worship only the one true God. You worship nothing else. It's their first commandment, it's their last commandment. If they forgot everything else in their memory banks, they never would have forgotten that. And Matthew is leaving you this impression of these eleven consecrated orthodox Jews on their face before the Lord Jesus Christ so that you will know that there was no doubt in their mind that this was God, the Lord Jesus Christ.

And then if you look at the end of verse 17 you see Matthew tell you something astonishing. This is not what you were expecting. This is not how you would write fiction. If you were writing fiction, you

would never have written the second half of this sentence. And yet some were doubting. Now why in the world does Matthew tell you that? Well, first of all he tells you that because it happens. It's true. It's just another indication of the historical accuracy of the historicity of Matthew's account. He never would have made something like this up. The idea of falsifying these kinds of claims is wholly a modern literary idea. You don't find it anywhere in ancient religious literature. There's nothing like this. And so Matthew is telling us this in order to indicate the weakness of the disciples. They continue to struggle in their quest to believe and understand.

Now why would he mention this? Well he mentions this first of all because he's going to tell you in his next breath what the source of faith is, what the source of banishing doubt is, but he's also telling you this because he knows that a tremendous, a great, a mind-boggling commission is going to be given to these disciples in a few moments, and if you think that they were able to carry out that commission in their own strength, he wants to eradicate any such misconception from your mind by telling you that even at this point, even after the resurrection, even after they'd seen the Lord Jesus Christ there were some who were still in a doubtful state, and it won't be until Pentecost that the eleven finally are over any of that doubt.

And that description that he gives us here of the disciples falling down and worshiping is poignant because we so rarely do. That's what His disciples did. And it's so poignant that we so rarely worship in our day and age. And so I would suggest to you that gospel of Matthew is for us. And that's what we see in this first section of the great commission, Matthew giving us a picture emphasizing the Gentile mission, emphasizing the worship of the Lord Jesus Christ and emphasizing the weakness of the disciples.

Now I'd like to look at verses 18 through 20. Here we see Jesus declaring His authority, issuing a command, telling us how that command is to be carried out and also giving us words of comfort and encouragement. And I want to suggest to you that the whole mission of the church, the whole ball of wax, the whole mission of the church is based upon Jesus' claim here, Jesus' commands here, and Jesus' comforts here.

Notice Jesus' word in verse 18 is in contrast with the disciple's unbelief. What has Matthew just told you at the end of verse 17? That there were still some doubting disciples. What is the very next thing that he does? He shows you Jesus coming and doing what? Speaking His word. What is Matthew telling you? He is telling you that it is the word of Jesus that produces belief and worship and ministry. It is the word of Jesus that drives away doubt.

You know there are a lot of doubting Christians out there that are looking for an answer to their doubt in mystical encounters, miracles, signs, wonders, books, and here's Matthew saying, you have doubts? Here's where you find the solution to those doubts, in the word of Christ. That's where doubt is vanished, when you perceive and you receive the word of Christ. And so Christ comes and He speaks this word.

And in verse 18, the end of that verse you see the claim that He makes. I want you to stop and I want you to think of the radical nature of this claim. It is an astounding claim that He makes. He says that all authority has been given to Me in heaven and earth. Now that claim is baffling to some people.

All authority belongs to Him. If you want to be in heaven with Him, you're there on His terms. And He's the only way because all authority has been given to Him. That's totally unpopular in our day and age. But that's exactly what Matthew is saying.

But that's not the only baffling thing about that statement to me. Notice what He says. "All authority has been given to Me." Now isn't that a strange statement. Now if Jesus claims to be equal with the Father, if Jesus claims to be divine, if Jesus claims to be the Second Person of the Trinity, what do you mean all authority has been given to you. Surely, you already have it. What does this mean? Well, this is why we need the eight-part series on the great commission. But you're going to get it in a sentence. What does it mean? Before the foundation of the world, the Father in the covenant of redemption had promised the Son, that in fulfilling Your obligations as the Mediator of the Covenant and rescuing and redeeming My people, I will place everything under Your feet. It's what Psalm 2 is all about. And Jesus is saying, I have delivered. I've earned it, and it's Mine on the basis of the Father's promise to Me before the foundation of the world.

My friends, the implications of that are staggering. Think about that for a minute. The Lord Jesus is saying to His disciples, all authority belongs to Me. And it's so important that these disciples understand that because He's about to ask these eleven trembling men to become the foundation of a world-wide movement that will end up in causing the nations to bow the knee before Him and to profess Him as King of Kings, and Lord of Lords. And so there's this astounding claim.

And then there is this command. And I want you to notice the focus of the command. So often because of the way our Scriptures are usually translated, we first focus on go. But as you know, Greek scholars, there is one imperative in this passage and there are three participles. The one imperative is make disciples. The three participles are going, baptizing and teaching. The going and the baptizing and the teaching are how you make disciples. The imperative is what Jesus wants the church to do until He comes again. Make disciples. And this is the way I want you to make them, Going, baptizing and teaching.

Let's think about that for a minute. He says to go make disciples. He doesn't say go build up the rolls of your church. Go get as many names on it as possible. He doesn't say go out and get as many people to ascent to the gospel as you can. He doesn't say go out and get people to pray a prayer. Or go out and get people to sign a card. No, he says, here's your aim, make disciples. I don't want people who will merely mouth a few words. I want people who will be followers of Me. That's your goal. Not membership expansion, not even church growth, but discipleship. I want you to make disciples. That is a real follower of Jesus Christ. Those who are consumed with a zeal for His glory.

To me that's what Bible Study is all about, Making Disciples! In Christian discipleship, all of your hope is vested in the company of the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ. Now, where is your heart? Now maybe we would experience more of the presence of Christ if our heart were more there in the company of His kingdom. May God enable us to realize the radical implications of the great commission, and may those radical implications transform the evangelical church today.

My prayer is that you have enjoyed this
Walk through Holy Week,
The Last Week of the life of Jesus here on earth.

Hopefully you have been able to relate to the Disciples
as you have been on this Journey. And now have a
different view of Easter.

Jesus is who He said He was, and He did Rise from the Grave!

Jack County Cowboy Church

Pastor JD Ezzell

Easter 2025