

# *encountering jesus*

devotional



TWENTY ONE  
LIFE-CHANGING  
ENCOUNTERS  
WITH JESUS

R Y A N D . P A R K E R

## DAY 1: [ john the baptist ]

### READ

Matthew 3:1-17

John the Baptist has to be one of the most interesting individuals in the entire Bible. Seriously! In the opening verses of Matthew 3 we learn that John spent the majority of his time preaching in the wilderness. And you've got to love John's style. He wore camel's hair for clothing and walked around eating locusts with a side of wild honey dipping sauce. Oh, and did I mention that Jesus and John are cousins? I *love* this guy! Matthew wastes no time in letting us know John's God-given purpose. John was *the one* who Isaiah and Malachi prophesied about.<sup>i</sup> He fulfilled very specific and significant Old Testament prophecies. He was the 'forerunner'—the one who prepared the way for the coming of the Messiah!

All four Gospels record John drawing crowds of people with his public preaching and baptizing. There was a very real sense of urgency in his words. John preached about the coming of the Kingdom, and boldly called all to repent of their sins. Many from near and far made their way to John to confess their sins and be baptized by him. He was on his God-ordained mission—to call people to repentance and to pave the way for King Jesus.

Jesus eventually made His way to the Jordan River, but John deemed himself unworthy to baptize his Savior. Mark's Gospel captures this well: "He who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals *I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.*"<sup>ii</sup> These were known as duties that only servants or slaves did, not for the baptizing preacher. However, John *did* view himself as a slave and servant of Christ. And all of this stemmed from a deep-seeded, genuine place of humility. We see the humility of John's heart when he stated: "He [Jesus] must increase, but I must decrease."<sup>iii</sup>

This level of humility is almost completely backwards from our modern ego-centric culture. How many people today, like John, strive and struggle to actually *lose* followers? How many send their loyal fans, clients, and anyone else they may have influence on over to someone else? And then *rejoice* when it actually happens? Today, many seeking to gain followers will use their platform to say, "Look at *me!*" John, however, was doing the complete opposite. He was constantly pointing others—including *his own disciples*—to Jesus, saying, "Look! There is the Lamb of God!"<sup>iv</sup> *That's* humility!

Sometimes people equate humility with weakness and passivity. They picture a life of humility consisting of throwing pity parties where everyone wears tiny hats with the word "worthless" on them. *No!* That's not *at all* what the Bible means by humility. It's been said that *humility is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less.*<sup>v</sup> While this phrase is a good start, Scripture goes a bit further to help us understand what humility truly is. For example, Paul writes, "Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too."<sup>vi</sup> See, Paul's understanding of humility was founded in the One who perfectly embodied it! The apostle continues:

Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and...he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross.<sup>vii</sup>

*This* is the Jesus we serve! Our Lord left His position in the heavens and chose to cast aside certain privileges to be born in the most humble of ways. The Son of God became fully man so that His sacrificial death would fully cover the sins of man! This is the good news of Jesus Christ! And this good news is offered to any who would repent from their sinful ways and trust in Jesus alone for salvation. And this, of course, requires *humility*.

It takes humility for one to recognize his own sinfulness—that he has freely chosen to sin against a Holy God. It takes humility for an individual to recognize that there is absolutely *nothing* she can do to earn her own salvation. Humility acknowledges and accepts the sobering fact that ‘being a good person’ is *not enough* to be saved. Humility knows that *no one* is capable of doing enough good to cover the stains of their sins. In fact, humility knows that it is only through the perfect sacrifice and the precious blood of Jesus that one can be saved. *Amen!*

Stand firm in the certainty of this truth: The Lamb was slain, but has risen and now reigns as the Lion forevermore! The King of the universe sits on His throne and calls you *His*. King Jesus is with you and He is *for* you. Today, make the decision to fully embrace humility—*true, God-honoring* humility. Remembering that “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”<sup>viii</sup>

### **REFLECT**

John the Baptist was gaining popularity and had disciples of his own ... show humility? How can you apply

How should Jesus’ example of humility in Philippians 2 shape the way you live as His follower?

What are at least 3 areas in your life where being humble is a challenge? Next to each of these, write how humility could specifically bring honor and glory to God.

### **RESPOND**

How will you apply this to your life today?

## DAY 2: [ nicodemus ]

### READ

John 3:1-21

As a Pharisee, Nicodemus was one of the religious and social elite who acted as a go-between for the people of Israel and the Roman ruling authorities at the time. There are several different ways we can identify ourselves with Nicodemus. Maybe you have some influence in your church. Maybe you've got some influence at your school or at work. Maybe you have some influence in politics or other elite institutions or people groups. These things—amongst many other factors—can cause us to look to ourselves for our own salvation. We all, at times, in our natural, sinful flesh want to think that we've got it all together. And in doing so, we really are looking to and trusting in ourselves for salvation and not looking to Jesus.

Nicodemus approached Jesus by cover of night. It seems that Nicodemus had heard and seen Jesus perform miracles. And because of this, he wants to find out what's different about Him. Maybe you are there, in a place where you are trying to figure out what all Jesus is about. Maybe you've been coming to church for a while, but you still aren't convinced about this Jesus character. You're compelled by Him and you're interested in Him, but you've never put your full trust and belief in Him. You've never received Him and experienced the new birth. Maybe you've gone to church nearly your entire life, yet you've never experienced anything like being born again.

The final way we could relate is our guy Nico is that he 'grew up in the church', as it were. He knew his Bible backward and forward. He would've been a first-round draft pick in the National Bible Trivia Association. He knew a lot about God's Word, yet he was still missing 'it'. What about you? Have you been coming to church but missing it? Did you think that the Christian life is just about being good so God will love you? Is Christianity something you adhere to a sort of 'fire insurance'— a 'get-out-of-hell-free' card? Are you simply trying to cover your bases just in case all of this Jesus and Christianity stuff is true? Do you go to church just because it's what you've always done? Is it some sort of cultural thing? If that's you in any way, there is a high probability that you are not a true Christian. You must be born again.

When we look back at the text we see that verse 3 is the unexpected volcanic eruption of the conversation. It hits Nico nearly out of nowhere and without much warning. Nicodemus clearly expects Jesus to explain something to him in human terms about what He's doing with God's help, etc. He's expecting Jesus to say something like, "Yeah, I just noticed they were running out of wine, so I prayed to God and then they found some more, I don't know..." Instead, Jesus blindsides Nicodemus by saying, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.<sup>ix</sup>" Whoa. What? Here is Nicodemus: a religious, social, and political elite, being told what needs to happen in order for him to see the Kingdom of God. That is, in order to see, know, and be a part of what God is doing to reign in the world through Jesus—he must be born again. The same is true for you and I today. If you want to be a part of God rescuing and reigning over a people in and through Jesus, you must be born again. Relying on your status or position or the good deeds you've done in life doesn't cut it. You must be born again.

In a similar breath, our need to be born again means that the popular phrase, "I was born this way," carries zero weight when it comes to salvation. Hiding behind the "I was born this way" cliché does not exempt anyone from their sins. We are all physically born into this world, but not all experience a spiritual birth into the Kingdom of God. You, me, and everyone else was born into sin with our physical birth as an infant. Because of this, each individual needs to be born again in order to be saved. The good news is this: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.<sup>x</sup>" Did you see that? Jesus said that whoever believes in Him can be born again and saved!

When we are born again we become a completely new creation!<sup>xi</sup> We receive a new heart, God's Spirit lives within us, and we are saved. Jesus says that being born again is like the wind—you don't see it, but you know it when you hear it and feel it. Just like the wind, you can feel it and see the effects of it in your life! If something like this is not your testimony, then maybe you've never been born again. How would I know if I've been born again? That's a great question to ask! It could look something like this: There was a time when you realized you were a sinner, and that your sin separated you from God. But then you heard the good news of Jesus and started trusting in Him to save you. The result was that there was truly something different about you. Though the pull of temptation was still present, you didn't love your sin anymore—you love Jesus now! Something happened and you can't explain it. But what you do know is that you are not the same. That's what it's like to be born again! That's what it's like to be saved. You were once one way, and now you're another. Just like how the wind blows all of a sudden and you feel it and see its effects! The experience doesn't have to be dramatic, but its effects should be recognizable—just like the wind. Have you been born again?

### **REFLECT**

Have you been born again? Whether Yes or No, how do you know for sure?

Has there been a recognizable change in your life since you became a Christian? If so, in what ways specifically?

Is there someone in your life that could relate to Nicodemus in some way? Once God brings that person to mind, write down several ways you can pray for him/her specifically.

### **RESPOND**

How will you apply this to your life today?

### DAY 3: [ the woman at the well ]

#### READ

John 4:1-42

In John 4, we find Jesus and His disciples traveling from Judea to Galilee. Though many Jews would opt to go *around* Samaria—to avoid any contact with a Samaritan—Jesus decides to travel directly through Samaria instead. The disciples went into town to purchase food while a weary Jesus stopped at a water well to rest. Around noon, a Samaritan woman approached the well to draw water by herself. Not only was she surprised to see a Jewish man sitting by the well, but she was also taken back by His request. Asking another person for a drink of water wouldn't raise any eyebrows to the majority of us today. However, when reading Scripture we must do our best to try to understand the cultural context it was originally written in.

Samaritans and Jews did *not* get along (and that's putting it rather lightly). In fact, it's safe to say that the two people groups had a *deep* disdain for each other. Okay, fine—they *hated* each other! In short, the Jews viewed the Samaritans as dirty half-breeds that abandoned the true ways of God. *Yikes*. From the Jewish perspective, Samaritans were seen as 'ex-Jews' that profaned the name of God by intermarrying with Gentiles (non-Jews), which was explicitly prohibited by the Law. This inevitably led to giving themselves over to pagan religions and myths—an unfathomable disgrace to the one true God. Because of this, Jews regarded Samaritans as utterly *unclean*. So much, that Jews would never even *touch* (let alone drink from) the same container that a Samaritan used, no matter the circumstance.<sup>2</sup> This is the context surrounding the interaction between Jesus and the Samaritan woman.

After a brief exchange, Jesus quickly cuts to the heart of the issue by asking the woman to go and get her husband. She answered honestly and said that she didn't have a husband. Jesus replies, "You are right...for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband" (v. 18). *Ouch*. Feeling exposed, the woman tries to change the subject in hopes that Jesus would take the bait. He doesn't. Jesus continues to press in to the heart of the matter because, to Him, *she mattered!*

As I read this story, I can't help but feel for this woman. She's at the well in the middle of the day because the other women in town won't be seen with her. They want *nothing* to do with her. She'd been married and divorced *five times*. On top of that, the man she is currently living with isn't even her husband. No one wanted to be associated with someone like her. The whole town had written her off. She was rejected and viewed as an outcast because of her sinful past. I might even assume that many would feel justified in their hearts as they condemn her. And if flawed humans cast her aside as filth, then a Holy God certainly wouldn't want anything to do with this sin-stained woman. Then in steps Jesus.

This is one of my favorite passages in the entire Bible. Jesus—going against the cultural norm—passes through the land of these 'half-bred blasphemers' to speak to *this* particular woman. While those in town would [say] she would be the *last* person to deserve the love of God, the God who *is love* goes out of His way to find her. Not to condemn her, but to reveal Himself—His *true* self—as the Messiah. Jesus loves the unlovable. He wants the unwanted. He sacrificed Himself to take on the punishment of this woman's sins, and He wanted her to know that. The Light of the world took on the wrath of the Father so that this woman would no longer have to live in darkness anymore. And what Jesus did for this woman, He also did for you.

I love how the woman responds to Jesus. She dropped her water jar and immediately ran into town to tell everyone, “Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did” (v. 29). And “many Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman’s testimony” (v. 39). What a beautiful testimony of the power of the gospel this is! Jesus was fully aware of this woman’s checkered past yet loved her so much that He specifically sought her out! *This. Is. Jesus.* He already knows what lies in the darkest corners of our hearts. He knows of the sin and the shame. He knows everything about us—including that ‘thing’ you think makes you unlovable—and He *still* loves *you!* He loves you even when you might not love yourself. Jesus loves *you.* *All* of you.

## REFLECT

Putting yourself in this woman’s shoes, what is the *one thing* you wouldn’t want Jesus to bring up or ask you about? (Is there anything about you that makes you think you’re unwanted or unlovable by others and/or by Jesus?)

Do you believe that Christ’s sacrifice on the cross was enough to [cover/pay for] your past, present, and even your future sins? Why or why not?

Jesus knows of every single sin you have and will commit in your life, and *still* He chooses you as His own. In what ways specifically does this truth impact the way you think and live?

## RESPOND

How will you apply this to your life today?

## DAY 4: [ the leper ]

### READ

Matthew 8:1-3

It's hard for us in the Western world to wrap our minds around not just what leprosy is, but also who a leper *was*. Leprosy was—and still is—a highly contagious disease that attacks the nerve system. From the inside-out, leprosy ultimately wreaks havoc on a person's skin, limbs, and other extremities. (I hope you weren't hungry when you started reading this!)

In the Old Testament one who contracted leprosy was seen as being punished by God and deemed utterly "unclean."<sup>xii</sup> This disease was essentially a death sentence. A slow, humiliating, and dehumanizing death sentence. Not only did lepers experience physical deformities, they were also forced to live outside of town, leaving behind the life they once knew. They were stripped of their jobs, their marriage, children, family, friends, society, as well as their faith community. To add insult to injury, if a leper were to come into close range of someone, the leper was required to yell, "Unclean! Unclean!"

The opening verses of Matthew 8 record a highly provocative encounter between Jesus and a man with leprosy. After delivering what is now known as the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus descends down the mountain with a large crowd following Him. And as He's making His way, Jesus is suddenly approached by a leper. Jesus—the Son of God who came to take on the punishment for the sins of the world—is approached by what is seen as the physical embodiment of sin itself. In the most general sense, leprosy was understood as sin in physical form. I can almost envision the responses of the disciples and the crowd as they try to comprehend what exactly is unfolding before them.

As the leper approaches Jesus he kneels down out of reverence and pleads with Him. The leper's humility is shown not only in his kneeling but also in the way he words his request, "*Lord, if you are willing.*"<sup>xiii</sup> The man immediately follows by declaring his confidence in the miraculous healing ability of Jesus. Everyone is hanging on the edge, *What will Jesus do?* I don't imagine anyone would've guessed what would happen next: "Reaching out his hand, Jesus *touch*ed him."<sup>xiv</sup> No one can believe their eyes.

One of the many things I love about God's Word is that it's always *intentional*. Do you think it's a coincidence that after Jesus delivers the greatest sermon known to man the *very first* encounter He has is with a leper? And similarly, do you think it was by accident that Jesus reached out His hand to physically touch the man? The answer to both is, *of course not!*

It wasn't necessary for Jesus to physically touch the man in order to heal him; in fact, the very next event that Matthew records is one in which Jesus heals a Centurion's servant *without even being present* for the healing! Jesus knew *exactly* what He was doing. He was making a point. You see, because of our sin, you and I are 'lepers,' *spiritually* speaking. You and I both have a disease that effects every area of our lives, slowly killing us from the inside out. The disease is called *sin*. And much like lepers being forced to separate from their community, our sin separates us from being made right with God and communing with Him.

Historically, when the unclean (such as lepers) came into contact with the clean, both became unclean. But in this event, something happens for the first time in history: The Clean willingly touched the unclean, and instead of both becoming unclean, the Clean makes the unclean, clean! That's quite the tongue-twister, I know. Here it is again: Rather

than both becoming *unclean*, the Clean [Jesus] makes the unclean [the leper], *clean*. In other words, Jesus identifies with the uncleanness of the leper, and in doing so makes the leper clean just as Jesus is!<sup>xv</sup>

Here's the point: You and I are like the leper. We are spiritually unclean and utterly hopeless to change our deserved fate of eternal separation from a Holy God. And there is *nothing* that you or I can do to change that. Nothing. *Unless*—like the man with leprosy—you and I come to this realization and humble ourselves before Jesus, asking Him to make us clean. And just like the passage, Jesus is *always* willing! Always! And I'm not just talking about that first time you trusted in Jesus alone for salvation; I'm talking about the freedom that you and I have to do this *every single day!* "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."<sup>xvi</sup> Jesus is willing to wipe away your sins and make you clean. Will you come to Him?

### REFLECT

Why was leprosy commonly viewed to be the physical embodiment of sin? In what ways are the two similar?

What does it mean that Jesus 'makes you clean'?

Two facts: 1) This interaction occurred immediately after Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount, and 2) Jesus reached out to *physically* touch the man with leprosy. What do these reveal about the character and the mission of Jesus?

### RESPOND

How will you apply this to your life today?

## DAY 5: [ matthew ]

### READ

#### Matthew 9:9-13

In the first verse Jesus simply says to Matthew, “follow me.” What’s interesting about this passage is we don’t see or hear anything about Matthew’s decision or the process. Jesus didn’t craft and deliver some big, grandiose speech. He simply spoke and Matthew responded by getting up and following Him. And even today, Jesus is calling each of us to get up and follow Him. Are we like Matthew in our response?

There are a good number of other passages in the New Testament where Jesus calls individuals to follow Him. From these, we can infer that the decision to follow Jesus was one that was weighed carefully. Jesus was asking them to leave their lives as they knew it and start a new one with Him. In the same way we bargain about decisions, I’m sure we bargain about following Jesus. We might ask ourselves questions like: *Is He worth it? Will He come through? Will it be hard? What do I have to do?* In today’s passage, we find Jesus and Matthew sitting and fellowshiping with those deemed unworthy or undesirable. They are heavily criticized. But Jesus is there in the midst of them.

Some people approach Jesus and aren’t shy in letting Him know how offended they are to see Him with *these kinds* of sinners. They question Him. They only wanted to be with people *they* deemed worthy. But Jesus’ ways are not our ways; His ways are higher than ours!<sup>1</sup> He tells these ‘righteous’ folk—those who consider themselves to be righteous and holier than these other deplorable sinners—He isn’t there for them. People who are well aren’t in need of a doctor. Instead, Jesus tells them, “I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.”<sup>xvii</sup>

In this exchange, who are you? Do you find yourself trying to decide who is ‘worthy’ of this or that? Do you find yourself trying to ‘gate keep,’ so to speak? Are you keeping a mental tally of who is “in” and who’s not? Does worry about risking your reputation stop you from engaging certain people that may be seen as “less than”? The Son of Man did not care about His social status or reputation among man. Jesus didn’t lose sleep wondering if He was going to be invited to the cool kid’s birthday party. (2,000 years later we’re still celebrating *His!*) Jesus was steadfast in His purpose and wasn’t afraid of ridicule. Why? Because He knew that He was sacrificially serving the Most High with His life.

I’ve always thought it was interesting that Matthew’s father is mentioned by name.<sup>xviii</sup> That makes [the entire situation] *that* much more real. People would’ve known who Matthew’s family and relatives were. Matthew’s chosen profession certainly caused [massive] strife between him and his family. Alphaeus’ boy was a tax collector—a traitor to his own people! Who even knows the amount of shame and disgrace Matthew’s family carried because of him. If anyone was undeserving of [God’s love], it was a Jewish tax collector. And yet, in light of all of these realities, Jesus *still* approaches Matthew. He disregards social norms and engages this tax collector, meeting him right where he’s at. Not for show. Not for the camera. Not for a social media post. But for *love*.

And like Jesus, we can strive to meet others right where they are at. To challenge them, but never to condemn them. If we respond to Jesus like Matthew, then we will love Matthew like Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 55:9

## **REFLECT**

Do you think following Jesus is worth it? Why or why not?

Why do we often feel unworthy to be loved by God?

What is it that makes us worthy to have a relationship with God?

## **RESPOND**

How will you apply this to your life today?

## DAY 6: [ bethesda pool paralytic ]

### READ

John 5:1-9

While in Jerusalem, Jesus visited an area that many people with disabilities [hung around]. This specific area had a pool of water that some people believed could bring healing. The legend was: *The first person to get into the pool the moment the waters stirred would be healed of whatever disease or disability he or she had.* One man lying near the pool had been disabled for thirty-eight years. John adds that this particular man had been waiting near the pool for a long time. Knowing this, Jesus approached the man and asked him if he wanted to be healed.

If I were reading this text at face value I'd think to myself, *What kind of question is that? Of course he wants to be healed!* But notice that the man doesn't respond with a 'Yes' or a 'No.' Instead, the man dives straight into the negative and complains about his situation. He tells Jesus he doesn't have anyone to help him into the pool whenever the waters stir. And on top of that, every time he tries to do it himself someone else always beats him to it. His response is that of a man whose flame of hope is hardly flickering. Like an ember that's ever so fragile, pitifully awaiting its inevitable fate. But, *God.*

The scene painted in this passage is so interesting when given a closer look. As mentioned, the area around the pool is littered with those living with disabilities of varying kinds. And each of these individuals remain in this area believing the pool is the only chance of healing. In their minds, the waters in this pool symbolize the last ounces of hope that remain. It's 'pool or bust' for them. There is no time for anything or anyone else. All eggs of hope are desperately placed into the Bethesda pool. And yet, in the middle of all of this, everyone seems to be completely unaware that the very Son of God is amongst them.

It can be tempting to read these verses and wonder how someone could be so ignorant. *Why would someone place all their hope in something like this? How could someone not know that Jesus is right there with them? How could someone dedicate all of their time, energy, and focus on watching and waiting for some pool water to stir?* Yet, I can't help but wonder how many people do the *exact same thing* today. Your hope might not be in a pool of water, but there are *plenty* of options available for us to choose from. Some people watch the stock market, obsessively watching and waiting for the right time to pounce. Others are focused on their grades, accomplishments, relationships, or anything else they think might bring them some kind of healing. Hoping that the next 'thing' will *finally* fulfill the lack of joy, peace, or love that is ever-so-painfully present. *lies*

What about you? Was there some 'thing' (or *someone*) that's coming to mind for you? Do you find yourself hoping in something that tends to draw your focus and attention away from Jesus? Perhaps a promotion or pay raise? Maybe it's getting into your favorite college, or making the varsity team. Regardless of the specifics, whatever it is we choose to place our hope in determines the direction of our focus. And we tend to set our focus—our time, energy, and ultimately our lives—onto that which we place our hope in. Thus, ***What you focus on reveals what your hope is in.*** Or, to put it another way: *Your focus is a direct reflection of your faith.*

So, what has your focus? What do you give your time, energy, and other resources to? What is your Bethesda pool—the thing that pulls your focus *away* from Jesus? The paralyzed man in our passage was so fixated on waiting for the water to stir that he didn't recognize the One who offers Living Water.<sup>xix</sup> He was so focused on the wrong, that he completely missed the *right*. Just like this man, Jesus is asking you, "Do you want to be healed?"<sup>xx</sup> Jesus loves you with a love that is greater than anything you or I have ever experienced. He cares for you so much that He will lovingly redirect your eyes *away* from false hope so that you may clearly see *true* Hope.

Today, consider setting aside some time to take inventory on the things you give your focus and attention to. Take an honest look at what demands your time, energy, finances, and other resources. Ask the Lord to show you areas in your life where you might be off. Confess to Him anything that needs to be confessed, and ask for His forgiveness. Ask Him to show you specific steps you can take as you redirect your focus in ways that honor Him. Trust in Him to guide you and rely on His grace with each step you take. And above all else, choose to fix your focus onto Jesus!

### **REFLECT**

What are some things that you give your time, energy, finances, etc. to? Be specific. (Instead of writing “job,” write about what it is *specifically* with your job—specific tasks, responsibilities, expectations, individuals, etc.)

Are there any fears or hesitations that come up for you whenever you think about making *real* changes to any of these things? If so, what are they specifically, and why?

What blessings or fruit may come about if you choose to fix your focus on Jesus? (i.e., peace, joy, perseverance, etc.)

### **RESPOND**

How will you apply this to your life today?

## DAY 7: [ the gerasene man ]

### READ Mark 5:1-20

When Jesus and His disciples were crossing the Sea of Galilee they were [met by/with] a flash storm. I love the fact that while the disciples thought they were toast, Jesus was peacefully in the stern of the boat taking a nap. He eventually rebukes the winds and the sea and there was instantly a great calm at His command.<sup>2</sup> Then, the moment they reach the other side and step onto land the first person they come into contact with is a man possessed by demons. *Bienvenidos, Jesus y amigos!*

I'm not convinced that anyone sets out to have their life end up like this man's. Verse 3 begins by describing him as one who "lived among the tombs." Maybe not the best [descriptor] to put on your dating profile. Either way, the tombs referenced here were burial chambers that were carved out of the hillsides just outside of town.<sup>3</sup> And the descriptions that Mark gives about this man seem to only become more disturbing as the passage continues.

If we're not careful, we can read about this man and categorize him as some sort of sub-human creature. Which is, sadly, how he was viewed by many. This is an individual who most likely had a family, friends, responsibilities, a community, and many other things *before* we find him here. It can be easy to emotionally distance ourselves from those [hard-to-read-about] individuals. This is especially true whenever watching a movie or reading a novel. But this passage isn't some fictional tale or folklore. This was *real*; this *actually happened*. We have to remember that this man is a human being created in the image and likeness of God; a sinner in need of the grace of God just like you and I. He was a precious life that Jesus came to redeem and set free!

From what we read about the man we can conclude that seemingly everyone in town had written him off. After no one could contain him—not even by binding him down with shackles and chains—everyone in town saw him as a lost cause. Everyone except Jesus, that is. For Jesus knew that His power was greater than the unclean spirits within this man. In fact, the *demons themselves* knew that Jesus was *more powerful* than they! They were so afraid they began begging Jesus to not torment them.<sup>4</sup> *Begging* Him. Wow! How interesting it is that even the demons believe that Jesus is the Son of God and has the authority to torment and ultimately destroy them!<sup>5</sup>

Can you imagine being one of the disciples and witnessing this event first hand? This ex-carpenter-turned-traveling-teacher just made some *very* powerful forces obey Him. Remember, He just finished exercising power over natural forces (calming the wind and the waves), and now He is demonstrating His power over the *spiritual* realm (casting out demons)! *This* is the Jesus that you and I serve. And this Jesus is the *only* One that can set us free from our own chains and shackles.

While we might not be physically chained like this man was, Satan still seeks to put people in bondage and keep them there. This could be many different things such as an addiction, an unhealthy relationship, fear, jealousy, lust, or anything else that holds one back from having a deeper and more vibrant relationship with God. Satan loves to use shame—whether of something from the past, or even from a current struggle—to keep individuals from believing that God could ever forgive them. He does this with non-believers *as well as* with those who follow Jesus. Though the enemy

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<sup>2</sup> Mark 4:39

<sup>3</sup> John MacArthur commentary

<sup>4</sup> Mark 5:7

<sup>5</sup> James 2:19

can never ultimately have those who belong to Christ, he will do his absolute best to make you as ineffective for the Kingdom of God as possible. He will feed you lies in hopes that you will eat them up. He will do everything in his power to keep you from embracing the *true* freedom that faith in Christ alone brings.

Question: Is there something that is binding you in your life currently? Is there something in your life that you know the enemy loves to use against you? Is there a 'chain' that you keep running back to even though you know you've been freed of it? No matter what it is, know this: *the grace of God is greater.*<sup>6</sup> If you belong to Christ—if you have repented of your sin and believe in the saving work that Jesus accomplished through His death and resurrection—then you are *free!* Though its presence remains on this side of eternity, ***sin no longer has power over you!***

Never forget that *Jesus* has the power to set you free. Even if everyone 'in town' has given up on you, Jesus has not. Even if others view you as a lost cause, Jesus doesn't. He desires to set you free. You and I must remind ourselves that "he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world."<sup>xxi</sup> And if the demons know this to be true, then how much more should you and I! You have been set free from the chains by the blood of Christ! And because of that, you can choose to walk in freedom today!

## REFLECT

Are there any 'chains' in your life that keep you in bondage? If so, what are they? (Darkness loses its power in the presence of Light!)

The resurrection of Jesus declared His victory over sin and death. Therefore, if you have trusted in Christ alone for salvation, then sin no longer holds power over you. ...

What does "he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world" mean? How does this truth change the way you view your current sin struggles? ...

## RESPOND

How will you apply this to your life today?

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<sup>6</sup> Romans 5:20

## DAY 8: [ the woman in the crowd ]

### READ

Mark 5:21-34

On average it takes 22 minutes to become fully focused again on what you were doing before being interrupted.<sup>7</sup> I don't like being interrupted nor do I like interrupting others. I never want to be a bother. And I like to think most people can relate with that. It becomes problematic, though, whenever we apply that sort of mentality to our relationship with God. *He's too busy running the entire universe and answering endless prayer emails. He doesn't have enough time for little ol' me, right?*

Jesus was on His way to resurrect the only daughter of a ruler in the local Jewish synagogue. This was *huge!* Bystanders would've had their phones out recording and others live-streaming the event. Group texts everywhere are blowing up about this. Many have heard about His miracles, but now they were actually going to witness one for their own eyes! He must go and do this *now*. There's no time to waste!

Yet, in the midst of everything that's going on, Jesus is interrupted. He is interrupted by a woman who—according to the Law—is *unclean*.<sup>8</sup> Not as in she needs to wash her hands, but she is ceremonially (thus, spiritually) unclean before God. She's not allowed to be at certain social events, and she's certainly not allowed to take part in any religious functions. Not only is this woman breaking the Law simply by being around others, now she's chosen to reach out and physically touch Jesus. She is *not* about to take a ticket and wait her turn. She has waited long enough. She's had this blood-related issue for 12 years now. *Twelve. Years.* She “had suffered much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had” (5:26). Not just financially, but she is mentally, emotionally, and physically *spent*. She's exhausted all other options and knows that her *only hope is Jesus*.

This woman doesn't want to be an inconvenience to Jesus, she knows how valuable His time is. She only wants to touch the fringe of His garment so that she can finally be made well. Can you relate to this woman in that way at all? Have you ever felt like you were unworthy or unwanted? You know that God loves you and that He can do all things, but maybe there's something about you that leads you to think that you're the exception to His saving grace. You've heard that you can always come to God, but you feel dirty and too ashamed to approach the Most High. If you have ever felt this way, you're not alone. Not even close.

In this woman's most desperate and vulnerable moment of her life, she acts on her faith and reaches out to Jesus. And what does the Son of God do in response? *He turns around*. Did you catch that? Jesus—on His way to resurrect the daughter of a well-respected religious leader—takes the time to stop and turn around. He then speaks to her with tenderness and compassion. He acknowledges a woman who is not allowed in the Synagogues, and addresses her affectionately as “*Daughter*” (5:34). No rebuke. No lecture. Simply grace and healing from Jesus.

Someone considered to be insignificant by others was valued as significant to the Creator of the universe. Can you imagine how she must have felt? Not only in that moment but for the rest of her life. Here's the good news: The Jesus we read about in this account is the *exact same Jesus* that you can call out to *today*. Right now, even. You're not interrupting or being some sort of inconvenience to Him. That's not possible. You're not bothering Him with your prayers. Seriously! In fact, the Bible says that God *delights* in hearing from you!<sup>9</sup> He really does! And He wants you to cast *all* of

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<sup>7</sup> At Your Best, Carey Neiuwhof

<sup>8</sup> Leviticus 15

<sup>9</sup> Proverbs 15:8, NLT.

your stress onto Him. He wants to bear that burden for you. He wants you to give Him your anxiety, your fears, along with *anything and everything else* that's weighing you down. Why? According to the Word of God: "Because He cares for you."<sup>xvii</sup>

### REFLECT

Have you ever felt as if you were an inconvenience to God? Or felt as if He doesn't have time for you or your prayers/requests?

What is something in/about your life that you feel shame around bringing to God? And why so?

In John 6:37 Jesus said, "Whoever comes to me I will never cast out." How do His words shape the way you view approaching Jesus with shame?

### RESPOND

How will you apply this to your life today?

## DAY 9: [ peter ]

### READ

John 3:1-21

I'm not a fan of scary movies. I'm not sure I've ever thought: *Now that I've got some free time, I'm going to watch something that completely stresses me out and gives me insomnia for the foreseeable future.* But even with this, for one reason or another I've ended up sitting through a handful of them. And there's a common theme I've noticed in just about every single one of them. Scary movies almost always start out *perfect*. Why is it that the very beginning part of horror films are almost always shown during the daytime, set in a beautiful small town, with a beautiful picture-perfect family or five, and every person the camera comes across is happy and having the time of their life? It's like the perfect ending of your favorite childhood movie. And about ten minutes into the movie I almost always think to myself: *Why can't it just end here?*

After feeding a group of 5,000 people, Jesus instructs the disciples to go ahead of Him to the other side of the lake. When the disciples were crossing the Sea of Galilee in the middle of the night, they saw Jesus walking on the water as He approached the boat. They were immediately struck with fear and initially thought He was a ghost. Jesus calmed their hearts by assuring it was Him. Then Peter—ever so bold—asked Jesus if he could go out to Him on the water. Once Jesus obliged, Peter stepped out of the boat and *walked on water* until he reached Jesus! What an incredible sight this must have been! And as I read this I can't help but think to myself: *Why can't it just end here?*

Don't you think that it would've made for a much better story if it ended *before* Peter began to sink? Wouldn't that be a great lesson for those of us wanting to be more courageous? For those of us needing encouragement or greater faith? Doesn't it seem like the perfect way to remind us that with Jesus all things are possible? But, as we know, that's not where the story ends. The next verse reads: "But when [Peter] saw the wind, he was afraid, and [began] to sink" (v. 30). Dang. *So close!*

As I read this story over several times the Lord began to transform the way I viewed this interaction. While I playfully say I wish that Peter never began to sink, ultimately I know the beauty woven into this story. In fact, now I can say I'm truly *thankful* that the story didn't stop before Peter began to sink. *Why?* For starters, now my heart isn't as inclined to put Peter on a pedestal, placing him in some sort of hero status that is unattainable for common folk like myself. But that's just the thing: Peter and the rest of the disciples *were* 'common folk.'<sup>xxiii</sup> They were sinful human beings that needed the rescuing of Jesus just like you and I. Second, I'm thankful that I serve a loving, compassionate, and *patient* Savior in Christ Jesus. I'm thankful that Jesus "immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him" the very moment Peter cried out to Him.<sup>xxiv</sup> I'm thankful that Jesus *still* does that with you, me, and whoever else cries out to Him for saving!

It's interesting that even after he *walked on water* and was physically *right in front* of Jesus, fear was still a reality for Peter. It might be easy to think: *How could he possibly be afraid when Jesus was right there with him?* But if we're really being honest, we could ask ourselves the same question, right? For instance, those that belong to Christ know that Jesus is always present with them. Nevertheless, how often do we allow fear to become captain as the storms of life rise up around us. And isn't it also interesting that Jesus allowed the events in this passage to occur? I mean, Jesus—the Creator of the universe—has full authority over nature. He has command over the winds and the waves. He has the power to silence the winds and the waves, yet He allowed them to continue to roar during all of this. This wasn't by accident.

Fear is still very much a reality in our lives today. The ‘winds’ of this world continue to roar all around us. And though we can’t control these winds—how strong they are, when they show up, how long they last, etc.—you *can* choose to keep your eyes focused on Jesus. He is the one who gives us the ability to accomplish the good for His kingdom—things we could *never* do without His power working in and through us.

While Jesus knows of the difficult circumstances and fears in our lives, He often allows the winds to continue to roar around us. This isn’t by accident. You see, He *wants* us to ‘step out of the boat’ in faith. He *wants* you to fix your eyes on Him and pursue Him amidst the winds and the waves. And if we, like Peter, ever take our eyes off of Jesus, we should also immediately cry out to Him to save us. How amazing it is that Jesus is ready and willing to rescue us! Whenever you cry out to Jesus, you can trust that He *will* pull you up. He will rescue you and restore you. Regardless of how mighty the winds and the waves around you may be, if you belong to Christ then *you can choose faith over fear*. Every single time. And if and when fear begins to show its head and tries to take over as captain, cry out to Jesus and He will save you! *Every single time*. And it is because of *this* truth that I’m thankful that the story didn’t end where *I* wanted it to. I’m thankful that God’s Word included the shortcomings of people just like you and I. And I’m thankful that even in the midst of fear, we can place our faith and trust in a Savior who is ready and willing to save!

## REFLECT

What is a present reality in your life right now that is causing fear? In what ways is this fear holding you back from a deeper relationship with Jesus?

What would it look like for you to ‘choose faith over fear’ with the above fear? (What would it look like for you to ‘step out of the boat’ in your situation?)

Using your answer above, write out the specific steps you are willing to take *today*.

## RESPOND

How will you apply this to your life today?

## DAY 10: [ the canaanite woman ]

### READ

Matthew 15:21-28

We often are taught some of life's biggest lessons in moments of discomfort. It is in those challenging times that our heart is revealed and we are taught to grow. However, in those moments of difficulty, we are often asking ourselves "Why"? Why do we have to endure such hardship to grow?

This is possibly the most curious and unique encounter with Jesus in all of Scripture. This is simply because of the reaction that Jesus has to this Canaanite woman. This is truly the most unique response Jesus ever has to someone approaching him for help. He is consistently a kind and encouraging individual to those who were weak and sick. But, here, His response is just the opposite. In fact it almost seems rude at first. This woman cries out to Jesus, "Have mercy on me, Lord!" Verse 23 tells us "He did not say a word to her."

I hate when people ignore me. I don't think anyone likes it. If you're trying to talk to someone, you would hope they have the willingness to listen. It is discouraging and it often makes you assume certain things about the person ignoring you. Maybe they didn't hear you. Maybe they don't like you. Maybe they think they're too popular to talk to you.

Now, put yourself in the shoes of this woman. She is a Canaanite woman. This means that she was a Gentile, and according to cultural norms at the time, she was not to be too close to Jesus. Being a Gentile, she would be considered unclean and an outsider. But she is desperate. Her daughter is possessed by a demon. This motherly love pushes her to be willing to embarrass herself publicly to try and talk to Jesus.

He clearly hears this woman, as the rest of the disciples beg Jesus to send her away. His response is also seemingly belittling to the woman. He says "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel," and then uses the term "dog" in reference to her. All of these are the complete opposite of what you would expect from Jesus. It seems rude and discouraging.

So, why? This isn't some story that isn't supposed to be included in Scripture; it is recorded in Mark as well. But, as you keep reading, you start to see that maybe there was a point Jesus was trying to make.

Jesus's God-given ministry at the time was to the people of Israel. This means that this woman was outside of that realm. However, Jesus's heart is not to leave her where she is, but He also is to remain obedient to the mission God has sent Him on. He does not send her away, however, and so she persists. She once again pleads with the Lord on her knees. However, Jesus is reluctant again, and it seems He does this to test her faith. She has been faithful in calling to the Lord, but her answer is so wise that Jesus is quick to provide her with what she is asking.

Sometimes we struggle in a season of waiting. It can seem like you're seeking the Lord and continually not getting a response. In the midst of some of the most difficult moments, it can feel like the Lord is ignoring us. This woman feels like an outcast, her daughter is possessed, and instead of getting discouraged, she displays her faith by continuing to pursue Jesus. In Psalm 13, David asks God, "How long O LORD? Will you forget me forever?" David feels like He is forgotten by God in the midst of difficulty. Yet, as you keep reading, you see that He is reminded of the faithfulness of God. We don't always know His timing in answering us, but we can know He is faithful. He ends Psalm 13 by saying "But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice again in your salvation."

Luke 11:9-13 tells us “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” This passage talks about prayer, and the story teaches us that we are to continually knock and ask. It paints the image that we are to continue asking to the point where God will honor our faithfulness to ask. When we ask in faith for things beneficial to our faith, God will be faithful to answer. Even when it seems like he is ignoring us, He will be faithful to answer if we keep asking. He has promised this and He hears our pleas.

### **REFLECT**

What difficult situations in your life have led to the most growth?

What should you do when it feels like God doesn't hear you?

What is God's promise to us for our prayers?

### **RESPOND**

How will you apply the truth of this text to your life today?

## DAY 11: [ the deaf man ]

### READ

Mark 7:31-37

Jesus is traveling through a Gentile (non-Jewish) region when a man in need was brought to Him. This man was not only deaf, but also had a speech impediment. Out of His compassion and care, Jesus took the man aside and healed him. Whenever the man returned, the crowd was astonished that he was instantly and miraculously healed.

It's possible to read through these verses without giving any second thought to them. I know that I'm guilty of that. I've read this passage before where my brain jotted down a quick note: *Jesus healed a person. Great!* And then I move on, unphased and unchanged. After all, Jesus performed *many* miracles on a *lot* of people—including resurrections! While this passage records a miraculous healing, there is an even greater implication [woven in]. This 'bigger picture' meaning is revealed to us in the last verse. The crowd reacts to the miracle and responds, "He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak" (v. 37). If you're reading through these verses quickly, there doesn't seem to be anything to note about their words. Nothing to write home about. There is, however, a *lot* more going on with these words. Scripture is much deeper than that.

See, "He has done all things well" is strikingly similar to the creation account in Genesis where God created all things and declared it was good.<sup>10</sup> John chapter 1—which also reads similarly to Genesis 1—lets us know that Jesus is the Creator of all things.<sup>11</sup> And as Creator God, Jesus has the power and the authority to miraculously work within His creation—including giving the power to hear and speak. Jesus knew exactly what He was doing when He chose to heal this particular man.

When Mark recorded the crowd saying, "He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak," he was referring to a specific prophecy found in Isaiah 35:6. The book of Isaiah has a lot of prophecies that God revealed to the prophet regarding the coming Messiah. Some scholars say there are roughly 300 'Messianic prophecies' given in the Old Testament that Jesus of Nazareth perfectly fulfills.<sup>12</sup> *Three hundred!* The event recorded in today's passage represents just *one* of the many Messianic prophecies Jesus fulfilled. What's more, the word translated *could hardly talk* in Mark 7:32 is a rare Greek word used only one other time in the entire Bible.<sup>15</sup> Can you guess where? Yep, you got it—in Isaiah 35:6! Mark wanted to make sure that his audience understood a very important fact: Jesus of Nazareth *is* the promised Messiah! The wait is over, He's finally here!

This is a promise that goes all the way back to the first book of the Bible. Genesis 3:15 is often noted as the first reference of the Messiah. Right after Adam & Eve sin, God declares that one day—though the serpent will strike his heel—a descendant of Eve will ultimately crush the head of the serpent. We now know that this imagery manifested itself in the death and resurrection of Jesus! And Jesus—as the promised Messiah—didn't just come to redeem one *kind* of people group. No. Not even close. Jesus came to die because He desires for *all* to repent and believe in Him.

God chose to send His Son, Jesus, to be born and raised as a Jew, by Jewish parents, in a small Jewish town in the Judean countryside. And Jesus—as the Messiah, foreshadowed in Genesis chapter 3 and promised in chapter 12—came

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<sup>10</sup> CCE (Mark), pg. ?

<sup>11</sup> John 1:3

<sup>12</sup> Reference? (Jews for Jesus website? Apologetics book?) <sup>15</sup> IVP, "pg"?

to save *all*. Jesus came to rescue and redeem even these Gentiles. And *that*, my friend, is *why* Mark recorded this event. God made sure this—along with every other word penned in Scripture—was written down and preserved through the years so that we may know that Jesus came to save *all*.

Regardless of who you are, we all fall short of the glory of God.<sup>13</sup> Where you come from, who your parents are, your background, your culture, status, wealth, power, or anything else—none of it matters in regards to our right standing before a Holy God. And this is great news! *Why?* Because every single one of us—whether Jew or Gentile, slave or free—we *all* are called to repent from our sinful ways and believe in Christ alone for our salvation. All because Jesus, the Son of God, the promised Messiah, died to rescue and redeem all. And you, friend, are not the exception. “All” means *all*. “All” means you, your co-worker, your boss, your classmate, your teacher, the family that just moved in down the street, the person who cut you off in traffic ... “All” means *all!*

### REFLECT

Why are the Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament significant to us today?

In what ways is the gospel (what God did to save sinners through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus) in direct opposition with things such as racism and other forms of discrimination based on ethnicity, culture, country of origin, etc?

Is there someone in your life that may feel like they’re the exception to the ‘Jesus came to save *all*’ truth? If so, what step could you take today in letting them know that Jesus gave His life for *them*?

### RESPOND

How will you apply the truth of this text to your life today?

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<sup>13</sup> Romans 3:23

## DAY 12: [ the father of the boy with an unclean spirit ]

### READ

Mark 9:14-27

Jesus—along with Peter, James, and John—return from the Mount of Transfiguration to meet with the other disciples. Upon arriving they find the disciples arguing with scribes. A crowd was gathered around to watch this unfold. Whenever Jesus asked what the argument was about, one man stepped out from the crowd to answer. The man informed Jesus about a spirit that had been tormenting his son ever since he was a young boy. And because of this, he had brought his son to the disciples in hopes they could heal him. The disciples, however, were unsuccessful in their attempt to cast the spirit out of the boy.

The moment that the son was brought into the presence of Jesus, the spirit began violently attacking the boy. The spirit knew the ship was sinking and wanted to cause as much damage as it could before going under. When this happened, the father turned to Jesus and pleaded, “If you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us” (v. 22). Jesus replies, “What do you mean, ‘If I can’?” He follows-up His rhetorical question by referencing the man’s lack of faith. And in utter desperation, the father cries out to Jesus, “I believe; help my unbelief!” (v. 24). In His grace and compassion, Jesus casts the spirit out and heals the boy.

There is something painfully beautiful about this story to me. It is both convicting and encouraging, all at once. The father’s plea with Jesus is coated in reservations due to the fact that the disciples failed to accomplish what they said they could. They fell short and let him down. I think we can all relate to that! The shortcomings of other Christians can negatively impact our own faith. I know that I have experienced this for myself. If you can also relate, perhaps a question brought to me during a time of discouragement can help. Ask yourself: *If the sins of others causes within me a lack of faith in God, then was my faith ultimately in God, or in man?* Read that over again and think on it for just a moment.

While that question won’t instantly remove all discouragement or doubt, it *can* help to reveal the *source* of faith. In other words, it helps to answer exactly *what* (or, *Whom*) your faith is based on. See, I think that just about every Christian can relate to not only this question, but also to the father in today’s passage. This man believes, but at the same time recognizes his lack of unbelief. While he ‘believes’ in the power of Jesus, he’s honest enough with himself to know that he could have *greater* faith. The waters of his belief are muddied by the infiltration of his own unbelief. He has a certain measure of belief *and* is in need of more belief. Both realities are present. But even in this, he also knows that he’s incapable of ‘mustering up’ more faith by his *own* will. If he *were* capable of somehow producing more belief within himself, then we would be reading a much different story. Instead, this father is brutally honest with himself—and more importantly, with Jesus—by admitting his own insufficiency.

What about you? It can be hard to admit your own insufficiency. That’s often seen as weakness in today’s world. But, as the saying goes, *at the end of yourself is where He begins*. God flips the script, you see—*especially* when it comes to salvation! It is whenever we acknowledge our own shortcomings, realize our absolute need of a Savior, and respond in faith that God works in us. Salvation comes to those who know of their own insufficiency, and in turn trust in the complete sufficiency of Christ! And if this is true for salvation then it’s also true for our sanctification. In other words, if this is true for us to be saved, then it remains true after salvation as we become more and more like Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit.

***If it is His grace that saves you, then it is His grace that sustains you.***<sup>14</sup> Perhaps your greatest challenge today is *not* in what you can accomplish *for* the Lord, but believing and *living in the truth* of what He *already accomplished* for you. One of the last words Jesus uttered just before dying on the cross was His divine declaration, “It is finished.”<sup>xxv</sup> It is because of this, that you can rejoice rather than retreat when reminded of your own insufficiency. It is because of this, that you are welcomed and encouraged to humbly approach His throne of grace at all times. And it is because of this, that you can rest in the certainty of His Word when He assures you: “My grace is sufficient for you.”<sup>xxvi</sup> Today, rejoice in the beautiful truth that you belong to and are deeply loved by the all-sufficient Savior, Jesus Christ!

### REFLECT

Can you relate to this father when he says, “I believe; help my unbelief”? If so, what happened and when? What was the final outcome?

When it comes to living out your Christian faith, is it sometimes difficult for you to admit your own insufficiency? Why or why not?

Is there a situation in your life that is currently weighing you down? If so, what specific steps do you need to take as you surrender and trust in the all-sufficient Christ?

### RESPOND

How will you apply this to your life today?

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<sup>14</sup> Ephesians 2:8

## DAY 13: [ the adulteress woman ]

### READ

John 7:53—8:11

Have you ever been caught ‘red-handed’ doing something you weren’t supposed to? I specifically remember a moment in high school where my parents found out I disobeyed them. I remember knowing there was no way of getting out of it, and I remember *knowing* that I was going to be punished. Have you ever been there yourself?

One day as Jesus was teaching at the temple courts some scribes and Pharisees tossed a woman who had been caught in the act of adultery into the middle of everyone. These Jewish religious leaders were trying to trap Jesus. They devised a scheme in which they thought would be a guaranteed lose-lose situation for Jesus. He was trapped with no way out, or so they thought. Old Testament Law states that a woman caught in the act of adultery may put to death by stoning.

Here was their thinking: If Jesus were to condemn the women to death, they would not only say He was rebelling against the Romans, but also make a point to show He is merciless. However, if He did not condemn her, then the religious leaders would use accuse Jesus of violating the Law of Moses and is therefore unjust.<sup>15</sup> A massive win for them, and a detrimental loss for Jesus with no way out (or so they thought). How ironic that these religious leaders attempted to use the Word of God as a means to trap the Word Incarnate.<sup>16</sup>

Unhurried and unphased, Jesus responds, “let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone (8:7).” One by one, each man eventually dropped his stone and walked away until only the woman and Jesus remained. Jesus tells her He does not condemn her and to leave her life of sin. Think about this: A woman was caught “red-handed” in an act that—according to *God’s* Law—was punishable by death. As if being utterly humiliated wasn’t enough, she’s flung in front of the Son of God while He’s teaching the ways of God in front of the people of God. Can you imagine the amount of shame and the fear of punishment she must have felt? And while it’s safe to say she knew she was guilty, I’m not nearly as sure she was expecting “the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth<sup>17,18</sup>” to respond in the way He did.

Some make the grave mistake of using this story as a license to sin: *See! We’re not counted guilty because everyone else sins, too!* Not only is kind of thinking incorrect, but it also doesn’t sound like heart of someone who’s been given a new heart and has been transformed by the grace and truth that only God can provide. It’s important to know that Jesus did not ignore, excuse, deny, or sweep her sin under the rug. He didn’t do that with this woman, nor does He do that with us today.

But, just as Jesus stepped in between this woman and her accusers, He also stepped in between our sin and the eternal consequences of sinning against an eternal, Holy God. “For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ.<sup>22</sup>” Jesus gave Himself over to be crucified—

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<sup>15</sup> Believer’s Bible Commentary.

<sup>16</sup> John 1:1

<sup>17</sup> John 1:14

<sup>18</sup> Corinthians 5:21, NLT.

taking upon Himself the wrath that you and I deserve—so that “whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.<sup>19</sup>” *Amen!*

You see, the only One who *could've* thrown the stone at her was Jesus, but He didn't. Not only did Jesus save this woman's life, He gave her a second chance and told her to leave her life of sin. This woman is expecting to be publicly shamed by the revered 'religious' leader. She is convinced that she will be rejected by God just after her own life is brutally taken from her. *But, God.* Instead, in her disgrace she meets the Grace of God and receives a new lease on life. How amazing His grace is indeed!

While we have no record of who this woman was, one can only imagine the difference that this one encounter with Jesus made in her life. Here's where it gets even better: ***The same truth and grace that Jesus showed this woman is offered to you today!*** If you have repented of your sins and trusted in Jesus alone for salvation, you are *free!* If you have never surrendered to Him and placed your faith in the work He completed on the cross, you can do that *right now!* You are free from the shame of your accusers. You are free from the shame you place on yourself. You are free from the fear of divine punishment, for Jesus personally took that on for you. “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.<sup>20</sup>” Now go, leave your life of sin and live freely in the truth and grace that only Jesus provides!

### REFLECT

In what ways is the “I can do whatever I want because Jesus will forgive me” line of thinking wrong?

How does the way Jesus treated this woman help you face some of the sins you struggle with?

What can you learn from Jesus when it comes to helping someone who has fallen in sin?

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<sup>19</sup> John 3:16

<sup>20</sup> Romans 8:1

## **RESPOND**

How will you apply this to your life today?

## DAY 14: [ man born blind ]

### READ

John 9:1-41

Have you ever played a game that involved being blindfolded? The instructions are almost always to complete a seemingly ordinary task, but—\*spoiler alert\*—you can't see anything. The moment you're blindfolded, the difficulty level goes from 'beginner' to 'near-death-experience' *real* quick. You automatically feel lost. You stretch your arms out in front of you to help stop you from running into anything. You take each step ever so cautiously. You can't see anything as you wander aimlessly feeling completely lost.

Jesus is with His disciples as they come upon a man that was born blind. The disciples take this as an opportunity to settle an age-old theological question. I always think it's funny that the disciples give Jesus a multiple-choice option and limit *Him* on what the answer could be. I can't help but think about how often we might go to the all-knowing God for answers, yet put limitations on what *we* will allow as an answer. But that's another devo for another day.

Jesus corrects their false thinking and tells them that this man was born blind so that "the works of God might be displayed in him" (9:3). Jesus then makes mud using His own spit and tells the man to go wash his eyes in the pool of Siloam. The man did as Jesus asked and came back seeing. An absolute miracle! Praise God! He is the only One who is able to do such things! However, as we continue reading we come to find out that the Pharisees weren't pleased about this. For they were spiritually blind, you see.

After hearing how the Pharisees cast the man out, Jesus finds him and asks, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" (v. 35) There's something to say about Jesus' initiative to seek out this man. He first sought out the blind man to heal him, and then He sought him out a *second* time after some time had passed. And it was in this second encounter that there was a *different kind* of healing. Jesus gave this man *physical* sight, and then sought him out a separate time to gift him with *spiritual* sight. How incredible is Jesus that He would seek out sinners like you and I!

Because of sin, we all are born spiritually blind. To be spiritually blind is: 1) to not see that Jesus is the Son of God, and 2) to not *believe* that Jesus is the Son of God. In addition to being born spiritually blind, you and I do *not* have the power within ourselves to 'see.' This gift can only be given by God, by His grace. If it were not for Jesus intervening in our lives, every single one of us would remain spiritually blind, just like the Pharisees. And though the Pharisees could *physically* see, they were *spiritually* blind. They were blind to the spiritual truths of God. In contrast, the blind man not only *knew* he was blind, he also understood his condition could not change *unless* the power of God intervened.

What camp would you say you identify most with today? Do you relate more to the Pharisees and spiritual blindness? Or do you relate more with the man who was born blind? Unlike the Pharisees, we must be willing to acknowledge our own spiritual blindness. In addition, we must also recognize that we are unable to change that blindness on our own. We must face this reality and sit in its truth, however uncomfortable or unsettling it may be at first. *Why?* Because it is only from this place of genuine humility and utter helplessness that you and I can cry out to Jesus. For it is *only Jesus*—the Light of the world—that can give you the ability to see.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Have you trusted in Him in this way? Have you admitted your own spiritual blindness and asked Jesus to open your eyes? Jesus is our only hope. Jesus is the only way you can be rescued from darkness and brought into the Light.

## **REFLECT**

What do you think it means to be spiritually blind, and why does it matter?

Why is the interaction between Jesus and His disciples in verses 2 and 3 significant and applicable to believers *today*?

Jesus sought this man out on two separate occasions. What does this tell us about the character and heart of Jesus?

## **RESPOND**

How will you apply this to your life today?

## DAY 15: [ mary and martha ]

### READ

Luke 10:38-42

If you have siblings, you may have experienced a moment like what is described here in Luke 10. As a kid, I loved to try and tell my parents what I thought my sister was doing wrong. It seems like this may be what is going on with Martha and Mary. These two siblings entertain Jesus in different ways, and it produces a teaching moment.

Now, please note that Martha is not doing anything wrong by serving. We are told she “welcomed him into her house.” Hosting Jesus was a lot of work. He did not travel alone, and he also was not loved by everyone. This would mean a lot of preparation and work to create a hospitable experience. It also could make people dislike Martha depending on their opinion of Jesus. Thus, her heart towards Jesus was good. She welcomed Jesus and His disciples into her home and was very hospitable. This was an act of faith and kindness to Jesus from Martha.

However, there is a difference between Martha and her sister. Martha is wrapped up in serving for Jesus, while Mary is wrapped up in the teaching of Jesus. Jesus evidently began to teach in the house, and Mary saw this as a unique opportunity to sit and listen. She attentively sits at his feet and listens. This shows a heart of readiness to listen and receive the teaching of the Lord.

Neither sister is doing anything wrong. Martha is serving the Lord by hosting Him. Mary is honoring the Lord by listening to His teaching. However, this willingness to host is what distracts Martha from valuable time at the feet of Jesus.

If you’ve ever worked or done chores with someone, you can maybe relate to what Martha is feeling. She is working while the person she feels should be helping her is just sitting and doing nothing. This can be so frustrating. It makes you feel like things aren’t fair. Maybe you give the person the benefit of the doubt for a moment, but the longer they sit there the more you want to say something to them. This is where it boils over for Martha.

Martha has become so distracted and stressed as a host that she has lost her patience. Her heart to serve was amazing, but she had let it trouble her. Jesus tells her she is anxious and troubled because of her busyness. This is where she has sinned.

Jesus’s statement back to her is that “one thing is necessary”. This is where we get to the heart of this story. This one thing is being in the presence of Jesus. At this moment, Martha chose work instead of sitting at the feet of Jesus. Work and busyness can cause stress and anxiety in our lives when we aren’t careful. The way we find peace is in the presence of Jesus. Mary chose what could give her life peace and joy. This encounter with Jesus was a once-in-a-lifetime moment. She got to sit in the presence of Jesus while He walked the earth. Martha would have time to work and host, but she missed out on an opportunity to have an intimate moment and encounter with Jesus.

In Matthew 6:25 Jesus tells us “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes?” He later tells us that worrying cannot add a single hour to our lives. We can’t take our earthly possessions with us. You won’t remember what you ate today next week. You won’t even remember what you wear. However, what does make an eternal impact in your life is moments with Jesus. Jesus tells Martha in this story that “Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.” Time with Jesus is what truly sustains us. He is our provider. He gives peace in the midst of

the worry and stress. He provides purpose. Matthew 6:33 says, "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

If you start replacing times of stress and worry in your life with time with Jesus, you will see a huge difference. Instead of worrying about it, pray about it. Instead of scrolling social media, spend time in the Word. Instead of trying to fit God into your schedule, build your schedule around your time with God. That is the better portion, and it will last and make a difference eternally.

### **REFLECT**

How often do you struggle with anxiety and stress from the things of the world?

Why is it so difficult to find peace sometimes?

How are we to react in times of stress?

### **RESPOND**

How will you apply the truth of this text to your life today?

## DAY 16: [ the thankful leper ]

### READ

Luke 17:11-19

One day as Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem, He entered a village and was met by ten lepers. I can't remember the last time I visited a town and ran into ten men who had leprosy. It's been a while. But really, can you imagine witnessing this in real time? My Spidey-senses would be going AWOL as I stood there shaking in my sandals. And while this wasn't the first time Jesus came into contact with a leper, this *is* the only recorded event we have of Jesus encountering two full basketball starting line-ups worth of men with leprosy!

These ten lepers stood at a respectful distance and pleaded, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us" (17:13). Jesus showed them mercy and "as they went they were cleansed" (17:14). And even though all ten men were healed, only one of them came back to thank Jesus. Luke writes that one man "turned back, praising God with a loud voice; and he fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks" (17:15, 16). Jesus acknowledged this man—a *Samaritan* man, at that—as the only one to give praise to God after receiving miraculous healing.

As Christians we know that God is the Giver of all good things. We also know that we should be thankful for what we have and show gratitude to God. I don't think I'm blowing anyone's mind with this right now. Giving thanks to God is as basic as it gets. Yet at the same time, whenever we read passages like this, or hear a message around Thanksgiving, we *know* that we aren't nearly as thankful as we should be. Not even *close* if we're being honest. But why is that? I mean, how is it that so many of us—myself included—are *so bad* at something *so obvious* and *so simple*?

Expressing our gratitude is something that God commands and expects of us. And if "all things work together for good" for those who love God, then God's commands are *always* for our good.<sup>21</sup> There's an overwhelming amount of scientific research—both Christian and non-Christian—around the amazing benefits that expressing gratitude has on an individual. *It's almost as if humans were designed to experience and express gratitude* (he says tongue-in-cheek). We know we're supposed to do it, and we know that it's good for us, but the question remains: *How* do we go about living with gratitude? What does that look like? And, where do I even begin?

For starters, the first thing we can do is 'Start Low.' As mentioned above, God is the Giver of all good and perfect things. Thus, a great place for us to start is positioning our hearts and minds in all humility. In this we're reminded that God doesn't owe us *anything*. When we understand this simple truth—knowing that everything we have is a gift from God—then we position ourselves to begin with a much more humble perspective.

Second, we can 'Start Small.' We can train ourselves to think about the blessings that we often overlook. For example, 1 out of 3 people in the world do not have access to clean water that's safely managed. Things such as clean water (and the quick access to it), a place to call home, food in the fridge and the pantry, air conditioning, a safe place to worship God along with our brothers and sisters in Christ, as well as so many other easily-overlooked gifts we have can be a great way to 'Start Small' when giving thanks to the Lord

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<sup>21</sup> Romans 8:28

The third and final thing we can do is 'Stick With It.' In Philippians 4, Paul says that whenever we bring our worries and needs to God we should also take the time to thank Him for His goodness and blessings in our life. And the more specific we can get, the better! Research showed that the more consistent we are in expressing gratitude the more natural it becomes.<sup>xxviii</sup> Consistency rewires the neural structures in our brains where we become much more inclined to recognize and focus on the blessings all around us. This sounds a lot like what Paul said in Romans, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind."<sup>22</sup>

What is something you can specifically do today to express gratitude? Some people make it a daily habit to write down 5 things they're thankful for. Others prefer to reflect on their entire week and journal. It's possible that as you've been reading this the Lord has placed someone on your heart that you can reach out to tell them 'Thank You.' There's many different things that we can do to become more intentional in expressing our gratitude. Find what works best for you, and do it! Today, simply take the next step to become consistent in showing gratitude until it becomes consistently part of who you are!

### **REFLECT**

*Start Low:* How does knowing 1) God is the giver of all good and perfect gifts, and 2) God does not owe us anything, impact your perspective on your possessions, your life, and God?

*Start Small:* What are some 'smaller' blessings in your life that you sometimes take for granted instead of being grateful for them?

*Stick With It:* What are 5 things you will commit to continually be thankful for throughout the day today?

### **RESPOND**

How will you apply this to your life today?

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<sup>22</sup> Romans 12:2

## DAY 17: [ the rich young ruler ]

### READ

Mark 10:17-22

Have you ever played *The Game of LIFE* board game? I'm actually a pretty big fan of it! It's fastpaced, colorful, has some twists and turns, and is overall just a fun game to play with a few others. It doesn't take nearly as much time to play as *Monopoly*, nor does it seek to absolutely destroy what were once thought of as 'unbreakable' bonds between friends and other family members.

Whether you've never played *LIFE* or it's been a while, you can always reference the game's manual for the 'How to Win' instructions. The first and last sentence of this section summarize the objective of the entire game: "After all players have retired, all players at Millionaire Estates count their money...The player with the highest dollar amount wins!"<sup>23</sup> Simple enough. And after someone wins you'll put everything back in the box and put the box away. And if no one rage quits then everyone can still stay for the sleepover. It's a great game! 'Game' being the key word, there. But even though it's only a game, the sad reality is that some people live their *actual* lives in the same way they would play this game.

In Mark 10, Jesus sets out on a journey when a powerful and wealthy young man ran up and knelt before Him. This Rich Young Ruler (RYR) asks Jesus what he must do to gain eternal life. Jesus references the commandments and proceeds to list several of them. At this point the RYR is thinking, *YES! Nailed it! I've kept all of these since I was a kid—I'm good!* But Jesus, "looking at him, loved him," and told the RYR to do *one* thing: "Sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me" (10:21). At the most pivotal moment of his life, the young ruler chose to walk away sorrowful. Doing so revealed that his heart belonged to the temporary things of this earth rather than the eternal riches found only in Jesus.

On the outside looking in, it seems like the RYR has it all. You could say he has the things that some people spend their *entire lives* striving for and still may *never* get. From what's recorded, we can see that he's respectful, genuine, he's kept the commandments, he's rich, and he holds a position of authority. And on top of that, he's still young and has the rest of his life to enjoy! Yet here he is kneeling in front of Jesus, asking about the one thing his money, power, and influence *can't* buy. He has everything the world can offer, but knows that the things of this world can't satisfy the deepest part of his being. C.S. Lewis wrote, "If I find in myself desires which nothing in this world can satisfy, the only logical explanation is that I was made for another world."<sup>24</sup>

Jesus wasn't after the man's money, He was after the man's *heart!* See, Jesus knew that the RYR's heart belonged to his money and possessions rather than to God. The young ruler loved *creation* more than the *Creator*. So, what about you? Is there something—or *someone*—that your heart desires over God? Now, the Bible tells us that God graciously gives us many gifts, and enjoying those gifts and showing gratitude to the Giver brings God glory! The problem, however, is when your hearts wants 'things' (creation) over God Himself (Creator).

Question: How would this story read if you were the one in it? In other words, take the Rich Young Ruler out of this story and put yourself there instead. Paint the scene in your mind: You're face-to-face with Jesus and you genuinely want to know what else you have to do to gain eternal life. Got the scene in your head? Great! Now,

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<sup>23</sup> <https://www.hasbro.com/common/instruct/life.pdf> (accessed on February 18, 2022 at 1:33pm)

<sup>24</sup> C.S. Lewis

envision Jesus looking at you with nothing but deep, inexpressible love and care for you. You don't know what's about to happen next, but you have a gut feeling that *nothing* will be the same. Jesus looks at you and asks, "Would you give up \_\_\_\_\_ if it meant gaining Me?"

What would go in that blank for you? Maybe you're not into money or material possessions like the RYR, but what might be one 'thing' you could put in that blank? Maybe it's something you cherish so much, that, if you were to lose it, you fear that it might break you? Or, maybe it's something you're working towards in life. If so, the same question remains: If you were never able to obtain this thing, would Jesus still be enough for you? It doesn't necessarily even have to be a 'bad' thing. But a good thing that takes the place of the Best thing in your heart is a *sinful* thing. What a tragedy it is that a gift would take the place of the Giver. A different way of asking the question is: If you were face-to-face with Jesus, what's the *one thing* you hope He doesn't bring up? What's the *one thing* you don't want Him to touch?

If you had a board game created about your life, what would the end goal be? What would it read under the 'How to Win' section? And if we *are* living our life as if it's a game, what do we have to show for in the end? Usually, whenever you finish playing a game you clean up, put everything back in the box, and put it away. Afterwards, all that's left is you and those sitting around you. *You can't take anything with you.* And any 'thing' is *nothing* in comparison to having Jesus. The truth is, *creation* will never be able to fulfill our inherent longing for the Creator. Jesus is the *only One* who can satisfy our deepest desires. Once we truly recognize and believe this, we know that to give up *anything* in order to gain Jesus is in reality giving up *nothing* and gaining *everything!* Jesus. Is. Enough.

### REFLECT

If Jesus wasn't after this man's money or possessions, then why did he ask him to go and sell everything he has and give to the poor?

If Jesus asked you, "Would you give up \_\_\_\_\_ if it meant gaining Me?" What would go in that blank for you personally?

What is holding you back from being willing to let that 'one thing' go?

## **RESPOND**

How will you apply this to your life today?

## DAY 18: [ thief on the cross ]

### READ

Luke 23:39-43

This passage shows us one last incredible encounter with Jesus before his death, burial, and resurrection. Jesus has been flogged, mocked, beaten, and carried his Cross to this place. He is here in between two other criminals. Jesus came down to the earth to be with and walk with sinners, and here he is dying with them and for them.

Now, put yourself in the shoes of one of the criminals. You have been convicted of a crime and have carried your cross to your own execution. You have already undergone immense pain and trauma, and it's only about to get worse. There is no hope for you. Except, one of the people you are being crucified with isn't a criminal at all. It's a man who was put there because He had claimed to be the Song of God. He is different than all the criminals you are used to seeing. Everyone is mocking Him for being the Christ and the King of the Jews. It seems like a long shot, but maybe He actually is. Maybe He could actually save you.

This thought is what makes one of the criminals ask Jesus "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" He mocks Jesus and is only thinking of how He can be saved. He is seeking His own physical gain. However, the other sees Jesus as the one who can spiritually save him. He rebukes the other criminal and proclaims that "this man has done nothing wrong." From this confession, He pleads with God in faith "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus sees faith in the man, and tells him "Today you will be with me in paradise."

We are all in a way just like these criminals. Maybe you haven't committed a serious crime, but we all have done wrong in a way that is deserving of death. Romans 3:23 tells us "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." Ultimately, this sin brings death to us physically and spiritually. However, this same sacrifice of Jesus is what redeems us.

Notice what the criminal says to describe himself in verse 41. In reference to their punishment, he says "We are receiving the due reward of our deeds." This process of his salvation begins here. He admits his wrongdoing. This is a heart of repentance towards God. Scripture tells us in James 4:6 that "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." The first step to a relationship with God is humility and admitting your sin. After this repentance, He recognizes the authority of Jesus. He says "This man has done nothing wrong," and then He alludes to Jesus being the ruler of a kingdom. He recognizes Jesus as King and pleads for grace. This heart of humility, repentance, and belief is what true faith in Jesus consists of.

Our sin is what held Jesus on that cross. He died so that our sins could be covered by His blood. In this, we have redemption and restoration from death and darkness. Romans 10:9-10 tells us, "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved." No matter what sin you have committed or what death you are deserving of, Jesus is offering grace in the sacrifice of Jesus. There is nothing we did to deserve it. All we have to do is repent, believe, and confess, just as the criminal on the cross did. Jesus wants to know you in a personal way, and through faith you can encounter Jesus in a way that will change you forever.

## **REFLECT**

Have you placed your faith in Jesus Christ?

Why does pride get in the way of our belief?

What is so important about a heart of repentance?

## **RESPOND**

How will you apply the truth of this text to your life today?

## DAY 19: [ mary magdalene ]

### READ

John 20:11-18

One of our favorite things we enjoy doing as a family is to take walks to our neighborhood park. We follow the path that loops around the ponds, and we love to point out to our daughter all of the different animals we see along the way. A good amount of houses back up to these ponds, so a bonus is getting to see the same dogs outside just about every time. One house in particular has two large dogs that run their fence line back and forth, barking at anything that dare pass by. And because we're secretly weird animal people, we have named them, "the Sisters."

One day my wife accidentally let her inner weird animal person slip out and unapologetically called out to their owner (who we don't know) and asked what the dog's names were. "Um, hi," the lady responded apprehensively. Finally breaking the awkward silence she answered, "Sadie and Lacy." We responded with a, "Thank you!" a little too enthusiastically and proceeded to run away like little school children. We thought about moving, and even changing our names and fleeing the country in order to avoid ever showing our faces again.

Some days later we bravely strolled along the same path and from a distance could see the Sisters were out again. The closer we got, the louder and more intimidating they became. While both of them are beautiful, I can't help but [jump and take a step back], even with the rod iron fence in between us. As we were approaching their fence my wife addressed them in a soft and sweet tone, "Hi Sadie! Hi Lacie!" And I am not kidding when I say both dogs were *instantly* calm. No barking. No more running. They became still and looked up at my wife. Their eyes softened and it's as if everything about them seemed to be saying, "You know my name!" Everything changed.

There's something special about someone else knowing your name. There's something that's a little more personal; something that communicates, "I see you. You matter." On a Sunday nearly 2,000 years ago, Mary Magdalene had a somewhat of a similar experience. While it was still early in the morning, Mary went to the tomb where Jesus's body was laid. However, she was surprised to see two angels sitting inside the tomb where Jesus' body was supposed to be. One can only imagine how confused Mary must have been in this moment. She then turns around and sees a Man standing nearby. Mary didn't recognize this Man to be Jesus, but—for reasons unknown to us—supposed Him to be the be gardener instead. After a brief exchange that must have only added to Mary's whirlwind of emotions, Jesus changed everything with one word. Jesus addresses her personally, simply called her by name, "Mary." And *instantly* she recognized the Man to be the One who she was searching for all along, Jesus!

Jesus was well aware of the state that Mary was in. In saying only her name, Jesus completely transforms Mary from being emotionally distraught to having unspeakable joy. She went from being utterly hopeless, to having an untouchable and everlasting hope! And all of this came about from Jesus simply speaking her name. The apostle John writes, "he calls his own sheep by name...and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice."<sup>25</sup>

Where would you say you're at right now as you're reading this? Do you feel like you're in a pretty good place spiritually, emotionally, and mentally? If so, praise the Lord! Or, would you say that you're more so on the other end? Do you find yourself connecting more with Mary *before* she heard her name? If so, I can promise you that you're not alone. Better yet, *God's Word* says that you're not alone.<sup>xxix</sup> If you happen to find yourself connecting more with Mary today, you

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<sup>25</sup> John 10:3, 4

can *still* praise the Lord! Why? If you have trusted in Jesus alone for your salvation, then you belong to Him! You are *His!* He created you; He knows the number of hairs on your head. He knows you, He loves you, and He calls you by *name!*

Like Mary, we will have days, weeks, and even seasons in life where we feel overwhelmed. There are times where we feel powerless against the whirlwind of emotions within us. The enemy loves to use the stresses of this life as an opportunity to fog our vision and distort whatever may be in front of us. But for those that belong to Christ, we can be sure that Jesus is standing right there with us. He is near to us, and He individually cares for each one of us. And even when we can't recognize Him, He faithfully stands beside us as our Rock. Even when we are all out of sorts and can no longer stand, He is the ever-present, unshakable foundation beneath our feet. Out of His love for you, Jesus reminds you, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name; you are mine."<sup>26</sup>

### REFLECT

Have you ever felt overwhelmed or hopeless? How does the truth of you sharing in the victory of Jesus change your perspective on that specific situation?

Jesus is a *personal* Savior. He knows: you by name, the number of hairs on your head, how you think, feel, operate, and He also knows things about you that you aren't even aware of. How does this truth impact the way you see yourself?

Is there someone in your life that needs to be reminded of the truths listed in the previous question? Is there someone in your life that needs to hear them (possibly) for the first time? Write down the names of those who come to mind!

### RESPOND

How will you apply this to your life today?

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<sup>26</sup> Isaiah 43:1, CSB.

## DAY 20: [ thomas ]

### READ

John 20:24-29

Do you know someone that has a nickname? Did *you* have a nickname growing up? Sometimes nicknames can be fun and lighthearted, but other times they can be hurtful. Whether good or bad, sometimes a nickname can live on even after the person is gone. For example, history class taught us about figures such as Alexander the Great and Ivan the Terrible. In Sunday school you may have learned about a disciple known as “Doubting Thomas.” While ‘Ivan the Terrible’ is—well—a *terrible* nickname to have, I can’t help but feel bad for Thomas. Here we are, roughly 2,000 years later, and many *still* refer to him by his nickname. I feel bad. The passage *clearly* states that Thomas ultimately believed in the resurrected Jesus as the Son of God. In fact, we learn that Thomas was not only the *first* but also the *only* individual in the Gospel of John to personally address Jesus as God. Yet, we still know him as “Doubting Thomas.” That’s terrible.

While they were together, some of the disciples told Thomas that they’d seen the resurrected Jesus with their own eyes. Thomas is immediately suspicious. He responds with a long list of *very* specific requests that *must* be met in order for him to believe. Like a good detective, Thomas demands to see the cold hard evidence that would support their claim. He defaults to doubt.

It can be easy to look down on Thomas in disappointment. “How could he *possibly* doubt when he had the privilege of *physically* being around Jesus?” some might say. And by “some” I admittedly mean myself. I’m not entirely sure how I would’ve responded to Thomas if I were in Jesus’ sandals. But as I like to remind myself: I’m thankful that *Jesus* is God and that I’m *not*. Amen! And I love how Jesus responds to Thomas. He doesn’t shame him or slap him with a ruler. He doesn’t tell him to go sit in the corner and think about what he just did. He doesn’t cast him out or no longer allow Thomas to follow Him. *No!* Instead, we see the character of Jesus on display in a beautiful way. Jesus, in His divine love and patience, offers to meet Thomas right where he’s at. He invites him to ‘see for himself.’ And in this interaction, Jesus transformed Thomas from ‘the disciple that doubted’ into ‘the disciple that declared,’ “My Lord and my God!” (v. 28)

Many people are hesitant to voice their doubts in fear of how they might be viewed by others. The word *doubt* is almost viewed as the “d-word” in some circles. But I’m not too sure we’d see Jesus leading any of those circles. You see, Jesus never rebuked Thomas for his doubts, but rather for his *unbelief*. There’s a difference. It’s possible to have belief in Christ *and* have doubts. Not only is it possible, but I’d argue that it’s *much* more common than some may think. We are imperfect beings navigating our lives in a fallen world. And as if this truth alone were not challenging enough, we are constantly reminded of our limitations at seemingly every turn. Doubts are *going* to come. The enemy wants to use doubt to convince us to not trust in God. That’s just what he does and we can’t change him. What we *do* have control over, though, is how we *respond* to these doubts. When doubts arise, do we immediately go into detective mode like Thomas did? Or do we humbly take them to Jesus, knowing that *He* is our Rock?

Maybe you’re reading this and you don’t doubt the resurrection or the Lordship of Christ. Would you say you have some questions? Sure! I mean, who doesn’t, right? But even in those, you’re still confident in your beliefs. And if you believe, *be encouraged and rejoice* that you fall under those “who have not seen and yet have believed” (v. 29)! Praise God! But what about the doubts that aren’t directly related to the

resurrection or the divinity of Jesus? What about the times when you mess up and give in to temptation? What about the times when you run back to old sinful habits whenever you're stressed or feeling down?

*That's* when the enemy strikes with doubt. He tries to get you to doubt that God loves you; to doubt that God will forgive you; to doubt that you will ever or *could* ever be free from such chains. It's in those times when he wants you to doubt goodness of God, and to even doubt your own salvation.

If you're a follower of Jesus Christ that experiences doubt, know that you're not alone. You belong to a long list of other imperfect believers who experience similar doubts as you. There's a reason why God led John to record this particular interaction between Jesus and Thomas. God knows that His people will have questions and experience doubt. But please, Christian, don't keep your doubts in the dark. Bring them to the Light. Be encouraged that you can do so without fearing His rejection of you. Be honest before God; tell Him your doubts and then give them over to Him. And whenever the enemy tries to feed you doubts and sell you his lies, remind yourself that you belong to the One whose scars prove otherwise! Remind yourself (and your doubts!) of *who* Jesus is and *what* He already accomplished. Rest in the certainty that you belong to Him. And because of this, *you are not your doubts*. You are *His*. You are chosen; you are loved; you are forgiven; you are a child of the King of the universe! These are only a small portion of the long list of nicknames you can claim now that you are His! And rest assured that these 'nicknames'—these *truths*—will live on as yours for all eternity.

### REFLECT

Is there a specific doubt or question you have but are hesitant to ask or bring up? What is it, and what are your hesitations around bringing it up?

Do you think God can use doubts to lead one to a *deeper* faith and love for Him? Why or why not, specifically?

Is there someone in your life that is struggling with doubts? In what ways might this passage and its truths be valuable for them?

### RESPOND

How will you apply this to your life today?

## DAY 21: [ paul ]

### READ

Acts 9:1-19

One of my favorite things to do is to sit across from someone and listen to their story. I love hearing about the different ways God has worked in people's lives. There's something deeply moving about hearing someone's personal testimony. I believe that it is one of the most encouraging gifts that can be enjoyed on this side of eternity. I'm always reminded of my own personal story. I'm brought back to that precious moment in time when I finally surrendered to Him. My mind is bolstered in Truth, while my heart recalls the emotions accompanied with placing my faith in Jesus Christ as Savior of my sins and Lord of my life. And come on, who *doesn't* love a good testimony! And fortunately for us there are *plenty* of those found in Scripture.

If we were asked to name someone in the Bible who was radically saved by Christ, I'd say that a *lot* of people would mention the apostle Paul. We first read of Paul (artist formerly known as 'Saul of Tarsus') in the book of Acts. The last verses of chapter 7 introduce us to him as this *anti-hero*, so to speak. He oversaw and approved of the outraged mob that murdered Stephen. We come to learn that Paul was also a Pharisee; a prodigy of sorts that was well-beyond his years in many ways. We also know that Paul had a dangerous reputation as one who "persecuted [Christians] to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women."<sup>27</sup> And this is exactly what Paul is attempting to do in Acts 9. While on the road to Damascus, a powerful light from heaven flashed around him causing him to fall to the ground. Paul's life was about to be radically transformed. Nothing would ever be the same.

The apostle Paul wrote the majority of the New Testament letters. And it is in these writings where Paul reveals the purpose behind his experience on the road to Damascus. A radical persecutor of Christians—and thus of Christ personally<sup>28</sup>—became a radical missionary and evangelist for the gospel. More so, this former Gentile-hating Pharisee was the very one that God chose to bring the gospel to countless Gentiles.<sup>29,30</sup> In his first letter to Timothy, Paul writes: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners'—and I am the worst of them. But I received mercy for this reason, so that in me, the worst of [all sinners], Christ Jesus might demonstrate his extraordinary patience as an example to those who would believe in him for eternal life."<sup>36</sup> *Amen and amen!*

Paul knew that the only appropriate response to the radical mercy and grace of God is to live in radical obedience to Him. And by "radical" I mean *radical*. Later on in Acts we read that his trusted brothers and sisters in Christ were doing their absolute best to keep Paul from going to Jerusalem. They knew that Paul going to Jerusalem might be the end of him. Even in hearing their hearts and knowing their intentions were good, Paul responds with a bold declaration: "For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus."<sup>31</sup> *Wow*. There is *so much* packed into that one statement. And in all of it I can't help but ask myself: "Does that reflect *my own heart* for the Lord?" What about for you? Do Paul's words represent your heart for Jesus?

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<sup>27</sup> Acts 22:4

<sup>28</sup> Acts 9:4

<sup>29</sup> Acts 9:15

<sup>30</sup> Timothy 1:15b-16, CSB.

<sup>31</sup> Acts 21:13

If you're like me in any way, Satan may use that question as an opportunity to try to unleash a full-on shame assault. Key word there is "try." Remember, those who are in Christ have the power to take up the full armor of God "with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one."<sup>32</sup> This is an important \_\_\_\_\_ as we remain on the road that God has for us. Paul knew this to be true as well. And it is this same truth that prompted him to write, "to live is Christ, and to die is gain."<sup>33</sup> But he didn't just write that, he *lived that*. Paul knew that if Jesus could forgive him, make him new, and use someone like *him* for the perfect purposes of the Kingdom of God—then God could save *anyone*. Not just those who had a 'Damascus Road experience,' but for *anyone* who would repent and believe in Jesus alone for salvation. *Anyone*.

God's radical saving and transformation of Paul is a beautiful reminder of just how amazing His grace truly is! But in reality, the fact that God would save *anyone* is radical on its own. Truly. You and I were once *dead in our sins*. Dead, in utter darkness, and headed towards the eternal punishment we deserved. We all have freely chosen to rebel against a Holy God. And in response, the Creator of the universe took on flesh and gave Himself over to be crushed by the weight of our sins. For there is no forgiveness of sins without the shedding of blood.<sup>34</sup> And "in him we have redemption through his blood."<sup>35</sup> So that sinners like you and I can be made alive, walk in His Light, and enjoy Him for all eternity. *That* is radical. And the only appropriate response to the radical mercy and grace of God is to live a life of radical obedience to Him.

### REFLECT

In what ways is Paul's transformation on the road to Damascus encouraging to you?

What does living a life of radical obedience to God mean? What would it look like for you *personally*?

How does knowing that Jesus saved someone like Paul—a zealous persecutor of Christians—impact the way you think of someone being 'too far gone' to be saved?

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<sup>32</sup> Ephesians 6:16

<sup>33</sup> Philippians 1:21

<sup>34</sup> Hebrews 9:22

<sup>35</sup> Ephesians 1:8

## RESPOND

How will you apply this to your life today?

<sup>i</sup> Isaiah ... ; Malachi ... <sup>ii</sup> Mark

1:7, emphasis mine.

<sup>iii</sup> John 3:30 <sup>iv</sup> John 1:36 <sup>v</sup>

C.S. Lewis, ? <sup>vi</sup> Philippians

2:3-4, NLT. <sup>vii</sup> Philippians

2:6-8, NLT.

<sup>viii</sup> 1 Peter 5:5 <sup>ix</sup> John 3:3 <sup>x</sup> John

3:16, emphasis added.

<sup>xi</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:17 <sup>xii</sup> Num. 12:10;

Lev. 13:45-46. <sup>xiii</sup> Matthew 8:2,

emphasis added <sup>xiv</sup> Matthew 8:3,

emphasis added. <sup>xv</sup> CCE, pg. ? <sup>xvi</sup> 1

John 1:9 <sup>xvii</sup> Luke 5:32

<sup>xviii</sup> Mark 2:14 <sup>xix</sup> John

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<sup>xx</sup> John 5:6 (do I need to ref this Scripture if it's already the main passage of that day's devo?)

<sup>xxi</sup> 1 John 4:4 <sup>xxii</sup> 1 Peter 5:7. <sup>xxiii</sup> Acts 4:13?

<sup>xxiv</sup> [scripture] (do I need to reference/endnote the Scripture if it's  
already the main passage of that day's devo?)

<sup>xxv</sup> John 19:30. <sup>xxvi</sup> 2 Corinthians 12:9. <sup>xxvii</sup> Mark 8:12

<sup>xxviii</sup> What research? Lol (Jennie Allen's book?) <sup>xxix</sup>

1 Corinthians 10:13