



Advent

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Understand the Bible in 10- minutes a day with clear and concise plans for every book and audio guides for every chapter of the Bible.

“Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked. “How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” Acts 8:30b- 31a

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Advent 2025 | Anticipation

Hello my friends. Welcome to *Advent Through the Word 2025*. My name is Kris Langham, and I am so honored to join you this Advent.

I'm also excited! Christmas is on its way. *Lovely, glorious, beautiful Christmas—upon which the entire kid year revolves!*

Okay, so that was a line from *A Christmas Story*. But I really do love this season. Christmas lights, Christmas trees, Christmas songs, Christmas *movies!* It's all finally here! And there's one thing that *A Christmas Story* gets right that is at the very heart of Advent: *anticipation*.

Anticipation is a powerful force. It affects you—holds your focus and reminds you to *prepare*. Have you ever had your mind *fixed* on one calendar date: the game, the presentation, the test, or even—the arrival? Anticipation *drives* you.

Now the various traditions of Advent go back *sixteen centuries*—not quite to Bible times—but the idea of *preparing* hearts and minds for Jesus is *thoroughly* Biblical.

In Isaiah 40:

“A voice of one calling: “In the wilderness *prepare* the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God” (Isaiah 40:3).

That call to *prepare the way* was a prophecy delivered *six hundred years* before Jesus' time. That's a lot of preparation—a lot of *anticipation*. Advent literally means *arrival*—as we await the *arrival* of the baby Jesus at Christmas.

And just before Jesus arrived, God sent a messenger to fulfill that prophecy. John the Baptist's *whole* job was to *prepare hearts to meet Jesus*.

Now you and I didn't get to *live* in that preparation time, so the core idea of Advent is to give *us* time to move our hearts through that process of *anticipation* and *preparation*.

And that waiting *affects* us. Lamentations 3 says:

"The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord"
(Lamentations 3:25-26).

Now what *you* think of with Advent traditions will depend on your background. Some of us remember lighting candles each Sunday at church or at home with an Advent wreath. And some of us mostly think of opening twenty-four days of little paperboard doorways to chocolate. Or Star Wars Legos.

Now those are just good fun, but what they get right about Advent is *anticipation*. I don't think there's any anticipation in the world quite like a kid at *Christmastime*. In my house, there's a little wooden snowman with two number cubes marking the daily countdown. My kids—raced to switch the numbers each morning—to move us one day closer.

I love it. Now some might argue that our kids are anticipating the *wrong* things. True—but they're kids. Of course they anticipate chocolate and legos. The real question is what changes when we grow up. What do you anticipate *now*? **What you wait for says a great deal about what you value.**

And the history is interesting here. The oldest records of Advent observation date back to 380 AD in *France* and later *Spain*. That predates most of the big church splits by a long shot—which explains why you’ll find Advent celebrated across denominations and all over the world.

And the candle tradition goes back to the 1830’s and a German pastor named Johann Wichern. He worked with poor children in the city of Hamburg, and he wanted to give the kids a reason to look forward to the arrival of Jesus at Christmas. So he built a large wooden wreath with twenty-four candles—twenty smaller for the weekdays and four *large* candles for the Sundays.

And it worked. Something about waiting for that *next candle* to light *captivated* the kids’ attention. And anyone who’s ever tried to teach kids knows—captive attention *is gold*.

And I think God looks at us that way. He *values* our attention. And rewards it. In Isaiah 40:

“But those who wait on the LORD shall renew their strength; They shall mount up with wings like eagles, They shall run and not be weary, They shall walk and not faint.” (Isaiah 40:31, NKJV).

So what is it we’re waiting for at Advent? For Jesus, of course. And not just his first arrival. Advent *also* looks forward to Jesus’ *next* arrival. Did you know that the song “Joy to the World” was written about his *Second Coming*? “*Let Earth receive her King.*”

So to help us anticipate *both* arrivals, our Advent plan has *two* tracks: every Sunday we follow the stories leading up to Jesus' birth at Christmas, and every weekday we follow Jesus through the entire gospel of *Mark*—all building up to the promise of his *return*.

We'll get the stories directly from the Bible, and you'll have teachers like me to explain it and guide you through it. That's what Through the Word is all about.

So here's the plan. We have 26 days—November 30 to December 25. Don't worry if you started the wrong day—just jump in and catch up.

The *most important* days are the *Four Sundays of Advent*, starting December 1st. Each Sunday we'll light one candle—honoring *hope, peace, joy, and love*—and we'll walk together through the Christmas story *in the Bible*.

And on the weekdays, *Mark*—which just happens to fit perfectly at one chapter a day. Then, Christmas Eve, we'll go back to the *birth* of Jesus in Luke 2, and close with the wise men on Christmas Day. And *every* day comes with a ten minute audio guide to walk you through it.

Now Saturdays are an off day—or a make up day if you need it. All together, it's a great plan. I'm so excited for this.

Now you don't *have* to do *all the days*. You could just do Sundays and Christmas Eve. But I think you're gonna love the full experience. And ten minute audio works anywhere—so bring Jesus with you. Like Charlie Brown, *we will not let commercialism ruin our Christmas!*

Now Sundays are special. Still audio and just *over* ten minutes. You can listen on the go, but they're also a *great* opportunity to slow down. If you want a Christmas tradition for your home—this one is great. Gather a few candles, bring the kids and listen together. I'd say most kids fourth grade and up will understand, and the younger kids you can help along. I will also occasionally be silly just because I know kids are listening. Like saying *Francisco* just because it's fun to say. And to shout out to Francisco. Hey man.

Little hint: listen to the end.

Parents, this is your chance to *harness* the power of anticipation with your kids—as God might just do the same with you. And this is definitely not *just* for kids.

For friends and family far away, you can also use the app to follow together. So invite some friends today. There's something powerfully connecting in knowing that thousands of us all over the world will be lighting candles together.

Speaking of candles—Advent tradition includes one candle each Sunday, then one more on Christmas Eve. You can use a traditional Advent set and wreath, or improvise. If you want a candle every day, up to you. And if your Advent smells like cinnamon spice and snickerdoodles—it's all good. With the kids, those lit candles are a surprisingly effective way to keep them *focused* while they *listen*. But kids, hands off.

I'll tell you when to light them *together* in the guide, and feel free to modify as you see fit.

The four Sundays are for *hope, peace, joy, and love*. We'll talk about the theme, light the candle, then walk through the Bible story. *Theme, candle, Bible*. And we'll give you a little something to reflect on together.

If you have kids, it's a great time to help them think deeper. Maybe ask *their* definitions of *hope, peace, joy* and *love*. If your kids say amazing and hilarious things like my kids did, save it. Then bring it back at future Advents. Or make a craft out of it. I see you homeschool moms and Sunday school teachers thinking. Or keep it simple and just listen—you and me.

And that's it! We start tomorrow. Can't wait to start this Advent together. And I'll close us with one more promise from Isaiah 9—also given with *six centuries* to wait and anticipate:

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6).

“Bye Buddy. Hope you find your dad.”

Day 1: First Sunday of Advent | Hope (Luke 1)

Well hello again my friends. Advent is officially here! Today is the First Sunday of Advent. And wherever I may be joining you—and even if you're a bit off schedule—this is amazing. Look at us making a tradition.

Who all's here? Got the kids? Family, friends? Is it just me and you? Maybe driving home from church? Hey, I'm just glad to be part of it. Now remember our Sunday plan: *theme, candle, then Bible*.

Today's Bible chapter will be *Luke 1*. And if you have your Advent candles, it's almost time. If not—I got us covered. Or just improvise—grab a house candle. Now before we light it...

Wait. Did you already light yours?

It's alright—just give me a heads up next time.

But before *some* of us light—let's remember what it's for. The first candle of Advent—is for *hope*. If you have a traditional set, hope is a *purple* candle—as are peace and love. Pink is for joy—week 3, and white is for Christmas. But today, purple—for the *hope* of a coming King.

I love hope. Hope is *the expectation of good things coming*. But I like to distinguish godly hope from worldly hope. So often worldly hope is just a set up for disappointment. But godly hope is resilient.

For the world, hope is like a lottery ticket—a very long shot at *very temporary* joy. But with God, hope is like a bus ticket—the journey might be long, but we *will* get there. And my ticket says *Heaven*. I'm going home.

So let's reflect: What has *hope* meant in your life *this* year? For me, it's been quite a year. Hebrews 6:19 fits it well:

“We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.”
(Hebrews 6:19).

I love that. Hope is an anchor. Some of you know I lost my Mom *last* year. Her decline was a journey, and along the way I shared with her a little practice—a thing I say to *remind* myself:

“I choose hope. I choose faith. I choose joy. I choose love.”

And that's it. See, hope *is* a choice. This year hit hard again. My daughter was diagnosed with Hodgkin's Lymphoma. Nineteen years old. And the moment I heard it—was like a storm hit us. And I had a choice.

Now I think it's dangerous to pretend that Christians *don't worry* when life hits hard—like we respond to tragedy with *some magical emotional serenity*. That just makes normal Christians feel *ashamed* for being human. She's my daughter. Of course I worried.

Hope is not the absence of normal human emotion—it's an anchor in the storm. That's not a serene setting—it's a battle. But I *chose* hope, and as Romans 5 reminds us:

“*Hope* does not put us to *shame*” (Romans 5:5).

Well, after months of chemo, my daughter is healthy again. Hair is coming back too. Thank you doctors, nurses, and all those who *hoped* with us. And I know some of you are going through so much more. Choose hope—and choose it together.

So that’s my story this year. Now time to light the candle. Our first Advent candle—to hope. And let’s pray:

“Lord we light our first candle together to honor the coming of Jesus, as we choose your hope to anchor us through every storm. In Jesus’ name, amen.”

Okay, now you can light.

And now for our Bible *Christmas* story. Remember that we’re borrowing these from our chapter audio guides. This is the Bible’s *lead up* to the Christmas story—from Luke 1. A chapter I call: *A New Hope*. Enjoy.

Luke 1 | A New Hope

Now Luke opens his account a short time before Jesus, with the very human story of an elderly husband and wife with no children. They were two people desperately in need of hope.

Verse 5:

“In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commands and decrees blamelessly. But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old” (Luke 1:5-6).

Sometimes life is rough on the nice guys. Two godly believers enduring one *long* trial. Infertility. It’s a hard trial for any couple. In *that* day, people treated you like you were cursed. Yet Zechariah and Elizabeth served God faithfully, and their heart’s one desire just never happened.

Zechariah is a Jewish priest, and we catch up with him serving in the temple of the Lord at the altar of incense. The incense in the temple represents prayer – and we see prayer happening everywhere in this story – both inside and outside the temple. Zechariah himself has been praying for one thing for a *long* time. There inside the temple, Zechariah is surprised by an angel named Gabriel. Let’s read at verse 12:

“When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him: “Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard” (Luke 1:12-13a).

Now there’s an encouraging message: *Your prayer has been heard*. Which prayer? The prayer to have a child, of course.

But Zechariah has been saying that prayer for years—praying, and *hoping*. God listened faithfully all those years, and His answer arrives at last in verse 13:

“Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John”
(Luke 1:13b).

This baby named John will become the man we know as John the Baptist. This is not the disciple John who wrote a gospel, this John is a prophet – one of the most important prophets in all the Bible. His job description is given in verses 16 and 17 – and it’s a whole lot more than just baptizing:

“He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke 1:16-17).

Now *that’s* a powerful ministry! Imagine that was your calling today - bringing many back to God, turning *fathers’ hearts to their kids*, turning rebellious hearts to *hear* true wisdom– and above all, making ready a people prepared for Jesus.

So after *years* of praying for a baby, Zechariah gets his answer, and it’s almost too good to be true. So good that Zechariah has trouble believing it! And because he won’t believe, he goes dumb. Not dumb as in stupid, dumb as in can’t speak – because God takes his voice away. There’s a lesson here – *unbelief makes you dumb*. When you don’t trust God’s word, it will keep you quiet and hold you back from sharing the good news.

So Zechariah can't tell anyone what he's heard, but the angel Gabriel still has more to say. Six months later, Gabriel shows up again, this time to visit a young Jewish woman named Mary who is engaged to a young Jewish man named Joseph. Gabriel's message to Mary begins in verse 30:

“Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.” (Luke 1:30-33).

That is quite a prophecy. You may have heard it before with the Christmas story, but look at the words carefully. The promise is made of a *King*. Jesus was born to be King, on the throne of King David, and His Kingdom will last forever.

But consider it from Mary's perspective: at this point the throne of David hasn't been occupied for centuries. The Jews have a king, a tyrant named Herod who rules the Jews ruthlessly. And he serves under Caesar Augustus in Rome—a cruel and wicked man who calls himself a god.

So this prophecy to Mary is a promise of *hope*, and it is a *long* time coming. Don't miss this - the Kingdom of God and the King who will rule it are at the heart of all Bible prophecy; it is what all of history is leading up to. That Kingdom will change the world, and it will last forever. Here in Luke, the archangel Gabriel just named the King, and His name is Jesus. This is big.

Now Mary's response to this massive prophecy is beautiful, honest, and very human. Verse 34,

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"
(Luke 1:34).

You gotta love this. Mary skips past all the everlasting kingdom stuff and says, "Wait a second! I'm a good Jewish girl, how am I gonna have a baby when I'm just engaged?"

So Gabriel explains that the Holy Spirit will make it happen, so that the child will be called the "Son of God." As he says in verse 37:

"For no word from God will ever fail" (Luke 1:37).

I like that. The angel reminds Mary that God's word comes with power. Nothing is impossible for God, and his word *will not fail*. The same is true for us. Our hope rests in the power behind every promise from God's word.

And Mary believes. Where Zechariah had trouble believing and so couldn't speak, Mary can't wait to tell someone! Ironically, Mary runs off to tell Zechariah's wife, who is also Mary's cousin – Elizabeth.

Well that's it guys. If you have time, reflect on your own or together on what *hope* has meant to you this year—and in this story. But let's say a prayer to close.

“Thank you Lord for Advent. As we look forward to Christmas, we thank you for the hope we find in your promise. Anchor us Lord with your hope as we choose to hope in You. In Jesus’ strong name, amen.”

And don’t forget—tomorrow we start Mark’s gospel. Now you don’t have to do the weekdays, but I think you’ll like the dynamic of getting Jesus’ *whole* story on the weekdays, and our *Advent* and *Christmas* stories on Sundays. So I’ll either see you tomorrow, or see you next week. Or both. You can blow out the candle now, but next Sunday we start with the first candle lit, but wait on the other. Happy Advent guys. Choose hope.

“You did it! Congratulations! World’s best cup of coffee! Great job, everybody!”

Day 2: Mark Intro | The Journey Begins

Hello friends, welcome to Through the Word, and welcome to the journey. My name is Kris Langham, and I will be your guide as we begin... the great adventure.

Okay, that was a little dramatic. We're beginning the book of Mark, and I think that's pretty adventurous. But maybe you're just here to check out the Bible. Or maybe you're just getting started following Jesus - or even *restarted*. Or even if you're just curious about this faith stuff - whatever your situation, you're welcome here.

So where do we begin? Well, for the disciples, it all began with two simple words from Jesus, "Follow me." And the road ahead - would change everything.

So that's where we'll start too: following Jesus.

Okay, let's jump in. Today, we start at Mark chapter 1, verse 1:

"The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God."
(Mark 1:1)

That's quite an opening. First, it's good news, and I love getting good news. It's about Jesus. Pretty much my favorite subject. Now if Jesus isn't your favorite subject, that's okay. The Bible is fascinating for anyone. **Check out Jesus for yourself** - read the Bible, ask your questions, find some answers, and **decide what you believe** on one of the most important questions the world has ever been asked.

In Mark 8, Jesus asks, “Who do you say that I am?” (Mark 8:29)

So - what do you say? Who is Jesus? That one name changed the course of history. Changed my life too. There are lots of opinions out there - but what do you think?

We’re here in Mark - to find out what the Bible says about it. So be sure to read the Bible for yourself each day after you listen to me. Or read it first, then listen. Go to the source. The Bible is the source - I’m just here to explain some things and share the journey with you. But right here, verse 1 introduces Jesus as the *Messiah*. Messiah means “anointed one” - as in *the one*, God’s chosen. And Mark tells us that Jesus is - the Son of God.

That’s a bold statement right out of the blocks. The Son of God. What does that mean? We’ll find out more as we go.

Verse 2 begins with a prophecy from Isaiah given centuries earlier:

“I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way - a voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’” (Mark 1:2-3)

So God sends a messenger. His name - is John - better known as John the Baptist. John was sent to preach - and to *prepare* hearts for Jesus. So how do you do that? How is a heart prepared for Jesus?

Well, verse 4 says that John preached a “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” Repentance is the key. Repent means change your mind - about the wrong way you’re living. “*Sorry God. I was wrong.*” That simple sorry, that little piece of humility - opens a door, and makes a straight path for Jesus in your heart. You change your mind - and Jesus gives you a change of direction - following Him.

Back here in Mark, people came from far and wide to hear John, to repent, and get baptized. This is key. The first step to following Jesus is a change of direction. Confess the wrong you’ve done, turn away from it, and turn towards Jesus.

So John baptized the people in water as a sign - a way for them to show their repentance. But he also told them that Jesus was coming, and in verse 8:

“I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

(Mark 1:8)

And then, Jesus arrived. John baptized him in the Jordan River, and in verse 10:

“Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: ‘You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.’”

(Mark 1:10-11)

That voice from Heaven - was the voice of the Father. And the Spirit that descended like a dove - was the Holy Spirit. And with Jesus, we have all three parts of the Trinity in one place.

A little explanation. In the Bible, there is one God. But that one God is presented in three different persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Each of them *is* God. Together, they are *one* God. The word *trinity* isn't *in* the Bible, but it's the best word to describe how the Bible presents God's nature. It means three in one. And that's important because reading the Bible is all about getting to know who God is.

And the Father declares about Jesus, "You are my Son, whom I love." I love that. The nature of God is *love*, and the Father *loves* the Son!

Now we'll cover the rest of Mark 1 tomorrow. But today, let's get some background on Mark's gospel. There are four gospels in the Bible - each one telling the story of Jesus from a slightly different perspective. Not disagreeing, just different focus.

So who is Mark? Well, he was just a kid when the events here took place. And he was likely an eyewitness to some of this - but not all of it. Matthew and John will both give us first hand eyewitness. But we meet Mark the night before the crucifixion, as a boy. And we'll find him again - all grown up- in the book of Acts and in several Epistles. There he's called John-Mark.

Now Mark was *not* one of the 12 apostles, but he served alongside several key leaders: Barnabas (his uncle), Paul, and Peter. Peter calls Mark his “true son in the faith.”

Now Peter was an eyewitness to Jesus’ ministry. In fact, the general consensus is that Mark’s gospel is really a recording of *Peter’s* testimony about Jesus. Mark got the full story from Peter - and also from the other apostles he spent time with Jesus.

So that’s Mark. But more importantly, what we’re going to read from Mark comes from the Holy Spirit. Peter explains how this works in his second letter: “Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:20-21)

In other words, it’s God’s Word. Humans wrote it down, and humans translated it, but it came from God. Now you don’t have to *believe* that in order to read the Bible, but you should know that the Bible claims to be the word of God.

Well - I’m about out of time for the intro. Tomorrow we dig in to chapter 1. For now - you can read ahead, and prepare your heart. Maybe you’ve got some repenting to do. And it’s also a great time to invite some friends to join us on the journey. I’ll meet you back here - tomorrow - for the rest of chapter 1.

Day 3: Mark 1 | Follow the Signs

Hello again friends - we start out in Mark chapter 1 today.

Question: Would you rather go to a church - with amazing miracles every week - or with great teaching every week? And which one - do you think Jesus is more likely to show up for?

Miracles or teaching? We're gonna see both of them here - Jesus was a miracle worker, and Jesus also came to preach. So - which one was more important? And for you today - which one makes for a healthy church? Now I know it doesn't have to be one or the other - but just think with me on this one.

Mark chapter 1 jumps in very quickly to the *ministry* of Jesus. In the first 13 verses, John the Baptist prepares the way, Jesus is baptized, the Father is pleased, and Satan tries to tempt Jesus in the desert. In Verse 14 - Jesus is ready to start ministry. And watch the words - the very first words here about Jesus' work,

“After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, *proclaiming* the good news of God. “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:14-15)

This is important. Jesus was *all* about the message. The Kingdom of God has come near. It's an invitation. God's Kingdom has come to you. You don't have to go on a great journey or undertake a mighty conquest to find it.

You can join His Kingdom right here. If you make God your King, you are part of God's kingdom.

But what if you don't belong in God's kingdom? What if you're not good enough? Hey - that's the good news! Jesus can get us in! He came to us. He paid the full price of citizenship. That's why in verse 15 - he says "Repent and believe the good news!" In other words, change your mind about your sin - and turn and *follow* Jesus.

And speaking of follow - that's exactly what Jesus says to each of his new disciples. He starts with two fishermen named Simon and Andrew in verse 17:

"Come, follow me... and I will send you out to fish for people." "At once they left their nets and followed him." (Mark 1:17-18)

Now just so you don't think this is something out of a zombie movie, it helps to understand that "**follow me**" was a known phrase in their context. It was spoken by a rabbi - to one of his talmidim - or disciples.

In Jesus' time, a *rabbi* was a local or traveling teacher, guiding students through the scriptures and helping them grow in faith and understanding.

Jewish kids in Galilee - learned a *lot* of scripture. When students grew up, a select few of the best students might ask their rabbi if they could follow him - to learn his ways - as a *disciple*. On *rare* occasions, a rabbi might even invite the student.

When Jesus said *follow me* - it was an invitation - to follow in his footsteps - to observe his ministry and learn his ways - to become more and more *like* Him - as a disciple. It was quite an honor to be invited by any rabbi. To be invited by Jesus - would be the adventure of a lifetime!

I wonder sometimes if the disciples knew that their lives were about to change, or that the whole *world* would change. I don't know how much they understood just yet, but they trusted Jesus enough to take the first steps.

Now back in verse 18, notice that they had to *leave* something in order to follow. As we consider what it means to follow Jesus, the same will be true for us. Jesus' invitation still stands, and there is still - as always - a leaving behind - and a stepping forward.

So Simon and his brother Andrew follow - Simon will later be called Peter by the way - and Jesus moves on to find two more brothers: James and John (different John this time), and they too leave what they have and follow Jesus.

And check out what Jesus does next.

In verse 21:

"... Jesus went into the synagogue and began to *teach*. The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had *authority*, not as the teachers of the law." (Mark 1:21- 22)

Jesus is *teaching*. And there's a key word here about *how* Jesus taught. He taught - with *authority*. Authority is a kind of power - but not just strength or energy. Authority is power with legitimacy - the right to exercise that power.

And the people take note. One of those people is demon possessed. Now as you read - watch how the demons respond to Jesus. They *know* who He is - and they respond to His authority.

Jesus - casts the demon out of the man - and in verse 27:

“The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, “What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to impure spirits and they obey him.” (Mark 1:27)

And all those amazed people - started telling all the other people. In verse 28, the news spreads fast.

Man - people start bringing the sick and the possessed from *all - over*. The whole town comes to Jesus' door. And he heals - and he casts out demons. But something curious - Jesus keeps telling the healed *not* to go tell everyone else. Why is that?

Well, when Jesus heads out early in the morning to get some solitude - the disciples show up to tell him:

“Everyone is looking for you!”

But in verse 38,

“Jesus replied, ‘Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. *That is why I have come.*’” (Mark 1:38)

Did you catch that? Jesus came to preach. It's about the message. It's about the invitation to God's Kingdom. And all the hype building up over miracles - was getting in the way of the message. Jesus says - "Let's go where I can preach. That is the reason that I'm here."

So then why did he do the miracles?

Well - for one - out of compassion. Jesus cared. But there's another reason. In the Bible, miracles are often called "signs and wonders." Now a wonder is something that makes you stop and think - as in "I *wonder* how on earth that happened."

It gets your attention. And a *sign* is something that points or gives direction. The sign itself is *not* the main thing. Just like John the Baptist said, "I am not the main guy. The one who comes after me - He's the one!" A sign - points.

Think about it this way. Say I'm driving to Disneyworld. On the side of the road - a Billboard says, "Disneyworld" - with a picture of Mickey pointing the way to the entrance.

Now if I pull the minivan over - jump out with my kids in tow - and we all go hug the billboard - you'd say "Kris! That's a *sign*. The Magic Kingdom is that way. Follow the sign - don't hug it. Don't miss the point." (Get it? Mickey is pointing - don't miss the... nevermind).

But the same truth applies to miracles. Watch how careful Jesus is with miracles. He keeps telling people *not* to tell everyone about them.

He doesn't want the miracles to become the main thing. They're pointing to something greater. To a *Kingdom* - far better than Mickey's kingdom.

Now this is a great lesson for us starting out. We're gonna read about a lot more miracles here in Mark. And you may see some in your life. But don't hug the miracle - look for the sign. Where is it pointing you? What is it *teaching* you?

In your life, and in your church - keep your priorities straight. The supernatural stuff is awesome when God is in it - but in your ministry, focus on the Kingdom stuff: love God, love your neighbor, and *teach* the Word.

Read Mark 1. Watch Jesus' authority as he casts out demons. Feel his compassion as he heals the sick. Hear his wisdom as he teaches, and follow the signs. And as you read, understand that Jesus does not invite us to simply believe a set of facts or ponder some philosophy. And he doesn't invite us to join an institution. He invites us to join him on a journey. He invites us to follow.

Day 4: Mark 2 | So That You May Know

Hello everyone. Welcome back to our journey through Mark's gospel. Chapter 2 today, which starts with one of my favorite Bible stories. But first - think about this one.

Jesus made some *big* claims - big enough to get him killed.

And this is the challenge for any who might try to take Jesus as a great philosopher - or teacher or healer or revolutionary or whatever you might say. Jesus *claimed* to be much more.

We'll see that as we read on. But a claim is just words. Anyone can *claim* to be anything. But did Jesus prove it?

The story in chapter 2 begins with Jesus in a town called Capernaum. The people of the small town heard that Jesus was there - and the crowd *showed* up. In verse 2:

"They gathered in such large numbers that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them." (Mark 2:2)

Notice that. Jesus preached - the word. That's the Bible. Remember chapter 1. There were lots of miracles - lots of excited people - but Jesus said that He came to *preach!* And he called the miracles *signs*. So follow - the signs.

And - though Jesus was there to preach, there was a man who *desperately* needed a miracle.

Verse 3:

“Some men came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus by digging through it and then lowered the mat the man was lying on. When Jesus *saw their faith*, he said to the paralyzed man, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” (Mark 2:3-5)

Time out. Do *not* miss the gravity of the statement that Jesus just made. Rewind the tape there. “Son, your sins are forgiven.”

The man showed up for healing, not forgiveness. The man is paralyzed - clearly his friends brought him to be healed! But Jesus knows something: no matter what you’re going through, there is no issue in life as big - as sin - and forgiveness.

And watch what happens next. Verse 6:

“Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, “Why does this fellow talk like that? He’s blaspheming! *Who can forgive sins but God alone?*” (Mark 2:6-7)

Now the teachers of the law were religious leaders - responsible for maintaining God’s truth.

Unfortunately, we’ll find out soon that they were also self-righteous and judgmental - the kind of religious people that make the rest of us resent religion. But at this point - understand that the teachers are doing their job.

Who can forgive sins but God? To claim to forgive someone's sins - was to claim the authority of God. If it's not true, it's blasphemy. And no one argued with that logic - not even Jesus.

But watch verse 8:

"Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, "Why are you thinking these things? Which is easier: to say to this paralyzed man, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk'?" (Mark 2:8-9)

I *love* this question. You gotta think about this one. Which one is easier to say? "Your sins are forgiven." It's *easy* to say - because no one can tell if it worked. But it's much harder to do! Only God can forgive sin!

But to say to a paralyzed man, "Get up, take your mat - and walk" - that puts it all on the line. Everyone's watching. A few seconds and everyone will know if you're the real deal.

So in verse 10 Jesus continues:

"But I want you to *know* that the Son of Man has *authority* on earth to forgive sins." So he said to the man, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!" (Mark 2:10-12)

Now *that* is how Jesus throws it down. Which one is harder to say? *Get up and walk* - of course. But Jesus says *both*. Why? Because he wants them all to *know* something. He wants *us* to know something - about the Son of Man.

Now the term *Son of Man* is an important Old Testament title for the Messiah - the Savior. When Jesus uses the title *Son of Man* to refer to himself, it may sound a bit odd in English today, but it's important. He is reminding the Jews that His life and ministry was prophesied, and that the Messiah had to be *human*. See, the son of man - is a man. The son of God - is God. Jesus - was both.

And the miracle was a *sign* - pointing to His authority. Jesus wants them to *know* that the Son of Man - a human - has authority to forgive sins - something *only* God can do. So he does it - he says the harder one - "Get up and walk." But he does it as a *sign*. Remember - follow the signs to where they are pointing. And this one is pointing very overtly at who Jesus is - and specifically, to His authority.

And there's *that* word again. **Authority** - power with the right to exercise it. Jesus - has the authority to forgive sin.

A side note here for you who have trouble forgiving yourself. If you say, "I know God forgives me, but I can't forgive myself."

Remember - that sin is not yours to forgive. You don't have that authority - only God does. And if Jesus calls you forgiven, because He paid the price - it is done. Your place - is to accept the truth.

And take note of *why* this man was forgiven. Jesus - “saw their faith.”
Forgiveness comes by faith in Jesus. Your part - is faith.

Also take note - that after the miracles - many stubborn hearts still refuse to believe. Understand - that **miracles don't produce faith, but faith does produce miracles.**

The story moves on in verse 13. Jesus is teaching beside a lake, and he sees Levi working as a tax collector. Now tax collectors were despised in that time, corrupt men who overcharged poor taxpayers and pocketed the extra. Wicked greed. And yet Jesus approached Levi, “Follow me,” Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him.”

There are those two words again, that same invitation. But this time Jesus invites a *sinner* - a very bad person. And Levi follows! And when Levi invites Jesus and the disciples for dinner, there are even more sinners.

Now this was especially difficult for the Pharisees to understand. The Pharisees were religious leaders - the judgmental and self-righteous kind - who just couldn't understand. If Jesus is a good rabbi, “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

Verse 17 is a profound statement:

“On hearing this, Jesus said to them, ‘It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.’” (Mark 2:17)

Don't miss this. Jesus chose sinners. Levi was a sinner. So were his friends. But just as a doctor comes to heal the sick, Jesus comes to forgive and restore sinners - to make them righteous. Righteous means right with God. That's an important word. You know that feeling between two people when your relationship is *right* - when nothing stands between you? And you probably know that feeling when a relationship is not right - when a wall is between you because you messed up. Well, that's where we are with God.

Sin separates us. We did wrong. But the gospel - the great news - is that Jesus came to make us right again. He forgives sins, and calls us righteous. What he asks from us is faith. We are righteous by faith.

And even more amazing, Jesus chooses sinners, makes them right, and sends them out to serve God. In chapter 3, we'll read as Jesus calls to himself a group of twelve, and appoints them to be apostles.

A disciple follows, an apostle is sent - like a messenger or ambassador. And there in that list of twelve is Levi, only his name is changed to Matthew. Jesus chooses sinners, forgives them, heals and changes them, and he sends them out to tell all the other sinners the good news: God loves you. Amazing. And he still does it today. Read Mark 2, follow the signs, and we'll meet you back here in chapter 3.

Day 5: Mark 3 | The A-Team

Welcome back to Through the Word. Pastor Kris here with you again and today, we are in Mark chapter 3.

Something very big happens in Mark 3. **Jesus - appoints His twelve apostles.** Why is that so big?

Think about it - Jesus is - amazing - on His own. But He chose - from the beginning - to work *through* others. And this is where it began.

So - in a way - these twelve will be the difference between Jesus as a lone hero who changed the world for three years, and Jesus as the driving force who changed the course of history, who moved nations, fought racism, established equality as a human right, outlawed slavery, started orphanages, rescued and rebuilt after disasters, founded universities, built hospitals, rehabilitated drug addicts, fed the hungry, and cared for the last and the least from the biggest cities to the remotest reaches of the planet.

Now - if you don't believe Jesus did all that, I would encourage you - to ask the people who *did* do those things - ask them to tell you *why* they did it. Now if you could ask - if you covered the globe and searched through history - you would hear many answers - to be sure. But I guarantee that you will hear one name - far more than any other. Jesus.

I'm not saying Christians are the only do-gooders, and I'm not saying Christians only do good. Not by a long shot.

I am well aware that many Christians are self-righteous jerks, and that greedy men and women have done many wicked things in Jesus' name. But there's a reason that we call those people hypocrites. Because greed and self-righteousness do not match the name of Jesus.

But get past the hypocrites, and look at the lives of those who truly lived out Jesus' calling. **I've seen Jesus change people** - make them selfless, generous, compassionate... whole. And I've seen people do the most amazing and selfless things in the name of Jesus.

And two-thousand years of history is marked again and again by the impact of those who took Jesus at His word - and cared for the least and the last, who sacrificed and fought for justice, for equality, for compassion and hope.

Visit the site of any natural disaster, any human emergency - and ask the locals - who showed up to help - and who keeps showing up years later?

As you read Mark - take note - **Jesus was never a one Man show.** He was all about others. And about teaching those others - to also be - all about others.

Here in Mark 3, we've been watching as Jesus teaches, works miracles, and shows compassion. Along the way, he stopped to make an invitation to a few disciples, "Follow me."

But it wasn't just "follow me to heaven." It was "Follow me to reach the lost and the last and the least - and love them."

And now he takes it a step further. In verse 13,

“Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. He appointed twelve that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach ¹⁵and to have authority to drive out demons.” (Mark 3:14)

Now there were more than twelve disciples, but these twelve he appointed specifically as apostles. Apostle means “sent one.” (A disciple follows - an apostle is sent). Verse 14 lists three specific assignments for these twelve:

- **First - To be with Jesus.** Before ministry, before preaching or any kind of work - be with Jesus. He is the vine, we are the branches. Apart from Jesus, we can do nothing. When you're in need, and you get help or advice from a Christian - you can always tell the difference between someone who's just been in church - and someone who's been *with* Jesus. Before you help, be with Jesus.

- **Second - To preach.** Just as Jesus said he came to preach, he sent his apostles to preach. The Word is primary in ministry.

- **And third - to have authority to drive out demons.** Jesus sends these men - into the battle. It is spiritual warfare. They will proclaim the Kingdom of God on enemy territory, right in amidst the kingdom of darkness. So Jesus gives them - and gives us - authority. Know your authority.

Now - one more thing strikes me as I read chapter 3. And that is - the twelve that Jesus chose.

They are listed in verse 16 and onward:

“These are the twelve he appointed: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter), James son of Zebedee and his brother John (to them he gave the name Boanerges, which means “sons of thunder”), Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.” (Mark 3: 16-19)

Now what strikes me about these twelve - these who would be sent to change the world - and who indeed turned the world upside-down - they were twelve ordinary men, with a crazy mix that just had to lead to conflicts. Indeed we will see them arguing on many occasions - and about really trite stuff.

But look at the mix:

- Simon the Zealot with Matthew the tax collector. Zealots were revolutionaries - they were violently anti-Roman. Tax collectors were Roman stooges - Jews who betrayed their own people. And throw in Bartholomew - the good kid, the pure hearted Jew. Imagine *him* at Matthew's party.

Or Peter with Thomas. Peter the gung-ho, swing first - discuss later, jump out the boat, always speak your mind guy. And Thomas the doubter, the realist. Imagine how they got along. “I knew you couldn't walk on water, Peter.” “Yeah but at least I took a step!”

Then throw in James and John - Jesus called them “Sons of Thunder.” “Lord, should we call down fire from heaven and zorch this town of naredowells and hooligans?” “Woah there Sons of Thunder. Take it easy.”

So why - did Jesus put together such a dirty dozen of conflicting personalities?

I think - that he did it to them - and he does it to us - to grow us. To teach us humility - because our humility gives a place for God to work. To teach us patience, because love - is patient. And to teach us - real unity. Because unity in Christ - is so much greater than our differences.

And I think he does it - so the world can really see - the difference made, in people who have been *with* Jesus.

Fast forward three years to the book of Acts. When these twelve - minus Judas - and the rag-tag group of men and women who are with them - take the gospel to the world. Compassion, miracles, preaching, the world turned upside-down. And watch how others reacted in Acts 4:13,

“When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, *ordinary* men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.” (Acts 4:13)

Fast forward again two thousand years.

I met a man who told me his story. He was a self-centered, money-loving businessman - who hit bottom. Jesus found him there. Now he runs an orphanage in China for disabled and discarded children.

I met another who was a drug-addict, who broke his family and planned his suicide. Jesus met him that very day.

Now he saves women and children from human trafficking in Mexico. Gives them a home, gives them school, gives them hope.

These are ordinary people - and the stories go on and on. From the DropBox in South Korea to the relief workers in Haiti, from Father Damien to Mother Teresa, from soup kitchens to orphanages - again and again, I hear one name above every other. Jesus. Many church names, but one Savior. Why - why is it that Christians are so drawn to human need? To sacrifice self to care for others.

Perhaps it's because our Savior - didn't just say, "Go help." He said, "follow me." Because He sacrificed His life first.

And you can always tell the difference - between a do-gooder, and someone who has truly *been* with Jesus.

As you read through Mark 3 - and as you watch these disciples follow Jesus and begin to grow - keep in mind - what He started. As for you today - Beware the hypocrites. Beware the self-righteous do-gooder, or the con-man with the fish on his card. And to make sure you don't become one of them - take Jesus invitation. Follow Jesus. Be *with* Jesus. And you may just be amazed at the places that He leads you.

Day 6: Mark 4 | Careful How You Hear

Hello friends. Pastor Kris with you again, and so glad to be here. Today a story. Jesus is a phenomenal storyteller. In Mark 4, Jesus tells *parables* - stories that teach a lesson. Jesus' first parable will help us answer two essential questions: what is the Bible and why should we read it?

This one is a personal favorite for me. It's a parable about dirt, seeds, and how you *listen*. The crowds are gathering - mostly for the miracles, but Jesus keeps His focus on the message. And Jesus gives us a lesson on how we *hear* the message.

Romans 10 tells us, "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing through the Word - of Christ." It's at the end of every audio guide.

You *hear* God's word, and then make the decision to believe it. That's faith. But is it really that simple? And does it always work?

Well, to help us understand all this, Jesus tells a parable. Mark 4, verse 3,

"Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times." Then Jesus said, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear." (Mark 4:3-9)

Notice - that Jesus' first word is *listen* and his last word is *hear*. He wants us to pay - attention.

We also see that the seed planted is corn - because we have *ears* to hear.... Get it? Ears. Sorry. Corny joke. ... A-*maize*-ingly corny.

Alright - this time I quit. I promise.

A little while later - Jesus explains to his disciples. In verse 11, he tells them why he uses parables. For the disciples - parables help them understand. Easier to grasp. But for those who refuse to believe, the parables keep them from understanding. See - God will not force himself on anyone. If they don't want to believe, God respects their **free will**. It is their own choice - and the choice comes in *how we hear*.

And then Jesus explains the parable. Verse 14:

"The farmer sows the word." (Mark 4:14)

Stop there. The seed - is the Word of God. I love this. I've said it before, but have you ever wondered at the power of a seed? That little, unassuming speck - has stored inside of it the blueprints for an entire plant - or tree - from the roots to trunk to branches to leaves to flower to fruit. And every amazing wonder of science that comes with it - is all coded inside that little seed. And with it, are the tools - literally, the tools - to build the entire tree - out of dirt, water, and sunshine. All that - inside a seed. Ask an atheist to explain how all that got in there by accident. Seriously.

Seeds are amazing. And Jesus - says that the word of God - is a seed.

The Bible is more than just a book. It's actually 66 books. But much more than that, the Bible is the Word of God. 2nd Timothy says:

"All scripture is God breathed" (2 Tim 3:16).

That means that the Bible *claims* to be *God's Word*.

Now in the parable, the seed is always the same. The difference here - is the condition of the dirt. The dirt here is us - those who hear. It's not an insult, by the way. We are made of dirt, after all. But God does amazing things with dirt - just add seeds.

So there are four kinds of dirt in the story.

In verse 15 -

"Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them." (Mark 4:15)

This first dirt is just hard - hard hearts and closed ears that never give the word a chance. Satan just picks it off.

"Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But since they have *no root*, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away."

(Mark 4:16-17)

So the problem with group two is shallow soil. Have you ever seen a tree trying to grow in a sidewalk crack? It won't last. Some people get very excited at a church service, but they won't let the message penetrate deep.

When following Jesus gets difficult - they walk. And notice that Jesus compares the sunshine - to trouble and persecution. Interesting - because sunshine is good for healthy trees. When it gets hot - a healthy tree digs deeper roots - finds deeper waters. Trials are like sunshine - they knock out shallow faith, but strengthen the roots for healthy believers.

Verse 18:

“Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful.” (Mark 4:18-19)

The problem *here* is not below ground, but above it. The heart may be fine - but life is just too crowded. They enjoyed the message at church, they just got too busy to go back. And look at what Jesus lists as the thorns that get in the way - worries, wealth, and just plain desiring other stuff. It's not even sin, necessarily - just stuff. And the seed never grows.

Then verse 20:

“Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown.”
(Mark 4:20)

This is the good dirt. But think about it - it's still just dirt. Just a simple human heart - soft enough to let the seed in, with some depth to grow roots below, and the junk cleared out for a tree to sprout above. Let it grow - and guess what that tree will start making! Fruit - to nourish and strengthen others - like love and joy, goodness and kindness. And right inside that fruit - more seeds.

Seeds for new plants. I love science. I love seeds. And I love the power of God's Word.

And you **don't even have to understand how it works**. Jesus tells another parable in verse 26. This time he compares the Kingdom of God - to a man scattering seed on the ground once again.

"Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head." (Mark 4:27-28)

I think what Jesus is saying here - is that ministry is easier than you think. Just plant seeds. Share God's Word. You don't have to know how it works - but it works. You can even tell them about an app with God's Word on it every day.

And one more little tidbit from this chapter. Verse 34 tells us that Jesus always taught in parables - But when he was alone with his own disciples, **he explained everything**.

That last little phrase should be on the job description of every Bible teacher. Explain - everything. Ex-plain. Ex means outward, and plain means - well, plain. Simple and clear. This is our calling Bible teachers. Take God's Word, and make it plain. Understandable. Before all the hype, before your stories and your jokes - your first job: ex-plain the Word.

And for you Bible students. Your job - is good hearing. Soften up the dirt below, clear out the thorns above, and open those ears.

And watch the last story very carefully - Jesus gives his disciples a Word in verse 35,

“Let us go over to the other side.” (Mark 4:35b)

It's a simple word. They're crossing a lake. But did the disciples really hear it?
And will you hear it?

He who has ears to hear - let them hear.

Day 7: Second Sunday of Advent | Peace (Matthew 1)

Hello Advent friends!

Today is the *Second Sunday of Advent* and our Bible chapter is *Matthew 1*. And you all get to meet my good friend Peyton Jones—the teacher on our Matthew series.

And you know what else? *We light another candle!*

What is it about *candle lighting* that gets kids so excited? Maybe it's the anticipation. I remember it would drive me crazy on the early Sundays that we *only lit* one candle for each Sunday, and the rest had to *wait*. Waiting it tough for a kid.

But let's get to it.

Now *following* the process, you should *already* have the *first candle lit*. (Or hint: relight it now). My *hope* candle happens to smell like vanilla pumpkin. Quite lovely. And candle number two has our next theme: *peace*.

Now last time I told you that *hope* is something we *choose*. But I think of *peace* more as something we *surrender* to. Colossians 3 says:

“Let the peace of Christ *rule* in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful” (Colossians 3:15).

I've always marveled at that verse. Let His peace *rule*—like it's in charge. The heart has all kinds of concerns and emotions fighting for priority, but something's gotta lead. Colossians says: Let peace *rule*. Jesus' peace—which is not an emotion, but a reality—and a gift.

Jesus says, "My peace I give to you... not as the world gives" (John 14:27). His peace is different. Worldly peace is external and temporary. The peace of Christ rules your heart for good.

As for my year, I needed it. There was—a lot. Three weddings, one cancer, wife in surgery, and not one but two new grandkids. One day I was at the same hospital twice—baby bedside, and chemo bedside. And a whole lot of busyness to boot. The emotions ran the gamut—and I needed peace to *rule*.

It was promised at Jesus' birth—by the angels themselves:

"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests" (Luke 2:14).

And in our story today, Joseph will need it—when engagement to Mary takes a surprising turn. And the words that set my heart at rest every time:

"...they will call him Immanuel—which means, "God with us" (Matthew 1:23).

For me, those three words are peace: *God with us*.

And with that, it's time to light our second candle—to peace. Lighters ready?
And let's pray.

“Lord we light this candle together to honor the coming of Jesus, as we invite your peace to rule in our hearts. In Jesus’ strong name, amen.”

And now it’s time for me to hand it over to Peyton—for our second Bible Advent chapter in Matthew 1.

Matthew 1

Welcome back to Through the Word. My name is Peyton Jones and I’ll be your guide today on Matthew chapter 1!

I’m beyond excited to start this journey with you

I’m hoping that you’ll also feel the Spirit of God tugging on your heart as you read the words of Jesus and learn about who he is.

And who he is, is exactly where Matthew starts off! Matthew tells us Jesus is the Messiah in verse 1:

“This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Matthew 1:1)

The Messiah – What was the messiah? The Jewish title of Messiah, meant savior – We’ll come back to that. Savior from what though?

People today don’t think that they need saving from anything, but a closer look at Jesus’s lineage tells us right away that we all need saving, mostly from ourselves...

Jesus's lineage is filled with a colorful cast of characters. There's polygamists, prostitutes and a whole rogues gallery that tells us that he came from a less than perfect pedigree.

But that was the whole point, Jesus wasn't descended from them. Not really. Jesus's birth was "**of the Holy Spirit**", meaning that he wouldn't be the sinner that they were...or we all are.

Jesus's heritage shows that everyone needs saving. But that's not why Matthew put it in there. No, Matthew knew his audience; the Jews would look for proof that Jesus was the Messiah, and in the temple, there were records that could be searched to verify that he was descended from David.

All Jews were descended from Abraham – and Abraham received a precious promise of the savior thousands of years before that, that from his line would come the savior. And David, 1000 years later received a promise that from his tribe, the tribe of Judah, one of the 12 tribes of Israel, would come the King whose reign would never end.

He would not only save his people from their sins, he would also be a king worth serving. IN some ways, David wasn't. He cheated on his wife, or wives, murdered others, and was desperately in need of a savior himself!

To these two men, the promise of a savior was made, and the term of Son of David was a nickname for the Messiah.

But Jesus has a whole host of names coming to him before this chapter is done. Let's jump into the story in verse 18:

“This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit.” (Matthew 1:18)

Uh oh... Being pledged to be married meant an engagement, but in those days, your parents arranged your marriage, and your engagement lasted one year to make sure that you didn't sleep with anyone else, and entered the marriage as a virgin. But imagine the shock when Mary turns up pregnant.

“Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.”
(Matthew 1:19)

So Joseph was in a pickle. He was faithful to the law, but a decent man to boot. He didn't want to marry her if she'd been unfaithful, but he also didn't want to make a public spectacle; so he wanted to quietly drop the whole thing and move on... Mary's reputation would take a hit, but Joseph didn't want to trash her.

But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

“All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”). (Matthew 1: 20-23)

The angel gives him the Name “Jesus” – or God saves. **“because he will save his people from their sins”**. So that’s what Jesus saves us from! And though that was his birth name, there was a nick name the angel talked about **“they will call him Immanuel, which means “God with us”**

Joseph was going to need God to be with him, because marrying her pregnant would trash his own reputation.

But, verse 24 tells us “he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.”

(Matthew 1:24-25)

Naming Jesus was a sign that Joseph was accepting Jesus as his own; adopting him as his son.

That didn’t mean that Joseph was unaware that his child was the Son of God; another term that would stick.

There was a lot that Joseph didn’t understand; why it had to be this way. Why all the shame if God was in this? And how God would save people from their sins through this little baby boy?

Whatever God was up to, it seemed like Joseph had a front row seat, but he’d have to wait for this child to grow, just as we’ll have to wait till the next chapter to find out more about this infant’s destiny and how it affects the destiny of us all, on our journey through the word.

And that’s it once again. Thank you Peyton for guiding us through Matthew 1. Now it’s your turn out there to share what peace has meant to you this year—and in this story. Let’s close with a prayer.

“Thank you Lord for the peace of Advent. As we move ahead toward Christmas, help us understand *how to let your peace rule in our hearts every day. Help us know the peace that the angels proclaimed, and be an instrument of your peace on earth. In Jesus’ strong name, amen.*”

That’s it guys. When you’re all done, you can blow out the candles. And we’ll light ‘em up again *next Sunday*. And if you’re following Mark with me on the weekdays—this week is really good. Not too late to start.

And of course, finish out your time today by thinking a little deeper about what *peace* has meant to you this year, and if you’re together or in a group plan, share it.

I’ll see you next time.

“If you get wind of anything, call me on my radio, channel three. Code word is, ‘Santa’s got a brand new bag.’”

Day 8: Mark 5 | Reason to Hope

Mark 5 today - with three stories - and each one begins *hopeless*. Three people, desperately in need - and in all three cases, the world had given up.

So when do you give up? When is the disease too much? When is the mind too far gone? When is a person - beyond hope?

Hope is amazing. Hope is like a shot of adrenaline for your soul. Hope can get me through anything. And Lord knows we all have those days - when we need some hope.

Now - context is key here. Chapter 4 ended - with the disciples out at sea - with Jesus. A storm hit. The disciples thought they were dead. The storm was *furious* - and the boat was ready to go down.

And they found Jesus.... sleeping! "Don't you care if we drown?"

Ever ask Jesus that question? Jesus gets up, rebukes the storm - and it was completely calm. The disciples are amazed! But what catches me - is Jesus question, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?"

All along - the whole storm - was about their faith. See Jesus gave them a word - we're going to the other side. But it took faith to believe.

And at one of the hardest points in my own life - storm after unending storm - God used that very story - to give me a word. *I won't get you out, but I will get you through.*

And true enough - the storms never died, but he keeps getting me through. He knew - that what I really needed was faith. And Jesus knew the disciples would need faith too - faith enough to have hope - for a hopeless man.

That brings us to chapter 5, verse 2:

"When Jesus got out of the boat, a man with an impure spirit (that means demon) came from the tombs to meet him. This man lived in the tombs, and no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain.

For he had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet. No one was strong enough to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones." (Mark 5: 2-5)

This man - was demonized. This is *not* the same - as mental illness. He is - literally possessed by demons. I say that - because in a previous version of this recording, I was not clear about that distinction and I want to apologize for - and clearly correct - that mistake. I am truly sorry.

Mental illness is a sickness in the brain that can take various forms - it affects Christians and non-Christians alike, and should be treated by a doctor - as any illness should. The man in this story - is *not* mentally ill - he is demon possessed. And most people - have probably long since given up hope. The guy lives in tombs. For some reason demons are all about death. Whether it's music, games, movies, art - they want your mind living in the tombs.

This man is a cutter too. And he's strong enough to tear apart chains. So should they just give up on the guy?

Have you ever tried to help someone - who just seemed beyond help? It's hard. It takes patience. It takes hope.

—

Zach Martinez - was a dear friend of mine. Zach was a sixties child. Abused as a kid, he tried acid at 19. Now those drugs can trigger a mental illness - but Zach was also wide open to the occult. He invited the darkness, and darkness entered. I don't understand exactly how demon possession works, or why God allows it, but Zach went through it.

Now Zach was still Zach, and he held it together enough to work, even marry and start a family. Zach fought in Vietnam, and was awarded a Purple Heart. But the darkness wouldn't leave.

So when do you give up on a man? A year? 2 years? 5? They all passed, and Zach's mind was filled with evil thoughts, 24/7. He was in and out of the hospital. He could carry a conversation, but always his mind was full of thoughts of hurting himself, his wife, his kids. It *never* left him. Again - I'm not a pro at this stuff, but I would say that it is the pervasive presence of *violent* thoughts - that really suggest that a demon may be involved.

Zach held a job in those years - even had Christian coworkers. Genuine, born-again believers. In his years of torment - not once did one of them even try to share the good news of Jesus. No one told him about the rescuer of souls.

I wonder about this demonized man in Mark 5. How long before his parents gave up? What did his old friends think? But then - what really matters - is that Jesus showed up.

When Jesus arrived, the man ran to Him - but it's the demons talking first. A bunch of them. They call themselves *Legion*. Now there's a lot to this story, but I'll let you read through it. In the end, Jesus casts the demons out of the man - and into pigs. And the pigs jump in the sea! The enemy - seeks to steal, kill, and destroy.

The pig owners go tell the townspeople, and the people come to check it out. And in verse 15:

“When they came to Jesus, they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons, sitting there, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid.” (Mark 5:15)

Check it out. The man - is dressed - and in his *right* mind. Amazing...

Zach told me the story - of Valentine's Day, 1980. *Eleven* years of darkness and insanity had passed. His wife handed him a Valentine's Day card, and walked out, broken. When - is it time to give up?

Zach was alone. That very day, he found a Christian tract - that he'd stolen from his mom. He read it - he read the gospel. He could feel God's hand pulling the darkness out from his heart. He was saved that day. He knew it. He felt God's touch, and He knew He was going to heaven.

His wife stayed. But time passed, and two years later, his *mind* still wasn't healed. The demons were gone, but Zach still had mental illness to deal with. Remember - the two are not the same. But why couldn't God just heal him of both?

Well, back in Mark 5 - Jesus moves on. He sends the man - set back in his right mind - and, thankfully - dressed - back to his home.

“Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.” (Mark 5:19)

But the disciples have more ministry ahead. They cross the lake again - and on the other side - two more hopeless people. First - a religious man with a dying daughter. Then an older woman - who had been bleeding for *twelve* years. She spent all her money on doctors - but no help. When Jesus stops for the woman - precious time is lost for the dying girl. Men come to tell the father, “Your daughter is dead. Why bother the teacher any more?” In other words - time to give up *hope*.

Now I'll let *you* read those stories. But if you've heard them before, slow down - and put yourself in their shoes. Would *you* hold out hope?

But I will finish Zach's story. In 1982, after 13 years off battle - the first 11 fighting with demons - the last two as a born again Christian - but still mentally ill, Zach resigned himself to the facts. He had to go back to the hospital for help. Perhaps God would use him there to share Jesus.

Well, God did use him there - but not the way he expected. When he finally submitted *everything* - God healed his mind. It was miraculous. By the time I met Zach, he had been healed and whole for many years. He became a dear friend, and one of the most stable, clear minded people I ever met. For many years, Zach served as chaplain in numerous mental hospitals.

Zach well knew the difference between demon possession and mental illness - he experienced both. In case of mental illness, he would encourage you to trust God - *and* trust a good doctor. He also worked tirelessly to help veterans get passed their demons - both emotional and spiritual.

And when my own dad struggled with bipolar disorder, Zach drove across the desert with me - just to go visit him. I loved my Dad, but it was hard to hope sometimes. Zach gave me hope again - and that hope did not disappoint. Zach passed away last year. Heart issues. A tough reminder - that God does *not* heal every illness every time. It just doesn't work that way.

The stories here in Mark 5 - remind me that Jesus heals - from spiritual issues - physical issues - even death issues! But they also remind me - that every story is different, and God's timing - doesn't work on my timetable. Each person healed here - endured a lot of pain before healing came.

I asked Zach one time if it was worth it. 13 years of darkness and anger. He didn't hesitate. "Without a doubt" he said. "I can go in to that hospital and say, 'I know what you're going through.'" He shared the gospel every time, and week after week - people came to Christ.

Zach told me - the greatest need in every hospital - was forgiveness.

We got talking one time about compassion and caring and such, and Zach said to me, "All that stuff is alive for me, because of what I went through."

Zach's favorite verse to share - is Revelation 21:4

"He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!"

Now there - is a reason - to hope.

Day 9: Mark 6 | Sent Out

Welcome back everyone to Through the Word - Mark chapter 6 today, and it's time for the disciples - to get in the game.

As you read through the gospels , it's easy to focus all your attention on Jesus. He is - amazing. Miracles, teaching, compassion... all amazing. But don't miss the story of the disciples. They are - well, ordinary. But what they get to do...wow.

Now thus far, most of what they have gotten to do - is follow along with Jesus, while He does most of the work. But **ministry was never meant to be a spectator sport**. These guys are in training. Preparation. But every training season must lead to game time. Chapter 6 - is game on.

And as **you read** - and I really hope you do - keep in mind - that church isn't a spectator sport either. And neither is Bible reading. You're in training. You have a calling. Jesus said, pray for *workers* for the harvest - not watchers. I'm praying that you'll be a worker.

Now if you're not a believer yet - that's okay. But I want you to know - the invitation is open. But you're not invited to join an institution, you're called - to a movement.

So what did that mean for the disciples? They're about to find out.

In verse 7:

“Calling the Twelve to him, he began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over impure spirits.” (Mark 6:7)

These were his instructions:

“Take nothing for the journey except a staff—no bread, no bag, no money in your belts. Wear sandals but not an extra shirt. Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you leave that town. And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, leave that place and shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.” (Mark 6:8-11)

So there it is. Simple instructions. A couple things to notice here.

First - **Jesus sent them out.** Does your church focus more on bringing new people in - or sending you out? And which one do you see more in the Bible?

Second - **Jesus sent them in twos.** Ministry has always been a team sport. Sometimes twos, sometimes more - but working together is key. They will know us by our love - for *each* other.

Third - **He gave them authority.** Authority is key. Read the great commission carefully. Before Jesus said “Go,” He gave us authority.

Then the **instructions.** Take **no extra provision.** No back up, no money, not even bread. Just *trust.* Their first mission - was a lesson in faith. Trust God to provide. Remember - without faith, it is *impossible* to please God.

Question: Do Jesus’ instructions here - apply to mission and ministry today? Should you go without money or bread?

Maybe.

Or maybe Jesus’ other instructions apply. In Luke 22 Jesus told them to bring a bag, and some money - to be prepared.

Wait - so which is it?

Understand - that following God is an adventure - and **the directions are not always the same. Mission is not a formula or a recipe.** It is following Jesus, and being sent by Jesus. Before you go, hear from Jesus. And always - trust God. With or without provision - you have nothing without faith. So - how'd it go? Verse 12:

“They went out and preached that people should repent. They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them.
(Mark 6:12-13)

I like this. Pretty simple - Jesus told them to do it, and they did it. Preach. Drive out demons. Heal the sick. Done. Amazing! But Jesus said to go - so they went.

Now let's jump to verse 30:

“The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught.” (Mark 6:30)

They come back to Jesus. Every day on mission should end this way. **Rest with Jesus.**

Unfortunately for them, it wasn't exactly rest. In verse 31, the crowds showed up. So many people that they couldn't even eat. He said to them, “Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.”

Hey - maybe that's a word for you today. Come and get some rest with Jesus. Life rarely gives you a holiday - especially ministry life. The needs never end. If you need rest - and you do, you have to take it. Men's retreat. Family vacation. Personal getaway with God.

I know, I know - if only it were that easy. Sometimes the needs *follow* you. Well - the disciples had the same trouble. Look at verse 32 - "They got away to a solitary place - but the crowd ran and got there ahead of them!" So much for solitary.

Jesus landed - saw the large crowd, and had compassion. They were **like sheep without a shepherd.**

Sometimes - you just help. Rest can wait. Life still needs balance - but it needs compassion too.

Well - it got late. And the disciples came to Jesus so he could send the people *away* to go eat.

Now we're about to read a familiar story. But it usually gets told as *Jesus* feeding 5000 people. But it's not Jesus - not alone. Pay attention here. The disciples say - send them away to go eat. And in verse 37- "(Jesus) answered, "*You* give them something to eat." (Mark 6:37)

Do *not* miss this part of the story. This story is about the disciples - and what Jesus called *them* to do. "*You* feed them."

But there's not enough. Not nearly! This need - it would take months to cover it! We don't have the money, Lord! And it's the middle of nowhere.

Now remember - Jesus just sent them out without money. Now it's testing time. Will they get it? Will they trust?

"How many loaves do you have?" he asked. "Go and see."

When they found out, they said, "Five—and two fish." (Mark 6:38)

Clearly - not enough food. Not - even - close.

But watch carefully. Who feeds the people? When you read the Bible - step in, and look around. Watch for these details.

All the people sit down in groups, and in verse 41,

“Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to his disciples to distribute to the people. He also divided the two fish among them all.” (Mark 6:41)

Hold there - pause the tape. *When* did the food get *multiplied*? Did Jesus pray and suddenly there’s a ginormous bread pile? I don’t think so. Jesus handed each disciple - part of a loaf, and part of a fish. And each disciple walked towards a group of several hundred hungry people.

Step in their shoes. Look down - small plate. Look up - hundreds of people. But Jesus said, “*You* feed them.” So you feed them. 42.

“They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread and fish. The number of the men who had eaten was five thousand.” (Mark 6: 42-44)

Now I have to say, I have heard *many* real-life loaves and fishes stories from friends in ministry. Hurricane relief work in the South, feeding the poor in Mexico, and countless more. Sometimes a truck shows up out of nowhere. Sometimes - a small supply just keeps going out. Genuine miracles - but always in the midst of *meeting* a big need. Always in *ministry*.

Ministry is a call - to do something - that *you* - *cannot* do. You don't have the money, you don't have the time, you don't have the skills.

But Jesus said "Go."

I learned a long time ago - I am not enough. I will never be enough. About six years back, I was on the mission field, a young pastor - short on time, short on money - long on ambition for Christ. I read this chapter, and I wrote in my journal...

"I do not have the time nor the resources that are necessary to be the pastor that I want to be... so I am determined to have the faith."

How 'bout you? Do you have what it takes to help all these people? No?
Good - me neither. Let's get to it.

Day 10: Mark 7 | Dirty is a Heart Issue

Mark chapter 7 on Through the Word -

Today - some matters of the heart, and a lesson in the fine art of missing the point.

Believe it or not - sometimes religious people are very good - at missing the point. When we do - Jesus brings us back to the heart of the matter. And in Mark 7, the heart of the matter—is a matter of the heart.

The story begins with some Pharisees and teachers gathered around Jesus.

In verse 2, they

“... saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed.” (Mark 7:2)

The disciple’s hands are unclean, and the pharisees - *find fault*.

Some people take pride in what they do. Others take pride in finding what’s wrong with what everyone else does. **Fault finding**. For these guys, it’s like a competition sport.

And they’re at church. They *love* church. Fault finders walk into church like Simon Cowell at a middle school talent show. Because church people are faulty! There’s so much to find!

Sometimes the fault-finders take over the church! Christians—stop it! And please - read on...

So the fault finders are out - and what do they see? Disciples with unclean hands.

Now - clean hands are a good thing. Hygiene is important. A research team in London estimated that if *everyone* routinely washed their hands, a million deaths *a year* could be prevented. Wash your hands!

In the Old Testament, God gave the Jews instructions about good hygiene and safe eating. Amazingly - three thousand years before the world understood the science of germs - God gave His people incredible instructions. Washing hands was part of it.

However, the teachers of the law - *added* to the law. Proper hand-washing - was 65 *pages* of directions. Seriously. So when the pharisees say the disciples didn't wash hands - what they really mean - is they didn't wash hands *our way*.

Verse 5:

"So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, "Why don't your disciples live according to the *tradition* of the elders instead of eating their food with defiled hands?" He replied, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written:

" 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.'"
(Mark 7:5-6)

Jesus - hits hard and hits home. Hypocrites. You honor God - but it's lip service. Nothing but empty words. But your *hearts - are far away*.

The heart of the matter - is a matter of the heart.

And don't miss the weight of this accusation. Jesus just told the most religious people around - their hearts are far from God.

Verse 7.

"They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.' You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions." (Mark 7: 7-8)

So how do you know their hearts are from from God? Because they paid more attention to man's word - than to God's Word. Oh sure - it was man's word about God's word - but still - man first. They lost the point - and held on to peripherals. The little stuff became big - while the big stuff got lost.

Example. Jesus reminds them *first* - of God's command: Honor your parents. And then he reminds them - of something the teachers called Corban. Corban - was a loophole. When parents got older - grown kids had a responsibility to care for them. That meant using your goods and wealth to care for them. But if you dedicated all of your stuff to God - when your parents needed help - "Sorry mom and dad - I wish I could help - but I dedicated everything to God. It's Corban."

A lousy loophole - that nullified God's Word.

In verse 13, Jesus says they did lots of this stuff.

If your religion makes you disrespect your parents - you missed the point. If it makes you uncaring, ungiving, ungodly - to anyone - you missed it.

There's also an important **lesson here for Bible teachers.**

I think that many preachers can be very good at using God's word to help them teach their message. But it's *their* message. They choose the lesson, then find verses to back it up.

Bible teachers - please listen. Teach God's message - from God's word. That is the *heart* - of teaching *through the Word*. God's Word already has a message - our job is simple: find it, explain it, and apply it. Every story - every chapter - find the heart of God's message, explain it, apply it. Simple.

And that's exactly what Jesus does here. There are lots of instructions in the Old Testament about clean and unclean. Jesus gets to the heart of them all in verse 14:

"Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them." (Mark 7:14-15)

Now the disciples didn't *quite* get it. So they asked Jesus about it later.

Verse 18

"Are you so dull?" he asked. "Don't you see that **nothing that enters a person from the outside** can defile them? For it **doesn't go into their heart** but into their stomach, and then out of the body." (Mark 7:18-19)

See the Old Testament laws about clean and unclean - focused on hygiene and diet. Which are *good*. But they were never the main point. They were always meant to be a picture of what really matters - *inside*. Clean hands are good - clean heart is better. Blessed are the pure in *heart* - they will see God!

Dirt you take in affects you - yes. It can make you sick - yes. But it is not who you are. Dirt that comes out of your heart - in your words, your thoughts, your deeds - that is who you are.

You will not be judged by the words you hear, but the words you speak. Not by what you see - but what you think and desire and *do*.

So - if Jesus said that nothing that enters from the outside can defile me - does that mean I can ***listen to dirty music and watch dirty movies?*** No - that's foolish. But understand - the movie is not the issue - it's how the movie affects **your heart**. Music is just music - but music has an amazing ability - to skip your mind and go straight to your heart.

Your eyes are a like a window to your soul - so be careful what you let in the window.

Hearing or seeing is not the sin - the issue is what you allow into your heart - that will soon come back out.

Proverbs 4: "Guard your heart above all else - for it is the wellspring of life."
Jesus explains more in verse 20

"He went on: "**What comes out of a person** is what defiles them. For it is from within, out of a person's **heart**, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from *inside* and defile a person." (Mark 7:20-23)

So there it is. The truly dirty stuff - comes from inside - from the heart.

So - what do you do - if your heart is dirty? I mean - how do you clean it? According to the Bible - *you* can't. But God can. In fact, he does better than just clean it - he offers you a new one.

There is a promise made in the book of Ezekiel - as God speaks to his people who had turned their hearts far from Him - when their lives had become defiled and dirty in every way. It's a promise - that Jesus came to fulfill.

Ezekiel 36:

"Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. "Moreover, **I will give you a new heart** and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh." (Ezekiel 36:25-26)

This is what Jesus offers us - a new heart. Not like the old one. To be in Christ is to be a new creation. And if the new one gets some dirt in it - Jesus washes us clean - through the Word. The Word of God is like soap for your soul.

So - read Mark 7 - and get clean. Real clean.

Day 11: Mark 8 | Who Do You Say He Is?

Welcome again to Through the Word, today - Mark chapter 8, as we come to the heart of the gospel, and the core of Christianity.

We've been tagging along with Christ and His disciples for several chapters now, but in Mark 8, Jesus cuts to the chase. **It's decision time.** Two things matter here - two questions at the very core of what it means to be a Christian: **Who is Jesus? And what does it take to follow Him?**

We start at verse 27:

"Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, "Who do people say I am?" (Mark 8:27)

Jesus opens the conversation with an easy question. What do other people say?

Really this is where any of us starts when we're trying to figure out what we believe. We start with what we've heard - what we've been taught. That doesn't mean it's right - but it is a sensible starting place. So - what do people say about Jesus?

Well the disciples give a few answers they've heard.

"Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." (Mark 8:28)

You know - it's actually pretty fascinating to find out what people say today about Jesus - even among non-Christians. Try asking them.

I read a great article in Newsweek some years ago - called The Other Jesus. Kenneth Woodward compiled a great summary of how *other* faiths see Jesus. **Jews** today are mixed about Jesus. Some see Jesus as a good Jew, a rabbi and reformer in Judaism, while many see him as a heretic and apostate. And many Jews have become Christians, just as the first disciples.

Muslims honor Jesus as a great prophet of Allah. Jesus is the son of Mary - the only woman mentioned *by name* in the Qur'an. *That's* interesting! Sinless, born of a virgin, worked miracles, ascended into heaven without dying. Jesus is the anointed one - messiah. That's a lot. Even Muhammed didn't do all that. Strike up a conversation about Jesus with a Muslim - you may be surprised.

However, Muslims do *not* believe that Jesus is God's Son. Muslims also believe that Jesus asked God to *save* him from the crucifixion - and God answered by taking Jesus directly to heaven.

And what about Hindus? What do they say about Jesus? There is a strong tradition in India that Jesus traveled across Southeast Asia as a teenager, learned yogic meditation, and returned home to become a guru to the Jews. Hindus have hundreds of thousands of gods, so most have little issue with Jesus being one of them. Just not the *only* one.

Buddhists find a lot in common between Buddha and Jesus, especially in the teaching of compassion and selflessness. Many Buddhists regard Jesus as an enlightened being - even a sort of brother to Buddha. However, Buddhists do not believe in a God, and sin is not a Buddhist concept - only karma.

So - there are lots of ideas about Jesus. Mostly positive. But back here in Mark 8, Jesus doesn't leave the question there. In verse 29, **"But what about you?"** he asked. **"Who do you say I am?"** (Mark 8:29a)

So now it gets personal. For faith to mean anything, it has to get personal. It's not enough to rattle off what everyone else is saying. "Who do you say I am?"

The first question was for the mind - this one goes to the mind *and* the heart. It's decision time.

And Peter makes his decision in verse 29.

"Peter answered, "You are the Messiah."

Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him." (Mark 8:29b-30)

Interesting - there would soon come a time when Jesus called them to tell everyone - but the time is not yet.

Then in verse 31,

"He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again." (Mark 8:31)

So Jesus lays it all out - plain as day. No parables or metaphors here.

Because Jesus is the Messiah - he has to suffer. He will be killed, and *rise again*. I wonder if Jesus shared the prophecies in the Old Testament. The crucifixion is in the Jewish Bible - if you know where to look.

Isaiah 53, "He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities;" (Isaiah 53:5)

Zechariah 12, “They will look on Me, the one they have pierced.” (Zechariah 12:10)

God says that. “They will look on *Me* - the one they...pierced.”

Psalm 22 is a graphic picture of the cross long before crucifixion was invented.

So Jesus lays it out. It is His destiny, and He wants the disciples to know what’s coming. But in verse 32,

“He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.” (Mark 8:32)

It is interesting that Peter takes issue with the cross. When you do have a conversation about Jesus with someone of another faith - **ask them what they think of the cross.**

Back to that Newsweek article - Woodward says this, “Clearly, the cross is what separates the Christ of Christianity from every other Jesus.”

Muslims reject the cross as an affront to Allah himself - who would never allow one of his prophets to be killed.

Hindus hold onto a Jesus as a yogi who passes into peaceful samadhi and escapes the degradation of death.

For Buddhists who don’t believe in sin - the cross is just cruel.

And when Jesus told the disciples about the cross in His future, Peter voiced the same ideas - “Far be it from you Jesus.”

Verse 33,

“But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. “Get behind me, Satan!” he said. “You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.” (Mark 8:33)

First thing to see here - is Peter's not perfect. He got it really right, then really wrong. Following Jesus - you make mistakes. So do your leaders.

But how did Peter get this so wrong? His mind was set on human concerns - rather than God's concerns. It's the same thinking that led the Pharisees so far from God.

Human thinking says the good guy always wins. God makes sure of it - right? All good dogs go to heaven. And every human religion in the world is built on God rewarding good guys and punishing bad guys.

Or *karma* does it. Either way - it's justice. Righteousness.

Yet this - this is what sets Jesus apart. Jesus lived righteous. He would have great Karma. But He died a sinner's death.

Why is the cross so hard? Well - apart from the blood and gore - it also says a lot about God. That God would love sinners. That the Son of God would trade His death for a sinner's life.

That article quotes a Buddhist who describes the crucified Christ as “a very painful image. ...It does not contain joy or peace, and this does not do *justice* to Jesus.” It's an ironic statement. No justice to Jesus. It's true. It wasn't fair to Jesus. It was God's justice on you and I - but Jesus took it.

Jesus wants this clear to everyone. Life will not be fair to Jesus, and it will not be fair to Christians. In verse 34,

“Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” (Mark 8:34)

Jesus lays it out. If *you* want to follow Jesus - memorize this verse. This is the cost - count it carefully. Is it worth it?

To follow Jesus

- Deny yourself. You can't do it. It's not about how good *you* are. You cannot save yourself - you need Jesus.

- Take up your cross. There is a burden, there is a sacrifice. Life won't be fair to you.

- And follow. Where Jesus leads, you follow.

Verse 35,

“For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? (Mark 8:35-37)

I love that verse. You know what Jesus is saying? He's saying that your soul - is worth more - than the whole world. So let go of the world, and hold on to Jesus. To Jesus, your *soul* was worth dying for. What is it worth to you?

As for me - I wasted a lot of years content to leave faith to other people. They believe this and that, and I respect them. But there came a day, when God wanted a decision.

You know - **There's a big difference between believing in marriage, and being married.** And there's a big difference between believing something about Jesus, and following Jesus.

The difference is commitment, sacrifice. In short - the difference is your life. So - what about you? Who do you say Jesus is?

Day 12: Mark 9 | Believing Is Seeing

Mark chapter 9 on Through the Word - where believing is seeing. Today - it's one of God's favorite subjects: faith.

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Why is God so big on faith? Why is *our* faith valuable to *Him*? Think about it. So much rides on it. Miracles - righteousness - salvation - all of it depends on *our* faith.

Hebrews describes faith this way. Faith - is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen. It also tells us that *without* faith, it is *impossible* to please God. *Im-possible*.

Now when we left off - Peter had just made a declaration of belief. Belief in who Jesus is. "You are the Messiah." In response to that faith, Jesus began teaching the disciples the very core of discipleship. Following Jesus means losing the world, but gaining your soul. It means losing your life in order to save your life. It means standing up for Christ in a sinful world that will not applaud.

And in all of those things - it means patience. The rewards come later. Most of them - after you die. Trusting that God will come through on His promises *after* you die - takes faith.

But not everything waits 'til death. Chapter 9, verse 1,

"And he said to them, "Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see that the kingdom of God has come with power."

(Mark 9:1)

Now there is a great promise. Some of you will see it - *before* you die. See what? Well - see the Kingdom of God - with power! Remember - Jesus was all about God's Kingdom. Follow His teaching, this was his central focus. In fact, the entire Bible is a tale of two kingdoms - man's kingdom, and God's Kingdom. But God's kingdom is reached by faith - not by sight. Sure - there will come a day when our faith will be sight, but that's later.

But in God's economy, believing is rewarded with seeing - so Jesus tells the disciples - some of you will see it on *this* side of death.

Now - what *exactly* Jesus meant that they would see - Christians argue over. Some say Pentecost. Some say the resurrection - or the transfiguration, which is the very next story - so that makes sense. The final answer is ... we don't know.

There's a good rule in Bible study - **If it's not plain, it's not main.** If the answer to your question is not *plainly* stated in the Bible - it's not the *main* issue. It's great to ponder over it - but leave the final answer to God.

What we should learn - is exactly what Jesus said. They will see the power of God's Kingdom *before* they die. It was a reward for faith. Exactly *how* they saw it is not the main point. I think they saw it several ways - and I definitely include the very next story. Verse 2:

"After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. **There he was transfigured before them.** His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them." (Mark 8: 2-3)

This story is called the transfiguration. It is so awesome, I hardly want to comment. Jesus is transformed.

The Greek word there is metamorpho.

Jesus - was a man. He was not just pretending to look like a man. He was fully human. And yet He was more. The disciples watched this man command the wind and calm the waves. They heard demons - who knew this man, feared Him, and obeyed Him. They saw miracles - the blind gained sight, the lame walked - and the dead restored. And yet - he was always - a man. But here on this mountain - they *saw* Jesus - transfigured. What they saw - well I'm sure it was beyond words. They can only describe Jesus' clothing as something way beyond human possibility.

This is the reward for faith in Christ. It's not seeing a magic trick - and it's not seeing whatever *you* want to see. It is seeing the *reality* of Jesus, and it is something beyond us. Verse 4,

"And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus." (Mark 9:4)

Now Elijah and Moses are the two *main* guys who basically sum up God's work in the Old Testament. Moses - the law, and Elijah - the prophets. Both of them - here get to see the fulfillment of the words God gave them. Jesus. And they get to talk with Him.

Now Peter says something silly - because he didn't know *what* to say. But then in verse 7,

"Then a cloud appeared and covered them, and a voice came from the cloud: **"This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"** (Mark 9:7)

That voice - is of course - Father God. It is the second time His voice appears to Jesus. The simplicity of God's statement is profound.

Jesus is His Son. The Father *loves* the Son. *Listen* to Jesus.

“Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.” (Mark 9:8)

When they come down the mountain, a large crowd awaits them, and an argument is in full swing. The argument is about a young boy with a demon - and over why the disciples who stayed back - were unable to help the boy. This kid was in a bad way, and the boy’s father steps forward - and begs Jesus for help. I’ll leave the full story for you to read - but one thing I want you to notice. Jesus focuses the whole conversation - on belief. In verse 22, when the dad says, “if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.” Jesus responds -

“ ‘If you can’? ... Everything is possible for one who believes.” (Mark 9:23)

Pause there a moment. Everything is possible for one who *believes*. Why is belief so critical to God? Why does Jesus hold back the miracles when the people won’t believe? Why doesn’t He just show off His power? Righteousness, salvation - eternal life - they are all promised to whosoever *believes* in Jesus.

Everything hinges on it.

Why is it impossible to please God without faith?

I don’t know that I can answer that fully. But I have a theory. First of all - I don’t think it’s for His sake. God doesn’t *need* us to believe in Him to feel good about Himself.

Faith is good for *us*. Faith destroys fear. Faith sets you free. It fills you with joy and peace.

And faith - brings us closer. The very core of human relationships is *trust*. Without trust - friendship is empty. Think of your *closest* friends. What makes them close? Trust. Faith in God - says I trust you. And it draws you near.

I was standing in my cubicle - on a job I used to work as an engineer. I had so much crazy in my life I couldn't even count it all. Bills, ministry, mortgage, time, bills, hopes, failures, bills. I was standing, overwhelmed, no way to fix it all. And I made a conscious and definite decision to believe. To simply trust God. When I made it - joy and peace flowed in. It was like turning a spigot. Faith is the spigot that lets God's grace pour through.

Now - faith in a lie - is worthless, even dangerous. And faith in faith itself - is just silly. Believing something doesn't *make* it true. But believing in the truth - lets me enjoy that truth.

Back in our story - when Jesus proclaimed the power of belief - in verse 24 "Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24)

Thank God for this desperate father who put to words what I feel so often. I do believe. But help me with the unbelief.

And for Jesus - the Dad's humble response was enough. He casts the demon out, and the boy is restored.

Now two things to follow up here. One - this kid had a demon. Demons are real. But that does not mean that every sickness or disability is the devil. Don't give the devil that much credit.

And two: Healing is not an on-demand service. The Bible does *not* teach that you can use faith to force miracles, that if you believe, God will be your genie in a bottle. That's dangerous teaching.

In verse 28,

“After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, “Why couldn’t we drive it out?” (Mark 9:28)

I appreciate the fact - that the disciples had a hard time figuring this out too.

“We believed. Why didn’t it work?”

He replied, “This kind can come out only by prayer.” (Mark 9:29)

So Jesus brings it back to prayer. Now I think some of us would have liked a more complete answer. How much prayer?

Wouldn’t it be great if Jesus said, “Fast three meals, pray two hours - and voila - get whatever you want.” But I think that misses the point.

The point of prayer - is spending time with God. Get close to God, and trust him. That’s faith.

And sometimes - God doesn’t heal. Sometimes real faith means trusting God *through* the storm, whether or not He does what you want Him to. Whether He gets you out or carries you through - what matters - is that He cares, that He’s with you, and that you trust Him.

Day 13: Third Sunday of Advent | Joy (Luke 1 Part 2)

Hello again my Advent friends. We are back _ and it is Advent Sunday number *three*. This one has a special name: *Gaudete*—which is Latin for *rejoice*. How great is that? And our Bible story today is back in Luke 1 again—and it’s about as close as the Bible gets _ to a musical!

Seriously. Mary sings. Zechariah sings. It’s all singing! *Musical*. Not like *Luke’s Gospel Musical: the Musical: the Series*, but close.

Okay, so the text doesn’t actually say they *sang* the words—but the words are so beautifully poetic, they’re *worthy* of song.

And—don’t make fun of me—but the first time I heard the *Latin* name for the first song, I kinda sorta thought it was a feline superhero. I don’t know Latin. And for me, *Magnificat* kinda sounds like a super-powered-cat.

Okay, so now I’m in trouble. But it is truly a *beautifully rich* song from Mary. I can’t wait to get there. But first, let’s talk about *joy*.

Rejoice is a great word, isn’t it? To *find joy* in something. Notice that we rejoice *in*. We *choose* to focus on it. That’s why Philippians 4 tells us to:

“Rejoice *in* the Lord always. And I will say it again, *rejoice*” (Philippians 4:4).

I always found it funny that he has to repeat it—like immediately. Like in between the period and the next sentence we already forgot.

Which—admittedly—I do. Do you ever catch yourself in the best circumstances and you just forget—joy?

Oh speaking of forget—*time out*. I forgot the candles. It's our *third* candle, and if you have a *traditional* set, today we light the pink one. For joy. =) Now if everyone remembered right, we already have the first two lit to pick up where we left off. *Hope* and *peace* are still burning bright.

Now where was I? Oh yeah—forgetting. Joy that is. It's a tough one for me. I'm a naturally joyous person, and joyful me is my favorite version of me. But I have to admit—stress can steal it.

Also—not every experience is joyful. A lot of life is *sorrowful*. So how does this *rejoice* always thing work?

And that brings me to *my* story for this year. I told you already my year has run the gamut. Remember that day I went to the hospital for one grandbaby and one chemo kid in the same day? Well earlier that week I spent part of a day helping a good friend navigate the heart-wreck of divorce, and just hours later attending a wedding for two young people I absolutely love. That's a lot for one man's heart!!

I was *determined* to *enjoy the joyful*, but life is also *hard*. Is it even right to *rejoice always*?

Well, I also happened to spend the summer studying through Job. And I saw there—a godly and blameless man expressing some dark and negative emotions.

And his *lament* was an expression of his *faith*. The Bible has it many times. Even *Jesus* wept.

And something profound hit me. *Joy is not the opposite of sadness*. Happiness is. So what's the opposite of joy? I think there's a clue in John 15. After delivering some very hard news mixed with encouragement, Jesus tells the disciples:

"These things I have spoken to you, that my *joy* may be in you, and that your joy may be *full*" (John 15:11 ESV).

And it's that last word that hits me: *full*. Joy is a fullness. And I think the opposite of joy—is an *emptiness*. God's *presence* brings a *fullness*. Happy and sad are on a different scale entirely. Things are good—be happy. Things are rough—be sad. You're human.

But for me—apart from God, they're both *shallow* experiences. Just...feelings. But knowing *God with us*, happy and sad are both *full* and *sacred* experiences.

Each one can have *joy*. Joy can be happy for all the fun of holiday traditions, but it can also grieve the loved ones that we miss at Christmas.

It's okay to feel your feelings. Joy can handle it. It's resilient. In Nehemiah 8, "The joy of the Lord is *your strength*" (Nehemiah 8:10).

And that's the heart of the Advent story, isn't it? Jesus is coming—to be *God with us*. Not to make the sad things go away, not to pretend they aren't here. But to be *with us* through good times and bad.

Well, it's time to light the candle. Who's got the lighter? Ready? Let's pray.

“Lord we light this candle together to honor the coming of Jesus, as we choose to rejoice *in* you, and we welcome your joy, so that our joy may be *full*. In Jesus' strong name, amen.”

And with that, time for our Bible story. We won't have time to add commentary this time, so we're going to read it straight through. And as you listen, *picture it*. It's a beautiful scene, and it is *packed* with joy. Recall that young Mary and her elder cousin Elizabeth are both *pregnant* now.

For Elizabeth, a blessing she thought would *never* happen. For Mary, a shocking surprise that shouldn't be *possible*. Yet *both* babies have the promise of phenomenal *purpose* from God.

I have to admit—this story is *extra* fun for me this year—because we just welcomed *two granddaughters* just three weeks apart! And my family—*loves* babies. Babies and joy—great combination.

So as we read, imagine the voice of Mary, singing with the *fullness* of knowing God's presence. *With her*. Feel Zechariah's deep joy at a dream fulfilled at long last—and God now giving purpose to all their long struggles.

It's so good. So let's begin at Luke 1, verse 39:

“At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!”

And Mary said:

“My soul glorifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
holy is his name.

His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.

He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.

He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful
to Abraham and his descendants forever,
just as he promised our ancestors.”

Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.
(Luke 1:39-56)

Now if you're following along, we're at verse 57 now. Still one song to go in our musical. But a little story first. And a baby. *Babies* are a great reason for joy. Recall that Zechariah is Elizabeth's husband - and both of them prayed for *years* for a child, and basically gave up. Let's read:

“When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy.

On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, but his mother spoke up and said, “No! He is to be called John.” They said to her, “There is no one among your relatives who has that name.” (Luke 1: 57-61)

Now remember at this part that Zechariah *can't speak*. Because he doubted God's promise. Okay verse 62:

Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, “His name is John.” Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God.

All the neighbors were filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, “What then is this child going to be?” For the Lord’s hand was with him.

His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

“Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
because he has come to his people and redeemed them.
He has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David
(as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),
salvation from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us—
to show mercy to our ancestors
and to remember his holy covenant,
the oath he swore to our father Abraham:
to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,
and to enable us to serve him without fear
in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.
And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;
for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,
to give his people the knowledge of salvation
through the forgiveness of their sins,
because of the tender mercy of our God,
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven
to shine on those living in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace” (Luke 1:62-79).

And now you know how John the Baptist was born. Jesus' cousin.

If you have time, reflect on what *joy* has meant to you this year—in your story and in this story. If you're with others, share together. Maybe put some of the song to music—and start your own musical.

No, kids, the musical cannot have a super powered cat. I knew I shouldn't have shared that. You're gonna get me in trouble. What does the cat have, *napping* powers? ... Okay I admit, that's a cool power.

Kids focus, it's time to pray. Eyes closed, hands folded.

Lord, we thank you for the gift of joy. Help us to rejoice in you this season, and may your joy fill us, and be our strength. In Jesus name, amen.

I'm going now. If you're following Mark, I'll see you tomorrow. The rest of you, see you next week.

Remember to take just a few minutes to slow down and consider what *joy* has meant to you this year, and if you're together or in a group plan, share it.

And when you're all done, candles out.

"Oh, (singing) is easy, it's just like talking - except louder and longer and you move your voice up and down."

Day 14: Mark 10 | Divorce, Adultery, and the Mercy of God

Welcome to Through the Word. Mark chapter 10 today - and we're stirring up controversy some with hard verses on marriage and divorce.

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Before I start - a little warning. I'm gonna talk about divorce - and love, and sex and marriage. Now it's PG rated - but it is impossible for me - to talk seriously about these issues - and not hurt *someone*. I hope - that I will also help.

There are of course bitter arguments today over the definition of marriage - but even beyond that - marriage and divorce are serious heart issues.

Marriage is at the core of some of our highest hopes, and for many of us, our deepest hurts. I myself have some of both. My parents were divorced. I hated it. So did they. It hurt a lot.

But today I am happily married. Crazy happy.

But if there is one thing I have learned from marriage - it is *humility*. I am human. And what I have - is *much* better than I deserve. I'm not kidding. I married *way* out of my league - and worse yet - I did *not* start marriage the right way. Not Biblically. So if you've been out there just waiting for the opportunity to call me a hypocrite - here you go! Have at it. And I still mess up.

Listen - I need grace - and so do you. We've all got scars - so let's lay down our guns, and start in on Mark 10.

Verse 2 opens with some pharisees *testing* Jesus by asking Him, "Is it lawful - for a man - to divorce his wife?"

Now - divorce is messy no matter what direction you come at it. It's a sticky question. Which is exactly the point. They're testing Jesus.

They don't actually want an answer, they just want Jesus to trip up. Watch out for that. The word "test" is the same word used when Satan tested Jesus in the desert.

"Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" No matter *what* you answer - someone's not gonna like it. This is basically the question that got John the Baptist beheaded. It's also the question that split the church of England from Rome; and sure enough - Jesus' answer to this question - is one of *the most* often used scriptures today to nail divorced Christians as hypocrites. Talk about divorce - and you can expect trouble.

Now in Jesus' day, rabbis argued all over this one. But watch how Jesus responds. Verse 3,

"What did Moses command you?" he replied. They said, "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away." (Mark 10:3-4)

The pharisees knew the law of course. Moses' law allowed divorce. But the real argument among rabbis was the *grounds* for divorce. Two schools of thought. One - was divorce *only* for adultery. The other - was divorce for pretty much anything the husband didn't like.

But Jesus does something interesting. In verse 5,

"It was because your **hearts were hard** that Moses wrote you this law," Jesus replied.

So God allowed divorce - because hearts were hard. It was *never* God's best plan. But God made rules to deal with real people and real life. Read through the laws on divorce - the aim is to ensure that an ex-wife is cared for.

In many cultures a wife could be dumped - with no way to support herself. God protected women, widows, orphans. That doesn't mean that God is all *good* with divorce - it just means he can deal with it.

Understand - that **God can handle messy.**

See this is what I've noticed when Christians are called hypocrites for divorce, etc. There are those Christians - who who give the impression that Christianity is for perfect people.

And we point the finger, judge and cast out anyone who fails our standard. And so people point back, "Well that Christian is divorced! That's a sin too! Jesus said so. So you're hypocrites." Yes. Yes he did. And - yes we are. Or we would be - *if* Christianity were for perfect people.

But it is not. **Jesus said, that he did *not* come for the righteous, but for sinners.** Messy, messed up, abominable sinners.

But he didn't come to leave us in our mess. He came to help us out. To help us get back to the way it was meant to be.

So here on the topic of divorce - *before* Jesus deals with the messy part - he goes back. Way back - before sin messed it all up. Verse 6.

"But at the beginning of creation God 'made them male and female.' 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh.

Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." (Mark 10: 6-9)

Back at the beginning - when God created us, what was the plan? Back when *everything* was good. In fact the only not good was loneliness. Marriage is the *only* institution that predates sin. And it is good.

Marriage - was at the very core of creation. It is not a Christian notion. It is a not a human invention, nor a construct of culture or society. God made it. "God made *them* - male and female. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be *united* to his wife, and the two will become one flesh."

Now Jesus quotes all of that from Genesis. But then he adds his own comments, So they are no longer two, but one flesh.

Two become one. Jesus reminds them that marriage - by its very design - is a unifying. It is a combining that is physical, but much more than physical. And He clarifies that they are *no longer* two. The two is over, history. You cannot simply separate the two pieces of the puzzle and start over. Something has changed. And in verse 9,

"Therefore what God has joined together..."
- hear that? *God* joins together - there is a work of God in the marriage vow, in the two becoming one flesh. "What God has joined together, let no one separate."

When we reduce marriage to our human understanding - to human emotions and worldly motives - to physiology & psychology - we lose the sacredness of marriage. God makes two - into one. Marriage is *holy*. And with it - sex is holy. Holy means it is set apart.

So Jesus answered the question - but the disciples aren't quite clear on it.

And in verse 11, Jesus explains,

“Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery.” (Mark 10:11-12)

I want to be careful with this verse, because it has often been used as a weapon. I also want to be careful not to write it off. I believe Jesus says what he means.

He says - that divorce and remarriage - is a form of adultery. It breaks the vow - severs the unity that God formed. That piece of legal paper doesn't erase the hurt done.

Now before you walk away offended, I want to remind you again that God can handle messy. Divorce - remarriage - messy. Jesus' words are *not* condemnation.

In Malachi, God says quite directly, “I hate divorce.” He does *not* say “I hate divorced people.” He hates divorce *because* he loves people. He hates it for the same reasons that most divorced people hate divorce. It's awful. Specifically He says it hurts the kids. It does! I've been there.

But does God condemn us? Remember the woman *caught* in the very act of adultery. What did Jesus say? Let the the one without sin cast the first stone. And when no one did, “**Neither do I condemn you.** Go and sin no more.”

Jesus did not come to condemn (John 3). We're already condemned. We already screwed up! Jesus came to forgive, to set us free, so we could go and **sin no more!**

And remember another woman - at the well - *five* marriages - all lost - and now living in sin! And Jesus offers her *living* water. Jesus can handle messy. So what do you do? Going back to God's original plan is *not* a simple thing - not without a time machine. Damage is done. With divorce and remarriage - there is no going back to plan A. But God is bigger than all our sins, and bigger than the messes we make.

If you're looking to the Bible for an excuse to divorce - you won't find it. If you want a verse to make your divorce easy, it's not there. You will find grounds for divorce - if your spouse cheats, if an unbeliever walks away. But nothing that makes it all good. If, however, you're looking for help and healing right where you are - you came to the right place.

If you are married, fight to keep your marriage. Do *not* presume God's mercy as an excuse to leave. That's called tempting God - and you will reap what you sow. Get right with God, and right with your marriage.

If you're divorced and remarried - be faithful now.

If your spouse is a **physical danger** to you - get away, get safe - as David fled from physical threat - even though he respected God's chosen king. And report it. It's a crime.

If you're parents divorced - forgive them. But acknowledge the hurt - something foundational has been broken. And bring your brokenness to God, so *He* can make you whole.

When I was a brand new Christian - I was searching for ways to get my wonderful Mom saved. Because I love her. So I decided that I would try to convict her of the sin of divorce - using these verses. It was - a well meaning, but cruel - mistake.

I came to learn that zeal - without humility - can just be *mean*. I apologized some years later. She didn't remember it of course. Because she's the sort of Jewish mom who refuses to recall anything remotely negative about her sons. Thanks Mom.

I have also come to learn, that God is a healer. Only God can take two, and make them truly one. And only God can take one that is broken beyond repair, and make it whole again.

Day 15: Mark 11 | Lost the Plot

Mark chapter 11 today on Through the Word - as our story enters into the biggest week in history - Holy Week.

Jesus walked the earth for about 33 years, but Mark dedicated more than a third of his gospel to this one week. There are a lot of stories to tell here, and you've probably noticed that we don't cover all of them in the audio guides. But I do hope that *you* read them all. Mark 11 opens on Sunday with Jesus' grand entrance into Jerusalem - on a donkey's colt. For my thoughts on that story, check out the Matthew 21 guide. Here in Mark, we're gonna jump to Monday, and follow Jesus back into Jerusalem the next day.

Now speaking of following - have you ever tried to follow a story - that **lost the plot**? What I mean is - it started in one direction - developed some themes and characters - and then suddenly you're in Wacky World without a clue as to how the story got there. Movie ends and everyone walks out of the theater going, "What just happened?" I'll tell you what happened. They lost the plot. Now the Bible is not like that. God is a much better author, and the whole story weaves together powerfully.

God's people, however, have bad habit of losing track of the point. I think some people walk out of church the same way that crowd walked out of the theater, "What was that even about?"

And that - is exactly what we have here on Monday.

In Sunday's story, we saw Jesus lamenting over Jerusalem - that they missed it. God told them what to watch for - He even pinpointed the day - and they missed it. It were not as though they didn't have reminders.

In fact, that is exactly why Jerusalem was so full. Almost the entire nation of Israel came together - as they did every year - for one huge *reminder*. It was called **Passover**.

Passover is a feast - one of seven annual feasts - declared by God Himself - for the Jews to gather together - to remember. Remember that God saved their lives - that He rescued them from slavery and from death - by the blood of a lamb. Passover was a celebration of God's faithfulness and God's promises - because some things should never be forgotten. Basically - the feasts were God's way of making sure that His people - didn't lose the plot. But then sometimes - we can miss the point - even when it's right in front of us.

Now **Passover** was Thursday - we're still on Monday - but there would be much preparation in Jerusalem, particularly at the Temple. Many thousands of families from all around Israel would come to the temple - to bring a lamb for sacrifice. The priests would be busy inspecting the sheep to make sure they were spotless - just as God had instructed.

But then there were other goings on at the temple - *not* as God instructed. Jesus is on his way there with his disciples - so let's catch up with them at Mark 11, verse 12.

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

Hold on a second. Did Jesus just curse a fig tree??

Yes. Yes he did.

Why?

Well - He didn't say. Not yet. I think sometimes Jesus makes a point by leaving you guessing - and forcing you to think. We do have some clues. In the Old Testament, the fig tree is used in two places as a picture of the nation Israel. God's people. And fruit is used throughout the Bible as an outward sign of inner health. Good fruit means it's a good tree.

So as Jesus approaches Jerusalem - he inspects a fig tree - picture of Israel - for fruit. What he found - was plenty of leaves - but no fruit.

What does it mean? We'll come back to that. Jesus is on the move - so let's catch up at verse 15.

“On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple courts and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He **overturned the tables** of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts.” (Mark 11:15-16)

Now this scene is intense. And pretty awesome. It reminds me that *mEEK* is not the same as weak. So here's what's going down. The temple of God - the place of worship, sacrifice, and prayer - was overrun by a money-making scam - set up by the very priests who were supposed to lead worship.

Here's how it worked. Jews from all over Israel and even beyond came to worship and make offerings. When they tried to offer money - “Sorry - it's the wrong coin.

No problem - my Uncle Vinny runs an exchange table - trade your coin in with him - only cost you fifty bucks to exchange. Then God will accept your money.” Or let’s say you come to offer a lamb. “Oh - sorry - there’s a spot. I know you can’t see it - but I have special training. No problem though - my cousin Guido sells perfect sheep right over this way. That’ll be another two hundred bucks - and you’re good to go. .. And God bless.”

It was a racket. A scam that preyed on people’s desire to worship God. Jesus was not happy. It was a mockery of faith, in contempt of the temple. And it was *not* the first time. John’s gospel records - Jesus had already chased these guys out three years prior. But they came back - so Jesus cleared them out again. And this was no polite protest. He knocked down tables, sent coins flying, cracked the whip to set animals running out and doves flying off. One man against the mob - and on their turf!

Only it wasn’t their turf. It belonged to God. So when Jesus finished taking his stand, he stopped to teach a little Bible study. Verse 17, And as he taught them, he said, “Is it not written: ‘**My house** will be called a house of prayer for all nations’ ? But you have made it ‘a den of robbers.’ ” (Mark 11:17)

Jesus does not mince words. God’s house - is for prayer - and prayer for all nations. God had ordained the temple to be the place where He would *dwell* among His people. Prayer and fellowship were to be the hallmarks of His house. But sadly, the only hallmark here was greed. It still happens today. Now I don’t believe that a bookstore or a coffeeshop inside a church is the same thing. Don’t go turning over coffee-tables. The real issue is *greed* inside the church - and it’s as ugly today as it was then.

Taking advantage of people's desire to worship in order to take their money - is sin. Ugly, wicked, despicable, sin.

So did the priests repent? Nope. In verse 18, they "began looking for a way to **kill him**, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching.

When evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city."

(Mark 11:19)

So that is Monday. Read Mark 11, and as you follow the story, consider - are we still following the story? Have we lost the plot?

The Israelites in Jerusalem were faithfully going through the motions of Passover, but somehow, some things that should not be forgotten - were lost. I mean if you looked from a distance - you would think that everything was good. Showed up to Temple for Passover. Check. Gave my offering. Check. Priest doing his thing. Check. Now that we've checked all the boxes, maybe God will finally send that messiah to be king and fix all our problems. But the worship was empty, and the first problems to fix - were inside His people.

What about us? Church is full on easter. Check. Pastor is blabbing about something. Check. Drop some cash in the bucket. Check. But does God want your cash, or your heart?

Here in the New Covenant - you and I are the House of God. We are His temple. Are you - His house - a house of prayer? Or is it all just a show?

Do you remember that fig tree that Jesus cursed?

Well down in verse 20, the disciples see it again,

“In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered **from the roots**. Peter remembered and said to Jesus, “Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!” (Mark 11:20-21)

See here's the thing. That fig tree pictured Israel. God's people. From a distance - all the leaves looked good, seemed like everything's cool - doing' the religious thing. But when Jesus showed up - there was no fruit.

Something was wrong. And within a day - the tree withered - notice - *from the roots*. That's how it happens. When you lose the plot - when you miss what matters and just walk through the motions - you can pretend for a while - but your roots - the part that nobody sees - the place where your soul gets it's nutrients - your roots wither. Without roots, the tree is hopeless.

As for you - read the story - follow His footsteps - and try *not to* lose the plot.

Day 16: Mark 12 | When God Went Away

Welcome back to our journey through Mark's gospel. Today - a question of authority: Why should I listen to you?

Here in Mark 12, it is Tuesday of Passover week, Jesus is in Jerusalem in the days leading up to the cross. He has just been challenged by some religious leaders - about his **authority**, and in that context, chapter 12 opens with Jesus telling a parable,

“A man planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a pit for the winepress and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place.

Now pause there a moment. Jesus taught many parables with many lessons - but there is one story that we find told several ways. A king - or a landowner or some other man of authority - who *moves away*. And in every story - that man is a picture of God.

Why does Jesus so often picture God as a man *going away*? And what about today? If God is everywhere - why does He let it feel like He's not watching.

Setting that question aside a moment - here Jesus tells a parable of a man who planted a vineyard - entrusted it to some farmers - and moved.

The farmers can live off the land - but they are always responsible to the owner. Verse 2,

At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants to collect from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. But they seized him, beat him and sent him away empty-handed.

Then he sent another servant to them; they struck this man on the head and treated him shamefully. (Mark 12:2-4)

Now at this point Jesus' listeners would be getting a little angry. The owner planted the vineyard and built everything. Without him, the tenants had nothing. He sends servants to collect - fair enough - but the tenants beat the servants. (I rented my home out once - and the tenants trashed it - and left without paying rent. I was mad).

But what is this story really about? What is Jesus driving at?

Remember the **context**. Back in chapter 11, the chief priests challenged Jesus, "By what **authority** are you doing these things? ...And who gave you **authority** to do this?"

In other words, **why should I listen to you?** Who died and made you king? (That was a favorite when I was a kid).

Every one of us comes to a point of challenging authority. Why should I listen to you - or to Jesus - or the Bible - or government - or whoever.

With all the voices trying to command your life, you have to ask - **who is telling you what's right, and who has the right to tell you?**

But are they asking because they want an answer - or because they just don't want to listen?

When they challenged His authority, Jesus' immediate answer was asking *them* about **John the Baptist**. Where did John's authority come from?

Because John was sent on God's authority - to point everyone to Jesus.

But the religious leaders refused to answer Jesus' question. They had not respected John's authority, and Jesus knew they wouldn't respect His.

And so Jesus tells this parable - to help everyone see what's really going on. The man who planted the vineyard - is God of course.

The vineyard comes from *Isaiah 5* - "the vineyard of the Lord... is the house of Israel." Read *Isaiah 5* - it even has the watchtower and winepress. So who are the tenants? Well - those responsible for Israel of course - the priests and elders who Jesus is talking to.

And right there, as these men challenge Jesus' authority - Jesus tells them of how the Owner of the vineyard has sent one servant after another - the prophets, like John the Baptist. Back in verse 5,

"He sent still another, and that one they *killed*. He sent many others; some of them they beat, others they killed. He had one left to send, a son, whom he loved. He sent him last of all, saying, '**They will respect my son.**' But the tenants said to one another, '**This is the heir. Come, let's kill him,** and the inheritance will be ours.' So they took him and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard." (Mark 12:5-8)

Now I hope that you don't miss meaning here. The owner - sent His *Son*. The tenants *killed* - *the Son*. Verse 9,

"What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others. Haven't you read this passage of Scripture: " 'The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes' ?" (Mark 12:9-11)

That verse Jesus quotes is from Psalm 118 - which, not incidentally - is the same Psalm the people sang two days earlier when Jesus arrived, "Blessed is He who comes in the *name* of the Lord." Name of the Lord - means with God's *authority*. And in that very song - the prophecy that the builders would reject the cornerstone.

Jesus is - the cornerstone - the piece that fits the entire building together - all that Judaism is leading to and built around - and yet - the builders rejected him. But verse 11 reminds us that the Lord has done this. And it is something marvelous.

The religious leaders got it - in verse 12, they knew it was about them, but they still refused to take the message to *heart*.

So then in verse 13 they send some other guys - this time it's Pharisees and Herodians. This is a band of religious lawyers - and political lobbyists. And they show up to "catch Jesus in his words" - that's what lawyers and politicians are good at.

So what do they ask about? Taxes. Of course. In verse 14, they butter Jesus up a bit - call him a "man of integrity - unswayed by others" - all flattery - and then,

"Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not? Should we pay or shouldn't we?" (Mark 12:14b)

Now just like the divorce question - every answer to this one will make someone mad. The Jews *hated* paying taxes to Caesar Augustus - who by the way claimed to *be* God. And he used the tax money to fund evil things - war, oppression and cruelty.

But if Jesus says “Don’t pay it” - Caesar could lock him up for sedition - even kill him.

Their scheme here - is to pit Jesus’ convictions and stand for truth - against the reality of the wicked powers ruling over them. Duty to God - against duty to government. Be careful of this trap.

In verse 15,

“...But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. “Why are you trying to trap me?” he asked. “Bring me a denarius and let me look at it.” They brought the coin, and he asked them, “Whose image is this? And whose inscription?” “Caesar’s,” they replied. Then Jesus said to them, “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.” (Mark 12:15-17)

And they were amazed at him.

And I have to say - I am pretty amazed too. Caesar minted the coin. His image is on it. So give it back to him. Each of us has a responsibility - to respect human authority - even wicked authority. There is a time and place for rebellion too - but watch your priorities. The coin - the coin is just money. Important? Yes - but the image on it is only a man.

But “give to God what is God’s.” What does that mean? Where is God’s image? Think about it.

What do you have - with the very image of God imprinted on it?

We are - all of us - made - in God’s image. The depth of meaning in that statement, I cannot begin to approach here. But Jesus says - give to God what is God’s.

When the tax-man comes asking for money - he represents the people who printed it. You may not like it - but it's theirs.

When God's servant comes - with God's authority - asking for fruit, from the vineyard that God entrusted to you, the life that He provided, the skills and abilities and opportunities that He gave you. What do you do? Maybe you thought God was away and never coming back. Started feeling like all this stuff was yours to keep.

In all those stories about the King or the owner leaving - always there is an expectation that His servants will care for what is His - and will be ready on His return. **In fact, that is exactly how the owner knows who His true servants are - how they act when He seems to be away.**

So for you - when God's Son shows up - with God's authority - how will He find you? What have you done - with all that He entrusted to you?

Day 17: Mark 13 | Signs of the End

Mark 13 today - and the end is near! Armageddon. Apocalypse. *End - of the world.*

Sorry about that - I had to be a little dramatic. Mark 13 is big time. We're talking end-times prophecy - the stuff that drives the imagination of religious fanatics.

Take one part prophecy, add two parts Mayan calendar, and stir in a few blood moons, and you've got a recipe for mass-hysteria, with a large side of hype. On the other hand, this is *also* core to the doctrine and teachings of the Christian faith. Or at least the Bible part of it is. Jesus will return to establish His kingdom. This is what all of History is leading to. And - this is Jesus' teaching. Same Jesus who taught love your enemies and forgive as you are forgiven - taught his disciples to watch for signs of the end.

So what do we do? Be careful. We're treading on dangerous ground here. End times prophecy is essential, but tricky. Balance is required.

We're in the days leading up to the cross, likely Tuesday, and in verse 1, 1As Jesus was leaving the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!"

The temple they saw - was indeed magnificent. 500 yards wide - with stones 50 feet wide and 25 feet high - so big that modern construction cranes couldn't lift them today. It was overlaid with dazzling gold and brilliant white marble. Amazing. But in verse 2, "Do you see all these great buildings?" replied Jesus. "Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down."

This prophecy is fascinating. What they saw was so impressive - and yet not one stone would be left on another. And sure enough - less than 40 years later in 70 AD - the Romans sacked Jerusalem. In the process - every last stone was taken down.

This first prophecy is important - because it sets the stage. First - it came to pass quite *literally*. Not allegorically or figuratively - but literally. Second - because it got the disciples looking passed what they see here and now - to something beyond.

Now I can't **cover the whole chapter** in a few minutes - so I'll focus on the forest and leave the trees for you. If you do read commentaries or listen to sermons - you'll find that good Bible teachers - do *not* all agree on how to interpret it. And that is *okay*. That's part of future prophecy. God doesn't make it 100% clear.

Think about it... on **Jesus' first coming** - rabbis had varying expectations about messiah. Jesus didn't match all their interpretations - but He did fulfill the Scriptures perfectly. The same will be true about His return. So keep your focus on the Word itself. The secret things belong to God - but the clear stuff is for us.

After Jesus first words - he sits down with four disciples on the Mount of Olives across from the temple, and they ask him two questions in verse 4: These two questions are important. If you get lost in the chapter - come back to these and remember that Jesus is answering these two - "Tell us, **when** will these things happen? And what will be the **sign** that they are all about to be fulfilled?"

5-6 Warnings

Jesus' answer begins in verse 5 with a warning,

“Watch out that no one deceives you. Many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am he,’ and will deceive many.” (Mark 13:5-6)

Our first lesson on end times prophecy - don't be deceived. Don't trust everyone who comes in Jesus' name, and especially those who claim to *be* Jesus.

7-8 Birth pains (wars, famines, quakes)

Next - Jesus gives signs that are *not* the end - but close.

“When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, *do not* be alarmed. Such things must happen, but *the end is still to come.*” (Mark 13:7)

Jesus explains that the signs will build up - like ***birth pains***. That's a key phrase. Labor pains build up and take a while. I took my wife to the hospital several times before the baby actually showed up. So wars, famines, earthquakes - and all the rumors and news that go with them - are warning signs, but not the big event. **What is the lesson of birth pains? Be ready.** You don't know when it's gonna happen - so *be ready*.

9-13 Persecution

In verses 9 to 13, Jesus warns - of persecution. Before He comes back - living for Christ will mean hard times. But in verse 13, “the one who stands firm to the end will be saved.”

14- Abomination of desolation. Flee!

That persecution is a prophecy for *all* times - but in verse 14, we jump to the *end* times - with a specific sign of the last days.

“When you see ‘**the abomination that causes desolation**’ standing where it does not belong—”

That specific sign repeated through the Old and New Testaments - as *the* big sign of the end.

Abomination - something horrific, nauseatingly horrible.

...*that Causes desolation* - it makes everyone *run*.

Daniel 11:31 says the abomination will be placed in the temple in place of sacrifices. That means there will be a *new* temple in Israel.

2nd Thessalonians 2:3-4 says it will be the Antichrist who sets *himself* in the temple, claiming to be God.

Daniel 12:11 says the abomination will take place exactly 1290 days before the end. That’s three and a half years - the half-way point of the tribulation.

So *this* is *the* big sign to watch for. The others are birth pains. Abomination of Desolation - is water-break.

When that happens - Jesus says to the Jews in Israel - run! Flee! Time is short!

Again in verse 22, don’t fall for false Christs and false prophets - even if they do miracles. Be on your guard!

24 Signs in heavens

In verse 24, great signs in the heavens. But watch the order there - those are the very *last* days.

26 Son of Man coming in clouds!

Then in verse 26, what it's all leading up to:

“At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And he will send his angels and **gather his elect** from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens. (Mark 12:26-27)

That is Jesus' Second Coming. It happens at the *end* of the Tribulation - Revelation 19. If you miss everything else - get this one. Jesus is coming back, in glory - and He will gather His people.

So - that's it - the forest view anyway. Please read the details - and you can get lots more in Daniel, Revelation, and Thessalonians.

But Jesus closes it with some essential guidelines on how to approach end times study. Read carefully and you won't be deceived by the latest appoco-date-predictor.

28 Fig tree lesson.

In verse 28- 28 “Now learn this lesson from the **fig tree**: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near.

In other words - when the signs build up, it *is* coming. He says, “it is near, right at the door.”

I like that picture. It's like preparing for guests to arrive. Get your house in order - Jesus is showing up. “How long 'til he arrives honey?” “He's at the door!”

The lesson: *be ready*.

Now - interesting Jesus chose the fig tree - which is used several times as a symbol of Israel. When the fig tree blossoms - could refer - to Israel blossoming. The nation Israel - regained it's homeland in 1948.

Today it is literally blossoming with flowers and agriculture. Truly a modern miracle. And all of that is a key Biblical sign.

And in verse 30, when Jesus says “this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened”

It could mean the Jewish people will not pass away - OR it could mean the generation that sees Israel blossom will not pass away - til the end.

32 No one knows about that day or hour

However - be careful about anyone trying to pinpoint the day. Verse 32 is key! “But about that day or hour ***no one knows***, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard! Be alert ! ***You do not know*** when that time will come. (Mark 13:32-33)

Understand - that God does not want us to know the exact time! Day and hour are about precision. You can know the general time - and be ready. But this is birth pains, and no human being can schedule a C-section for God's Kingdom!

Please - prophets - stop predicting dates. You ruin those dates for me, because I'm convinced that God refuses to work on your timetable!

Jesus says *nothing* about predicting a date - in fact he does the opposite. But he does say, Be alert. Be ready!

And in **verse 34**, Jesus tells a familiar story,

“It's like a man *going away*: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with their assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch.” (Mark 13:34)

Here - this - is the heart of the message. Why *doesn't* God give us exact dates, why don't we get 100% clarity. Why are the signs general?

For the same reason that God lets it feel like He's gone away. He wants us to keep watch. He wants us to stay ready. We show our true character when we think He's not watching. We show our faith in His promise - when we stay ready. When you *know* that Jesus could knock on the front door of your life - at *any* moment - you're house is ready *all* the time.

In verse 35,

“Therefore *keep watch* because *you do not know* when the owner of the house will come back—”

Jesus did not tell us to spend all our time pinpointing a day - he did tell us to “be ready - so that at any moment we will be found about the Father's business.

Oh hey - hold on - someone's at the door. “Hey beautiful - will you get the door.” Good thing I cleaned... I'll see you guys tomorrow... maybe.

Day 18: Mark 14 | Last Meal

Welcome back to Mark's gospel. Today - one of the great traditions of the Jewish year - *and* the only tradition started by Jesus Himself.

We're in Mark 14 today. Jesus and His disciples have been in and around Jerusalem all week, and the crowds from all over Israel have gathered for the Passover. Jesus spent much of the week answering the questions and challenges of the priests and religious leaders among the Jews. A conspiracy is brewing. All these questions have an ulterior motive - as the jealous leaders dig and prod for any grounds to put Jesus on trial.

The plan is almost together - and that trial is just one day away. And so - Jesus takes His last day aside with his disciples. It is an important one, after all. It is the day called **Passover**.

Let's start in at verse 12

“On the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread, when it was customary to sacrifice the Passover lamb, Jesus' disciples asked him, “Where do you want us to go and **make preparations** for you to eat the **Passover**?”

(Mark 14:12)

The question from the disciples has a bit of accidental irony. “Where should we make preparations?” - but it becomes quite clear that God was preparing for this very day for more than a millennia.

The Passover feast was... a remembrance. Many centuries had passed since the Israelites had been slaves in Egypt. But every year God called His people together - every family - to sacrifice a lamb, and remember - how God brought **judgement** on the cruel gods of Egypt - how death came to every door - and how - by the blood of a lamb - death **passed over** the houses of Israel. This was the story of Passover - it was **rescue from slavery - and escape from death.**

Now there - is the heart of the story - not just for Israel - for God's plan for the world. Escape from death. We'll get back to that later in the week. For now, it's time for Jesus and his disciples to remember.

In verse 13 he sends two disciples into the city to find a man with a room upstairs - that was already furnished and ready. Indeed, God had planned ahead - and in verse 17

“When evening came, Jesus arrived with the Twelve.”

So the disciples sit together to enjoy a meal - the table would be shaped in a U - and the disciples would be reclining on the floor, enjoying the fellowship of a good meal. In Jewish culture, eating together was a sign of unity - the same bread becomes a part of each of us. But for one, the unity was not genuine. Verse 18,

“While they were reclining at the table eating, he said, “Truly I tell you, one of you will **betray** me—one who is eating with me.”

Betray. It is - a harsh word. Wounds from an enemy I expect - but from a friend... There is no injury deeper than broken trust.

Yet Jesus let it happen. It is the risk of true love.

It amazes me sometimes - just how much betrayal God puts up with, yet keeps on loving.

Communion

And then the story turns. In verse 22,

“While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, “Take it; this is my body.”

Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, and they all drank from it. “This is **my blood** of the **covenant**, which is poured out for many,” (Mark 14: 22-25)

This is - the first communion. Some call it Eucharist - which is Greek for give thanks - because Jesus gave thanks. Now in church, we've heard this story. But step out of that for a moment, and sit with the disciples. For the disciples, this was **Passover** - which is full of tradition and memories. **Four wine cups** are shared in the course of the meal - and with them the story of Passover. The first cup - is blessing, or sanctification - as God set His people apart in Egypt. The second - is the cup of judgment - remembering the plagues. The third cup - is redemption - remembering the blood of the lamb, that saved them from death. The fourth, is praise.

It was likely the third cup - the cup of redemption - that Jesus shared, when he said, “**This is my blood.**”

Now stop there. When a person offers you a cup of wine and says, “This is my blood,” he's either a little off, or making a seriously profound statement.

The disciples knew Jesus. He was no crazy man. He had the words of truth and life. But sometimes - Jesus said some things that almost shocked you into paying attention. What did he mean by “This is my blood”?

It had happened before. In John 6, after Jesus had fed five thousand people, the people tracked him down again to get more bread. Jesus said, "I am the bread of life." This was a little off-putting to some of the Jews, so Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man, and drink His blood, you have no life in you."

Now what does that mean?!

Understand - that in the Bible - **blood** is perhaps *the* most important symbol. From the Passover to the cross, blood is the universal object lesson of the Bible - and blood always pictures **life - and death**. And there was one law - given to Noah - repeated to the Jews - and even passed on to Christians - God gave mankind *food* to sustain life - but do not eat meat, with the lifeblood still in it. **Do not - drink blood**.

Now why is that one rule so important? God explains in Leviticus, "Because the life is in the blood."

Pagan cultures throughout history have tried to drink in more life by drinking blood. Where do you think vampire stories come from? But God told *His* people, do not drink blood - do not find **life** there.

So imagine the shock of the Jews, when Jesus said that unless you eat His flesh and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Even the disciples said, "This is a hard teaching." But Jesus explained, "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has **eternal life**..."

The key - is in the word - eternal. Every other place you try to find life - drink it all up - is mortal. It doesn't last.

Don't drink blood - means don't find your life there. It's empty. For us, there is only one way to eternal life. The blood of Christ.

Now the obvious but weird question is - does Jesus mean his *literal* blood? Again - churches argue this. There is nothing in the text of the Bible that says, Jesus gave them "literal" blood. So it's just symbolic then - right? Not "*real*"? Well, I think that depends on your **definition of real**. Jesus said, "For my flesh is *real* food, and my blood is *real* drink." I think that Jesus is saying that there is a greater *reality* - than what we call real. Just as the river of living water is real - but not physical - so I believe that finding eternal life in Jesus' blood - is profoundly real. The blood I drink is not physical, but the life I live because of it is very real.

And back at the Passover meal, look at what Jesus calls the wine in verse 24, "This is **my blood** of the **covenant**..." A **covenant** is a relationship bound by promise. A covenant is not a physical thing, but it is real. It is the very real relationship that God desires with us - that we abide in Him and He in us. That was the picture of sharing bread - it becomes a part of us, and unites us together.

What Jesus gave to His disciples, was a covenant, binding us together - in the bread of life, shared within each of us.

Well, there's a whole lot more to this chapter - so I hope you'll take the time to read it well. Jesus' prayer at Gethsemane, the betrayal by Judas and the arrest. Even a little personal story added by the author Mark. Remember - Mark's gospel is generally considered to be Peter's account.

Mark was a very young man at this time - but he shows up in the middle of the night - at the arrest of Jesus. It's a funny little story in a very sad moment there in verse 51. Then the trial begins - so please read it all - and I'll meet you at Pilate's house tomorrow - in chapter 15.

Well, there is more to this meal. We'll come back to it tomorrow. For today, please read Mark 14. If you'd like to read more about the Passover story you can find it in Exodus 12 - and we have Audio Guides for you there as well. We'll see you back here for more of the Passover feast - tomorrow.

Day 19: Fourth Sunday of Advent | Love (John 1)

Well hello again my Advent friends. Welcome back to our series, as we have arrived at the *Fourth Sunday of Advent*. Just a few days left. Here at my house, the snowman countdown-to-Christmas cubes are down to *four!* And today we get to light our fourth candle, and this one _ is for *love*.

So I decided: what could be more fitting on this *Sunday* than to open John's gospel for his Christmas account. *A little different*. But John *always* focuses on love:

“For God so *loved* the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

That's John 3:16 of course, but do you know *1st* John 3:16? It's another great one, and it will help us a great deal with the very real challenge of giving a definition to *love*. How *do* you define it?

As we've seen every week, the first thing to understand about hope, peace, joy, and love is that one simple word can hold a multitude of meaning. For each there is a distinction between the worldly and the godly meaning. Each one is a feeling—yet the feeling is distinct from the *substance*. We all love the *feeling* of love—it's beautiful, but what *is* the substance of *love*? 1st John 3:16.

“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters”
(1 John 3:16).

So how do we know the *reality* of love? Jesus. He showed us. He *sacrificed*. A bit of fatherly wisdom for you: *Never trust the feeling of love without the sacrifice of love.*

So is that the whole answer? Have we defined love? Not even close. Love is a symphony. Its instruments are multitude.

As for me this year, love has meant a lot. Two new granddaughters. Three sweet weddings—of families so close to us. But I think the big one was watching the way my wife cared for our daughter through chemo. *That* was a deep lesson in love. *With* her. *Two-hundred percent. Unfailing.* And even more. There were so many people caring in so many ways to help our girl get through, so many expressions of love from family to friends to incredible doctors and nurses caring so *well* for *my kid*. Love is a symphony—and when all the instruments play in time with *His* baton—the music is miraculous.

And with that, it's **time to light the candle**. The first three should be lit already, so lighters ready and let's pray:

“Lord we light this candle together to honor the coming of Jesus. Because *you* loved us, you sent Jesus. Lord teach us to see *what love is* in Him, and let that love flow to us and through us in tune with your symphony. In Jesus' strong name, amen.”

Alright, time to light candle four.

And now time for the word. Now Peyton teaches our John series, but I grabbed this one from a not yet released version that I wrote. So you're stuck with me again this time.

John 1 | The Word Became Flesh

John's version of the Christmas story _ is different. John wrote later, so he didn't bother repeating the shepherds' watch or angels' song. John zooms out—and offers a much grander view of what really happened when that baby was laid down in a feeding manger. Let's read at John 1, verse 1:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:1-5).

John starts _ where Genesis started, *in the beginning*. And already there from eternity past is *the Word*.

Wait... I thought God was there in the beginning. Yep.

“...and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning” (John 1:1-2).

Okay, so what is this *Word*?

How do you define the word word? Remember that a single *word* can carry a multitude of meaning. Same is true of the word *word*. And at its most basic, that's just what a *word* is: something that carries *meaning*—delivers a message. It's a beautiful thing really. I feel something inside me and want to share it. *Words* give me language to do it—to express my heart, share my story, and tell you about *me*. Ideas, plans, emotions, jokes, love and hate, joy and sorrow—all carried between us and others through *words*.

So the idea here is that God had a *message* to communicate.

And the Bible does that—with lots of words. And yet—some messages don't quite fit into words on a page. Ever felt like that—like you're about to send a text, but you realize that *words* aren't enough? Like this message needs to be...in person.

Look back at verse 1:

“The Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1).

In other words, God wasn't just expressing feelings or ideas. He was communicating Himself. His person. Which explains why the Word is referred to as *he*, *not it*.

Verse 3:

“Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made” (John 1:3).

So the Word _ is Creator. Made *everything*.

Verse 4:

“In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind” (John 1:4).

What a picture. *Life*—what makes us alive. And light—that makes us see.
Light for all mankind.

“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:5).

There is much darkness in this world. But none of it has overcome this *light*.
But in *whom* was life? Who is this *Word* that *is* God’s message to the world?
It’s Jesus of course. And yet, some just didn’t recognize. Verse 10:

“He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.

He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him”
(John 1:10-11).

So John acknowledges that many didn’t believe. They saw Jesus, heard the Word, and just wouldn’t receive him. Receive is an interesting word choice—as though a gift showed up and they decided: *return to sender*.

But John is determined to present this testimony so that we might believe.
And verse 12 tells us what’s at stake:

“Yet to all who did receive him, to those who *believed* in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God”
(John 1:10-13).

Wow. No matter how many times I read that phrase, it still stops me. “*Children of God.*” God’s own kids. “*Born of God.*” That we might call out to Creator God and say *Father*. That’s the relationship we’re called to.

However broken your relationship might be with your earthly father, or if it’s healthy or in between—God invites you into a new relationship. To be *his kid*.

And that—blows my mind. I so appreciate the apostle John, because he is just as amazed by this as I am. In 1st John 3 he says:

“Behold *what great love* the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!” (1 John 3:1a).

That kind of love is truly a wonder. *His own kids*. That’s the invitation.

But an invitation like that could not be sent with words on a page. A *word* like that required special delivery—something that *carried the full meaning* of the message. So in verse 14:

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14).

So God’s message _ came as a living person. Flesh and bones, laughter and tears. A face to smile and arms to embrace. Jesus.

And he *dwelt* among us—made himself at home—lived life like one of us.

When you really want to get to know someone, you *dwell* with them. That’s what Jesus did for us.

John says:

“We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14b).

And verse 17:

“For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known” (John 1:17-18).

And that’s the heart of it. We can’t see God. It just doesn’t work that way. But Jesus made him *known*. Jesus *is* God’s message—and God’s message is *Himself*.

How can we *know what love is*? Look. See Jesus in the Bible. Watch how he treats people. Watch how he *cares*. And look around you. Watch the multitude of ways that *His instruments* deliver his love in our world.

We are broken vessels, to be sure. We often play out of tune. Break a string. And yet, he chose us. Saw the value in us—and redeemed it. He even calls us *his own kids*. And he teaches us to see others and treat others with that same love.

So let’s close with prayer.

Lord, we thank you for love, and the amazing Word you sent us in Jesus—to express that love in all its multitude. Teach us to love like you do Lord. In Jesus’ strong name, amen.

That's it for today guys. Remember that we have just two days left to finish out Mark's gospel—a powerful time to read the greatest expression of love ever shown. And on Christmas Eve, please remember to join us for *one more candle* as we read the story of Jesus' birth in Luke 2. And we'll have one last story for Christmas Day. Now I know that day can be busy between families and all, so no shame if you make that one up the next day.

And if you have a few minutes now, slow down and consider what *love* has meant to you this year, and if you're together or in a group plan, share it.

Merry Christmas guys. Almost there.

"We elves try to stick to the four main food groups: candy, candy canes, candy corn, and syrup."

Day 20: Mark 15 | King on a Cross

Welcome back to Holy Week. Today is Good Friday, and the Son of God stands trial - in the courts of man. We are in Mark 15 today, and the story begins - early.

Darkness of night still covers the city of God, and the Jewish multitudes who have traveled to Jerusalem for Passover - are tucked away in the homes of family and friends. The people sleep, but the Jewish leaders have been awake for some time, gathered at the house of Caiphas, the high priest. There in the dark hours before daybreak, a trial is underway.

Jesus of Nazareth, a humble rabbi, stands accused, and the entire Sanhedrin and all the chief priests have gathered, hoping to make a conviction before the people of Jerusalem awake to see it.

There is a delicate **balance of power** in Jerusalem, and it is not entirely clear who is the rightful ruler. There in the house of Caiphas, the high priest exercises rule over the religious life of Israel, and the Sanhedrin meets to debate matters of doctrine.

Yet the political power lies in the hands of the Romans, and the Jewish priests will have to bring their decision about Jesus - from the house of the high priest, to the palace of the Roman governor. His name is Pontius Pilate, charged with keeping the peace, and passing judgment.

And there is one more building to consider in this city. The Temple of God. The place where God promised to dwell with His people.

It was an awesome structure - with the outer courts, Solomon's colonnade, the grand room of the Holy Place where the priests served, and where they would see the great veil - a curtain 60 feet tall, 30 feet wide, and four inches thick - separating every human from the room called the Holy of Holies. Behind that veil, God had promised, "There I will meet with you" (Ex 25:22).

God's presence - but none could enter, save for the high priest just once each year. The veil that guarded it, was an 1800 square foot reminder - that God is holy, and we are separated from him.

Mark 15 begins, "Very early in the morning," but much has already happened. After Jesus left the Passover meal with his disciples, they went to pray at the Garden of Gethsemane, though the disciples fell asleep. They awoke to a full battalion of soldiers, led out by Judas, along with several of the priests, to arrest Jesus. John records - that when Jesus simply stated who he is - the entire group fell to the ground. Shaken but undaunted, the soldiers arrested Him, and the disciples scattered.

Jesus was taken before Caiphas, the high priest. To read that part of the story - back up to Mark 14. One thing you will notice - as accusations are hurled at Jesus, none of them stick - but what is most striking is the silence of Jesus. He hardly speaks. He gives a direct answer to only one question:

"Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" "I am," said Jesus."
(Mark 14:61b-62a)

And for this, and this only, the High Priest condemns Jesus - for blasphemy - for who he claimed to be. Watch this as you read through the trials. Jesus answers a select few questions - and they all have one thing in common - one very important thing.

Now it is daybreak, and Mark 15 opens,

“Very early in the morning, the chief priests, with the elders, the teachers of the law and the whole Sanhedrin, made their plans. So they bound Jesus, led him away and handed him over to Pilate. **“Are you the king of the Jews?”** asked Pilate. “You have said so,” Jesus replied. The chief priests accused him of many things. So again Pilate asked him, “Aren’t you going to answer? See how many things they are accusing you of.” But Jesus still made no reply, and Pilate was amazed. (Mark 15: 1-5)

Again, Jesus will not speak up. But notice the one question that He does answer. “Are you the King of the Jews?” From his arrest and through his trials, Jesus answers the questions - about **who He is**. Search the red letters. It were as if Jesus is saying that this one thing - this is what matters. Who He is.

And Pilate doesn’t miss it. Every time he refers to Jesus from here on out, he calls him, “the king of the Jews.” And for his part, Pilate does try to free Jesus. There was a custom each year at Passover, to release a prisoner, as a sign of peace. In verse 9, Pilate asks,

“Do you want me to **release** to you the **king of the Jews?**”

But the priests convince the crowd to ask for Barabbas instead.

Then verse 12,

“What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?” ...

“Crucify him!” ... “Why? What crime has he committed?” ... But they shouted all the louder, “Crucify him!”

And Pilate gives in. Jesus is flogged brutally, and led away to the palace with a whole company of soldiers. In verse 17,

They put a purple robe on him, then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on him. And they began to call out to him, “Hail, king of the Jews!”

(Mark 15: 17-18)

Added to the mocking are senseless beating, insults and spit. The callous cruelty of man. I don't know why it still shocks me, but it does. But notice the core of their mocking - the robe and the crown - they mock him as King.

Jesus has made it clear who He is, and the guards make it just as clear - what they think of it.

The soldiers finish their sadistic fun, and lead Jesus to a place called Golgotha, the place of the skull, and in verse 24,

“...they crucified him. Dividing up his clothes, they cast lots to see what each would get. It was nine in the morning when they crucified him.”

(Mark 15:24-25)

Crucifixion is a testament to the unashamed cruelty of mankind. It was a hideous punishment for crime, and the Romans wanted everyone to know exactly why each man was crucified.

So in verse 26,

“The written notice of the charge against him read: The King of the Jews.”

The priests convicted Jesus, because he claimed to be the Messiah, and Pilate crucified him with just one conviction - the King of the Jews.

The notice does not seem to impress those who stand nearby. They hurl insults at Jesus, mocking him, ““He saved others,” they said, “but he can’t save himself!”

There is a sad irony in that statement. If only they would listen to their own words. Jesus did save others. And He was still doing it.

Then in verse 33, “At noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon.”

This darkness was no mere shadow - or even eclipse. Passover happened at full moon, making an eclipse impossible. Luke’s gospel makes it clear - for three hours, “the sun stopped shining.”

Step across history for a moment, and set yourself there on the hill of Golgotha. Standing in torchlight at midday, the cynical conversation of mockers, the weeping of women weeping. Before you, the cold confidence of the Roman guard, refusing to be shaken by a little darkness; and behind them the cross.

Forget for now your own bias and just look on for a moment. What is happening? What have they done? What have we done? The sign above the bloody figure reads, “King of the Jews.”

Who is this man?

Verse 34,

“And at three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “*Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?*” (which means “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”).

There is some discussion among the onlookers about what Jesus means, but they determine to leave him alone. Then in verse 37,

With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last. *The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.*

And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, he said, “Surely this man was the Son of God!” (Mark 15:37-39)

And so, the man with the closest view of Jesus’ death, closes the story - with a simple statement - of who Jesus is.

And just as you turn to walk away from it all, an onlooker next to you asks, “Who do *you* think he was?” Well, what about it then? Who was he? It would be a question that hung in the air over the entire city.

From the palace of Pilate, as his wife questioned him, “what did you do with the man I warned you about?” - to the house of the high priest, busy appeasing his own conscience. And in the homes of families still gathered for the feast, the memory still fresh of crying Hosanna to the new king, the hopes so high, and the news of the trial almost unbelievable.

Who was this man?

And there in the temple, as priests scrambled to know how to respond to a situation for which there was no protocol. The veil was rent - the Holy of Holies - the presence of God - was exposed.

Who was this man?

As many wondered, a man named Joseph, from Arimathea, a member of the Jewish council, went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body.

A centurion was sent to verify that the prisoner was fully dead, and Pilate granted Joseph's request. In verse 46,

So Joseph bought some linen cloth, took down the body, wrapped it in the linen, and placed it in a tomb cut out of rock. Then he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where he was laid. (Mark 15: 46-47)

Day 21: Mark 16 | Risen

Welcome back to Through the Word - to Mark's gospel - and to **the moment of truth.**

It's an interesting phrase isn't it? The moment - the critical seconds, the pivotal pause - when the truth hangs in the balance. Everything depends on this moment - and all will be revealed.

And that is precisely what we have in Mark 16. It is the moment of truth for Jesus. We left off at the end of chapter 15, at a tomb, and the body of the man who claimed to be the Son of God, the Jewish Messiah, the way the truth and the life - was lain there lifeless. Jesus - was dead.

For the disciples - it was the moment of doubt - if not despair. The one they had followed, the one for whom they had lost everything - set all their hopes, dedicated their entire lives to follow - was killed at the cruel hands of a Roman cross.

I hope that I will not be guilty of overdramatizing this - but this is drama. Very real drama - for the disciples, for every person who wants to follow Christ - and for everyone who faces the reality of death and wants to know whether there is hope on the other side of it.

And for the disciples, this is not a rehearsed play. It is unknown. It is waiting - through Friday, through Saturday, and finally to very early - Sunday morning.

Verse 1,

“When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus’ body. Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb and they asked each other, “Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?” (Mark 16:1-3)

These three women were devoted followers of Jesus. Two of them are moms to some of the disciples - every group needs some faithful moms around - and one was saved from a dark and demonized life. The women were the last to stay at the cross - and they are the first to show up at the tomb.

I imagine the disciples are busy trying to figure this all out - but these moms decide to just go ahead and do the right thing. And for them - honoring Jesus with proper burial spices was very simply - the right thing to do.

Now they’re not expecting a miracle. They showed up with burial spices. They’re worried about the massive stone at the tomb’s entrance. There’s no amazing faith here - but there is faithfulness.

Then verse 4,

“But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed.”

(Mark 16: 4-5)

The alarm of the women - is understandable. When you walk into a place expecting no one - and find a man dressed in gleaming white - it’ll spook you.

We know from the other gospels that this man in a white robe is an angel - and there were in fact two of them there.

Verse 6 -

6“Don’t be alarmed,” he said. “You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. **He has risen! He is not here.** See the place where they laid him. 7But go, tell his disciples and Peter, ‘He is going ahead of you into Galilee. **There you will see him, just as he told you.**’ ” (Mark 16: 6-7)

Jesus - wasn’t there. Verse 8 says the women were *trembling* and *bewildered*. No kidding! This is shock. What did the man in white just say? “He has *risen*.” Risen.

He’s going to Galilee. You will see him there - just as *he told you*.

That last phrase had to stick. “**Just as he told you.**” Jesus had told the disciples *many* times that his death and resurrection were coming soon. But it just didn’t click. It didn’t fit their plan or their ideas.

Now before you judge - consider how many times the Lord has promised us trials and persecutions - and how often we are so surprised when they actually hit.

It’s selective hearing - we all do it.

But the key for you - and the key for the disciples - is to look back, and see that God has always kept His word. He is ever faithful.

“Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.” (Mark 16:8)

Now **putting the gospel stories together** - the women left the tomb to tell the disciples. The disciples wouldn't believe it - but Peter and John came backed to the tomb, and Mary Magdalene tagged along. Peter and John found the tomb empty - and left. But Mary stayed this time, and as it says here in verse 9, Mary was the first to see Jesus. Alive! Just as He told them.

Now one quick question to answer. **Why don't all four gospels tell the same story?** If it's true - shouldn't they be the same? Well - not exactly. A **friend of mine who works in court** shared some insight with me on hearing testimonies.

When stories contradict each other - that's an obvious issue. But when stories agree *too* well - if they all say the same thing - it usually means that they conspired ahead of time. "Everybody just say this."

Honest testimonies - should not contradict - but should not be identical either. The real world has *real* facts - with *different* perspectives - and different parts to every story. And *that* is precisely what we get here in the four gospels. Particularly with the resurrection.

Piecing it together is good - but don't get lost in the details. The central testimony here - the real question at hand - is Jesus dead or alive? Is it true?!

Back here in Mark, Jesus appeared again - on the road to Emmaus, as two disciples walked with him for miles. The rest of that story is in Luke's account.

In fact most of the end of Mark here is a quick summary of what the others record in more detail. Jesus appears several times, Commissions His disciples to go and make more disciples, and He ascends to Heaven.

But - some of you are already caught on a note in some Bibles - that says **verses 9 through 20** are not in the earliest manuscripts. There is a long standing argument on this one - as to whether or not this last section really belongs in the Bible - and I will not delve into it deeply.

Two things for you to know. One - there is nothing new here. As I said - it's really a short summary of what we already know in the other gospels. So if it doesn't belong - nothing new is lost. Though a misuse of verse 18 has convinced some very foolish Christians to pick up snakes and drink poison.

Two - There are good arguments that say it does belong. But I'll leave that for you to research. Whatever you decide - don't pick up snakes. Unless you have to.

But snakes are beside the point. The heart of this story - and of all of the claims of Jesus Christ and of the entire Bible - **are hinged on the resurrection of Jesus.**

In 1st Corinthians, Paul said *this* is of first importance - that Christ died for our sins, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day, and that he appeared to many. If Jesus is dead, Paul says your faith is useless - it's all vanity.

But if it's true - if Jesus is alive - then it's everything.

If it's true - then Romans is true - the at the Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead - is living in us - believers - and He will give life to our mortal bodies.

If it's true, then I want to know Christ - and the *power* of His resurrection. I do not want to hold on to a form of godliness but deny it's power. I want Hebrews 7 - the power of an indestructible life!

Listen - Jesus did not come to teach us platitudes of wisdom. He came to take on death. The ultimate enemy! To grab sin and death hold them fast to the cross - to go down with them, and come out alive!

Jesus' claims were massive. There's no way around it. The priests got it - they said it. Jesus - a mere man - claimed to be God. And they demanded a sign from him. And Jesus promised them only one - the resurrection.

There is one key statement in verse 14 - that should not be missed. Later on - when Jesus appeared to the eleven disciples - he rebuked them for their lack of faith and **their stubborn refusal to believe.**

So what about you? Will you hide behind arguments over whether or not a few redundant verses belong? Will you get lost in some minor dilemmas over whether there was one angel or two?

Or will you take this head on - and come face to face with the questions that really matter. Who is Jesus? Is He dead - or is He risen? And when it comes to your moment of truth - will you call Him - Lord?

Day 22: Christmas Eve & Fifth Advent Candle | Christ

Hello my dear Advent friends and welcome to the big day. Christmas Eve has arrived at last. And we are all prepared to light our *fifth* and final candle.

Now traditions vary, so some Advent sets don't have a fifth candle, but others have a white candle today—for the light of Christ.

So if you're lighting candles with us, you should have the first four lit—or light them now—for *hope, peace, joy, and love*. My studio desk is very well lit and smells ever so Christmassy. And there is just one unlit candle remaining: the fifth is for *Jesus* himself.

Now that's a pretty big question to ask me: *What did Jesus mean in your life this year?* How much time do you have? But then, I feel like we've said it already. He is *hope*, he is *peace*, his is *joy*, he is *love*. He is _ with us.

Back in Matthew 1:

“The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”)” (Matthew 1:23).

One of my favorite Christmas movies is *About a Boy* with Hugh Grant—who's character Will is convinced that he can get through life without *needing* or *being needed* by anyone.

But alas, when circumstances bring him to actually care about a kid, and that kid needs real help with real life issues, Will feels useless. Not his skill set.

But my favorite line—is when the boy’s mom says, “*Will, you’re not useless. You’re here. And that matters.*”

I love that. Even though it’s a secular movie (and PG-13 if you’re curious), the heart of it is the very real difference made—by being there. *With* someone.

You don’t have to fix it, sometimes you just get through it *together*. And that’s what Jesus meant to me this year. In a million little ways, and through countless different people, Jesus was *with* me.

Also in the movie, the kid grows up to be an X-Men superhero, so it’s a happy ending. Are the movies connected? No, but same actor—so I mash them together.

Well, it’s time to light our final candle. Lighters ready? Let’s pray.

“Lord we light this candle together to honor the coming of Jesus—to be *with us*. Lord help us to see *how you are with us* through so many people, and help us to *bring your presence* to those who need it. In Jesus’ strong name, amen.”

And now in the warm glow of *five* Advent candles, let’s listen together to our audio guide through the Christmas story in Luke 2.

Which is—me again. So once again I’ll have the awkward job of introducing myself. Here’s me.

Luke 2 | Peace on Earth

Luke chapter 2 on our journey through the word, the story of the day that peace came to earth. That peace arrived as a little baby boy, and for anyone who has ever longed for peace in the world, or peace in your heart, this story is for you. It is, of course, the Christmas story—the birth of Jesus, and it begins at verse 1:

“In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world” (Luke 2:1).

And so, every person in the vast Roman empire traveled back to their hometowns to be registered and counted. Verse 4 introduces Joseph—living in Nazareth, but now traveling south to *Bethlehem*, the town of David, “...because he belonged to the house and line of David” (Luke 2:4).

Don't miss that. Chapter one introduced us to King Herod, and chapter 2 to Caesar Augustus. But whatever happened to *the line of King David*? Verse 5: “He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child” (Luke 2:5)

Betrothed and pregnant will get you a lot of sideways glances and muttered judgments, but underneath this very human story, there is a great undercurrent of God's mighty hand working everything together. Many details of this story were written on scrolls *centuries* before it all happened.

Bethlehem. The line of David. And a virgin with child—enduring an arduous journey, and a whole lot of judgement she doesn't deserve.

Verse 6:

“While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them” (Luke 2:6-7).

And just as simple as that, Almighty God entered the world that He created, a little baby boy who was laid down to sleep in a feeding trough.

Verse 8 introduces a group of shepherds out under the starry skies above Israel’s countryside keeping watch over their flocks by night. Bethlehem has pastureland for sheep to this day, and I can tell you _ the hilly terrain provides some great viewpoints for stargazing. Now shepherds in that day were among the lowly of society. Yet God has a way of lifting up the lowly, and honoring the humble. So in verse 9:

“An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord” (Luke 2:9-11).

That is *awesome*. Never forget that the story of Jesus is good news of *great joy*, and may it always be great joy to your heart and mine.

“In the town of David a Savior has been born.” Jesus was *born* to save. I am often perplexed by books and articles that attempt to explain how Jesus *became* savior as his disciples exaggerated his story over time.

But that's not the historical record. Here Luke records the story—prophesied for centuries beforehand, and now proclaimed by an angel on high—of a *baby* _ who is Messiah and *Lord*. And Jesus came—not to condemn—but to save.

Verse 13:

“Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests’” (Luke 2:13-14).

Peace on earth. It's a popular phrase around Christmastime. And for good reason: it's right here in the Christmas story. But sometimes those three amazing words get separated from the story of Jesus' birth.

I remember riding in Small World at Disneyland around Christmas one year, and it was all lit up and beautiful. At the end of the ride, “Peace on Earth” was posted beautifully on a banner, and again in languages from *all around the world*. A lovely sentiment, but of course there was nothing about the birth of a savior.

Now I'm not offended that they don't include Jesus in their Christmas décor. It is our job to proclaim the good news of great joy, not Disney's. But it is interesting. The whole world loves this phrase: *peace on earth*. We long for it. But how to find it? And why do the angels proclaim it here? How does the *birth of Messiah* bring *peace*?

The world can wish us peace, and all that well-wishing may be very well intended, but where to find it? Here a host of angels *proclaim* it. And I wonder what those shepherds thought.

Well I don't know what they thought, but I can tell you what they said. "*Let's go to Bethlehem and see!*" (Luke 2:15). They do just that, and then they're ready to go tell it on the mountain to anyone they can find _ that Jesus Christ is born.

And that's it for our Christmas Eve story. Thank you so much for making *us* part of your journey on *this* day. I am deeply honored. So let's close out again with prayer.

Lord, thank you for Jesus. Thank you for sending your Son to be God with us. In Jesus' strong name, amen.

Well, we have just one day left in the plan. I know December 25th is busy—so no pressure. It's totally okay if you listen later. But if you could use the company, we'd be honored to be with you. We're gonna close out with the story of the Magi and the three gifts—traditionally read on the *twelfth* day of Christmas—so you have time.

Don't forget to take a few minutes to share together what Jesus meant in your lives this year. And Merry Christmas everyone. Enjoy His company.

"Merry Christmas, movie house! Merry Christmas, Emporium! Merry Christmas, you wonderful old Building and Loan!"

Day 23: Christmas Day | Matthew 2

Well hello and *Merry Christmas* everyone. Look at us. Christmas Day! What a day!! And you included *me!* I'm so honored!!

I know some of you are listening back later, *but I'm still honored.* And for you who are on your own on Christmas, so glad I could join you. So right now, we have each other, we have many thousands of friends listening all over the world together, and most importantly, we have God with us. And... thanks for keeping me company.

Well as tradition goes, December 25th is Christmas day which is *not* part of Advent. Advent is the *lead up*, and by tradition today is Day 1 of the *Twelve Days of Christmas.*

Yes, there is more to the story than a pear tree and a wide array of flying and/or dancing gifts. Traditions vary, and I know most of us will *not* be playing Christmas music after New Year's. That's okay. There's also no candle today, but we do have a story.

Tradition wise, this story would normally be told on January 6—the twelfth day of Christmas. But I think our nativity set wise men have been wandering the living room long enough. It's time for their story to be told.

(Anyone else make their wise men wander before Christmas? Just me? Okay.)

Now our story today is in Matthew 2, which means Peyton will be guiding us once again. But before I go, I'd like to read a passage for you from Isaiah 9. It's a prophecy—six centuries before Jesus' time.

You'll recognize the *end* of it, but I want to read you the context. The prophecy is about Jesus—about his *full* purpose. It speaks of an *end* to oppression. An end to war, and the arrival of peace.

I want to read it—to remind us that Jesus' purpose on earth isn't done. He's still working. And he who began a good work in us will be faithful to complete it. So here is Isaiah 9 at verse 2:

“The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness
a light has dawned.

...

For as in the day of Midian's defeat,
you have shattered
the yoke that burdens them,
the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor.
Every warrior's boot used in battle
and every garment rolled in blood
will be destined for burning,
will be fuel for the fire.

For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the greatness of his government and peace
there will be no end” (Isaiah 9:2,4-7a).

I love that prophecy. So one more time, let's pray:

Lord, we thank you for the gift of Christmas. And we remember this day that your purpose in Christ is *still at work*, and we trust that *you will complete your good work in us. In Jesus' strong name, amen.*

Now before Peyton starts, I want to acknowledge that Peyton and I pronounce Magi differently. I don't know which of us is right, but I'm acknowledging. Peyton lived in Wales, UK so this stuff happens—Isaiah, Isay-ah, potato, potahta. No need to email us. We're on it.

Now let's open Matthew 2 with Peyton Jones.

Welcome back to Matthew's gospel. Chapter 2 today, and it's feeling a little bit like Christmas in here; I don't mean like those old ladies that decorate too early and take down their Christmas decorations too late. I mean that we're going to talk about the birth of Jesus today.

It was Ebenezer Scrooge who said, “I shall honor the spirit of Christmas in my heart and aim to keep it all year” and that’s the spirit, but before we’re done with this chapter, I’m afraid you’re going to think me a bit of a grinch. Matthew tells us the Christmas story as it happens, not as it sells Hallmark cards and nativity sets.

Let’s jump right in (verse 1) “After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem 2 and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” (Matthew 2: 1-2)

Okay, who are these magi?

They were astrologers, men who studied the stars; most likely from Babylon or Persia. We’re never told there were three; or that they were Kings.

These men were wealthy, as we learn from their gifts, but the mysterious thing about them is that they report seeing “his star”. What do they mean, “his star”?

Way back in the book of Numbers, as the children of Israel were traveling through the pagan lands, there was a man named Balaam, a prophet from the East, who is paid to curse the Israelites as they pass through the land, but finds it impossible...every time he tries to pronounce a curse on them, God puts a blessing in his mouth.

And his very last one, is a doozy:

“The oracle of one who hears the words of God...I see him but not now. I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob, a scepter will rise out of Israel.” (Numbers 24: 16-17)

He prophesied that a star would come announcing the King of Israel. But then flash forward over a thousand years, and Daniel is taken to Babylon and prophecies of Jesus as well to the wise men, or magi of Babylon.

And this story is unique to Matthew; because despite his writing for a Jewish audience, Matthew is determined to tell them that their Jewish Messiah was also the savior of the world.

The King of Israel? The king of Heaven? This sounds like good news; unless you were sitting on the throne of Israel pretending to be a Jewish King. And that is exactly what Herod was; an imposter. He'd been put into power by the Romans, and given the title "King of the Jews" and he wasn't a Jew. He was an edumean, or edomite; descended from Esau. Verse 3

"When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

"But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel."

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him." (Matthew 2:3-8)

Herod isn't just a phony, he's also a liar! And he's also a murderer. He intends to pay his respects to Jesus with a gift of a clubbing to the head.

“After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.”

(Matthew 2: 9- 12)

Okay, wait; I'm sorry, my heart must be two sizes too small because I'm about to go full grinch on our assumptions here. Jesus is a child here. And they're in a house. So this doesn't happen while Jesus was in the manger. Nope, in fact, we'll see it was probably about 2 years after Jesus was born before we're done.

Note that they didn't bow to him as a King; it says that they bow down and worship him. This must have been awkward to this young teenage couple to be sought out; have their baby worshipped by important men who shower him with wealth; gold (because he was a king), frankincense (which was used in worship because he was God), and myrrh (an expensive burial spice; because Jesus was born to die). Die for us.

When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up,” he said, “take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.”

(Matthew 2:13)

And that's exactly what Herod did. Because he couldn't determine which of the male children born in the last two years was the King the wise men sought, he wiped them out. All of them. But behind evil King Herod, we see the devil himself; as the book of Revelation plays this out on a cosmic level, telling us that the dragon tried to swallow up the infant child, but an eagle swept the child and his mother away. Colorful words, but in the black and white of the moment, it probably felt less than magical to Joseph.

“So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called my son.”
(Matthew 2:14-15)

Jesus would come up out of Egypt, the perfect son, whereas Israel being brought up from Egypt were the imperfect son.

And that's it for our Advent plan everyone. We have been so honored to walk with you through Jesus' story and to spend these important days with you. Thanks for making us part of it.

And with New Year approaching, I want to invite you to join us for another journey!

Through the Word has audio guides through every book and every chapter in the Bible. If you like this one, New Year's is a fantastic time to start a new Bible habit—and to invite some friends to join you!

If you're listening on YouVersion, check our *Partner Page* to find all our plans and suggestions for what's new. If you're on the Through the Word app, check our News and Updates for our New Year plan. Maybe join Peyton for the whole Matthew plan. Or pick your own plan! And make *God with you* a part of your New Year *every day*.

Merry Christmas everyone. I'll see you on the journey.

"What if Christmas, he thought, doesn't come from a store? What if Christmas—perhaps—means a little bit more?"