

Because Biblical Context Matters

THE REST OF THE *Story*

A Closer Look at “Familiar” Passages



Contextual Reflections for Individuals and Groups

Doug Greenwold

Author of Making Disciples Jesus' Way



A Digging Deeper Faith Study

Reading the Bible through fresh eyes constantly reminds us of the depths that still remain to be discovered there.

—*Phillip Jenkins*

Happy are those who see beauty in the modest spots where others see nothing. Everything is beautiful, the secret lies in knowing how to interpret.

—*Camille Pissaro, Impressionist Painter*

Those of us who know the Bible story well can suffer from knowing it well.

—*Alistair Begg*

The NT (New Testament), after all, does not come in the form of timeless aphorisms; every text was written in a given first century time/space framework.

Indeed the NT authors felt no need to explain what were for them and their readers common cultural assumptions

—*Gordon D. Fee*

Context rescues truth from the familiar.

—*Kenneth Bailey*

When reading the Scriptures, we see what we know but do not always know what we see.

—*Unknown*

There is no substitute for reading the Bible; it throws a great deal of light on the commentaries!

—*Unknown*

I never saw a useful Christian who was not a student of the Bible.

—*D. L. Moody*

The Christian who is careless in Bible reading is careless in Christian living.

—*Max Reich*

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Doug Greenwold

Author of

Making Disciples Jesus’ Way: Wisdom We have Missed

Zechariah and Elizabeth: Persistent Faith in a Faithful God

Encounters with Jesus: The Rest of Their Stories

First Edition July 2007

Second Edition June 2011

A Digging Deeper Faith Study

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Dedication

To those followers of Jesus who have ever wondered,
“is there something more I could be getting out of my
Bible study” – this book is for you.

And to those “Bible Alive” weekend participants who
keep asking for more Bible-in-context teaching, this
book is a modest attempt to respond to that request.

May the context of the Bible encourage you to dig
deeper into the Scriptures to discover more of the
gems of God’s truth and wisdom that are patiently
waiting there for you to find.

Acknowledgements

Any Archaeologist will tell you it takes the time and effort of many people to excavate an ancient site so as to uncover its many clues to the past. Many people are needed to carefully dig, brush, sift, measure and categorize before a reconstruction of the past starts to come into view.

Even when it comes to the individual pieces of broken pottery scattered around a site, many potsherds (pottery pieces) need to be discovered and organized before they can be placed back together to recreate the nature and shape of the original vessel.

This work is no exception. It comes with great appreciation and thankfulness for the work of digging, sifting and categorizing that many have previously done to discover the pieces (sherds) that have allowed for the contextual development of the passages in this effort. Those contributions include:

- Those early nineteenth-century contributors to biblical context like Alfred Edersheim and twentieth-century contextual contributors like Dr. Kenneth Bailey who continue to set the standard for what it means to culturally restore a passage.
- Dr. James C. Martin, co-founder of Preserving Bible Times, who first introduced me in 1988 to the land of the Bible and started me down this contextual road.
- The late James Montgomery Boice whose passion for both biblical context and its pastoral implications continues to be an inspiration as to why context always matters when it comes to the Scriptures.
- Becky Cooke who once again provided helpful insights and editorial suggestions.
- Dr. Mark Whalon, an entomologist at Michigan State University, whose insights into Mesopotamian vineyard care brought much added depth to an understanding of John 15:2.
- Jon Eikenberry who used all of his photographic enhancement tricks to improve my Judean vineyard photograph.
- The Adult Bible Study classes at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Bethesda, Maryland, and the Rockville, Maryland, Community Bible Study Thursday Evening Classes who so graciously allowed me to develop, refine and teach much of this contextual methodology.

Preface

Nothing has meaning without a context.
—Bob Beall

A Caution

In just about any well-respected book written to help us study and understand the Bible better, you will find some version of the following caution:

We should not ask what a passage means for us today until we first know what the words and phrases meant to those who first heard them.

Intuitively we know this has to be true. That is not just good advice; it is also one of those Laws of Gravity when it comes to studying God's Word. As we know from our physical world, if we chose to ignore the reality of gravity, we will surely stumble and fall because of our carelessness and ignorance. The physical Law of Gravity continues to operate in our world whether we believe it or not, or like it or not. The same is true when studying God's Word. Ignoring the context of a passage does not mean that the context residing in that passage is irrelevant. It does mean, however, that if we ignore that context we can easily miss much of what God intended to reveal to us in that passage.

This first-understand-what-the-passage-meant-to-those-who-first-heard-it caution does prompt a question or two. Is it even possible to know what the Bible words in a passage meant to those who first heard them and, if that is possible, how would we go about discovering that meaning? Answering those kinds of questions is why biblical context matters. It is an assumption of this book that we will never get to the fuller

meaning of a Bible passage without first understanding its original context.

Context Always Matters

Context matters in everything we do. Always has and always will. We know that to be true in our professions, in our families and in our relationships. Yet despite knowing this universal truth, we still seem to have this amazing ability to disconnect ourselves from that truth when we enter the Scriptures. The words in the Bible were chosen because of their precise meaning and that meaning is drawn from the passage's context. Thus, if we are to more fully connect with the original meaning of a passage today, we need to know what its verbs, phrases, idioms, events, names and places meant to those who first heard them. As this book will repeatedly demonstrate, understanding the context of a biblical passage can significantly improve our ability to "correctly handle" God's Word for today.

Is Everyone Doing It?

In my teaching travels, I am blessed to be able to meet and dialogue with many wonderful people – Bible students, church leaders, pastors, para-church professionals and seminary professors. What each shares with me at some point in our time together is that "of course I study/preach/teach the Bible in context." I have learned to probe those statements by asking a series of questions aimed at understanding: What do you mean when you say you study the Bible in context?

What I often discover is that everyone has a different (and usually limited) perspective on what it means to study the Bible in its context. Those varying responses have caused me to increasingly add the phrases "cohesive context,"

“comprehensive context,” “integrated context” to my vocabulary to try and capture what the biblical writers assumed we would know about the words they used and the scrolls they wrote (for more on this theme, see “The Case for Context” in the Appendix). Only when we put a passage back into its comprehensive and integrated historical, geographical, literary, cultural and visual context, will we have the best chance to understand what those words mean in the often breath-taking, three-dimensional, timeless way the passage was meant to be understood.

Making the Case

At the beginning of our Bible-in-Context teaching weekends, before we start to equip people with tools to better help them understand the Bible in its context, the case needs to be made to this generation that context really does matter when engaging the Scriptures. Without having convincingly made that point, there would be little interest in the contextual tools, frameworks and resources developed in those seminars to equip people to dig more deeply into God’s word.

Rediscovering the “Familiar”

In building the case that cohesive context always matters when engaging the Scriptures, we have found it crucial to examine a number of “familiar” passages more closely. Thus during the opening session, we take a number of these “familiar” Bible passages and show what happens to our understanding of them when each of those passages is restored back into its original contextual setting. Said another way, we recreate the relevant context of a passage (or as much of it as we can) that the biblical writers drew upon in creating their narrative. It is a surprising initial session full of “Aha” moments, dropped jaws and

amazed looks as people suddenly start to realize that even in these most “familiar” of Bible narratives, there is a whole lot more to the rest of these stories that we have been missing.

Transformation is the Objective

While contextually restoring a biblical passage is exciting and often leads to a series of new discoveries, that is not the main reason why context is essential when studying the Scriptures. The real reason to restore the context of a passage is that it gets us closer to the Holy Spirit’s original meaning of a passage. It also follows that the closer we get to that intended meaning, the closer we get to the epicenter of the Holy Spirit’s intended transformation. Therein resides the power of biblical context as the Holy Spirit, the author of every word in Scripture, uses the fullness of that passage to bring us into God’s presence where He can transform us. That is why the contemplative person needs to become good friends with the contextualist (and vice versa). If we are going to ponder a passage, then it behooves us to ponder as much of that passage as we possibly can.

Great Friends

It is always a delight to be able to bring one’s good friends together for a leisurely evening of serendipity sharing. Those evenings are a joy because each person who comes is surprised by the wisdom and insight they can gain from the others gathered around the table.

The contextually restored passages in this book are some of my best “friends.” This book is my opportunity to share some of these enriching (passage) friends with others who would enjoy sitting around a fellowship table for an evening of discovering more of the riches contained in God’s Word.

Ready to Wrestle?

As is usually the case, good friends are also very thoughtful and wise friends. Their wisdom can be both comforting as well as challenging; depending on what they feel each of us needs at any particular moment in our lives. In the first-century rabbinic tradition, I hope you will be willing to wrestle with some of the challenges that these contextually restored passages will bring to the table. After that wrestling, perhaps you will be led to move into a time of reflection and meditation, necessary preludes for meaningful change. After that time of pondering, then proceed to open up a discipling dialogue with those around you asking: “What are we doing, how are we living, why are we doing it that way, and what fruit are we experiencing?” Finally, in the leading of the Holy Spirit, start to make appropriate changes in how we live each day to honor and glorify God.

Meaningful Change

As we all know, new information and insights, no matter how intriguing, are insufficient for meaningful change to occur. Those insights need to be pondered and processed if they are ever going to penetrate us, let alone marinate, e.g., soften, tenderize our hearts and minds. It is in the midst of that meditative process that the Holy Spirit teaches us, touches us, and transforms us, both individually and corporately.

It is my prayer that God’s Spirit will find something useful within these pages to encourage you, as well as to challenge you to be more passionate and intentional about digging into the depths of His Word.

Doug Greenwold

Columbia, Maryland

May 2007

Introduction

*When reading the Scriptures, we see what we know
but do not always know what we see.*

—Unknown

How Do You Read It?

In the opening of the Good Samaritan story,¹ Luke tells us that a certain lawyer came to test Jesus. This confident lawyer initiates his dialogue with Jesus by posing a great question: *What must I do to inherit eternal life?* In true rabbinic fashion, Jesus answers his question with another question: *What is written in the Law? How do you read it?*



Since this lawyer had memorized the Hebrew (Old Testament) Scriptures for his *bar mitzvah*, the nature of Jesus' *How do you read it?* question is not meant to ask him what does God's Word *say*; rather, what does it *mean*? In other words, how do you interpret God's Word regarding your question of eternal life?

Biblical Illiteracy

Jesus' *How do you read (interpret) it?* question is the challenge of this book. Over twenty centuries later, that question still confronts us. How are we reading God's Word today? Through what kinds of cultural filters, world-view grids and paradigm lenses are we reading, massaging and/or altering God's word?

Our contemporary situation is radically different from Jesus' time. Unlike the first century, biblical illiteracy, not proficiency, is epidemic throughout the evangelical church. As a result, we now have at least two core questions to ask followers of Jesus Christ today: What does God's Word say (a content question), and then what does God's Word mean (an interpretation question)? When we read and ponder the Scriptures, do we understand the content of what the Holy Spirit, the author of God's Word, intends for us to see and understand? Then, are we able to recognize the implications of that timeless content for today?

Words Have Meaning

Before the books of the Old Testament and the Gospels were written down, they were first spoken in a Semitic language that embodied well-known paradigms (ways of thinking, seeing and understanding things) that Jewish listeners well understood. As such, those words had a very specific meaning within the Hebrew mindset of its day. Since then, those Hebrew words have been translated into Greek and then into Latin before being translated into the constraints of the English language more than a thousand years later. Thus, a needed perspective for engaging a text or passage is to first disconnect from our traditional Hellenistic (Greek) way of thinking – easier said than done – and then ask how the Hebrews who first heard those words would have understood them.

Original Meaning

This process of sequentially disconnecting from our Western way of thinking to engage the world of the Bible, and then reconnecting to our modern way of thinking, is crucial. If we miss the original meaning embodied in those Holy Spirit inspired words, it then becomes relatively easy to not only misunderstand those words, but to redefine them and then misapply them. As part of the process of discovering the intent of the biblical writers' words, we need to be reminded that this disconnect-engage-reconnect process is not always an easy one for today's Westerners:

For many of us Westerners, the Hebrew mindset is so strange, so alien, so impossible to fathom, that we quickly snap back into the comfort zone of the Hellenistic mold of studying the Hebrew Scriptures. We then impose this distorting grid over the Hebrew text – or for that matter, over the Greek text of the New Testament.²

Synthesis or Analysis

Not only have we in the West been conditioned by a Greek worldview for 2,000+ years, but we have also been shaped by 300 years of modernity thinking.³ This has taken its toll and made us egocentric people who instinctively prefer instant analysis and “how to” answers when engaging the Scriptures. We are also much more comfortable tearing things apart than we are fusing and keeping things together. As a result, we like to label the analytical pieces we create, convincing ourselves that in putting these pieces into the right cubbyholes means we have actually mastered them. However, being able to list and organize sixteen attributes of God may mean we know something *about* God, but it does not necessarily follow that we actually *know* God. All of this stands in stark contrast to the Hebrew perspective, which was always about synthesis and integration when wrestling with the Word of God.

Existentialism is Alive and Well

Sadly, existentialism (what a passage means to me) is not only very much alive and well in evangelicalism, it is flourishing in both subtle and not so subtle ways. For example, a very common response I get before leading a “Bible Alive,” immersion experience weekend (where we engage the Bible in its context) is, “Who needs this?” The preferred evangelical existential approach to God’s Word often seems to be some form of “I just open my Bible each day to a verse or passage and let the Spirit speak to me.” While we would not dare learn physics, nursing, or astronomy that way, we do seem to have this peculiar way of approaching and reading the Bible!

Unaware that we are often pragmatic existentialists, we are not looking for the original

meaning of a passage. It is not part of our thinking that the Holy Spirit had something very specific in mind to communicate to us in a timeless manner when inspiring those particular words in the text. Thus we unknowingly rely on the Holy Spirit to work overtime on our behalf to reveal God's intended wisdom to us in the passage because we are too lazy to work at discovering what is the Holy Spirit's original meaning in the text. And then we wonder why we find mostly anemic Christians sitting limply in the pew.

Discerning Purpose and Meaning

Without the measuring rod of the Holy Spirit's original meaning for a passage, we are left with only two possible outcomes when approaching the Word of God, both woefully deficient. Either the Holy Spirit had nothing specific in mind when He inspired the words we are reading or; if He did, we are incapable of discerning what that intent is. While it is a fine line, and I'm certainly not trying to create a new specialized body of knowledge in suggesting this, I am convinced it is necessary for us to do the best we can to try and discern the Holy Spirit's timeless intent for any passage we are studying. With that understanding in place, we are then in a much better position to ask the Spirit for discernment regarding the purpose and meaning of that passage for the complexities and issues of our life and world today.

"What Do You Think it Means?"

In the world of the Gospels, the rabbi had the role of authoritatively interpreting the Scriptures for his disciples. In modern evangelicalism, the reader of God's Word, not always under the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, frequently assumes that role. However, when widespread biblical illiteracy is part of this

dynamic, the implications can be unsettling.

Have you ever been in a small group Bible study when a seemingly difficult passage is discussed? The typical question that the leader often sets in motion is, "What do you think it means?" That is certainly a good question. However, it is the response to that question that should give us cause for concern! Often, as that question progresses around the room and each person renders his or her opinion, that process ends with a straw vote to determine the best answer! While this may be good representative democracy, it is a dubious approach, at best, to understanding God's Word.

Unaware that we are often practicing existentialists, we tend to focus on what we think or guess a passage might mean rather than digging more deeply to discern what the Holy Spirit intended it to mean. Then we wonder why we end up looking so much like clones of the culture, very much at home in our "comfortable self-centeredness,"⁴ instead of distinctive disciples of Jesus.

There is Work to Be Done!

Not too long ago while reading A.W. Pink's commentary on Exodus, I was challenged in my thinking about studying God's Word. In one of his chapters, Pink makes the observation that "the Bible does not yield its meaning to lazy people."⁵ Oh my! It's as if we have become too lethargic or complacent to want to do the work that is necessary to dig more deeply into the riches of God's Word. Paul's exhortation to *do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth*⁶ appears to be missing from our consciousness. Note the presupposition of *work!* So we dabble in our understanding of the Scriptures, quickly investing

two minutes on power 10 in our microwave approach to studying God's Word, and then collectively meet and share our what-do-you-think-it-means superficial opinions.

Some Convincing Examples

To underscore these preceding observations and to illustrate both the power and the necessity of understanding the context of the passages we read in the Scriptures, this book takes ten "familiar" Old Testament and Gospel passages and contextually restores them. Doing so allows us to understand the passage as if we were those Middle Eastern villagers who first heard and understood the words, places, idioms, names and references used in the passage. The ten passages we will contextually restore include:

Luke 2:7 *No room for them in the inn.* That's how almost every contemporary Bible translates Luke 2:7. This widespread misuse of inn conjures up an image of Joseph and a very pregnant Mary arriving in Bethlehem so late on the eve of Jesus' birth that a "no vacancy" sign greets them at the only "inn" in town. Not only is this not true to the text, nor its context, this misunderstanding also keeps us from grasping the full extent of the glory, wonderment and significance of this extraordinary coming of the Christ Child. It seems like a good place to start in underscoring our thesis that context always matters, to show that even the most well known of Bible narratives is really not so well known after all.

Matthew 27: 46 The last words of Jesus in Matthew, *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* would have most likely been understood by an observant Jew as a *remex* (a hinted meaning) back to Psalm 22, 23 and 24, not as a statement that God had somehow turned His back on Jesus and

thereby "abandoned" His Son. This is a good example of how understanding the language in which the Bible words were first spoken, the literary form being used, and the genre of the communication technique being employed can completely change the traditional understanding of an important passage.

Matthew 5:1-20 The verses are very familiar, oft quoted, and are even thought by many non-believers to embody a universal social ethic. To disciples of Jesus, they are the epitome of Christian virtue and the standard of what character and behavior should be like in the Kingdom of God. Such has been the impact of the earth-shattering words that Jesus chose to use to initiate His **Sermon on the Mount and Beatitudes** discourse. This chapter takes a contextual look at not only what Jesus said, but particularly at the groups and sects to whom He was saying it and why He was saying it to them.

John 15:2 Is it possible that John 15:2 has been mistranslated all these years causing us to miss deeper spiritual formation insights into Jesus' process for making disciples? To answer that question, we need an understanding of **Mesopotamian vineyard techniques** because a Westernized Napa Valley vineyard perspective will never fully yield the discipling riches that reside in these verses. This chapter also illustrates how much more wisdom can be found in a passage when just one mistranslated word is corrected by rediscovering its original context.

Luke 5:1-11 Have you submitted to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in the very things you do best - your core competencies? Is submitting to the authority of Jesus an imperative verb that you willingly and intentionally live out each day in all areas of your life? Those are

some of the contextual issues embedded in **Jesus' encounter with Simon** (later to be Peter) in the opening verses of Luke 5. The key to discerning the original message in this passage is understanding the first-century implications of night (and day) fishing with linen nets on the Sea of Galilee.

Matthew 28:19 When Jesus said *go and make disciples*, it was a Jew speaking to other Jews in a Semitic dialect. As such, those words had a very specific meaning and embodied a well-known paradigm that first-century Jewish listeners well understood. What was that context and what should those well known words mean for us today? These are key questions to understand if we are going to rediscover what it means to authentically be and effectively make disciples today.

Exodus 32 Whatever you may have thought about the **Golden Calf** debacle at Mt. Sinai, might you have had the following reaction: "I can't believe they actually did that! I know that if I had been there, I would never have been part of that scene!" With the context of that rebellion put back in place, we realize that most of us would have indeed been willing participants in that same rebellion because many of us still have a golden calf (or two) embedded in the daily reality of our lives.

Numbers 20 How did **water** come from the "rock" when Moses struck it in Numbers 20? What kind of a rock was it and why was it such an issue to God that Moses struck the rock instead of speaking to the rock? Those are some of the contextual issues resident in this encounter that continue to have faith and obedience implications for believers today.

John 11 In the seventh and last of his recorded miracles, John describes the **raising of Lazarus from the dead**. In the beginning of his narra-

tive, John also tells us that after Jesus heard about Lazarus' illness, He waited two more days before starting out for Bethany – the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. This chapter delves into the contextual significance of when Jesus deliberately chose to raise Lazarus – on the fourth day – and its "waiting on the Lord" implications for His disciples today.

Exodus 3:8 When God reveals to Moses that He will be delivering *My people* from the oppression of the Egyptians, He declares that He will be bringing them to *a land flowing with milk and honey*. This last chapter takes a contextual look at the significance of this descriptive biblical phrase and presents some continuing lifestyle challenges for God's people to wrestle with today.

The Case for Context With the case now convincingly made that context indeed matters when we engage the Scriptures (the objective for these ten contextually restored passages), this Appendix topic further elaborates why context always matters when encountering God's Word.

Why This Sequence?

You will notice that the above chapters are somewhat out of order, at least with regard to the chronological flow of the Bible. The reason is to capture your attention. What better way to do that than to start with the two most "well known" events of Scripture – Christmas and Easter!

Following those events are chapters dealing with the whole issue of the way we think – our paradigms and worldview. That then leads to passages dealing with how Jesus pulverizes all our paradigms so we can truly embrace His Kingdom of God way of doing and seeing things. Finally I explore key passages which deal with some of the

core issues that challenge our ability to be faithful as we “keep on keeping on” in our journey of faith.

From a thought development point-of-view, this sequencing of passages made the most sense to me. However, should you prefer, you are more than welcome to read them chronologically beginning with Exodus 3 and ending with the “Last Words of Jesus.”

For Pulpit and Pew

It is my belief that people in the pew can do what this book does – namely restore much of the context of a biblical passage. That’s what those Bible-in-Context weekends are all about – giving people the tools, frameworks and resources to meaningfully reconstruct the context of a passage. It is important to accept the premise that this contextual restoration process is not something that should be confined just to the pulpit or to ministry professionals.

The ability to contextually restore much of a passage was always meant for the pew – the priesthood of all believers.⁷ After all, it was “lay people” who first heard the Bible’s words and understood those meanings. As such, it is important to remember that the sources providing the contextual facts used in this book are available to the priesthood of all believers. The last thing I would want you the reader to conclude is: “I can’t do this. This is too hard.” Yes, it requires some digging and perseverance to find contextual facts; however, that digging will be done if you are convinced of the value of mining God’s Word. Hopefully this book will demonstrate the value of contextual digging into the Scriptures. Such an

effort can profoundly deepen your love affair with the Father and His Son. It can also re-energize your spiritual life and journey.

Remember Paul’s admonition to young Timothy: *Present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth?*⁸ That would certainly suggest there must be a number of ways to *wrongly* handle God’s Truth. Are you ready to work at further understanding God’s Word? Are you willing to be your own version of a biblical explorer in passionate pursuit for understanding more of the riches to be found in God’s word?

If so, grab some shovels and let’s start digging!

Take Time to Reflect

Appropriate “Reflections to Journal and Share,” as well as some thoughts to “Ponder,” will be found at the end of each chapter. In the spirit of the first-century rabbinic tradition, you will find no fill-in-the-blank questions; rather, thought-provoking questions to wrestle with to further hone your discernment regarding the intended purpose and meaning of God’s Word for your life today.

For small groups and Bible studies, these guided thoughts can serve as helpful discussion questions with which to collectively wrestle. For devotional purposes, they can serve as a guide for personal meditation and journaling. The prayed-for outcomes of both are the same – personal and corporate transformation by the Holy Spirit.

Reflections to Journal and Share...

- What do you think 20 centuries of Greek thinking and 300 years of modernity thinking has done to the way we approach God's Word in the West? What kinds of thinking patterns and processing filters might we implicitly be bringing to a biblical passage without realizing it?
- Are we often unaware that we are using an existentialist mindset (the only thing that matters is what a passage means to me) when we engage the Scriptures? What implications might that have for you, your Bible study and your church?
- What issues and implications do you see for people in today's Westernized, industrial, urban culture reading biblical words that have first-century, Middle Eastern, village, agrarian meanings?
- Would you agree or disagree with the thesis that you have to work at studying God's Word? What is your notion of what that work means? Are you willing to do it?
- What is your prayer right now as you prepare to rediscover these ten "familiar" passages?

Ponder...

Faith may be exercised without a jar to the moral life and without embarrassment to the Adamic ego. Christ may be “received” without the creating of any special love for Him in the soul of the receiver. The man is “saved,” but he is not hungry nor thirsty after God. In fact, he is specifically taught to be satisfied and is encouraged to be content with very little.

—A. W. Tozer

In the midst of the cultural obsession with expertise, it is essential that the Christian life should be preserved with its proper amateur status.

—James Houston

The Lord says: These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men.

—Is. 29: 13a

Notes and Resources

¹Luke 10:25-26

²Brian Knowles, *The Hebrew Mind vs The Western Mind* (website godward.org under “Hebrew Root Studies,” “Study Papers and Feature Articles” category, September 1999).

³Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, A Wiley Company, 2003), pp. 106, 116, & 120.

⁴Henri Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart* (Minneapolis, Minn.: The Seabury Press, 1981), p. 13.

⁵A. W. Pink, *Gleanings From Exodus* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1981), p. 327.

⁶II Timothy 2:15

⁷I Peter 2:9

⁸I Timothy 2:15

1

The Glorious and “Shameful” Birth of Jesus

Christ became what we are so that He might make us like Him.
– Athanasius

Read: Luke 2:1-20

No Vacancy?

N*No room for them in the inn.* That is how almost every contemporary Bible translates Luke 2:7. This widespread use of *inn* conjures up an image of Joseph and a very pregnant Mary arriving in Bethlehem so late on the eve of Jesus’ birth that a “no vacancy” sign greets them at the only “Motel 6” in town. Not only is this not true to Luke’s text, nor his context, but it also keeps us from grasping the full glory, wonder and significance of the coming of the Christ Child. To more fully appreciate that first Christmas, we need to take a closer look at the various contextual clues Luke gives us in this most “familiar” and well known Bible story of all.



Prior to the night of Jesus’ birth, Luke deliberately tells us that Mary and Joseph have already been in Bethlehem: *While they were there, the time came for her baby to be born* (NEB). We don’t know when they arrived in Bethlehem nor where they have stayed until the birth night, but one thing is clear from Luke’s words – this couple did not first arrive in Bethlehem late in the day (or night) of Jesus’ birth.

Inn or Guest Room?

Luke gives us a clue to what might be going on in Bethlehem when he deliberately uses the Greek word *kataluma* in 2:7, which most translators have preferred to render as “inn.” However as we will shortly see, from a contextual perspective the preferred understanding of *kataluma* is “guest room.” Those who would argue that *kataluma* could also mean “inn” in this verse lose the thrust of their argument when the cultural contexts of first-century “inns” is examined.

Archaeology tells us that inns populated the major trade routes in

first-century Palestine¹ and were typically located 16-18 miles apart outside of towns on major trade routes, the average daily distance traveled by a caravan. These inns were round, stone hedgerows roughly four feet tall and 40-60 feet in diameter – essentially a circular walled space that was open to the sky.²

In these commercial establishments overseen by an innkeeper, there were no rooms to rent, no privacy, little security, just one shared common area. The “inns” were rough and tumble environments often inhabited by caravanner rogues plying the trade routes. These scoundrels often brought to these open lodging areas all the ambiance of a biker bar of today. When Luke makes reference to these kinds of “inns,” he uses a very different Greek word – *pandoxeion* – the word used for “inn” in the Good Samaritan story.³ One thing is clear; no self-respecting man would ever bring a pregnant woman about to give birth to a *pandoxeion*.

Judean Houses

In cities and towns, the Jews were required to give hospitality to strangers and travelers even though the humblest Judean family often lived in a one-room house. This one room was a true “family room” where parents and children lived, ate and slept. In this culture, an observant Jewish man was forbidden from sleeping in the same room with another man’s wife. Thus, in order to allow for overnight lodging of visitors while maintaining ritual purity, the structural solution was to separate off one end of this one-room living room with a partition.⁴ The small area created on the other side of this floor-to-ceiling room divider was known as the *kataluma* – the guest room. Here visiting relatives could stay for extended periods of time. (You can see a typical Judean home in Israel today in the

town of Taiybe 12 miles NE of Jerusalem that still demonstrates this first-century *kataluma* configuration.)

The “Basement”

There were dozens of variations of these small one-room (or should we say one and one-half room) homes in Judea.⁵ Often these homes were built over a recessed area – a mini cave or recessed grotto – that functioned as a holding area for the family’s animals.⁶ This area was the first-century equivalent to what we would call a shallow cellar today. This basement/cellar might be a natural depression in the stone floor or a natural half cave in the side of a hill (imagine a large ice cream scoop taking a swipe out of the side of a gentle hill).

Typically, this small basement was a dark, windowless area no more than four and one-half feet tall that afforded the family’s animals protection during the night. A feeding trough (“manger”) hewn out of a rectangular block of stone or fashioned from mud and straw would lie on the floor of this area.⁷ Sometimes this feeding trough was only a depression in the floor. In addition to protection, this basement provided a natural heating system during winter as the animal’s body heat would rise and help warm the family and guests sleeping above it.

In light of this historical information about inns and houses, we need to look more closely at Luke’s narrative for further contextual clues regarding Jesus’ birthplace.

Mandatory Hospitality

Luke reminds us that Joseph is part of David’s Bethlehem clan.⁸ In this culture, hospitality is mandatory, especially to visiting members of the clan and especially to a pregnant woman about to give birth. At the time of Jesus, the population

of Bethlehem is estimated to be at least 2,000 people.⁹ If we assume that the average family size was two adults and four children, there are at least 300 (mostly small) homes, each one with a *kataluma* (guest room). Since Mary's high-priority need for such a room was self-evident, why is no one in the Davidic clan willing to offer the use of their *kataluma* to Mary and Joseph? What is Luke communicating to us in 2:7 with the deliberate use of the word *kataluma*?

A Revealing Clue

Luke gives us an additional clue in 2:5 when he again informs us that Joseph is with Mary his betrothed wife who was *expecting a child* (NEB). Why does Luke repeat these facts when he already told us this in Chapter 1? What Luke seems to be underscoring for us by repeating this betrothed-with-child fact is the reason no one in Bethlehem will offer this couple the use of their *kataluma*.

According to first-century marriage customs, when Mary was betrothed to Joseph, a scribe in Nazareth drew up a betrothal contract documenting that the two of them were now legally married as husband and wife.¹⁰ However, a marriage would not be consummated until the girl/woman began to menstruate, which typically occurred between twelve and twelve and a half years of age.¹¹ When that reproductive capability became evident, a multi-day wedding feast would soon be announced to the family clan (remember Jesus traveled from Nazareth to Cana for a wedding in John 2). Only after such wedding festivities could a bride co-habit with her husband and their marriage sexually consummated. Furthermore, since Joseph likely visited Bethlehem each summer to participate in the Davidic wood offering in the Temple in Jerusalem,¹² the Davidic clan would be knowl-

edgeable about Joseph's life, especially of his betrothal to Mary and whether or not there had been a wedding feast.

Questions and No Answers

Thus when Joseph arrived in Bethlehem for the census along with a very pregnant betrothed Mary, what do you think was the first question the clan asked Joseph? "We have not heard about any wedding feast. How could you have consummated your marriage?" And so the word would have spread very quickly – we have an adulterous couple in town and she is about to give birth. What to do? Well for one thing, no one is going to allow this couple to abide in their *kataluma*. Maintaining ritual purity would not permit any house to be so defiled. Fortunately, however, there must have been at least one family who was moved enough with compassion to allow this couple the privacy afforded by their dark, half-cave, animal holding basement – most likely the truly humble birth place of Jesus.

A Shameful Situation

By now the implicit contextual backdrop of this blessed event should be coming into focus – culturally perceived shame. The birth of Jesus the Messiah was indeed glorious from heaven's perspective. But from the perspective of Joseph's clan, it had the scandalous stench of adultery. That misperception never entirely left Jesus and, when given the opportunity, the Jerusalem establishment never let Him forget His alleged "illegitimate" status.¹³ Interestingly, this perspective is still with us as Jewish scholars continue to reject Jesus as the Messiah because of his "illegitimate" birth. Their "evidence" comes from citing the characterization of Mary in the Babylonian Talmud as one that "played harlot with carpenters."¹⁴ These contrasting motifs of

heavenly glory and perceived earthly shame further enrich our understanding of the significance of the birth of the Christ Child.

Shameful Shepherds

Luke's narrative continues with the "Good News" of the birth of Jesus being first announced to shepherds living *out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night*. While Psalm 23 portrays the role of a shepherd in a most honorable way, by the time of Jesus, shepherding was viewed as a despised profession – one scorned by observant Jews as unclean.¹⁵

There were also rabbis during this time who held that shepherds, because of the wandering trespass nature of their profession, could never be forgiven because they could never make retribution for the grasses their flocks ate (stole) from someone else's land.¹⁶ For the purpose of more fully appreciating Luke's birth narrative, shepherds are forgotten, needy people practicing a shameful profession. It was to just this kind of a hopeless person living in chronic, cultural shame that God's amazing grace directed the angels to announce His incredible Good News!

Motif of Shame

Are you starting to see the consistent motif of "shame" that starts with the birth of Jesus and continues through His life and death?

- At the beginning of His earthly life, Jesus was likely born in culturally perceived, shameful circumstances and His birth was first announced to shepherds living in shame.
- Throughout His three-year ministry, Jesus brought God's Miracle of Compassion, Mercy and Grace to people systematically marginalized and excluded as He rescued them from their no-hope prisons of "sinner" shame.

- At the end of His earthly ministry, Jesus died a horrific death on a Roman cross – the most shameful way to die.

Have you ever wondered with whom those Bethlehem shepherds first shared this incredible Good News? Certainly not with the "righteous" observant Jews who despised them! Only other shepherds likewise living in shame would ever listen to these Bethlehem shepherds. Thus, the first oral communication of the "Good News" of the coming of Jesus the Messiah was spread from one shameful person to another.¹⁷

For me, this added motif of shame further enriches the meaning and significance of this incredible God-has-come-to-be-with-us event. Jesus, whose Semitic name *Yeshua* means "The Lord Rescues,"¹⁸ so identified with rescuing those living in shame that He was willing to be born in the midst of perceived shame.

Being Misunderstood

The next time you ponder the traditional "familiar" Bethlehem crèche scene, see it for the unfamiliar event it most likely was – a 13-year old girl/woman giving birth to the Savior of the world in a dark, half-cave cellar of a modest Judean house, all the while being misunderstood by the Bethlehem Davidic clan. Someone once said that the greatest burden in life is to be misunderstood and to realize there is nothing you can do about it. Mary must have felt the weight of that reality as she held "The Lord's Rescuer" in her arms and pondered again the unpredictable and improbable ways that God accomplishes His purposes.

The Sounds of Silence

The most prevalent sound of this incredible birth-in-a-cellar-cave evening is one of silence.

Ponder

You may be wondering: if this *kataluma*-basement-shame motif is indeed more contextually correct, why don't more of our Bibles reflect it that way? A significant number of translators and commentators through the years have documented that "inn" is an inappropriate contextual translation for *kataluma* in Luke 2:7. So why doesn't that word treatment get changed?

Consider your own way of thinking. Would you want to buy a Bible that presents this shame-in-the-cellar contextual reality of the birth of

Jesus? For over a millennium, this Westernized got-to-town-too-late-no-vacancy-birth-in-a-stable-with-a-wooden-elevated-manger tradition has been espoused. That is a very long time and has made this traditional version of Jesus' birth more believable than the profound reality of that first Silent Night. As a result, for many this tradition has become the truth. In fact, tradition has such a grip on our understanding of the birth motif of Jesus that most people would dismiss the contextual reality of His birth as full of obvious error. Such is the paradox of Christmas!

Think of yourself the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. He had equal status with God but didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside his privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, being human! Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim special privileges. Instead he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death – and the worst kind of death at that – a crucifixion.

Because of that obedience, God lifted him high and honored him far beyond anyone or anything, ever, so that all created beings in heaven and earth – even those long ago dead and buried – will bow in worship before this Jesus Christ, and call out in praise that he is the Master of all, to the glorious honor of God the Father.

—Phil 2: 5-11, The Message

The early Christians did not say in dismay, "Look what the world has come to," but in delight, "Look who has come to the world!"

—Carl C. F. Henry

The mystery of the humanity of Christ, that he sunk himself into our flesh, is beyond all human understanding.

—Martin Luther

The divine Son became a Jew; the Almighty appeared on earth as a helpless human baby, unable to do more than lie and stare and wriggle and make noises, needing to be fed and changed and taught to talk like any other child. The more you think about it, the more staggering it gets.

—J. I. Packer

The awful majesty of the Godhead was mercifully sheathed in the soft envelope of human nature to protect mankind.

—A. W. Tozer

Visual Resources

For some incredible visuals that make the birth of Jesus come contextually alive, see the “Birth and Early Years” images in Preserving Bible Time’s Overview of the Gospels DVD, particularly the interior images of the Taiybe, Israel house “living room,” *kataluma*, and cave “basement.”

Other Resources

For a fuller contextual development of the birth of Jesus, see “The Real Birth of Jesus: Luke 1–20 in Context” CD recorded in 2007 and available from Preserving Bible Times, www.preserving-bibletimes.org.

Notes and Sources

¹Harry N. Wendt, *Christmas: The Real Story*, (Minneapolis, MN: Crossways International, 1998), p. 22.

²I am indebted to Dr. James C. Martin of Bible World Seminars for this conversational description of a first-century commercial inn.

³Luke 10:34

⁴James C. Martin, *The Gospels in Context* (Amarillo, TX: Bible World Seminars, 2002), p. 42–43.

⁵Gustaf Dalmann’s work as cited by Kenneth Bailey, “The Manger and the Inn: Cultural Background of Luke 2:7,” *Theological Review 2* (November 1979) Reprint, p. 6.

⁶James C. Martin, *The Gospels in Context*, p. 42.

⁷Kenneth Bailey, “The Manger and the Inn: Cultural Background of Luke 2:7,” *Theological Review 2* (November 1979) Reprint, p. 4.

⁸Luke 2:4

⁹Karen Lamb, “New Look at an Old Story,” Associated Press, December 10, 1994 as reprinted by University of the Holyland, 1999.

¹⁰Alfred Edersheim, *Sketches of Jewish Social Life in the Days of Christ*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), p. 148.

¹¹James C. Martin, *The Gospels in Context*, p. 33.

¹²Mishnah: Taanith 4:5.

¹³John 8:41

¹⁴Babylonian Talmud: Sanhedrin 106a

¹⁵Kenneth Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), p. 147.

¹⁶Kenneth Bailey, “Shocks in the Christmas Story: For Whom Was He Born?” *The Presbyterian Outlook*, December 18–25, 1991, pp. 7–8.

¹⁷Luke 2:17–18

¹⁸James C. Martin, *The Gospels in Context*, p. 33.

2

The Last Words of Jesus – What Did He Really Say and Mean?

*This is the fundamental thing, the most serious thing of all,
that we are always in the presence of God*

—D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones

Read: Matthew 27, John 19, then Psalms 22, 23 and 24

What if?

What if we could somehow transport a typical Western thinking evangelical Christian in a time-machine back to the First Century to stand at the foot of the Cross on “Good Friday”? Wouldn’t it be fascinating to ask him or her how he or she would have understood the last words of Jesus?

My God, My God, why has thou forsaken Me?

—Matthew 27:46 and Psalm 22:1



It is finished.

—John 19:30 and Psalm 22:31b

Most likely we would have heard an interpretation something like this: “There is Jesus on the Cross carrying all the sins that were, are, and ever will be. It is such a hideous sight to a holy God that the Father turns His back on His only Son and abandons Him (for a day or two?)” Most likely he or she would have arrived at such interpretive reasoning in a similar fashion as this: “It must be that God abandoned His Son. After all, isn’t that what the text says?” Let’s overlook for a moment some of the theological implications of this perspective, e.g., does God have a back? How can an omnipresent God ever be away from His Son? Is it true that God cannot look upon sin or is He looking at sin all the time? Perhaps pondering those inconsistencies might prompt us to ask, “Is there another way to understand the last words of Jesus?”

It’s a First-Century Remez

In the first century, an observant Jew would have understood the last words of Jesus as found in Mark and Matthew, *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me*,¹ as a **remez** back to Psalms 22, 23 and 24, not as a

statement that God had somehow “turned His back” on Jesus and thereby “abandoned” His Son.

Remez is a Semitic word meaning “hinted meaning” or a harkening back to something that needs no further elaboration because the hearers all know its obvious context.² Since most first-century observant Jewish young men had memorized the Hebrew Scriptures at the local synagogue school as part of their childhood education, rabbis were able to speak and teach in this *remez* (shorthand) manner because everyone knew the complete (longhand) version of the portion of Scripture being referenced.

Today’s Remez

We are all familiar with this *remez* communication technique. If I were to burst into song and start singing “God bless America, land that I”, and then suddenly stop, you could continue the song because almost everyone knows how to finish it. That would be a contemporary *remez*. The same would be true of the opening phrase of The Lord’s Prayer. All someone has to do is start by saying, *Our Father who art in Heaven . . .*, and we all know how to continue it.

Words as Remez

The use of *remezim* (plural) is common in Jewish literature. It is also a common literary form used by the Gospel writers. In fact, *remez* words and phrases occur over 270 times in the Gospels. Mary’s Magnificat and Zechariah’s Benedictus are best understood as a cascade of *remez*. Jesus used *remez* to signify who He was. For example, *Son of Man*³ in Luke is a messianic harkening back to the much fuller meaning of that title in Daniel 7. *Daily bread*⁴ in The Lord’s Prayer is a *remez* back to daily manna in the wilderness of Zin.

Actions as Remez

Likewise, many of Jesus’ actions would have been understood by first-century observant Jews to be

in this *remez* genre, e.g., walking on the water in Matthew was a *remez* back to Job 9:8, writing in the sand in John 8 when they brought to Jesus the woman caught in adultery is best understood as a *remez* back to Jeremiah 17:13 (*those who turn away from you will be written in the dust*). Jesus bringing the just-died son of the widow of Nain back to life⁵ was a *remez* back to Elisha who did the same thing in essentially the same place with a Shunammite woman.⁶

Riding a donkey down into the Kidron Valley from Bethphage on Palm Sunday would have been understood by many in the crowd that day as a double *remez* back to Zechariah 9:9 as well as to Solomon who did the same thing when he became king centuries earlier.⁷ Understanding this literary form of *remez* can be very helpful in understanding the original meaning of a passage. That’s one reason why we have a teaching module on this subject in our “Bible Alive,” contextual immersion teaching weekends where we teach people to engage the Bible in its context.

A Parting Remez

Jesus is a rabbi and is teaching and speaking in a Semitic dialect as a rabbi even to his dying breath. As previously noted, observant Jews standing around the cross would have understood Jesus’ last utterance, *My God, My God, why have you forsaken me*, as an intentional *remez* back to Psalm 22:1. Likewise, *It is finished* (completed, ended, accomplished) in John 19:30 is a *remez* reference back to the very last phrase in Psalm 22. Fascinatingly, Jesus bookends Psalm 22 with *remezim* references to the first and last phrases of that Psalm. To the best of my knowledge, this occurs nowhere else in Scripture. That is strongly suggestive that Jesus may well have intended a *remez* understanding of His last words by referencing Psalm 22 twice!

In the first century Jewish mind, Psalms 22, 23 and 24 were viewed as “the shepherd Psalms” of David, and thus as a unitized whole to their way of thinking.⁸ Thus, Jesus would have been understood as invoking the totality of those three Psalms as His final prayer by invoking Psalm 22:1 (note that some did not clearly hear what Jesus said and mistook *eloi* as *Elijah*⁹ – both are phonetically very similar in Semitic pronunciation). In doing so, Jesus identified Himself one more time as the Messiah in how He would die (Ps. 22), stated His hope and trust in His ever-present Father (Ps. 23), and envisioned His triumphant return to heaven (Ps. 24) in this progression of the Good Shepherd (Ps. 22), the Great Shepherd (Ps. 23), and the Chief Shepherd (Ps. 24) Psalms.¹⁰

Reading these three Psalms from Jesus’ perspective can take your breath away. For example, Psalm 23:4, *Lo, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death... thou art with me.* From the perspective of Psalm 22:24, Jesus is affirming His confidence that *...neither hath he hid his face from him; but when he cried unto Him, he heard.* This echos the reassurance Jesus gives His disciples in John 19:13 that *the father is with Me.* On the Cross, Jesus identified with those three shepherd Psalms of David and claimed them for His own long before we did.

The Wrong Conclusion

Why does this matter? Because Passion Week often gives rise to those traditional sermons and homilies that go something like this: There is Jesus on the Cross bearing all the sins that ever were, are and ever will be. It is such a horrible sight that a Holy God turns His back on His Son, thus breaking fellowship with Jesus, and that “abandonment” of Jesus by God is the real agony of Calvary.

We need to remember that to a Holy God, it’s not the amount of sin that is the issue! In Job, God goes eye-ball to eye-ball with Satan. Looking upon sin and evil is not contradictory to God’s Holy nature. What God cannot do is look **favorably** upon sin. That was part of Jesus’ agony – His Father no longer looked upon Him fondly as the beloved, but with infinite wrath. But that’s not the same thing as a rupturing of The Eternal Oneness of the Godhead.

If you view the last words of Jesus absent the first-century literary context of *remex*, your only choice is to conclude that it must be that the Father somehow “abandoned” His Son, even though that conclusion would stand in conflict with all the rest of the Scriptures. God must have abandoned His Son, so this Greek-thinking logic goes, despite what Acts 2:27 says, *For David said about Him...because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let Your Holy One see decay.* Other verses that could also be cited include Heb 13:5 and Dt. 31:6.¹¹

Why is this important? Because there are Muslims who use the traditional evangelical teaching of “abandonment” on the Cross as proof that Jesus really was separated from God, and therefore cannot be considered to be One with God. Said yet another way, if God really did “abandon” His Son, then the Eternal Trinity wouldn’t be Eternal would it? It would no longer be an “indivisible essence.”¹² Using that “abandonment” reasoning, the inseparability of the Godhead would have had to be broken at some moment during Passion Week!

Understanding “Forsaken”

As if these perspectives are not compelling enough, consider the contextual understanding of *forsaken*. All throughout the Psalms,¹³ when *forsaken* is used it is never in a context where

God is somehow removing His presence. Rather, *forsake* has to do with the Psalmist feeling that God seems to be letting one of His own fall into the hands of His enemies (for His own purposes until He deems it time for rescue). That is a far different issue from that of God removing His Presence from the Psalmist. That Jesus fell into the hands of His enemies for a moment is certainly true. In His humanity, He may have even felt like He had been abandoned. But that did not mean that He was actually abandoned. Furthermore, in His Divinity, Jesus could not have been separated from the Godhead. Only Divinity could pay the perfect price God's ransom required and being separated from God at that moment would have negated Jesus' Divinity.

As you might gather, in understanding the last words of Jesus from the perspective of a first-century *remez*, it is difficult to conclude that the Father somehow "abandoned" Jesus because of His hideous sinful condition as He hung upon the Cross. That He endured unspeakable anguish and agony as He absorbed God's judgmental wrath (in God's presence) toward sin is certainly true. Think about it for a moment. Relationally speaking, the hardest thing to do is to absorb the justifiable wrath of another being directed at you while in his or her presence. It is at those kinds of moments that we all wish we could be as far away as possible from the person giving vent to that wrath! As payment for what we deserve, Jesus drained every last ounce of God's infinite wrath toward sin while in God's presence and then died on the Cross so that we would never have to absorb the wrath in God's presence that we deserve. Therein lays the ultimate agony of Calvary for Jesus.

Limits to Our Comprehension

In approaching our comprehension of what happened on the Cross, as well as what happened

after Jesus uttered the first and last phases of Psalm 22, we need to realize that we approach Holy ground. We need to also realize that we reach the limits of our abilities to comprehend it all and run out of words to even try to describe it. As Westerners we seem to have this proclivity to always want to use our most eloquent words and best examples to try and describe the indescribable while the Hebrew mind is simply content just to stand in awe. We need to allow room for the mystery that will always be intrinsic to the Godhead and its Trinitarian interrelationships and realize we can only approximate fathoming the Holy anger of God and the cosmic pain of Jesus as He bears our sins.

Assurance

The last words of Jesus actually stand as an assurance that God will never abandon His own. His Father's care is constant and His presence is always with us even when we walk through our own "valley of the shadow of death," even when we may feel forsaken in the midst of our own "valley" experiences. The efficacy of Calvary in atoning for our sins has always been rooted in the blood! It is the shed blood of Jesus that atones for our sins, not any God-turning-away-from-Jesus sense of "abandonment" even if that were somehow possible.

Scriptural misunderstandings can arise when we approach the text like Hellenistic Greeks, reading words without understanding their cohesive context – the language they were first spoken in, the literary form being used, and the genre of the communication technique being employed! As Dr. Kenneth Bailey has observed, restoring the context of the Scriptures often allows us "to rescue biblical truth from the familiar."¹⁴ This is certainly true when it comes to the last words of Jesus!

*Jesus called out with a loud voice, Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.
When he had said this, he breathed his last.*

—**Luke 23:46**

*But a time is coming, and has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home.
You will leave me all alone. Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me.*

—**John 16:32**

Hear O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one.

—**Deuteronomy 6:4**

*Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?
If I go up to the heavens, you are there. If I make my bed in the depths, you are there.*

—**Psalms 139:7-8**

A man may hide God from himself, and yet he cannot hide himself from God.

—**William Secker**

Visual Resources

For some very helpful visuals that make the crucifixion and death of Jesus come contextually alive, see the “Final Days” images in Preserving Bible Time’s *Overview of the Gospels* DVD, particularly the images in the “Death of Jesus” section.

Notes and Sources

¹Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34

²James C. Martin, *The Gospels in Context* (Amarillo, TX: Bible World Seminars, 2002), p. 148.

³Luke 5:24, 6:5, 6:22, 7:34, 9:22, 9:26, 9:44, 9:59, and more

⁴Luke 11:3

⁵Luke 7:11-17

⁶II Kings 4:34-35

⁷I Kings 1:32-40

⁸J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible, Vol. II*, “Joshua Through Psalms,” (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1982), p. 716.

⁹Matthew 27:47; Mark 15:35

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¹¹James C. Martin, *The Gospels in Context*, p. 148.

¹²L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1941), p. 87.

¹³Psalms 9:9-10; 37:28-29; 71:10-11

¹⁴Kenneth Bailey, *The Astonishing Jesus: Through the Lens of Luke* DVD set, Disc 2 “One Violent Day in the Synagogue,” (Minneapolis, MN: Crossways International, 2005)

3

Pulverizing Paradigms and the Kingdom of God

So my form of worship and my style of prayer and my focus in service easily shapes the pattern into which I squeeze spiritual reality. The subjective, in other words, never has trouble overwhelming the objective.

—Donald McCullough

If our view of God is different from or smaller than the Bible's, we shall be astray in all our thinking and living.

—Robert M. Horn

Read: Matthew 5, 6 and 7

T Purpose



The verses are very familiar, oft quoted, and are even thought by many non-believers to embody a universal social ethic. To disciples of Jesus, they are the epitome of Christian virtue and the standard of what character and behavior should be like in the Kingdom of God. Such has been the impact of Jesus' earth-shattering words that we know as the Sermon on the Mount¹ and the Beatitudes Jesus chose to initiate that discourse.² Since we need to know what a Scripture passage meant to those who first heard those words before we ask what it means for us today, we need to re-infuse this “familiar” teaching with some of its first-century context.

THE Question

Let's start by asking a foundational question: **What is the most important thing about you?** Until recently, I always thought that A.W. Tozer had the best possible answer in his book *The Knowledge of the Holy* when he observed: What comes into our mind when we think about God is the most important thing about us.³ In recent years, after pondering that question more, I now believe that the most important thing about any of us is simply **the way we have been conditioned to think by our respective worldviews.**

Your Worldview Matters

A person's worldview determines everything about him or her, including his or her mindset – how each sees, thinks, and understands things. Contained within a worldview are all the paradigms that go into forming

how a person defines his or her world, as well as how each then responds to it. Our worldview and the hundreds of paradigms that comprise it not only profoundly influence how we approach the Scriptures, but how we have been conditioned to filter and reshape God's Word to make it more palatable to our entrenched and well-defended comfort zones.

Our worldview is the "prison" within which we live. In that "cell block" are all the norms, standards, rules, truths, assumptions, presuppositions, thoughts and experiences that we draw upon to make our decisions, evaluations, and judgments, and how we accept, alter or dismiss the ideas that create our attitudes, biases, and prejudices. Yet the most important thing about us, the one thing that we almost never stop and think about, is why do we think the way we think. As a result, we are unknowingly held captive by those paradigms.

Paradigms Matter

A paradigm is a framework of all that we think and feel, and thus hold to be true about some aspect of our life. Each of us has a multiplicity of paradigms that make up our worldview. This includes our financial, environmental, nutritional, and work paradigms, as well as marriage, family and childrearing paradigms. It also includes paradigms about worship, prayer, church, spiritual growth and what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

First-Century Religious Paradigms

In first-century Palestine, there were multiple worldviews within Judaism including those of the Sadducees, Zealots, Essenes, Pharisees, ordinary observant Jews and Hellenistic Jews. Each was unknowingly being held captive by his paradigm. When Jesus came with His radical Kingdom of

God worldview, His eternal perspective was more than just another competing worldview. It was (and still is) a totally integrated way of seeing reality from God's perspective that is in conflict with every other (fallen) worldview. Unlike all other worldviews, Jesus' Kingdom perspective brings *freedom for the prisoners...recovery of sight for the blind.*⁴

There were some people in first-century Palestine who had no choice as to their worldview – it was thrust upon them. These "prisoners" included the lame, the blind, those with diseases, the lepers, as well as people with birth defects. These "poor" were told by the religious establishment that they were "sinners," a technical word in observant Judaism that means God doesn't look with favor upon you. According to this view, that is why these "sinners" found themselves in their marginalized, ostracized, shamed predicament.

In a religious culture where mercy was conspicuously absent (if God does not like you, why should we?), these "poor" people had no expectations, no future, and consequently no hope. They became convinced that somehow they deserved their fate. At least that is how the rabbis, those who defined "truth" in this first-century religious culture, authoritatively interpreted God's Word when it came to these poor.

Blessed

To understand the seismic impact of the eternal Truth that Jesus revealed on the Mount that day, we need a working understanding of what *blessed* means. Our Westernized commentaries generally treat *blessed* as "spiritually happy." While that is true, its meaning is expanded from answering such questions as: Why should I, or will I be happy? What is the source of such happiness? Using David's Hebrew understanding, you are

blessed because God will **rescue** you⁵ and **restore** you.⁶ Thus *blessed* means to have a deep-seated sense of joyful satisfaction in your soul because God will rescue you (where it starts) and restore you (a continuing process).

Paradigm Rebukes for All

To further understand the context of Jesus' hill-side audience that day, it is important to know that in the crowd listening to Jesus were many people familiar with the worldview of the Sadducees – a group with no belief in an afterlife. Therefore, whatever you were going to get out of this life, the Sadducees contended, you had better get it now. Many of them obtained their riches by corruptly running many of the businesses that comprised the Temple scene; e.g., money changing and the selling of sacrificial animals that creatively extorted money from the people. For them, wealth and prosperity were the measuring rods of righteousness, and it did not matter how you became rich. Deceit and deception were all consistent with their smug, self-serving definition of “righteousness.”

Thus when Jesus said *blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven*⁷ and *blessed are you who are poor for yours is the Kingdom of God*,⁸ Jesus went for the jugular vein of the Sadduceean worldview. He took their foundational paradigm and pulverized it. The Sadducees did not realize it but Jesus was actually inviting them to unlock the door of their worldview prison.

When Jesus said, *blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted*⁹ (mourning because of the ostracized, no-hope condition of their life), He went for the jugular vein of the observant Jewish worldview. Jesus took their foundational theological paradigm and challenged it so they too could be set free. But there

was more to come! He wanted to offer His keys of rescue and restoration to other “prisoners” as well.

Next came the Zealots whose value system held that Rome was the Kingdom of Evil and anyone who worked for Rome deserved to die. These Zealots were engaged in guerilla warfare killing Roman officials and soldiers to “honor” God. So when Jesus said, *blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called sons of God*,¹⁰ He sent a heat-seeking missile right to the core of the Zealots' worldview.

In His “Sermon,” Jesus also eradicated the core paradigms of others. One of the Essene's essential paradigms was that a disciple needed to be on a multi-year probation before being fully accepted in their ascetic community. Jesus rejected that notion by inviting His disciples to be part of His traveling band with no probationary period – a direct rebuke to the Essene way of doing things.

Saving the Best for Last

Gleefully watching Jesus demolish all these key paradigms of other sects were the super-smug Pharisees. Because they considered themselves to be the spiritual crème de la crème of Israel, attaining their “righteousness” by scrupulous behavior, they saw themselves as the apples of God's eye. Thus they had to be in shock when Jesus turned His paradigm-pulverizing gaze on them by declaring that *unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the Kingdom of God*.¹¹ With that declaration, Jesus gives us a glimpse into God's anger toward those who reject His will and ways as embodied in His Son – they will **NOT** enter His Kingdom. In the midst of a compassionate, freeing new perspective, there is also a warning of God's impending judgment for

those who spurn His Son and His freeing Kingdom way of doing things.

Rebuke Reactions

For those with Jesus on the hillside that day, there were penetrating paradigm rebukes for almost everyone except the “poor.” Whether they were Sadducees, Pharisees, Essenes, Zealots, or ordinary observant Jews, they all had to be thinking, feeling or saying something to themselves (in Aramaic of course!) along these lines:

You have got to be kidding me!

None of this makes any sense!

Get real Jesus, that’s not the way the world works!

Rabbi, you don’t really know what you are talking about on this one.

Whatever you’re selling, Jesus, I’m not buying!

Good News

One group of people on the hillside that day who would have given Jesus’ teaching an emphatic **YES** were those “poor” listening to His life-giving words. Their hearts must have leapt for joy and their souls stirred and soothed by Jesus’ affirming words. Jesus was inviting them to give up their “no hope” paradigm prisons and embrace His new Community of Hope. Long deprived of any compassion from the religious establishment, these “poor” heard Jesus’ redemptive mercy-bringing Good News and soaked it up like water on a dry sponge.

What is really going on here in Jesus’ introduction to His Sermon on the Mount? Nothing less than a frontal assault on the essential paradigms of all the major compassionless worldviews of His day. Jesus knew that if people were ever going to understand and embrace the Kingdom

of God, everyone in His new redemptive community would need to be detoxed from everything their religious belief system had taught them to be “right” and “true.” As the Gospels vividly record, His disciples were certainly not exempt from this transformational process.

Jesus knew that He had to remove the religious and cultural paradigms of the Twelve as part of totally remaking their minds, hearts and identities. He needed to change the way they perceived *everything* if they were to be transformed to understand His Kingdom of heart and mind. For all that to happen, these disciples needed to be remade from the inside out. And that is exactly what Jesus did! He knew it would not be easy, so He emphasized a “**do** and **teach**” – watch Me touch and heal a leper; we’ll talk about it later – shock-therapy methodology,¹² so unlike the “**teach** and **maybe do**” approach of much of Western evangelicalism today.

The Disciples

Before Jesus called His disciples, they were deeply mired in their observant Jewish worldview with all of its flawed ways of thinking. Some of the “truths” that Jesus would tear away from them included:

- Extreme cultural prejudices toward Gentiles and Samaritans.
- A belief that an earthly messiah was needed to overthrow Roman occupation.
- A ritualistic notion of prayer with a prescribed “blest” prayer for every function and task.
- A view of God that caused them to fear ever mentioning one of His names.
- A blessing notion that reasoned if you were pleasing God, life would be good for you.

- Birth defects, chronic disease and barren wombs were indications of God's disfavor.
- A social perspective that had a self-serving concern for status and reciprocal hospitality.

Jesus came with a whole new Kingdom worldview that inverted all the foundational religious paradigms of His day. In fact, transformation can be viewed as a new way of seeing things with your heart and mind – replacing constraining “religious” paradigms with a new freeing Kingdom of God way of understanding reality. The Kingdom perspective that Jesus' disciples would eventually be transformed to embrace included:

- A view of God that said it was acceptable to call God, *Our Father*¹³ (a child's form of Daddy), what some have called the most radical verse in the Bible for a first-century Jew.
- More concern about the condition (soil) of your heart rather than your scrupulous behavior.
- An emphasis that the “last shall be first” and

that a servant's humble, compassionate heart pleases His Father.

- A heartfelt concern and agape love for Samaritans and Gentiles.
- An emphasis on a Kingdom of the heart and mind rather than a political/military kingdom of this earth.

Remember

The next time you hear the Beatitudes recited or someone quoting from the Sermon on the Mount, remember part of their contextual purpose: to detox the listener from what “religion” and secular culture has done to them and to destroy the paradigms of each person's before-Jesus worldview. Jesus' words on the Mount that day were intended to set every captive free from his/her prison of preconceived notions and beliefs. Doing so would free them up to live abundantly in His abiding (John 15) love. He is still extending that same freeing invitation today. Sadly, many who heard Jesus' liberating teaching that first-century day chose not to be liberated. And that is still happening today.

Reflections to Journal and Share

- Do you ever think about why you think the way you think? What significant events, family influences and environments from your formative years may have most shaped the way you think today?

- Do you agree with A. W. Tozer's thought that the most important thing about a person is what comes to his or her mind when he or she thinks about God? If so, what are the implications of that for you? What misconceptions of God do you think you might have right now? How might you best expand your understanding of God and correct any misconceptions about who God is and how He does things?

- How do you react to this whole notion of paradigms and the way they can unknowingly shape your life and control the decisions you make? Would you agree that paradigms can be both comfort zones as well as prisons? What are the implications of that for your life, your faith, your spirituality, and your pursuit of God?

- Has anything really changed in 2000 years? Today are we somehow exempt from this necessary process of having all of our cultural and "religious" debris stripped away so we can fathom the full scope and extent of the Kingdom of God? Or do we still have a tendency to cling to our flawed secular paradigms of success, achievement, significance, prestige and importance – all defective notions that need to be first challenged and then pulverized by Jesus?

- How much detoxing would Jesus say still needs to be done in your life? What paradigms might still be holding you captive? Where might you still be blind? Are you asking the Holy Spirit to reveal to you those paradigms that need to be changed as well as those areas in your life where you are still blind?

- Meaningful change always starts with a sincere desire to want to change. What do you do when you find that desire missing (as it often is)? Are you praying for the desire to have those barriers and impediments removed by the Spirit?

- What would you suggest as some practical ways for you to remake the restrictive paradigms that need to be changed in your life – to free you up to be more of what God intended you to be?

- Where are you challenged most in this chapter? What did you hear the Holy Spirit whisper to you as you journeyed through this chapter?

Ponder

One of the flaws in Western discipling today is that we often take a new believer from our narcissistic culture and cover him/her with a veneer of Jesus “Principles.” Usually this leaves the core of a new believer untouched and unchallenged. This flawed approach can easily result in a cultural Christian with pronounced spiritual narcissistic tendencies – what’s in it for me? This is **not** the kind of disciple Jesus requires for His Kingdom of servants and shepherds of His flock.

If Jesus walked into your church or para-church ministry next week and selected a new group of disciples from your fellowship, which of the first dozen “religious” paradigms of your church/denomination/ministry do you think He would start to tear down and remake?

- Would He remake our self-serving view of God, a view of God that we have constructed to conform to our felt needs? Would our compromised notions of God’s holiness or our

convenient notions of submission to Him come under His this-needs-to-change gaze?

- Would Jesus challenge our performance and achievement paradigms, and particularly our frenetic lifestyle paradigm?
- Might Jesus find our flawed but cherished notions of what constitutes body life, church growth, “real” worship (and the music that goes with it!), “Quiet Time” and in-depth Bible study to be woefully anemic?
- Might Jesus address our spiritually narcissistic vocabulary by severely restricting the use of the personal pronouns “me” and “my” in our church hallways replacing them instead with “Him” and “His?”
- Might He ban the use of the word “principles” from ever again being uttered in the Kingdom of God? “Principle” is a non-biblical word and a non-biblical notion. There is Eternal Truth to be found in God’s Word, but no “principles.” It is a Person we love and worship, not a “principle.”

*Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts.
See if there be any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*

—Psalm 139:23-24

We tend to see Him in precisely the same old ways we’ve always seen Him.
We see what we have come to expect. Nothing more. We are so selective.
We shut out what we don’t choose to see. We aren’t willing to be surprised.

—Sue Monk Kidd

*Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the **renewing of your mind**, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.*

—Romans 12: 1-2 NASB (emphasis added)

It takes great strength and courage to move out of our comfort zones and claim new ground spiritually. And in fact, our greatest potential for growth lies in our areas of weakness.

—**Bruce Demerest**

How easy it is to define authentic spirituality according to my particular experience and expression of it!

—**Donald McCullough**

We must be made aware of the call to let our false, compulsive self be transformed into the new self of Jesus Christ...Solitude is the furnace in which this transformation takes place...without solitude we remain victims of our society and continue to be entangled in the illusion of false self.

Solitude is not a private therapeutic place. Rather it is the place of conversion, the place where the old self dies and the new self is born, the place where the emergence of the new man and the new woman occurs.

—**Henri Nouwen**

To try to distill the Bible, which is bursting with life, drama, and tension, to a series of principles would be like trying to reduce a living person to a diagram.

—**Rabbi Abraham Heschel**

The words flee (into solitude), be silent, and pray summarize the spirituality of the desert. They indicate the three ways of preventing the world from shaping us into its image and are thus the three ways to the life in the Spirit.

We are responsible for our own solitude...we have, indeed, to fashion our own desert where we can withdraw every day, shake our compulsions and dwell in the gentle healing presence of our Lord.

—**Henri Nouwen (added)**

Resources

If you would like more contextual background on the importance of paradigms and how Jesus remade the Twelve, see *Making Disciples Jesus' Way: Wisdom We Have Missed*, particularly Chapter 5, "Do and Teach," as well as Chapter 8, "Paradigms: Barriers to Spiritual Growth." The book is available from Preserving Bible Times, www.preservingbibletimes.org

Notes and Sources

¹Matthew 5-7

²Matthew 5:3-12

³A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), p. 9.

⁴Luke 4:18

⁵Psalms 35:17

⁶Psalms 23:3; 51:12

⁷Matthew 5:3

⁸Luke 6:20

⁹Matthew 5:4

¹⁰Matthew 5:9

¹¹Matthew 5:20

¹²Acts 1:1

¹³Luke 11:2

4

Lift Up and Then Prune

*I am the true vine and My Father is the vine-dresser.
Every branch **in Me** that does not bear fruit,
He **takes away**; and every branch that does bear fruit,
He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit.*

—John 15:1-2, typical translation

*I am the true vine and My Father is the vine-dresser.
Every branch **in Me** that does not bear fruit,
He **lifts up**; and every branch that does bear fruit
He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit.*

—John 15:1-2,
contextual linguistic translation

God does not stop to consult us.

—D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones

Read: John 15:1-11

A Summary Statement

On the last night Jesus was with His disciples, He concisely summarized His disciplemaking strategy. In doing so, He drew upon an agricultural example that was already 1500 years old in the Middle East – that of Mesopotamian vineyards and their care. It was a metaphor that the Eleven, as well as any Middle Eastern villager would readily understand.



In drawing upon the nature of vines and their care, Jesus stated His purpose in making disciples – fruitfulness. He also described the sequential manner in which He accomplished that objective with the Eleven – first lift up, and then prune. Unfortunately, John 15:2a has long been mistranslated in most Bibles. This has kept Jesus' followers from seeing the full weight of what the Master Disciplemaker was conveying that night about His intentional way of making disciples.

A Theological Dilemma

In John 15:1, Jesus declares Himself to be the true vine and His Father the vinedresser. In the second verse, Jesus describes His Father's first act of care for the vine. Western translators, unfamiliar with Middle Eastern vineyards, have traditionally chosen to render the key Greek verb *airo* in

that verse as “takes away,” “throws away” or “cuts off.” That creates a problematic question. If you are already *in Him*, how can the Father remove you from that position? Such a possible outcome creates a theological dilemma.

Thanks to James Boice

One day as I was preparing to teach the first eleven verses of John 15, I was studying James Montgomery Boice’s marvelous *Expository Commentary on John*. Remember those E.F. Hutton ads from a decade or two ago that closed with, “When E.F. Hutton speaks, everybody listens!” That is how I have always felt about Boice’s teaching.

For Boice, the traditional translation of John 15:2a makes no sense. How can you be *in Me*, he asks, and then later removed by the Father from that connectedness.¹ Boice develops the four meanings of the Greek verb *airo* used in 15:2 starting with its primary usage and progressing to its lesser usages. In that order, they are 1) to lift up literally, 2) to lift up figuratively, 3) to lift up with the added thought of carrying it away, and 4) to remove.²

Boice’s analysis concludes with the observation that the linguistically preferred use of *airo* in 15:2a should be its primary meaning – to lift up literally. Thus for Boice, John 15:2a was always intended to read, *Every branch in me that does not bear fruit, He lifts up*. Boice then speculates on why Western translators have traditionally used the least obvious meaning of *airo* for 15:2a. He concludes it was most likely to be consistent with a second use of *airo* in John 15:6, where its appropriate use there (as well as its appropriate contextual understanding) is “cuts off” or “removes.”³

A “Lift Up” Picture

When I read Boice’s analysis regarding the historical way that *airo* has been traditionally mistranslated in 15:2a, I jumped out of my seat, shouted, “YES,” and ran to get my Israel photo album. There I found pictures I had taken many years earlier as part of a Bible-in-context study program, including pictures of vines being “lifted up” in a Judean vineyard. Since a picture is worth a thousand words, you will find that image on the inside of the back cover. This vineyard scene dramatically underscores the point Boice was making about the best understanding of *airo* in 15:2a as being “lifts up.”

Context Matters

In using this metaphor of Judean vineyards, Jesus (and John) assumed their future readers would understand how Middle Eastern vineyards were cared for and managed. This contextual understanding is crucial since there is little similarity between the Middle Eastern vineyard methods used in Jesus’ time and the viticulture techniques used in the Western vineyards of Napa Valley and France today, e.g., no trellising.

In a Judean vineyard of Antiquity, a vine left to its own natural tendencies would grow spreading along the ground. Given the warm days and cold nights in the south of Israel, and the moisture laden, prevailing westerly winds coming in from the Mediterranean, heavy morning dews in the spring and early summer are common. This predawn moisture fosters the development of mold and fungus in anything that stays in contact with the ground.

Repositioning for Fruitfulness

Knowing all this, the first priority of a Middle Eastern vineyard manager is to keep all parts of the vine from touching the soil. As that 1988 picture shows, the vinedresser first wedges a substantial rock up against the vineyard trunk, thus lifting the vine. This has the effect of “repositioning” the vine so that the winds and breezes (think *pneuma* – the Holy Spirit) can circulate around its growing branches evaporating any moisture. This “lifting up” keeps mold and fungus from injuring the developing leaves and fruit, and also protects the vine from a variety of crawling critters intent on harming the developing branches. This repositioning of the vine is the vinedresser’s first act of care and takes place before any pruning occurs. With that vineyard image in view, now ponder Psalm 62:2, *He alone is my rock and my salvation.*

More Contextual Insights

There are more contextual implications to Judean vineyard management that deserve consideration. For these observations (in bold), I am indebted to Dr. Mark Whalon, a Professor of Entomology at Michigan State University, who has studied the Mesopotamian viniculture practices of Antiquity. While this chapter cannot do justice to all his viniculture observations, there are many spiritual formation insights worthy of reflection and pondering.

- **It is often true that the poorer the soil the better the harvested grapes.** The poor soil in southern Israel was often planted with grapes. In this region, most other food or forage plants may not do well because of the slope, soil condition, poor pH, rockiness, or other

problems, yet grapes can do well. Given this thriving-in-poor-soil attribute, the worst thing you can do to a Judean vineyard is to over-fertilize it. Doing so overly stimulates the vine to put most of its energy into branch and foliage production, not grape production.

- **Reflections to Journal and Share:**

- Does the soil of your life right now have too many cultural and good-life nutrients in it? Are you too busy?

- Are you generating too many leaves (activities), but little Kingdom fruit? The “good life” and the frenetic life can so easily become a detriment to a spiritually fruitful life. Ask God to take away those cultural stimulants and activities that are detrimental to your spiritual formation and growth.

- **For wine production purposes, the issue is never the size of the grape, rather its character** – the chemical makeup of the grape – that gives the wine its taste and aroma.

Ponder the condition of your character and the aroma of Christ in your life right now.

- **The more the soil is stressed, or the vine is stressed (within a certain range), the better the character of the grapes produced.** Soil stress leads to the production of secondary chemistry in the grape resulting in a unique and desirable blend of flavors in the finished mature wine. Likewise, drought or heat induced plant-stress also produces flavor and aroma characteristics that make for fine wine. Interestingly, this secondary chemistry likewise promotes the production of vitamins that humans need. Because of this, unstressed fruit may often be less healthy than fruit produced under more stressful conditions.

- **Reflections to Journal and Share:**

- Have you ever thanked God for the situations He has put into your life to stress (and stretch) you to deepen the “character” of His wine in you? Also for the circumstances that created spiritual “vitamins” in your life that are useful in encouraging another’s life (don’t confuse His growth opportunities with the many self-induced stresses we inflict on our own lives due to bad decisions and poor choices!)

- When did those flavor enhancing stressed situations and circumstances arrive in your life? How did they reshape you?

- **Lifting up the vine is a process that unfolds in stages.** First the main trunk is lifted up by the large rock. Later in the growing season, smaller rocks similarly lift up branches growing out from the trunk when they sag too close to the ground. Lastly, the runners that shoot off from these branches are likewise lifted up with Y-shaped twigs to keep them from touching the ground.

- **Reflection to Journal and Share:**

- Are you praying for God to keep repositioning you and those around you for greater fruitfulness? How many of those intentional repositionings can you already see in the rear view mirror of your life?

Ponder:

When His “lifting up” occurs yet again, ask for the strength and courage to allow you to welcome and embrace it; not resist it, or perhaps even dread it.

- **Newly planted vines are aggressively pruned and are not permitted to produce grapes until after the third year.** In nature, the end result of pruning is almost always an “invigorating” process in the plant. That process redirects resources that once would have been sucked off into non-fruitful portions of the plant and puts the growth emphasis into those plant parts that can contribute most to future yields. See any similarities with the Eleven and their three years of discipling before Pentecost?
- **Reflection to Journal and Share:**
 - Looking back through the rearview mirror of your life, would you say that the periods of God’s pruning in your life were (ultimately) spiritually “invigorating?”

Ponder:

Newborns should not be in a hurry to be fruitful, nor should the church prematurely encourage them to be. Too many new believers (to their detriment) have been thrust into ministry too quickly. By first focusing on abiding in Jesus, fruitfulness will supernaturally unfold in God’s timing.

- **Grapevines by their very nature have very few natural pests.** Apples have about 20 natural pests that can damage the tree and its fruit. Grapes have only about four such pests, one of the lowest numbers in nature for fruit producers.

Ponder:

Being a branch connected to the True Vine minimizes the impact of a variety of ever-present pests (remember Luther’s three enemies of the Christian – the world, the flesh and the devil) intent on being harmful to your branches and fruit. Abiding in Him and His Word is a proven way to protect oneself from these three persistent “pests.”

- **Those branches closest to where the main trunk comes out of the ground tend to produce the most fruit.** That is where the most productive “abiding” occurs.
- **Reflection to Journal and Share:**
 - Have you intentionally positioned your life close to the feet of Jesus (the posture of a disciple)? That is where you will yield the best fruit.

- **Judean vineyards desperately need a vine-dresser.** Visit a Middle Eastern vineyard that has been ignored for years, but adequately watered, and you will find a vineyard that is a mat of interwoven vines and branches. It is an out-of-control vineyard that produces an immense amount of foliage, but no fruit. In fact, the carpet of leaves created is so dense that sunlight cannot penetrate to ripen whatever embryonic grapes might be trying to develop below its sea of leaves.
- **Reflections to Journal and Share:**
 - What would you consider to be the leafy activities in your life right now that are keeping the “Son’s rays” from ripening your fruit? Are you asking the Holy Spirit where you need to be pruned right now, and then inviting Him in to do it?
- **Leaf pruning is continuous until the harvest is complete.** Even today, vinedressers will frequently walk the vineyard eyeing the developing fruit and its surrounding leaves. Whenever leaves are found that are 1) in the wrong fruit to leaf ratio (too many leaves) or 2) positioned in such a way as to block the sun’s rays from ripening the grape clusters, those leaves are immediately removed.
- **Reflections to Journal and Share:**
 - Do you see the need for continuous pruning in your life, or do you have a flawed notion that pruning is something that needs to be done every ten years or so, and then only for a brief 30-day period?
 - What would you say is the next thing that God needs to start pruning in your life?
- What are the barriers we often erect in our lives to keep us from asking those kinds of pruning questions and issuing those kinds of pruning invitations? As an encouragement to ask for pruning, remember what happens to a vineyard that never gets pruned.

Ponder:

Seeing the need for continuous pruning in your life will change the way you pray. The closer you get to the abiding mirror of Christ, the more blemishes (things that still need to be pruned) you will discover and thus the more pruning you will see still needs to be done.

- **At the end of the growing season, the main vine is totally pruned (think brokenness).**

With all its main branches pared back, the vine looks as if there is little life left in it. Yet it is during the dormant winter season that the vine puts all of its energy into extending its roots deeper into the soil. When nothing seems to be growing above the ground, the vine is nevertheless going deeper below ground. The pictured vines on the inside of the back cover show what a totally pruned vine looks like just before it begins a new season of fruitfulness.

- **Reflections to Journal and Share:**

- Are you feeling “broken” and unfruitful right now in this season of your life? Have you been in that condition in the past? Do you identify with that lifeless looking vine in the picture – barren of all leaves and fruit? Again looking back through the rear view of your life, how many of these end-of-season pruning cycles have you experienced?

Ponder:

Be encouraged to remember that the vine in the picture is on the verge of another season of fruitfulness, just as you may be on the verge of a new season of fruitfulness in the Father’s care.

Remember Psalm 1:3 where the tree planted by streams of water yields its fruit in season.

Disciplemaking Implications

The implications of lifting up the vine is significant as well as sobering for disciplemaking ministries. First and foremost, the Father is the disciplemaker, not our programs, models and formulas! It is about Him, not us. We are called to be helpers and laborers of what the Godhead is unilaterally doing in the lives of God’s people. Thus, in the same sense that educators talk about looking for “teachable moments” in the lives of students, so the disciplemaker is always praying to discern repositioning (“lifting up”) moments in the lives of those that God has relationally entrusted to him or her. The most fruitful ministering opportunities often occur right after God repositions one of His children (yet again) for future growth.

Jesus is declaring in John 15:2 that His Father is the disciplemaker and His strategy is a process of repeatedly repositioning a disciple’s life for greater fruitfulness while constantly pruning that life to insure its fruitfulness. Everywhere you look in Scripture, you find people being unilaterally repositioned in the sovereignty of God for greater fruitfulness. Abram gets repositioned and becomes Abraham. Likewise Sarai becomes Sarah. Jacob gets repositioned. Moses gets repositioned. Joseph, Joshua, Ruth, David, Esther, Daniel, Peter, Paul all get repositioned for fruitfulness. Even you and I get repositioned for fruitfulness in God’s Kingdom. Note that none of

these “vines” were consulted regarding their willingness to be repositioned and then pruned! Only the Vinedresser knows when and how to best reposition and prune each branch for greater fruitfulness (blessing).

Pruning the Disciples

As previously observed, leaf pruning is continuous in the Middle Eastern vineyard. We certainly see that in how Jesus remade the Eleven. First, He repositioned them with his call to “Follow Me,” which put them into a better environment for future fruitfulness. Then He started to prune away everything they dogmatically held to be right and true in their observant Jewish religious culture. For these disciples, most days were shock-therapy pruning days as Jesus systematically stripped away their religious worldview and all the paradigms that comprised it. Whether these disciples liked it or not, they were constantly with Jesus watching Him touch lepers, talk with Gentiles, welcome tax collectors, rescue a naked demoniac living in a tomb, to name but a few. This was all intentional repositioning and pruning to get these disciples ready for a lifetime of fruitful service after Pentecost. Only then could these disciples (in training) be culturally detoxed and thus remade to see and understand the Kingdom of God.

• *Reflection to Journal and Share:*

- Have all of your cultural and religious paradigms been stripped away so you can fully see and understand the Kingdom of God?

Repositioning God’s Way

Being repositioned by God for future growth is seldom easy or comfortable. Remember David? After crowning David to be the future king of Israel,⁴ God repositioned him to be a fugitive on the run from Saul for the better part of the next ten years. In reading some of David’s Psalms of discouragement, you can sense his struggle with the “why” questions. Yet through it all, God was ripening and maturing David’s character and faith. During that season on the run, David discovered the Philistine’s source of iron ore in the south, and then gleaned their metallurgy secrets when he was a mercenary warrior for the King of Gath.

After ascending the throne, David knew where to find ore as well as how to transform it into Israelite iron weaponry that was equal to that of the Philistines. As a result, never again would the Philistines be a military threat to Israel. Did David ever realize all the implications of that unexpected ten-year repositioning of his life by God? Most likely he did not. Nor do we in our own lives. That perspective is a comforting backdrop for the “why” questions we so often want to ask when wondering about our own repositioning(s) by God in His sovereign plan for each one of us.

In Closing

As you ponder that image of the vine in a Judean vineyard, put yourself into that scene, and then:

Ponder

Nothing is ever discarded in the Middle East. That is also true for Judean vineyards. Resources are far too scarce for anything to be thrown away. There is always a secondary use for everything. Those branches that do get pruned are set aside for a secondary use. The vinedresser deliberately places each pruned branch on top of the rock wall that surrounds the vineyard. There the branches will dry out for several weeks. When sufficiently dry, they are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned as kindling (15:6 NIV) in the village's bread ovens. Even though these pruned branches will not be producing grapes, they still

serve a useful purpose in the making of bread. Now consider the aforementioned 15:6 from that perspective remembering that bread and wine are the two elements Jesus chose for that first Communion at the Last Supper. Could it likewise be that what we have traditionally thought this verse is saying is contextually quite different? Something to further ponder!

A wise person is usually one who has learned from his or her mistakes and is willing to share those insights with others. We tend to be most fruitful in the lives of others when we minister to them out of our scars, not out of our successes.

From the Psalms...

Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers. (1:1-3)

*The Lord is my **rock**, my fortress and my deliverer;
my God is my **rock**, in whom I take refuge. (18:2a&b)*

*The Lord lives! Praise be to my **Rock!** (18:46a)*

*For in the day of trouble he will keep me safe in His dwelling; he will hide me in the shelter of His tabernacle and set me high upon a **rock**. (27:5)*

*I waited patiently for the Lord; he turned to me and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a **rock** and gave me a firm place to stand. (40:1-2)*

*From the ends of the earth I call to you, I call as my heart grows faint; lead me to the **rock** that is higher than I. (61:2)*

*My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from him. He alone is my **rock** and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will never be shaken. (62:1-2)*

*I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go;
I will counsel you and watch over you. (32:8)*

*If the Lord delights in a man's way, he makes his steps firm; though he stumble,
he will not fall, for the Lord upholds him with his hand. (37:23-24)*

God has the sovereign right to do what He wishes,
and no other explanation is necessary.
—John M. Frame

That my times are in God's hands is a fact whether
I realize and experience it or not.
—E.F. Hallock

If God lights the candle, none can blow it out.
—C. H. Spurgeon

We must believe in the grace of sovereignty
as well as the sovereignty of grace.
—Augustus H. Strong

*In his heart a man plans his course,
but the Lord determines his steps.*
—Proverbs 16:9

*Lord you have assigned me my portion and my cup;
you have made my lot secure. The boundary lines
have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have
a delightful inheritance.*
—Psalm 16:5-6

Notes and Sources

¹James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John, Volume 4* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1999), p. 1161.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴I Samuel 16:13

5

Simon Encounters Jesus

One of the miracles of the grace of God is what He is able to do with the torn nets of lives surrendered to Him.

—G. B. Duncan

Read: Luke 5:1-11

Night Fishing

In his fifth chapter, Luke gives us a key piece of contextual information regarding Simon's encounter with Jesus by informing us that Simon (and his business colleagues) fished all night and caught nothing. As expert fishermen, they all "knew" (and with justification) that fish could see their linen trammel nets during the day.¹ That is why they always fished in the deep at night.



To these Sea of Galilee professionals, fishing during the day was foolhardy. Also, these seasoned fishermen knew that their linen nets were fragile. The longer linen is wet the weaker it becomes. That is why their linen nets required both cleaning and complete drying after each use to prevent weakening and subsequent breaking. Fishing all night meant that they rested and slept during the morning hours as soon as the nets were cleaned and hung out to dry. These facts were part of the unquestionable paradigm that everyone "knew" about Galilean fishing.²

A Modest Request

In this encounter, Luke tells us that Jesus is teaching on the Galilean seashore early one morning as Simon and his business partners are cleaning their nets. Luke assumes that we remember Simon's prior exposure to Jesus when Jesus healed Simon's mother-in-law one Sabbath morning after synagogue services.³ Most likely at this moment in time, Simon's view of Jesus is that this new rabbi in town is yet another in a long line of *Hasidim* miracle working rabbis from the north.⁴ That is something very different from seeing Jesus as the Messiah!

An Inconvenient Time

As Luke unfolds this story, Jesus asks Simon if He can use his trammel boat as a teaching podium to better address the growing crowd. Jesus' modest request comes at a very inconvenient time. Simon is likely very tired, hungry and in need of sleep. There is also the necessity of cleaning, drying and mending the trammel nets. Nevertheless, Simon decides to submit to this miracle-working rabbi's request and allows Jesus the temporary use of one of his boats. Note also that Jesus asks Simon to be with Him in the boat. Closeness is always something Jesus desires for His relationships with the Simon's of this world. Assenting to Jesus' request, a very tired Simon now has a new challenge – to stay awake for a few more hours as Jesus teaches the crowd.

An Inconceivable Request

When Jesus' teaching is over, He directs Simon to take his boat out into the deep and let down his nets. In his tired condition, Simon now has some new issues to consider. Fishing in the deep is done in four-person 27-foot trammel boats,⁵ so he needs two more helpers (assuming that Jesus will also pitch in as the fourth fisherman). Simon also needs to reload the trammel nets back into the boat, even if they are not yet dry.

But the bigger issue is this: Only a fool would fish during the daytime in the deep! *Everybody* knows this – his business partners as well as those lingering on the shore in the just-taught crowd. Furthermore, Simon might well have been thinking, “What does this rabbi know about fishing? He may be an authority in interpreting God's Word, but what does He know about the realities and nuances of my fishing profession? That's my core competency, not his!”

Jesus' request creates strong feelings of dissonance and conflict within Simon. For

him to submit to Jesus' request is to run the risk of looking very foolish, both to his fishing colleagues as well as to the remaining onlookers. He might well be the recipient of jokes and barbs for the next ten years: “Remember when Simon foolishly listened to that new rabbi one morning and then went out and tried to fish during the day...!” Submission to Jesus also introduces a good bit of personal risk to Simon as he is now putting key financial assets of the business – namely the nets – at risk as well.

Submission is a Verb

In his conflicted state, Simon submits to the authority of Jesus and does as Jesus directs. In so doing, Simon gives us insight into the Hebrew understanding of submission – it is a verb. It means submitting to the authority of another even when every fiber of your being says, “this is not in my best interest; plus this will never work.” To a first-century observant Jew, belief and submission are verbs. They are things you do, something you live out. That was also Mary's perspective in Luke 1:38 when she submits to God's way even though every part of her being knows full well that it is not at all in her best interest to be known as an un-wed mother in that culture. By way of contrast in the West, belief often takes on much more of the nature of a creed, a menu listing of particular theological and doctrinal facts we will or can (mostly) agree to.

The Promise!

Why would Simon submit to Jesus' command? Everything about this scene doesn't make sense to Simon. To his way of thinking, you will never catch fish in the deep during the day. Furthermore, you can't put still-wet nets back in the water. Reading verse 5:4 closely, notice that Jesus gives Simon a promise – there will be a catch of fish! He doesn't say, “Put out into the

deep and see what might happen. Who knows, this could be your lucky day.” No, Jesus assures him there will be a catch. It’s a pattern that we see elsewhere in the Gospels. Case in point: John 11:4, when Jesus is going to stretch Mary and Martha’s faith, He tells them that Lazarus’ sickness will not end in death. When Jesus is really going to enlarge your faith, He often starts with a promise concerning the outcome. And so the promise of a catch tips the scales for Simon and he does it; he submits to Jesus’ direction. And here we see the Hebrew understanding of trust and submission. It is an action verb, not a philosophical posture.

A New Fear

From Luke’s narrative, we know what happens next. Simon goes out with Jesus and a few of his colleagues with the (most likely) still wet/moist nets, lowers the nets into the deep waters in broad daylight and in full public view, and then experiences a remarkable (and miraculous) catch of fish. The catch is so large that it now introduces a new element of danger into Simon’s reality. These never-fully-dried nets may not be equal to the weight of this catch. What if they break? That would cause the business to miss this catch plus many missed nights of fishing and lost income until the nets could be repaired or replaced.

I Knew It!

For a critical moment, Simon’s fear seems justified as Luke tells us the nets did indeed start to break from the immense size of the catch! Fortunately, Simon’s fishing colleagues were on shore watching this remarkable scene unfold, so it wasn’t too hard to get their attention and to have them come out in another boat to help. As Simon will later learn, if Jesus can be trusted for the catch, He can certainly be trusted to bring the catch to shore. Note also that if Simon had

not submitted to Jesus’ direction, some of his colleagues, as well as the remnant of the crowd still on the shore, would have missed a life-changing experience. Our submission to Jesus during conflicted times always has transformational repercussions for those around us who are closely watching.

A Second Promise

Why would Peter believe Jesus’ second promise in 5:10 that he would (eventually) become a fisher of men? Why would Simon Peter leave everything behind to follow this Rabbi and His prediction of Simon’s people-catching destiny. Because the first promise of a catch of fish came to pass in a spectacular way! The promises of Jesus build upon each other. Experiencing the fulfillment of Jesus’ prior promises provides the courage to trust in and submit to His next (and subsequent) promise(s).

Core Competencies and Paradigms

Note what Jesus is doing in this encounter. He frames the issue of submission right at Simon’s core competency. Jesus does not direct the issue of submission at any of the peripheral areas of Simon’s life, but brings it to bear at the one thing Simon knows best – fishing. Jesus knows that unless Simon submits and is broken at the one thing he knows and does best, the one thing he would always depend upon to provide his needs, he will never become Peter, the rock, fully and fruitfully dependent upon God for *everything*.

Simon is rewarded for his submission. This day’s catch is equivalent to many nights of good fishing.⁶ The catch is more than compensation for the sleep lost, a breakfast missed, and putting his reputation as well as his business assets at risk in submitting to Jesus.

Jesus uses this day-fishing encounter to pulverize one of Simon’s foundational paradigms.

Jesus did the very same thing with the Twelve during His earthly ministry. The Gospels document a consistent pattern of Jesus pulverizing every religious and social paradigm that His disciples had been taught from their earliest years to be “true.” Day in and day out, the disciples experienced shock therapy with Jesus. Everything these Twelve held to be “right” in their religious culture was removed from them – pulverized before their very eyes. Jesus knew this was necessary if they ever were going to be useful in His inbreaking Kingdom of God.

What’s in a Name?

Did you notice how Simon’s name starts to change as this encounter unfolds? Luke starts this narrative by referring to Simon (5:3), the Semitic meaning of which is pebble. Then after the great catch of fish, he changes and refers to “Simon Peter” (5:8) who is now bowed at Jesus; knees declaring his sinfulness. With the Semitic meaning of Peter being rock, this is Luke’s way of telling us that Simon’s transformation from being a Galilean pebble to a Kingdom rock (that we will later see in the book of Acts) is now underway.

Reflections to Journal and Share

- What did you learn about God in this encounter? About human nature? About yourself?
- Total submission to the authority of Jesus in *all* areas of our life is certainly not a popular notion these days, even in many parts of Christianity. Have all of our religious and cultural paradigms been sufficiently shattered by submitting them to the authority of Jesus so that we can be fully used in doing “the Lord’s work the Lord’s way?”
- Have there been times when Jesus called you to fish in the deep during the day? To do something that seems not only counter-intuitive, but puts your credibility and even your personal assets at risk? How did that work out and what did that experience do for you and to you?
- Are we still protecting (even defending) some of our flawed paradigms of success, achievement, significance, relevance, discipleship, church growth, to name but a few, even though they are significant barriers to the growth of God’s Kingdom here on earth?

- What challenges you most in this chapter? What did you hear the Spirit whisper to you or nudge you to realize as you journeyed through this chapter?

Ponder

Is *submission* a verb to believers today? Is submitting everything to Jesus a “given,” or have we allowed our understanding of faith to be something that we just keep compartmentalized at the intellectual level? Are we content to have the right creed, to be able to check off all the right theological and doctrinal statements, or do we understand that a living faith requires that we submit everything every day to the authority of Jesus?

It is relatively easy to turn over to Jesus those weak areas of our lives. In those areas we need all the help we can get, and we are more than willing to acknowledge that. But to take what we do best and submit that to Jesus can be a whole other issue. The question is: Have each of us been sufficiently broken in the areas of our

core competencies so that Jesus can fully use them, and us, in His Kingdom for His Kingdom?

Note that if Simon had applied logic and reason from his fishing expertise to Jesus’ request, he never would have obediently submitted to Jesus’ direction. When *Jesus’ call is clear*, our logic and reason needs to be subordinate to submission and obedience. Otherwise, our fleshly logic and reasoning can so easily talk us out of doing what God’s Spirit is prompting us to do causing us to miss His My-ways-are-not-your-ways surprises.

Ever wonder how many times later in his apostolic life Peter harkened back to this paradigm changing experience? Doing so may well have nudged him to be obedient in situations where obedience seemed counter-intuitive as he was reminded yet again that *My ways are not your ways*.

We live by faith, not by sight.

—II Corinthians 5:7

The path of submission is the way to peace.

—Herbert Carson

If you don’t surrender to Christ you surrender to chaos.

—E. Stanley Jones

It has always been my ambition to have no plans as regards myself.

—Robert Murray M’Cheyne

Let God have your life; he can do more with it than you can.

—D. L. Moody

When all that you are is available to all that God is,
then all that God is is available to all that you are.

—Ian Thomas

Visual Resources

If you are interested in a DVD containing some extraordinary Galilean fishing video and photographic images for use with texts like this, see Preserving Bible Time's *Jesus the Messiah: Overview of the Gospels* DVD, particularly the section entitled "Messiah and the Sea of Galilee: Fishing Industry."

Notes and Sources

¹Mendel Nun, *Monograph on the Sea of Galilee*, (Kibbutz Ein Gev, Israel, 1977) as summarized by David Bivins, Jerusalemerspective.com. For more information on fishing at the time of Jesus, see Mendel Nun's book *The Sea of Galilee and its Fisherman in the New Testament* (Kibbutz Ein Gev, Israel: Kinnereth Sailing Company, 1989)

²Ibid.

³Luke 4:38-39

⁴Professor Hanna Safrai, Hebrew University, evening lecture on "The Oral Tradition and First Century Judaism," The Jerusalem Center for Biblical Studies, March, 1988.

⁵Mendel Nun, *Monograph on the Sea of Galilee*

⁶Ibid.

6

Being a First-Century Disciple

A student is not above his teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher.

—Luke 6:40

Trying to be a disciple of Jesus Christ is not the same thing as training to be His Disciple.

—Bruce Demarest

Read: Matthew 28:16-20

What is a Disciple?

When Jesus said *go and make disciples*, it was a Jew speaking to other Jews in a Semitic dialect. As such, those words had a very specific meaning and embodied a well-known paradigm that first-century Jewish listeners well understood. Since then, those words have been translated into Greek, and then into Latin, before being translated into the constraints of the English language more than a thousand years later.



To more fully understand what Jesus said, we first need to disconnect from our traditional Hellenistic understanding of those words – easier said than done – and then ask how the Jews who first heard those words would have understood them. Only then are we in a position to ask what might those words mean for our discipling efforts today.

The Role of the Rabbi

Every first-century Jew knew that the Scriptures had authority over all aspects of life. God may have been a mystery to them, but behavior was not. Furthermore, it was scrupulous behavior, not the condition of your heart that defined a “righteous” person. Thus, many Jews had a **desire to honor God** by doing all the right things. In the world of Pharisaism, rabbis were the teachers who had been given the authoritative role to interpret God’s Word for the living of a righteous life – defining what behavior would or would not please God.

Willing Submission to a Rabbi’s Authority

If a rabbi ultimately agreed to a would-be-disciple’s request and allowed him to become his disciple, the disciple-to-be agreed to **totally submit** to the rabbi’s authority in all areas of interpreting the Scriptures for his life.

This was a cultural given for all observant Jewish young men – something each truly wanted to do. As a result, each disciple came to the rabbinic relationship with a desire and a willingness to do just that – surrender to the authority of God’s Word as interpreted by his rabbi’s view of Scripture.

Wrestling with the Word of God

Yeshivas, or groups of disciples intensely dialoging over an aspect of life and Scripture’s claim on it, were a standard part of rabbinic teaching methodology.¹ Studying their rabbi’s view of Scripture and **wrestling with the texts** to comprehend God’s way for the conduct of their lives were the main priorities of a disciple and the yeshiva experience. Since all disciples have memorized most, if not all, of their Hebrew Scriptures in preparation for their *bar mitzvahs* at age thirteen,² the issue was not what God’s Word said, but rather what did it mean and how was it to be lived out.

Real Life Questions

Life questions were the causative factors in searching the Scriptures for authoritative direction. For example, everyone knew about the broad “no work”³ injunction regarding the Sabbath. But how should that command be lived out in specific terms? Thus, a real-life question regarding Sabbath observance might be, “May I light a candle on the Sabbath?” Or, “How many candles may I light on the Sabbath?” A real-life question regarding marriage might be, “Can I divorce my wife if...” A real-life question regarding tax collectors would be, “If I know my taxes are going to oppress our people, should I pay them?” The rabbi would authoritatively address such daily practical questions concerning righteous living and that response was under-

stood as coming through Scripture as defined and interpreted by the rabbi.

As part of this how-should-we-live interactive process, the disciples would debate various rabbinic interpretations of the texts pertaining to a real life issue. This might involve weeks of dialogue and debate, for the rabbis were in no hurry to resolve these issues and questions. However, when the rabbi ultimately did declare his authoritative interpretation on an issue, all further debate ceased. His declared interpretation was now known and therefore *binding* on his disciples’ lives for the rest of their days. As such, the rabbi was the matrix, the filter, the grid, through which every life issue flowed, as well as the lens through which every life issue was viewed.

Transparency

Unlike many of our contemporary discipleship programs, there was no curriculum or agenda for this multi-year discipling experience. Rather it was a **continual daily relational living experience** where either the rabbi would ask questions of the disciple as he closely observed the disciple’s daily life, or the disciple would initiate a discussion by raising an issue or asking a question based on some aspect of his daily life.

In the dynamics of this **intimate** discipling community, all of a disciple’s **daily life was observable** by the rabbi. A disciple would expect the rabbi’s consistent and persistent question, “Why did you do that?” The emphasis was always on behavior formation, not just the imparting of wisdom and related interpretive information. In this interactive manner, the rabbis served to clear up gray areas of understanding and difficult areas of textual interpretation for their disciples. By always asking questions, the rabbis were concen-

trating on **developing discernment** in the mind of the disciple, not the imparting of “how to” formulas. Notions of three principles of prayer or four steps to righteousness would be abhorrent to a first-century rabbi.

Emulation

While not overtly required, disciples invariably had a **deep desire to emulate their rabbi**. This often included imitating how their rabbi ate, observed the Sabbath, what he liked and disliked, as well as his mannerisms, prejudices and preferences. Some disciples would go to extreme lengths to try to imitate their rabbi. The story is told of one disciple who so wanted to emulate his rabbi that he hid in the rabbi’s bedchamber. That way this disciple would be better able to emulate with his own future wife how the rabbi was intimate with his wife.

Believe is a Verb

The Semitic understanding of “believe” was not based on an intellectual assent to a creed, doctrinal statement, or series of faith propositions. Rather, to a first-century disciple, **believe is an action verb** in which you willingly submitted to your rabbi’s interpretive authority regarding God’s Word in every area of your life. Thus, to say you were a disciple in the name of Gamaliel meant that you **totally surrendered your life** to Gamaliel’s way of interpreting Scripture. As a result, you conformed all of your life’s behavior to his interpretations.

Summary

The essential qualities of first-century disciples were desire and submission. Biblical literacy, emulation, community, transparency and a willingness to wrestle with God’s Word were assumed to be a “given.” This passion also

included **the zeal to give up any and all of their preconceived notions** of how to live their lives and to embrace the behavior that their rabbi deemed best to honor God. It was a radical, willing, and **totally conforming submission** to the interpretive authority of their rabbi.

Observations

Reconstructing some of the context implicit in the first-century rabbi-disciples relationship allows us to make some observations regarding discipling and spiritual formation today.

- A disciple of Rabbi Jesus is one who totally surrenders to Him and His way of seeing and doing things. As such, a disciple comes with a willing desire to conform all aspects of his or her life to the authoritative Lordship of Jesus Christ. To Jesus, righteousness was more a matter of the heart than a codification of behavior. Furthermore, Jesus came to reveal further “who God is and how God does things,”⁴ Thus, a disciple of Jesus is one who is always asking Jesus, as revealed in Scripture, more about who God is as well as for an understanding of God’s will and ways.
- Jesus’ disciples should come with a deeply rooted desire to want to surrender to His authority. Jesus is always the authority. He is our rabbi as well as **The Rabbi**. It is to Him and to Him alone that we surrender. Disciples of Jesus today cannot explicitly or implicitly transfer any authority away from Jesus to a pastor, teacher, or well-known author. In Matthew 28:20, Jesus states that He will be with His disciples always. Thus, with the continual indwelling of the Spirit of Christ within every believer, there is no need for anyone else to assume His role as Rabbi of His

disciples.

- Jesus revealed much about who God is and how God does things in His encounters with people. His disciples learn much about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus by studying the cohesive context of Jesus' explicit and implicit teachings in these encounters. The role of the teacher-preacher-author in discipling is to be a co-disciple with certain spiritual gifts that can help open the depths and riches of the Scriptures, thus further revealing to all disciples more of who God is, His will and His ways.
- The central issue of being a disciple of Jesus is: Will I willingly surrender and submit for a lifetime every aspect of my life, including worldview, paradigms, career, personality, character, ethics, desires, motivations, values, family, ego, sexuality and attitudes to the authority of Jesus and His teachings?
- Small groups and one-on-one relationships can often serve much of the purpose of a yeshiva if those involved consistently ask and explore what it means to daily surrender every aspect of their lives to the Lordship of Christ. It is important that these groups and relationships define what they are about, and what their purpose is. The difference between accountability groups, Bible study groups, fellowship groups, and social groups can be vast in terms of their respective impacts on the daily, personal holiness of a disciple.

Then and Now

In the Gospel texts, Jesus often did not answer a direct question, but responded with another question or a parable. That was standard rabbinic teaching technique. This forced the questioner

and the listeners to **wrestle** with the issues that came with their questions as well as with their encounter with Him. Jesus' intent was to **develop discernment** in His disciples regarding who God is, how God does things, and what God cares about, rather than providing easy answers without the often-rigorous effort of **wrestling** with God's Word and its demands.

Today we don't seem to have as much of an appetite to **wrestle** with the biblical text as it relates to the daily issues of our lives and God's authority over them. We seem to prefer simple answers that we can selectively embrace when convenient. Thus, much of what it means to be a committed follower of Jesus Christ today is often reduced to simple formulas of "how to" steps. As previously observed, all of us are familiar with this simplistic genre with its four principles of humility and five steps to Spirit-filled living. Such an approach would never have survived rabbinic scrutiny in the first-century yeshiva environment. Being discipled by Jesus was not a quick, fill-in-the-blank Bible study. He was not handing out "principles" (a non-biblical word and notion) for daily living. He came to reveal God's Truth. In fact this whole Greek notion of biblical principles was alien to the world of the rabbis. It is with a Person, not a "principle" that we fall in love, and it is to a Person, not a "principle" that we submit.

We Do Understand

Observe how we develop board certified surgeons, nurses, licensed electricians, school-teachers, biochemists, counselors, and golf pros today. Common to each are long periods of study, training, mentoring, practical experience, as well as continuing education. We are accustomed to

the practice of placing ourselves under the watchful mentoring oversight of others who have established proficiency in our areas of interest. Ironically, we seem to put far more passion, commitment, and dedication into becoming a disciple of someone, or some thing, than we seem to do in developing and nurturing our piety as committed disciples of Jesus Christ. Thus, we are all disciples of something or someone – be it hedonism, atheism, career, self-absorption, materialism, our favorite cause, or Jesus Christ.

Reflections to Journal and Share

is the mantra of the day. How might this cultural malaise impact our understanding and willingness to put ourselves under biblical authority? To what extent do we even have a desire to surrender to the authority of Jesus today in the same manner that first-century disciples had a willingness to surrender to their rabbi's interpretive authority?

This overview of making disciples during the time of Jesus has highlighted some of the assumptions and presuppositions embedded in the rabbi-disciple relationship. These first-century “givens” provide us with issues to wrestle with as we ask questions of ourselves, and raise issues for our small groups, churches, and informal communities of faith. This wrestling should also include our discipling processes, programs and ministries.

- We live in a culture that chafes under almost any concept of authority. “Do your own thing”

- Biblical discipling is a life shaping, life determining process. Who are the people, or what are the things that are shaping your life? Do we ever outgrow our need to be in some form of a discipling relationship?

- How would you describe your biblical understanding of making disciples to others? Do you see any cultural expectations that may have shaped our current view of discipleship (another non-biblical word)? How would you contrast the discipling of the first century with contemporary notions of discipleship today as you have experienced or observed them?

- Is there a meaningful difference today between what it means to be a believer in Jesus Christ and what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ?

- Is “believe” mostly a creedal statement to you, or an action verb to passionately live out each day?

- Contrast total surrender to the authority of Jesus with a partial surrender, or an occasional surrender, a convenient surrender, or even token surrender to Him. How would you assess your willingness factor in regards to surrendering all (not most) areas of your life to the authority of God’s Word? When you do surrender, is it a willing surrender, or a surrender that arises from some form of resentful, obligatory obedience?

Ponder

Jesus' approach to remaking the Twelve brings to mind G. K. Chesterton's profound observation that "All education is implication." Much of the disciples' education came from daily wrestling with the paradigm changing implications of what

Jesus was doing that went far beyond the boundaries of their religious culture. A question for disciplemakers today is: How best to utilize this all-education-is-really-implication reshaping reality as part of the process of making disciples today?

We seem to assume that spiritual growth will automatically result from knowing more about the Scriptures.

—Bruce Demarest

Why do you call me "Lord, Lord", and do not do what I say?

—Luke 6:46

*Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.
See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.*

—Psalm 139:23-24

*To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said,
"If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.
Then you will know the truth, and the truth
will set you free."*

—John 8:31-32

What the Evangelists recorded in the Gospels was the sweat, blood, tears and elation they **experienced** with Jesus. Fishermen and tax collectors came to Jesus, listened to His teachings, witnessed His works, and observed His devotion to the Father. The theology of Jesus in the Gospels is rather thin. But their **experience** of Jesus is rich – so strong and convincing, in fact, that it prompted them to lay down their lives for Him. **Experience** changed them from timid, lukewarm followers into tenacious, blazing disciples of the risen Lord.

—Bruce Demarest
(emphasis added)

When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. “Do you understand what I have done for you?” he asked them. “You call me ‘Teacher and Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.”

—John 13:12-17

We assume that if anything can be done at all, it can be done quickly and efficiently. Our attention spans have been conditioned by thirty-second commercials. Our sense of reality has been flattened by thirty-page abridgements. It is not difficult in such a world to get a person interested in the message of the gospel; it is terrifically difficult to sustain that interest...

There is a great market for religious experience in our world; there is little enthusiasm for the patient acquisition of virtue, little inclination to sign up for a long apprenticeship in what earlier generations of Christians called holiness.

—Eugene Petersen

Resources

If you would like more contextual background on the rabbi-disciple relationship at the time of Jesus and more insight into how Jesus remade the Twelve, see *Making Disciples Jesus Way; Wisdom We Have Missed*,⁶ particularly Chapter 2, “Rabbis and Disciples” and “Chapter 5, “Do and Teach.”

Notes and Sources

¹James C. Martin and Douglas Greenwold. *Rediscovering Discipleship: A Contextual Perspective* (Rockville, MD: A Preserving Bible Times Discipling Discussion Paper, 2002)

²David Bivins, “Jesus’ Education,” www.jerusalemerspective.com, under “Articles.”

³Leviticus 23:3

⁴James C. Martin, *The Gospels in Context* (Amarillo, TX: Bible World Seminars, 2002), p. 9.

⁵II Timothy 3:16

⁶Doug Greenwold, *Making Disciples Jesus’ Way* (Rockville, MD.: Bible-in-Context Ministries, 2005)

7

The Golden Calf: Been There, Done That

A made God is no God

—Matthew Henry

Read: Exodus 32 and Joshua 4

Institutional Memory Loss

What happens to your sense of identity, spirituality, culture and worldview when you have been in an oppressive foreign culture for 430 years?¹ Sociologists studying North American immigrant families tell us that the biggest changes in cultural identity and practice begins with the third generation. Can you imagine what living in Egypt for 15+ generations (430 years) did to this early Hebrew people?



Living in Egyptian bondage and slavery was extremely debilitating to the spiritual understanding and identity of these sons of Jacob. After four centuries of significant growth in numbers, there were very few of Jacob's descendents left who had memory of the covenant-making God of Abraham. Most of them, if they had any institutional memory left at all, would have most likely deemed Jehovah a mythical figure. In Egyptian polytheism, since no one god is capable of meeting all of one's needs, a portfolio of gods is necessary to cover the basic needs of life – water, crops, fertility, and health. This portfolio of gods seems to have taken Jehovah's rightful place in the Hebrews' worship.

Hebrew View of God

In the Hebrew worldview, a god is what a god does. To a culture long imprisoned and oppressed in Egypt, whoever this Jehovah was or might have been, He certainly hadn't done anything helpful for them in a very long time. Knowing the way the Hebrew mind thinks, God had a plan to re-establish who He is and how He does things in the consciousness of this embryonic nation before delivering them. Thus God had Moses confront Pharaoh with a series of plagues, in part to demonstrate to the

Israelites that Jehovah was not only still there, but that He was mightier than all of the Egyptian gods combined. To drive that point home, God's plagues were designed to intentionally mock the impotency of many of the gods in Egyptian polytheism.

Remember: No Idols!

As the Exodus events unfolded, culminating in what we now know as the Passover, God promised Moses that He would soften the Egyptian hearts so they would give the Israelites much silver and gold and animal flocks as they departed Egypt.² God told Moses that this Egyptian silver and gold would be part of the initial wealth that the Israelites would take to this new land flowing with *milk and honey*.³ Knowing full well what the various religious practices of 430 years of captivity had done to His people, Jehovah commanded that the Israelites were not to use any of that gold or silver to make idols.⁴

A Faulty Paradigm

Water is essential to life in any culture, and particularly so in the Middle East. For over 400 years, the availability of water in Egypt was a given. Living near the Nile delta in the land of Goshen, a Hebrew need only go a few miles west to see water, drink it, and take some home. After four centuries of being progressively immersed in Egyptian polytheism, these Hebrews slowly were seduced to believe that one of the principal Egyptian gods, Apis, a bull representing fertility and power over nature⁵ could always be counted on to provide water. Thus these Hebrews began to embrace a new religious paradigm: Apis could always be counted upon for the essentials that made human, animal, and agricultural life possible.

Trust Me

Sinai was starkly different from the fertile land of Goshen. In this wilderness land, good water was not readily seen nor found. However, on the fourth day of their post-Red Sea deliverance, Jehovah demonstrated at Marah⁶ that He could be trusted to supply potable water to sustain this nation even in the most desolate places. God again spectacularly brought forth water from the rock at Meribah to re-enforce His promise.⁷ Along with the provision of water, every day fresh manna⁸ demonstrated God's provision and sustenance for His people in this barren wilderness.

Where is He?

In the third month of leaving Egypt, God calls Moses up to the mountain to receive His instructions.⁹ After roughly 40 days of Moses' absence, an intentional period of time chosen by God to test this newly delivered nation, the people grew increasingly anxious. Jehovah hadn't done anything lately. Is He still there? Apparently the continuing cloud upon the mountain did not answer that question sufficiently for them. Furthermore, their leader, Moses, was also gone. And what had he done for them in the last 40 days? Nothing. What were they to do? Maybe this intangible God needs a tangible representation so we can feel reassured that He is still there thinking about our needs.

Creating a Helper God

In their embryonic faith state, the Israelites just couldn't believe that this Jehovah could be relied upon *all the time for everything*. Perhaps as powerful as this Jehovah was, He still needed a little help or encouragement to "deliver the

goods.” And that is where the idea of making an image of Jehovah in the form of a golden calf, something they could see and touch, began to be formed in the Hebrew mind. Even though they had vowed to never do such a thing,¹⁰ these sons of Jacob began to crave something tangible that embodied what they were becoming increasingly worried about – provision (particularly water) in the wilderness. How soon they forgot what God had repeatedly and recently done for them on this journey.

When crunch time comes, when we get preoccupied with our own issues, it is easy to forget “who God is and how God does things,” a favorite phrase of Dr. James C. Martin, the co-founder of Preserving Bible Times. When that happens, we seem to have this human inclination to want to fall back on past practices, habits, patterns – to repeat behaviors we have (often unfortunately) practiced before. So to these Israelites, selecting an appropriate Egyptian god to represent the qualities that they were beginning to wonder if the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob could be trusted to provide, seemed like a

reasonable thing to do to. Thus, their practical theology became one of syncretism – a fusion of

God + Something = My Confidence & Trust.

Managing God

The wilderness challenges these Hebrews **now** faced seemed to suggest that Apis, the god of nature (and water) possessed the needed attributes they would like to see manifested in Jehovah now. So they ignored God’s repeated warnings about using the gold and silver from Egypt for the constructing of idols, and created a physical, visual representation of Jehovah which embodied reassuring attributes from their pagan past. In committing this abomination, the people did not intend to give up on Jehovah. They still wanted to worship Him.¹¹ However, a representation of God portrayed in the form of Apis gave them more confidence that God would meet their current wilderness needs. So they created what they wanted, and then projected that image onto God.

When you construct a representation of a god, you also feel like you have a better chance of managing that god to achieve your desired outcomes. In so doing, you not only trivialize “your” god, but the One True God as well!

Reflections to Journal and Share

- What are some of the implications for you of this wilderness case history? Like the early Hebrews, God’s people today still live in a polytheistic culture. The Western ideological gods that consistently get offered up to us as either replacements for, or as a helper to Jehovah, are materialism, the American Dream, the Good Life, individualism, financial security, to name but a few.

—What would you add to this list of contemporary idols that we are tempted to embrace?

—Does this idol-making tendency hit close to home right now in your life?

- An idol is anything that either takes God's place, misrepresents Him, or takes some attention and focus away from Him. C. S. Lewis once observed that our hearts can so easily become "idol making factories." In examining our lives for possible idols, perhaps some helpful diagnostic questions are

—What is it that you think about more than God and His Kingdom?

—What is it that you devote more time and energy to instead of pursuing Him?

—In analyzing your last 100 prayers, what do you seem to be desiring more than God?

—What one thing, e.g., a spouse, the perfect job, a financial wind fall, etc., that if it suddenly showed up in your life right now would finally put you on the road to happiness, or at least that is what you have been telling yourself?

—What do you worry about? Most likely the thing(s) you are worrying about can easily become more important than God Himself, and therefore an idol. As Helmut Thielicke once observed: Worry is idolatry.¹²

- Now revisit this issue of idols depending on your responses to those diagnostics questions:
 - Do we depend upon and trust in God alone, or do we pragmatically depend upon **God + Something** (from either our secular or religious cultures) for our daily manna? What has been, or still might be, the “something” in your life that you have made into a god to help God out in case He doesn’t deliver for you on your timetable?

 - The irony of the Golden Calf debacle is that God’s people took a gift from God, the gold and silver He purposed for them, and used it to make something to meet their present, perceived needs. In doing so, the end result was that it lessened their need for sole dependence upon Him. Ring any bells? Remember Paul’s challenging question in I Cor. 4:7b: *What do you have that you did not receive?* What gifts, abilities, capacities, resources, and endowments have you received from God that you might be using to actually lessen your total dependency on Him? In other words, what idols might still co-exist in your life with God right now?

- What did you learn about God in this chapter? About our human nature?

- Where are you challenged most in this chapter? What did you hear the Spirit whisper to you as you journeyed through this chapter?

Ponder

We seem to be particularly susceptible to creating “religious” idols, e.g., church growth models, the carefully crafted monthly para-church fund raising letter, our pet evangelism techniques and discipleship formulas – and there are many more that could be cited. The issue is not so much with our theology. Rather, it is how we pragmatically live life each day in the circumstances and stresses we face, particularly during those wilderness periods that God leads us to in order to detox us from our idols. There is nothing wrong with any of these religious models and templates per se, unless, of course, we start to rely upon them, and then come to depend on them instead of solely on God’s provision and sustenance.

God’s gifts and blessings are not the issue. The problem resides in how we receive and accept those gifts and blessings; what we do with them and make of them. If we take comfort in His gifts and put our faith and confidence (ever so slightly) in what we construct with them rather than the One who gave them to us, we

become contemporary Israelites living as Egyptians in the wilderness of today’s culture.

We need to be people who never forget to remember who God is and how God does things, regularly reflecting on His utter faithfulness *always and for everything*. The theme of “remembering” is the most prevalent theme in all of the Scriptures. It occurs over 250 times. God must have a reason for this emphasis. He knows us so well! Failure to remember who God is and how God does things makes us vulnerable to being seduced (yet again) by the golden calves of this age.

Take time to reflect on what God has already done in your life – His faithfulness in the Egypts and deserts of your life. Become a superb historian of your own journey. Then ask yourself: Where do I need to build monuments of remembrance to the faithfulness of God just as Joshua did in front of the nation when they entered the Promised Land.¹³ Doing so will tend to keep you on your knees in grateful prayer.

*They soon forgot his works; they waited not for his counsel:
But lusted exceedingly in the wilderness, and tempted God in the desert.
And he gave them their request; but sent leanness into their soul.*

—Psalm 106:13-15, KJV

Idolatry is anything which cooleth thy desires after Christ.

—Oliver Cromwell

Ever since man ruined the image of God in which he has been created
he has been fashioning gods in his own image.

Ultimately, all idolatry amounts to worship by the idolater of himself.

—R. B. Kuiper

You do not have to make a graven image picturing God as a man to be an idolater;
a false mental image is all that is needed to break the second commandment.

—**J. I. Packer**

When we invent our own ideas of God, we simply create him in our own image.

—**Kenneth F. W. Prior**

Idolatry is everywhere presented in Scripture as the greatest insult the creature
can offer to the Creator.

—**Charles Hodge**

Satan doesn't care what we worship, as long as we don't worship God.

—**D. L. Moody**

In His Hand is where I start each day
Firmly held as I go on my way,
And with the unfolding of each hour
I remain sustained within His Power.

In His Hand is where I spend each day
Safe and secure in every conceivable way.
So when wonder and worry their storm clouds roll
I will remain deeply settled in my soul.

In His Hand is where I end each day
It is a blessing and a debt I cannot repay,
And even when doubt and discouragement send their darts
I'll remember again my Lord the Red Sea parts.

—Excerpt from my 1993 Unemployment
Journal

Summing it all up, friends, I'd say you'll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious – the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse. Put into practice what you have learned from me, what you heard and saw and realized. Do that, and God, who makes everything work together, will work you into his most excellent harmonies.

—Philippians 4:8-9, The Message

Notes and Sources

¹Exodus 12:40

²Exodus 3:22; 12:36

³Exodus 3:8

⁴Exodus 20:4-5; 20:23

⁵Arthur W. Pink, *Gleanings in Exodus* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1981), p. 317.

⁶Exodus 15:25

⁷Exodus 17:6

⁸Exodus 16:4

⁹Exodus 19:3

¹⁰Exodus 24:3

¹¹Exodus 32:5

¹²Helmut Thielicke, *Life Can Begin Again* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1963), p. 129.

¹³Joshua 4

8

Stealing God's Glory by Striking the Rock

A concern for the glory of God is the ultimate motive for Christian living.

— Unknown

Read: Numbers 20

A Barren Place

The Wilderness of Zin is where the Israelites spent almost all of their 40-year desert experience. If you have ever been in this region or seen it from the air, you are immediately struck by how barren and desolate this area is. Most of the terrain appears as large, flat sandy plateaus sitting between distant ridges that appear as small mountain ranges. The only disruptions to the flatness of these barren plateaus are occasional deep canyons and gullies (wadis) that appear to be slashed out of the earth by a giant knife.



From the air, these wadis look like miniature versions of the Grand Canyon. Through the millennia, these wadis have drained the brief winter rains from this region to the Southern Dead Sea Valley – the Arabah. The Bible refers to this place as *that vast and dreadful desert, that thirsty and waterless land*.¹ These early Hebrews complainingly describe this environment to Moses as *this terrible place. It has no grain or figs, grapevines or pomegranates. And there is no water to drink*.²

Geology Matters

As the scant winter rains fall in this wilderness, the water is quickly absorbed into the porous ground. As a result, year after year the plateau's soft sandstone geological formation slowly accumulates more and more water. This sandstone formation sets atop a limestone floor, which serves as a barrier and seal keeping the water from going more deeply into the formation. Eventually this limestone barrier forces the water accumulating in the sandstone strata to start flowing towards the sides of the canyon. As the water moves through the sandstone layer toward the walls of the wadi,

it leaches calcium, iron, copper and other minerals from the soil. As this evaporation occurs on the rock face of the wadi, these minerals end up being deposited on the surface of the canyon walls creating a transparent barrier. This evaporation process effectively establishes a second seal holding water in this sandstone geological formation. The end result is an ever-growing reservoir of water being effectively held in place by these two barriers.

Water From the Rock Face

The details of winter rains, geological formation, and rock face mineral barriers are important contextual details that help us understand why striking the vertical rock face of the wadi can readily bring forth water. Even today in this region, you can observe water seeping/flowing from the rock face (the Hebrew for *rock* in Numbers 20 is best translated *elevated rock*, which fits this wadi motif very nicely) of the canyon wall.

Do Methods Matter?

With this wilderness site context in place, we can now consider the core issue of Moses striking the rock (face) instead of speaking to the rock (face). A pragmatic 21st-century Western perspective might be: What's the issue here? After all, the people got the water they needed didn't they? However, from God's perspective there is much more to this encounter! Note that Moses' sinful methodology still results in the blessing of water for the people. That is a sobering reminder that just because God chooses to bless the results of our events/activities, it does not mean He is necessarily condoning our methods. Rather He has chosen to bless those events and activities for His own reasons.

How Long?

Numbers 20 is set in the 40th year of the people's wilderness experience. These Israelites have already experienced 39 years of God's utter faithfulness to them on a daily basis. Likewise, Moses has 39 years of leadership experience in "doing God's work God's way." It is also helpful to remember that much earlier in this 40-year wilderness experience, and in very similar circumstances, God instructed Moses to strike a different kind of rock to bring forth water for the people.³ Because of that prior experience, Moses is at least familiar with obtaining water through the act of striking.

Gratitude or Grumbling

This 40th-year rebellion in the wilderness was instigated by a new generation of grumbling Israelites. The original chronic complainers that left Egypt are now almost all dead. The new generation has known nothing but God's continual faithfulness to them. Their 39-year wilderness history is littered with daily manna confirmations of His faithfulness. Yet incredibly here in their 40th year, they are still complaining! What does that say about the duration of gratitude in the human heart? At the same time, this event reveals yet again the extent of God's remarkable patience and incredible mercy.

Listen Carefully

To these functionally oriented, early Hebrews, God is what God does. They are not philosophical people. If God provides them water, then God is their provider. If Moses provides them water, then Moses is also their provider. In Numbers 20, God clearly instructs Moses to *publicly speak* to the rock (face), not strike it.

If Moses had done that, it would be clear to everyone that God had (yet again) provided water. Furthermore, it now seems as if God wants to give the people a new revelation about Himself through this particular event – that His Word alone is sufficient and can be totally trusted for daily necessities. God knew they would regularly need that understanding of the power of His Word as they moved into Canaan, a land filled with enemies' intent on their destruction.

Mutiny

In this particular setting, Moses is once again under great pressure from these complaining people regarding the quality of his leadership. Remembering his prior experience with striking the rock, and apparently skeptical about God's instruction to simply speak to this rock face, Moses rejects God's command and, in the eyes of the people, takes matters into his own hands. That was an act of mutiny, which is what sin always is.

In yet another way, God wanted to be glorified (accurately revealed) yet again in the eyes of the people as their utterly faithful provider. However, Moses thwarted God's purpose that day by taking the credit for supplying the water in the eyes of the people. This mutiny by Moses shifted the focus and dependency of the people from God to himself, and in so doing, Moses stole God's glory. Failing to appropriately trust God and follow His leading always compromises His glory.

Trust Me

God makes it clear in Numbers 20:12 that the core issue here is that Moses did not sufficiently believe (trust, rely on) that God would bring

forth water by having Moses just speak to the rock. Lacking that threshold of trust, Moses reverted to something he thought would work – *striking* the rock. What Moses missed was that while God blessed striking in the past, He wanted to bless *speaking* today to achieve the same outcome for a different reason.

In a similar manner, that is often the faith challenge that confronts church and ministry leadership. There are times when God calls us to do things differently. Rather than listening carefully to how God is now telling us to change our approach, and then courageously moving out of our comfort zones to do it, our skepticism causes us to stay within our “we've always done it that way” traditional approaches to ministry.

Misrepresenting God

To these you-are-what-you-do people, Moses had just provided them with needed water – and took God's place. C. K. Chesterton's quote, “All education is implication,” speaks to this situation as the implication communicated to the Israelites that day was that the nation needs both God **and** Moses to survive here in the wilderness. Note how Moses characterizes this situation, “*Listen, you rebels, must we (Aaron and Moses) bring water out of this rock for you?*”⁴ In speaking and acting this way, Moses did the Lord's work **his** way. Is it possible for us to act like Moses today, to misrepresent God to those around us, and thus steal His glory? To further ponder that, we need some context for God's glory.

God's Glory

When we talk about God's glory, there are at least two facets to consider. One is God's Shekinah-glory, which is the external manifesta-

tion of His intrinsic holiness.⁵ Another Hebrew understanding of God's glory has to do with God being accurately revealed for whom He is (His nature, character, attributes), how He does things (His ways), and what He cares about (His heart). When God is accurately revealed and portrayed, He is being glorified. That's why the writer of Hebrews states that Jesus *is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature*⁶ (NASB). Jesus perfectly reveals and portrays who God is and how God does things. In so doing, He always glorifies God.

Stealing God's Glory

In light of this context of God's Glory, do we ever mutiny like Moses and steal God's glory? Do we ever take some or all of the credit for something that God alone has done or is doing? Do we come off to a watching world as if we are the beneficiaries of our own wisdom and abilities, not His investment of resources in us? In our daily lives, are we inclined to let the spotlight fall far too much on us and too little on Him? Unfortunately we do and all too often we are oblivious to it. Why?

Me and My Glory

Narcissism is alive and well in Western culture where everything gets selfishly defined in terms of "**me**." The church has not been immune from this creeping cultural narcissism. The world

has indeed been squeezing the church into its narcissistic mold and the church as been far too accommodating in allowing that to happen. Far too many believers seem to be disproportionately focused on **my** salvation, **my** spiritual gifts, **my** blessings, **my** call, and **my** ministry, even **my** Jesus. Sadly, spiritual narcissism, with its overemphasis on **my** blessings and what's in it for **me**, is rapidly becoming a serious malady in Western evangelicalism. It's no longer all about Him. Rather, it's far too much about **me** – **my** efforts and **my** blessings – as if God's Providence exists solely for my benefit, not His glory.

Closing Perspective

Every day our secular culture pressures us to act like Moses. It encourages us and even provokes us to strike the rock face and take credit for the good things that continue to flow from God's hand. To resist that, ask the Holy Spirit to sensitize you to the enormous extent of God's provision in your life. That way, when your time of testing in the wadi comes, you will remember to speak to the rock on God's behalf in the eyes of a watching world and thereby glorify Him. Make it a prayerful priority to avoid stealing God's glory, and when the Holy Spirit reveals to you that you have done that, confess it at once. Don't let your Wilderness of Zin testing become your wilderness of sin.

82 • The Rest of the Story

- Are we using God-honoring and God-glorifying methods in pursuit of Kingdom results? Are we doing the Lord's work the Lord's way? Looking through the rearview mirror of your life, can you now see instances where God might have blessed your results even though you realized (perhaps much later) He was not condoning your methods?

- Just because Jesus called us to do something one way "yesterday" does not necessarily mean He will call us to do the same thing the same way today. Have you any examples in your own life that illustrate this reality?

- Do we regularly confess before our Holy God that we have once again acted like Moses and stolen His glory?

- What challenges you most in this chapter? What did you hear the Spirit whisper to you as you journeyed through this chapter?

Ponder

Looking back at these Israelites in the wilderness, we realize we always have two choices before us – to grumble or to be grateful. Where we decide to put our emphasis depends on whether we take time to remember who God is, how He does things, what He cares about, and to adequately review the history of our lives within the continual care of His providence. Anytime we fail to remember God's faithfulness to us, we quickly lose our perspective along with any sense of gratitude. When that happens, doubt, anxiety and dissatisfaction begin to move into the vacuum created by gratitude's departure.

There is a reason God made remembering the predominate theme of His Word, occurring some 250 times in Scripture. God, who made us and knows us perfectly, knows that unless we take time to remember who He is and how He does things, we will shortly forget and will end up compromising His glory. Note that by

grumbling the Israelites not only stole God's glory, but also pressured Moses to stumble and commit a rash act that also stole God's glory. Grumbling has a way of affecting others, even compromising our leaders.

Remember Paul's challenge to the Corinthians: *What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why did you boast as though you did not?*⁷ That is a reminder that we do nothing on our own, accomplish nothing on our own, and have nothing of our own. All of it proceeds from God's hand – ALL of it.

What would our church conversations be like if we banned the use of the personal pronouns I, my, and me for six months. Instead, we always substituted He, His, and Him as we start to detox ourselves from the self-centeredness of pointing too much to ourselves and too little to Him. John the Baptist summarized our collective challenge: *He must become greater; I must become less.*⁸

*Not to us, O Lord, not to us but to Your name be the glory
because of your love and faithfulness.*

—*Psalm 115:1*

*God, after He had spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many
portions and many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son,
whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world.
And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature
and upholds all things by the word of His power.*

—*Hebrew 1:1-3b NASB*

In commanding us to glorify Him, God is inviting us to join Him.

—**C. S. Lewis**

The only thing God is bound to do is the very thing that He requires of us –
to glorify Himself.

—**J. I. Packer**

God cannot allow another to be partaker of honours due to Him without
denying Himself. It is as much His prerogative to be God alone as to be God at all.

—**William S. Plumer**

Visual Resources

If you are interested in extraordinary helicopter video for the Wilderness of Zin and the Negev region, see the first three video clips from the “Negev” section of Preserving Bible Time’s *The Coast, Shephelah and The Negev* DVD, which is part of PBT’s *Above Israel* DVD series.

Notes and Sources

¹Deuteronomy 1:19; 8:15

²Numbers 20:5b

³Exodus 17

⁴Numbers 20:10

⁵Exodus 24:16-17

⁶Hebrews 1:3 NASB

⁷I Corinthians 4:7b&c

⁸John 3:30

9

The Raising of Lazarus and God's Timing

For nothing is impossible with God

—Luke 1:37

I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!

—Mark 9:24b

Read: John 11

Purpose

In the seventh and last of the Apostle John's recorded miracles, he describes the raising of Lazarus from the dead. In the beginning of his narrative, John tells us that after Jesus heard about Lazarus' illness, He waited *two more days* before starting out for Bethany – the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. This chapter will delve into the contextual significance of **when** Jesus deliberately chose to raise Lazarus and **why** it was on the **fourth day**.



Sending a Message

As the book of John unfolds, in the eleventh chapter we learn that Lazarus has fallen ill. Apparently Lazarus' condition worsened enough that Mary and Martha felt the urgent need to contact Jesus about his rapidly deteriorating state. Interestingly, Mary and Martha also felt the need to remind Jesus in their message of His love for their brother Lazarus. In doing so, they indicate an expectation that 1) Jesus could make a difference in Lazarus' condition, and 2) Jesus would respond. So the sisters found a messenger, entrusted him with their "come and help" message, and sent him on his two-day journey to an area east of the Jordan where Jesus was spending the late winter.¹

The Response

When the messenger delivers the sister's message,² Jesus immediately sends a promise back to the sisters to reassure them: *This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that His Son may be glorified through it.*³ We need to remember that in the Hebrew way of understanding things, God is glorified when He is accurately revealed for "who

He is and how He does things,” that oft-used phrase of

Dr. James Martin, Preserving Bible Times’ co-founder.

Strategic “Delay”

John reminds us that Jesus loved this brother and sister threesome⁴ and then surprises us by telling us something that seems inconsistent with His affection for these good friends. John informs us that after learning of the sisters’ “please come” request, Jesus *stayed where He was two more days*.⁵

Is this how you would respond to a message that a dear friend of yours is seriously ill and rapidly deteriorating? Would you wait two more days before leaving to see him or her in the hospital? Before answering, remember that Jesus’ timing is always purposeful and impeccably appropriate. So what are we to make of this intentional two-day “delay”? Let’s look more closely at the clues John gives us.

Reassurance

John has already told us that Jesus loves Mary, Martha and Lazarus. So this deliberate two-day “delay” is certainly not because He doesn’t love them. Furthermore, Jesus has already reassured the sisters with a promise that this is not a sickness that will end in death – Lazarus will not die from this illness. How did the sisters receive and understand that return message on the second day after Lazarus died? Did they believe it – even into the fourth day? Or might that message have been perplexingly received as too little, too late?

Note that when Jesus summarizes Lazarus’ condition for His disciples, He tells them that Lazarus *has fallen asleep*.⁶ In using this verb tense, John is informing us that Lazarus died before the messenger found Jesus. Jesus also used the word *asleep* to characterize the state of

Jarius’ just-expired twelve-year old daughter.⁷

Remember also that Jesus brought back to life the only son of the widow of Nain.⁸ Given the inevitable notoriety of these two raisings, it is highly likely that Mary and Martha were very much aware of these two remarkable bringing-back-to-life **same-day** miracles (neither body had yet been placed in a tomb before the end of the day of death, something this culture required then and still does today).

Same-Day Faith

Now that Lazarus is dead, according to Mary and Martha’s “faith system,” Jesus could still make a difference only (perhaps) if He got to Bethany before the end of the day that Lazarus died. Yet as that day of death ends, Jesus is not there and no message has been received from Him.

When Jesus finally leaves the Transjordan area and arrives in Bethany after a two-day journey, John purposely tells us that Lazarus has been dead **four days**.⁹ A deeper contextual understanding of this passage hinges on comprehending the Hebrew worldview of death and the significance of the fourth day.

Officially Impossible

The Mishnah seems to suggest evidence of a rabbinic belief that the soul (*nephesh* in Hebrew) hovered near the corpse of the dead person for three days hoping to be able to re-enter the body.¹⁰ But by the fourth day there began a process of (smelly) decomposition that prompts the soul to depart. Thus, if we had a Richter scale (1-10) of Miracles like we do for earthquakes, bringing someone back to life on the day of death – like Jarius’ daughter and the widow of Nain’s son – might be a 9.9 reading. But bringing someone back to life on the **fourth day** would be off the scale, unthinkable, a virtual

impossibility!

A Contemporary Analogy

By way of a 21st century analogy, envision that Lazarus' body, after lying in repose for three days of viewing at a Bethany funeral home, is cremated (in this contemporary analogy) at the beginning of the fourth day. Several hours later as Lazarus' ashes are about to be raked from the floor of the now-cooled cremation chamber, Jesus stops by. After opening the door of the furnace chamber, Jesus peers in and sees the small pile of Lazarus' remains on the chamber floor, pauses, and with tears flowing down His cheeks, begins praying to His Father. After praying, Jesus authoritatively says, *Lazarus, come out.*

Miraculously, an able-bodied Lazarus suddenly emerges from the ashes and is helped out of the cremation chamber! That is the analogous 21st century contextual significance to a first-century observant Jew of someone being raised on the fourth day!

Meanwhile Back at Temple, Inc.

The full weight of Jesus' incredulous raising of Lazarus on the fourth day was not lost on the Temple's "Board of Directors." This ruling elite saw the miracle for exactly what it was – an extraordinary event that only God could do. Caiaphas, the High Priest that year, immediately recognized the implications of this unimaginable outcome: *If we let Him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place (Temple) and our nation.*¹¹

The Temple Aristocracy was preoccupied with maintaining their religious power and preserving this incredible cash flow generating institution. In their worldview, if Messiah really did come He would politically and militarily rule

the nation from His throne in the Temple. Were that to happen, their oversight of this "cash cow" enterprise would suddenly cease. Even if Jesus was the Messiah, their hearts were so hardened that they would never submit to Him. So the Temple "Board" took Caiaphas' advice, and decided to kill Jesus.¹²

All Part of the Plan

The raising of Lazarus, and deliberately waiting until the fourth day to publicly do it, "sealed the deal" for Jesus. The Sanhedrin saw and heard enough! They were now committed to finding a way to kill Him. Achieving that outcome was all part of Jesus' purpose in waiting two more days before returning to Bethany to raise Lazarus from the dead. It was all part of God's plan to reveal the full **fourth-day** extent of His glory as well as pointing forward to the Cross and the upcoming glory of the empty tomb.

Observations

It is worth reflecting on Jesus' deliberate two-day "delay" and some of the implications of God's timing for disciples today:

- **God's Glory** In raising Lazarus on the fourth day, God was indeed glorified (accurately revealed) as the One who transcends death – the doer of the "impossible." Jesus was also accurately revealed as *the resurrection and the life*.
- **Providence can Perplex** Note that being loved by Jesus and being part of God's plan to manifest His glory does not shield us from disappointments, difficult times, crises or even "catastrophes." As we live our lives out in the perfection of God's providence, the focus needs to always be first and foremost on Him and His glory, not on our self-absorbed

notions of what seems best for us. Seeing, understanding, and then embracing this spiritual reality can be a struggle. The increasing spiritual narcissism of Western evangelicalism, e.g., **my** gifts, **my** ministry, **my** calling, **my** blessings, **my** leading someone to Jesus, even **my** Jesus, can so easily view being a disciple of Jesus as far too much about me than about Him. It's as if "discipleship" is first and foremost about my personal search for self-fulfillment, and not for His glory.

- **Consequences** It goes without saying that this deliberate two-day "delay" did not spare Mary and Martha anxiety about their brother's deteriorating condition, nor grief when he died. Note also that being brought back to life did not necessarily make Lazarus' life easier. He became a hunted man. His face was now on the Jerusalem area "wanted" posters along with Jesus. He was now a living Exhibit "A" that a messianic miracle had occurred. In the eyes of the Temple authorities, Jesus and Exhibit "A" Lazarus both needed to be removed.¹³
- **Expectations** When we define our expectations, we usually set the stage for our disappointments. Life seldom turns out the way we hoped or dreamed it would – witness Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Elizabeth's (John the Baptist's mother) 30–40 years of barrenness. In walking faithfully, we are to avoid any sense of *rigid expectations* of what God should do for us, as well as setting (usually self-serving) timetables and deadlines for when He needs to do it.

We are called to live each day in God's providence with a *sense of expectancy* that our utterly good and faithful God and Father will surprise us, often at the most unexpected time(s). As the Apostle Paul reminds us in his benediction to the Ephesians: *He is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us...*¹⁴

- **Faith** These fourth-day "crisis" events also serve as barometers of our faith. Mary and Martha received the promise that Lazarus would not die on the second day after he died. What did they make of that? Giving Mary and Martha the benefit of the doubt, we could credit them with an it-still-is-possible-Lazarus-can-be-brought-back-to-life faith that stretched through the first three days. But now it is the fourth day! In their view, Lazarus' soul is gone! Being brought back to life by Jesus is now officially impossible! According to their understanding, the decomposition process and resultant stench is already underway.¹⁵ John indicates that the sisters' faith did not extend to the fourth day which was underscored by Jesus' question: *Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?*¹⁶ Mary and Martha will now find out, just like Mary and Elizabeth did in Luke 1, that "*nothing is impossible for God.*"¹⁷ How heartening it is to realize that God's faithfulness to us continues even when our faith in Him runs out!

Ponder

This case history of Mary, Martha and Lazarus, real people dealing with the real circumstances of life, reminds us that we need to be extremely cautious when reacting to situations that don't seem to be working out according to our desired timetables. Whether it relates to a single person long awaiting for a spouse, a childless couple laboring through the frustrations of infertility, an unemployed person still anxiously waiting for a new job, we all seem to have our own implicit endpoints for these “delays” when our souls want to cry out to God, “Enough is enough!”

We are usually willing to accommodate, or even tolerate some “delay” in God's timing, as long as it seems to be a reasonable period of time (as defined by us). We are even good at rationalizing these kinds of delays and even assigning to them a redemptive faith-building quality because we want these waiting times to make sense. But what happens when our fourth-day arrives? When none of it makes sense anymore? When our situation now seems to be somewhere between utterly bleak and totally hopeless?

During those “desperate” times, we need to be very careful about drawing any lines in the sand with respect to God's timing and our willingness to accept it. If we do, we might well be instigating our own crisis of faith. We always have a choice in how we decide to respond to the “adversity” in our lives. A seasoned faith in God

chooses to respond by intentionally resting the purpose and meaning of our lives in the perfection of His all wise, all knowing, all loving nature and timing.

One of the many dividends of heaven will be that not only will all of the “why” questions of our lives be answered, but God's purpose in them will become praise-worthy clear. Not only will we then see all the events of our lives through the rear view mirror of the impeccable providence of God's Sovereignty, but we will also eternally rejoice in them. We will celebrate God's timing because we will then fully see how all those deliberate “delays” and waiting periods in our lives served to reveal His glory to others. In fact, **God Ordained “Delay”** is an essential part of every disciple's faith-building journey. The acrostic of **GOD** can remind us of that!

A Post Script

The issue we always have to wrestle with is whether these “delays” are God ordained or whether they are simply self-inflicted wounds stemming from the actions and decisions that flow out of our own fallenness. Mary, Martha, and Lazarus were centered in God's will with respect to their circumstances. In some of the train wrecks and derailments in my own life, it needs to be said that they were caused not by God but because I wasn't even trying to be centered in God's will doing what He wanted done.

*All the days ordained for me were written
in your book before one of them came to be.*

—**Psalm 139:16b**

I have lived, seen God's hand through a lifetime, and all was for the best.

—**Robert Browning**

The longer I live, the more faith I have in providence,
and the less faith in my interpretation of providence.

—**Jeremiah Day**

God's providence is like the Hebrew Bible; we must begin
at the end and read backward in order to understand it.

—**A. J. Gordon**

Providence is much more about God's glory than about our happiness.

—**Geoff Grogan**

If our circumstances find us in God, we shall find God in our circumstances.

—**George Muller**

God is to be trusted when His providences seem to run contrary to His promises.
It is a sin as much to quarrel with God's providence as to deny His providence.

—**Thomas Watson**

Believe your beliefs and doubt your doubts; do not make
the mistake of doubting your beliefs and believing your doubts.

—**Charles F. Deems**

Visual Resources

For some wonderful contextual visuals that help make the raising of Lazarus come alive, see the collection of "Facing the Cross" images in Preserving Bible Time's *Overview of the Gospels* DVD, particularly the "Jericho to Bethany" section including the "Raising of Lazarus" reconstruction.

Notes and Sources

¹John 10:40; see also Matthew 19:1

²John 11:3

³John 11:4

⁴John 11:5

⁵John 11:6

⁶John 11:11

⁷Luke 8:52

⁸Luke 7:15

⁹John 11:17

¹⁰Leviticus Rabbah 18:1 and Yevamot 16:3

¹¹John 11:48-53

¹²John 11:50

¹³John 12:10

¹⁴Ephesians 3:20-21

¹⁵John 11:39

¹⁶John 11:40

¹⁷Luke 1:37

10

Living in the Land of Milk and Honey

The obvious mark of a truly happy person is that he needs nothing more, and so many of us act as if we need more of everything.

—Roger Palms

Read: Exodus 3

Purpose

When God reveals to Moses in Exodus 3:8 that He will deliver *My people* from the oppression of the Egyptians, God declares that He will bring them to a land *flowing with milk and honey*. What is the contextual significance of this descriptive phrase and what continuing implications might that suggest for us today? To discern that, we first need to walk this land and see it through the eyes of Abram as he *first passed through the land*¹ from north to south experiencing the geographical contrasts that are embodied in this *milk and honey* phrase.



The North

Abram entered the land of Canaan from the north where his first sight would have been snow-capped Mt. Hermon reaching over 9,200 feet into the sky. From this imposing entry point, the geography of the land transitions into a rolling terrain of gentle hills. Climatically, this northern portion of the land is a sub-tropical environment that benefits from abundant rainfall and Mt. Hermon's snow melt which provides ample water for the Jordan River. In the north, green is the predominate color that comes to your eye. In this part of the country, crops readily grow in its fertile soil and water is plentiful and, as a result, life is good and relatively easy.

The northern part of Israel is also where the International Highway traverses this land. In biblical times, this artery of multi-national commerce connected Damascus with Egypt passing through Capernaum at the northern edge of the Sea of Galilee, the base camp of Jesus' Galilean ministry. This conduit of international commerce also served as an avenue

for bringing new ideas into the land – particularly new ideas about other gods to worship.

The Midlands

As Genesis unfolds its narrative, Abram journeys from the north to the mid-section of this country to a place called Shechem² near Sychar where Jacob was later to dig a well (that is still there). This hill country of Judea and Samaria is only about 60 miles south of Capernaum and is characterized by rugged terrain. Parenthetically, it was into this area of steep hillsides and deep valleys that Joshua brought the nation after conquering Jericho. The difficult landscape provided the nation safety and protection from the armies of Egypt who would not venture inland from the Mediterranean coastal plane with their chariots.

The South

From Shechem, Abram continued southward to the sparsely settled south – the Negev.³ Even though he is now only about 120 miles south of the Galilee region in the north, the complexion of this *land flowing with milk and honey* has radically changed again. The prevailing color is a sandy brown because less than 10 inches per year of rain falls in this arid region.

Land of Contrasts

From the lush fertile green of Mt. Hermon in the north to the desolate lifeless sandy brown soil of the Negev in the south, the distance traveled is less than 150 miles. Welcome to the land of *milk and honey*. It is a small land of climatic and topographical extremes with a subtropical north and a desert-like south. If we were to paraphrase it, we could say it is the land of green and brown – the land of productive soil and (mostly) dry, lifeless dirt. The land of farmers and nomads.

Goats and Bees

The terrain and the climate create differences in agricultural pursuits in the northern and southern regions. When Westerners think of milk, they usually think of cows. However, in biblical times milk meant goats. Goats are the ideal animals for living in the austere south. Goats will eat almost anything, including weeds. They are a hearty species and survive well in this forbidding environment. From goat herds, southerners not only got milk to drink and meat to eat, but also a variety of processed goat cheeses used to sustain those who live and wander through this harsh region.

The word *honey* usually evokes pictures in our minds of bees, which presupposes flowers. In Palestine that means the fertile north. In the context of Genesis, however, this reference to honey is felt to be first attributable to the date palm trees that populate the north.

With this brief background of climate, rainfall, agriculture and terrain in place, we can now contextually see that the phrase *milk and honey* refers to the extreme differences in the northern and southern regions of this Promised Land.

Spiritual Implications

This raises an intriguing question. What might the phrase *milk and honey* suggest about the spiritual tendencies and history of those who live in these two very different regions of this country – the north and the south? Even more intriguing, what might be the implications for us living in the West today? Perhaps the best way to consider that question is to reflect on the respective histories of those who ruled in the north and the south during the Divided Kingdom era of the nation.

Northern and Southern Kings

Do you remember how many of the 19 northern kings were God-fearing? Not one! They were god-fearing in the sense that they certainly worshipped idols, but not one of them bowed the knee solely to the Lord. In contrast, a majority of the southern rulers did fear the Lord for significant portions of their lives. While living in the south is no guarantee one would choose to live close to the Lord, living in the north certainly appears to significantly increase the risk that one would choose not to do so.

Different Destinies

Why this difference in spiritual histories and destinies? As previously observed, life in the north is relatively easy; life is good, at least in comparison to life in the south. In the north, you can make it on your own because the land is so much more amenable for sustaining life. In the north, you don't need to (totally) lean upon the Lord to make it through each annual season. By and large, you are able to provide for your own daily bread. Furthermore, in the north you have this continual influx of information about new

gods crossing your path. Thus in living the “good life” in the north, you are much more vulnerable to “syncretism,” the co-mingling of spirituality from different cultures, gods and idolatrous worship patterns.

In the south, life is much more difficult and daily bread and survival are not necessarily something you can take for granted. Here the environment forces both peasants and kings alike to depend much more on the Lord's provision.

Living in the north is dangerous to anyone's spiritual health. Always has been, always will be. Yet that is where many of us find ourselves living each day. What might that mean? Are we like the oblivious frog that is being heated up in a pot of water soon to be boiling?

The Challenge

The *land of milk and honey*, a phrase rich with descriptive meaning, also speaks to our spiritual tendencies. It is also a challenging phrase that embodies risk and reward, choices and consequences. It is a phrase that begs Francis Schaffer's (still) penetrating question: “How should we then live?”

Reflections to Journal and Share

- Would you agree that the environmental and economic climate in which we live has significant implications for defining the nature of our spirituality?

- Do the cultural gods that are always prominent in the north surround you – gods of success, materialism, self-absorption, the good life? Might you be at risk of contracting the northern malady of syncretism, taking attributes from our business and social cultures and grafting them into your faith – like performance Christianity? Any other examples come to mind?

- The challenges before most of us are this: How can we continue to live in the economic abundance of the north while maintaining our daily spirituality as if we were living in the scarcity of the south? How can we continue to live in northern environments of (relative) economic extravagance while still living each day fully conscious that we are totally dependent upon the Lord to sustain us as if we were goat shepherds in the south? What is your strategy to live each day in that total dependency posture?

- What does the phrase *milk and honey* suggest about your life's journey? Have you had both experiences? What did each of them tend to do to your spiritual vitality and life? Where do you find yourself living right now – in the North or the South?

Ponder

It is part of the reality of our lives that we are travelers (sojourners) who can be jolted from living each day from a northern reality to suddenly seeing it from a southern perspective. When cancer unexpectedly enters our life, or sudden unemployment, or the birth of a special-needs child, we immediately view the forward

landscape of our lives very differently. And as many have surprisingly experienced, we are usually drawn much closer to the Lord when we are in the southern portions of our life's journey than when we are comfortably residing in the north. As many have repeatedly relearned, our life with the Lord always seems to be richer when the south is our portion rather than the north.

At the height of his financial accumulation, an interviewer once asked
John D. Rockefeller,
“How much is enough?” to which Mr. Rockefeller replied,
“Just a little bit more.”

*But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness,
and all these things will be given to you as well.*

—Matthew 6:33

*Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow
or reap or store away into barns,
and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.
Are you not much more valuable than they?*

—Matthew 6:26 NASB

*Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines,
though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food,
though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior.*

—Habakkuk 3:17 & 18

*The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.
He heals the broken hearted and binds up their wounds.*

— **Psalm 34:18 & 147:3**

Pick at random a score of great saints whose lives and testimonies are widely known....

I venture to suggest that one vital quality which they had in common was spiritual receptivity.... They differed from the average person in that when they felt the inward longing they did something about it.

—**A. W. Tozer**

Visual Resources

If you would like a video resource that would dramatically add to your visual understanding of this chapter, see the first three low-level helicopter video clips – “Mt. Hermon,” “Hill Country of Judea” and “Beersheba” - in Preserving Bible Times’ *The Bible and the Land* DVD.

Notes and Sources

¹Genesis 12:6

²Ibid.

³Genesis 12:9

Appendix

The Case for Context

A text without a context is a pretext for a proof text.
—unknown

A Diagnosis

Words in Scripture have precise meanings – they always have and always will. Unfortunately, 2000 years of a Western worldview layered over with 300 years of modernity thinking, have taken a toll.¹ This has caused us to increasingly become egocentric people who prefer analysis, categorization and “how to” answers when reading the biblical record. We have also been conditioned to prefer simplistic answers to deep questions. As a result,



- Spiritual narcissism is increasingly becoming the malignant condition of the church. This causes us to approach Scripture as if it’s all about me – my Jesus, my salvation, my gifts, my call, my ministry – rather than first and foremost about Him.
- We increasingly don’t know how to accurately read the Bible as it was meant to be read, let alone understand the original purpose and meaning of a passage.
- Unaware that we are often practicing existentialists, we tend to be more focused on what we think (or guess) a passage might mean rather than dig deeper to discern what the Holy Spirit intended it to mean.
- With our “microwave” orientation to life, we are all too often focused on trying to quickly discern the “principles” or application of a passage rather than its intended purpose (and meaning) as part of a greater whole.
- We have a distinct preference for quick, easy answers packaged in neat spoon-fed formulas accompanied by simple diagrams, e.g. three steps to humility, four steps to effective prayer, five principles of righteousness.
- We much prefer dissection, analysis and quantification, yet the Bible is all about synthesis and integration. Thus, we can easily become so

preoccupied with analyzing a leaf (verse) under the microscope, that we forget the leaf came from a tree (book), and the tree came from a forest (entire Bible).

- We take the theological facts we discover and put them into categorized cubbyholes. Then having put a label on them, we convince ourselves that we have now mastered these truths. However, being able to identify and list all the attributes of God does not necessarily mean we actually “know” God!

Far too often these Westernized, modernistic tendencies are as true for the pulpit as they are for the pew. When taken together, they create an interpretation climate that is often alien to the world of the Bible! Because of this twenty-first century mindset conditioning, much of what the Gospel writers assumed their Middle Eastern readers would contextually know and understand about a passage is now missing from our comprehension. While we still have the words of the text, much of the assumed context of those words is gone. As a result, we often hear only part of the passage and therefore grasp only a part of its intended message.

It should be a “given” that if we are going to connect with the fuller meaning of a passage for today, we first have to know what those words meant to those we meet in the Bible. To do that, we have to adopt their mindset. As a result, understanding the cohesive context of a passage becomes essential for several reasons.

Words Have Meaning

Words have very precise meanings in Scripture. That’s why the biblical writers deliberately chose their words under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to communicate an intentional message.

For the Gospels, insights into these word meanings include the

- Literary context of the words used including their literary form, idiomatic expressions, linguistic meaning and their use in rabbinic teaching pedagogy.
- Historical context they were rooted in, including the intertestamental and Roman occupation periods, as well as Israel’s own extensive history.
- Geographical context of the sites mentioned including their physical characteristics as well as their respective topographical, geological and climatic features.
- Religious context they were drawn from including the nature of observant Judaism, the Temple, Sabbath worship, the Oral Tradition, Rabbinic interpretive wisdom, Messianic themes and prophecy, as well as ceremonial feasts and ritual purification.
- Village context issues including Jewish social customs of mandatory hospitality and social reciprocity, as well as the rural agrarian nature of farming, shepherding, vineyard care and fishing life.

Such an integrated contextual approach allows us to get closer to what the biblical writers intended to communicate about whom God is and what God wants to reveal to us about Himself in His Word.

Context Enhances Connectedness

One of the issues that every Bible teacher struggles with is how best to get the hearers of a lesson or sermon to connect with the text. As pertains to Jesus’ encounters with people, how to help the listeners relate to and identify with these

lepers, tax collectors and prostitutes, real people with real issues, in a real culture that was hostile to them. An integrated context enhances our ability to help others connect with the text and meaningfully identify with those individuals whom Jesus encounters.

Context Sets Helpful Boundaries

One of the problems with many Bible messages today, so often crafted without the inherent constraints and illumination of context, is that a passage can easily be taken into metaphorical realms the biblical writers never intended. It can also be treated in allegorical ways that may actually violate the intent of the text. Carried over into small group Bible studies, this can easily slide into group thinking where we collectively listen to everyone's version of "What do you think it means?" and then vote on the best answer! That may be good representative democracy, but it hardly qualifies as a group that correctly handles the word of truth!²

Context Allows Meaning to Emerge

Reconstructing the cohesive context of a passage is like staining a fine piece of wood. That approach does not change or alter the nature of its truth (its inherent grain). Quite the contrary, it serves to draw out the inherent grain (of the passage) so that its meaning and purpose can be more readily seen and understood. In this way, the revealed truth can be first seen, then internalized, and then lived out in the reality of every day.

Context Gets to the Heart of the Matter

When all the aspects of the Middle Eastern contextual setting of a passage get rewoven back together for our Western mindsets, we see that some things have not changed in 2,000 years. People then and people now still struggle with

the same relational issues of abandonment, humiliation and rejection. They are the timeless realities of the human condition.³ Integrated context allows these human issues to be more clearly drawn out of the passage for all to see. In doing so, the compelling narratives of the Scripture touch our hearts and connect us with the reality of both the text and our own life experience. As a result, we fall in love with Jesus more deeply.

Watching Jesus rescue and restore people from these human realities back then is to understand His non-changing heart for us today as we still struggle with all those same abandonment, humiliation and rejection issues. Post-modern people are still people with these same relational issues. Contextually restoring these Gospel encounters reveals the timeless truths of Jesus to be relevant to all ages, all cultures and all worldviews.

Context Enhances the Contemplative Disciplines

Not too long ago I attended something called the Spiritual Formation Forum.⁴ The purpose of that conference was to encourage disciples of Jesus to devote more time and attention to the contemplative side of life. As I left that conference, it struck me that the contemplative needs to meet the contextualist. If the contemplative is going to meditate on the words of Jesus and His encounters with people, then it behooves us to meditate on as much of that encounter as we can – to see the whole scene in 3-D. Doing so gets us closer to the intended meaning of the passage and therefore closer to the epicenter of intended transformation.

The contextualist brings a wide-angle lens that can help the contemplative see not just the one-dimensional, 21st century Western under-

standing of many passages, but also the fuller first-century Middle Eastern understanding of the text. The biblical contextualist always provides more for the contemplative to ponder.

Context Provides Boundaries for the Appropriate Use of Imagination

Jesus used the technique of imaginative story telling not only to reveal more about His Father, but to teach His disciples how to live, think, feel and act in the Kingdom of God. His imaginative use of stories allowed His listeners to remember His message together with its purpose and meaning. He is both The Story as well as the Story Teller. His parables were consummate narratives, rich with imaginative treatments of everyday images, situations and occurrences. His use of people's imaginations not only allowed his listeners to connect with the story, but also allowed them to remember it word for word so they could accurately pass it along to others.

In today's environment, using any form of imagination in some Christian circles runs the risk of being misunderstood. Today that word can also suggest meanings of fantasy, unreal, and make believe. That was the antithesis of how Jesus used His imaginative stories to connect with His listeners' lives. He used imagination to bring out both the truth and the meaning of what He was communicating.

In opening up a passage, we need to restore the rightful use of appropriate imagination in bringing out the fuller meaning of God's truth in memorable and transforming ways for pulpit, pew and culture. C. S. Lewis said in one of his selected essays that "reason is the natural organ of truth, imagination is the organ of meaning." For too long, evangelicalism has emphasized reason as the pathway to truth without also using appropriate imagination to bring the passage's meaning into clearer focus.

Contextually reconstructing a passage not only suggests appropriately imaginative ways to allow the text to come alive for people today, but also paradoxically sets limits on where that imaginative treatment can go. With the integrated context of a passage in place, limits are then set on where interpolation ("connecting the dots") of the text can be taken and where speculation beyond the context cannot.

Context Allows Us to See The Whole Picture

All too often during our time spent in churches, we end up being given many theological, doctrinal and factual ornaments, but seldom are we shown the tree on which to hang them. It's as if we have been handed hundreds of pieces to a puzzle, but no one has ever showed us what the completed picture on the top of the puzzle box looks like. We have emphasized the dispensing of facts without providing appropriate frameworks within which people can organize and understand the facts they have been given. I am convinced that the more we can reset a passage back into its original context, the more we will see the complete picture on the top of the box.

Contextual Resources

By now, some of you may have come to the erroneous conclusion that I must be pretty smart to know all this contextual information. Nothing could be further from the truth! But there may be one difference between us right now. I do know where to go to find the contextual information pertinent to a Bible passage. You may not. So I am going to let you in on a little secret. You too can know much of what we know at Preserving Bible Times.

You can find our favorite Preserving Bible Times' (PBT) resources for studying the Bible in context on PBT's website www.preservingbible-times.org. Go to the "FAQ" section (top center

left) of the home page, open that section up, and click on the first question you see: “What Are Some Other Resources That I Can Use to Expand My Understanding of Biblical Context?” By opening up that link, you will find a helpful

listing of contextual resources for understanding the Bible in its context organized by area of interest. These are some of the resources you may want to explore with your new contextual pair of glasses.

Reflections to Journal and Share

* We know that context matters in everything we do and in everything we know. Yet somehow we seem to so easily forget that notion when we come to the Scriptures. Why is this? How did this come to be?

* In the Middle East, the community is always more important than the individual. In the Western world, it seems to be axiomatic that the individual is always more important than the community. Since the Bible was written with an assumed Middle Eastern context, what implications does even just this one presupposition have for Western worldview people encountering and interpreting the Word of God?

- * Without knowing it, how many ways might we be filtering the message of the Bible through our Western worldview perspectives? And then further massaging it so that it fits neatly within our framework of modernity thinking? Is it any wonder that sometimes we just don't "hear" or "see" what the biblical writers meant to communicate to us?

Ponder

Context rescues truth from the familiar.

—**Kenneth Bailey**

When reading the Bible, we so easily see what we know,
but do not always know what we see.

—**Unknown**

Those of us who know the Bible well can suffer from knowing it well.

—**Alistair Begg**

Notes and Sources

¹Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, A Wiley Company, 2003), pp. 106, 116, 120.

²II Timothy 2:15

³Dr. David Allen, Handout from the Eleuthera Institute, Arlington, VA. Dr. David Allen, a Christian psychotherapist and author of *In Search of the Heart* has developed what he calls the “Bermuda Triangle of the Soul.” His clinical experience suggests that the three sides of his Bermuda Triangle – abandonment, rejection, and humiliation – speak to the human condition of every person. The only question is to what degree. Contained within that prison triangle are the issues of guilt and shame in what Dr. Allen calls “The Hurt Trail.”

⁴Spiritual Formation Forum Conference, May 18-20, 2006, Westin Hotel, Long Beach, California.

About the Author

Doug Greenwold is a long-time teacher of the Scriptures. He received his BS and MS degrees, as well as a MBA degree from the University of Michigan, where he also played basketball. For thirty-two years, Doug worked in general management and executive positions in Information Systems, Healthcare Services, and Life Sciences. He retired from the corporate world in 1999 to work and teach with non-profit teaching organizations.

In 1978 Doug discovered that he was called to teach the Scriptures, his true vocation. An ordained Elder in three denominations, Doug has been teaching the Bible, writing and leading retreats, conferences, and workshops for churches and para-church ministries ever since. In 1988, he first visited Israel on a study program and realized the importance of integrating the context of the land with the biblical texts. Since then he has been an avid student and passionate teacher of the Bible in its contextual setting.

Presently Doug is the Executive Director of Preserving Bible Times, a non-profit organization dedicated to preserving and presenting biblical truth through contextual restoration of the biblical record. Prior to that, he was a Teaching Associate at the C. S. Lewis Institute in Washington, D.C. Doug has also been a Teaching Director with Community Bible Study and a long-time Christian educator in the Washington, D.C. area.

Doug's first book, *Zechariah and Elizabeth: Persistent Faith in a Faithful God*, is a contextual revisiting of Luke's first chapter. This innovative book "tells the rest of the story" of this couple's remarkable journey of faith when life did not turn out as they hoped and dreamed it would. His second book, *Making Disciples Jesus' Way: Wisdom We Have Missed*, contextually examines the process of making disciples in the first century to identify some of the missing ingredients in our Western notions of "discipleship" today. Doug's most recent book, *Encounters with Jesus: The Rest of Their Stories* opens up the wisdom and insights from "familiar" Lukan passages that have been staring us in the face for centuries, but that without the lens of context we could not see.

Presently Doug and his wife Nancy live in Columbia, Maryland, where they are in close proximity to their children and grandchildren.

ORDERING INFORMATION

To order additional copies of *Making Disciples Jesus' Way: Wisdom We Have Missed*, *Zechariah and Elizabeth: Persistent Faith in a Faithful God*, *The Rest of the Story: A Closer Look at Familiar Passages*, and *Encounters with Jesus: The Rest of Their Stories*,

contact: Bible-in-Context Ministries
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OTHER RESOURCES

For helpful information, weekend seminars, Israel study programs, conferences, publications and DVD visual resources for understanding the Bible in its context, contact:

Preserving Bible Times
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E-mail: info@preservingbibletimes.org

Or visit www.preservingbibletimes.org



"Lifting Up the Vine"

THE REST OF THE STORY

Ever Wonder if There's Something More You Could Be Getting Out of Your Bible Study? Could Your Time in the Word Use a Jump Start? Then This Book is for You!

The text within these pages is like someone pulling the curtain back so you can see the movie that's been playing for quite some time on the BIG screen. While it's been there all along, you just didn't have the capacity to see it due to it being covered up. Within these pages, Doug Greenwold "pulls back the curtain" to help all of us uncover wisdom and insights that have been staring us in the face for centuries. Yet, due to holding onto old paradigms and a lack of cultural, geographical, and contextual understanding, we miss much of the great "movie" of all God has given to us to draw our hearts toward His. I highly recommend *The Rest of the Story* to you as a resource that will expand your understanding of God's nature in familiar passages!

—**Pat Goodman, Teaching Pastor,**
Grace Fellowship Church, Timonium, Maryland

Read this book. It is for anyone interested in developing a more comprehensive understanding of certain key Old and New Testament Biblical passages. We all look at Scriptures through presumptive and culture-shaped glasses. Doug Greenwold helps us correct our vision and take those glasses off. *The Rest of the Story* is for Biblical explorers both old and new. Any serious believer or seeker is a "student." New students will be struck with delight and made thirsty for more study. Experienced students will be renewed and refreshed and once again realize just how rich these texts can be!

—**Richard L. Gathro, Ed.D, Executive Vice President,**
Council for Christian Colleges & Universities

In *The Rest of the Story*, his latest study, Doug Greenwold continues to encourage us to accurately interpret Scripture as the original authors intended. Using familiar Bible stories, Doug challenges us to discover the true, original meanings. This is not always comfortable because it challenges traditional paradigms; however, it is essential if we are to correctly acknowledge what the original authors intended. An excellent study and resource, highly recommended for individuals or groups desiring to seriously consider Scripture as those who first read and heard the accounts many years ago would have understood it.

—**Dr. David Hansen, author,**
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