



FOREWORD *by* NANCY GUTHRIE

A NARRATIVE *of the*
LIFE, DEATH, *and* RESURRECTION
of JESUS CHRIST



BEHOLD
the KING *of*
GLORY

R U S S R A M S E Y

STUDY GUIDE

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Study guide for *Behold the King of Glory: A Narrative of the Life, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ*

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About This Study Guide

Behold the King of Glory: A Narrative of the Life, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ was written to help readers follow the arc of the story laid out in the four Gospels. I tried to thread the narratives of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John together into a cohesive and compelling tale while staying true to the text of Scripture.

To do this, I buried the narrator's voice as much as I could so as not to draw attention to the storyteller himself. I took this idea from the apostle John, who only rarely made direct eye contact with his readers. What lessons I hoped to teach from the Gospels, I tried to do through the way I told the story. Because of this, *Behold the King of Glory* does not address the reader directly until the closing chapters.

I have written this study guide to serve as a companion to the book and to engage the reader more directly. It is designed to do three things. First, I wrote this study guide to take the reader deeper into the actual texts of Scripture that the narratives in each chapter are built upon. Second, I wrote it to highlight some of the main ideas and details—forty truths—I found

fascinating in the Gospel accounts, like how Jesus left the upper room at the end of the Last Supper by leading his disciples in a song or how the Pharisees plotted to kill Lazarus. Third, I wanted to offer some application-oriented questions readers could reflect upon after reading the correlating chapter. The majority of the questions posed in this study guide are open-ended thought starters—invitations to think about a topic or a struggle the chapter raises.

Though the story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is timeless, and could and should be studied year round, I intentionally structured both the book and this study guide to have forty chapters so that they can be used as a daily reader during the season of Lent. Regardless of when you choose to use this guide or the book it drawn upon, I pray these resources will bring about the same results the apostle John wanted people to experience when they read his Gospel.

“These [things] are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31).

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

Colossians 1:15–20

Life for the Dying

John 4:43–54

Truth 1

The Mystery of Jesus of Nazareth

Jesus stepped into his earthly ministry under a shroud of mystery.

Read

So Jesus came again to Cana in Galilee, where he had made the water wine. And at Capernaum there was an official whose son was ill. When this man heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he went to him and asked him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death. So Jesus said to him, “Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.” The official said to him, “Sir, come down before my child dies.” Jesus said to him, “Go; your son will live.” The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went on his way. (John 4:46–50)

Consider

It was hard to know which of the stories were true and which were inflated composites of third-party anecdotes. Taken on their own, some seemed more credible than others. But taken together, they presented Jesus as a man who loved the hurting, healed the sick, and welcomed the destitute. This stirred in the nobleman the courage to hope since he himself was hurting, his son was sick, and the entire world around him seemed to be a fractured mess. (p. 21)¹

Though we have had two millennia to sit with the story of Jesus from Nazareth, there was a time early in his earthly ministry when people did not know who he was or what he was about. The nobleman from Capernaum did not know Jesus. He only knew second-hand rumors about Jesus’s ability to perform miracles. But what he did know was enough for him to set off on a desperate quest for help. He knew no father should have to watch his own son die. And this truth turns out to be the glorious tragedy of the gospel story. Jesus stepped into his earthly ministry under a shroud of mystery for the purpose of laying down his life. At the time few understood this.

Examine

The nobleman from Capernaum was drawn to Jesus because of a crisis with his son. Has there ever been a crisis in your life that has awakened a sense of need for supernatural help? How did you proceed?

How well do you think you know the story of the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth? Where does your knowledge and understanding of him come from? Does it come from personal study of Scripture? Stories you have heard others tell about him? Representations you have seen on films and read in books?

Do you find the fact that the very people Jesus lived among understood little about who he was encouraging or discouraging in your journey of faith? Explain.

Pray

Acknowledge in prayer that there are aspects to the life and mission of Jesus that you do not fully understand and ask God to give you insight to deepen your understanding of the implications of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

¹Page numbers in parentheses refer to Russ Ramsey, *Behold the King of Glory: A Narrative of the Life, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015).

Wild with the Hope

Matthew 4:1–11

Truth 2

Anticipating the Coming of Christ

Though Jesus stepped into his earthly ministry under a shroud of mystery, his coming was anticipated and known by some.

Read

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” (Matthew 3:13–17)

Consider

Though John didn’t know when, he knew the day would come when the Savior of the world would step from the shadows of his preparation into the public eye. Seeing Jesus wade down into the water toward him, John suspected that day had now come. So he baptized the One whose trail he had come to blaze. (p. 25)

Jesus did not come out of nowhere. The people of Israel had long anticipated the coming of the Christ. John the Baptist had grown up hearing the stories of his own miraculous birth and how he was appointed to prepare the way for the Messiah’s coming. The Scriptures were filled with prophecies and details concerning the Messiah. Jesus’s claim that he was the Messiah was a claim that could and would be tested against ancient prophecies. This testing, in fact, was one of the ways his identity was validated.

Examine

How does knowing Jesus’s life and ministry are tied to ancient prophecies shape the way you think about him and his role in history? In your own personal life?

The people of God spent hundreds of years waiting for the coming Messiah. Many along the way gave up hope or lost patience. Where in your life are you waiting on God for something? Where are you losing hope or patience?

To what extent does your perception of God’s faithfulness depend on your ability to understand what he is doing? Why do you think this is the case for you?

Pray

Ask God to show you places where you struggle to see the larger unfolding story of his mercy and grace at work in your life.

Behold the Lamb of God

John 1:19–51

Truth 3

Light and Shadow and Sin and Freedom

Jesus came to bring things hidden in shadow out into the light in order to set us free from sin's power.

Read

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. (John 1:1–5)

Consider

Just as through one man sin entered the world and death through that sin, so death spread to all men because all men had sinned. But Jesus would set death in reverse through his righteous life and sacrificial death. He would seize the power of death in his hands and deliver those who had lived their entire lives as slaves to sin. His righteousness would reign, and by believing in him that righteousness would spread life to the otherwise spiritually dead. (p. 31)

So many of Jesus's encounters with people dealt directly with sickness and death. He came to lay down his life as a ransom for many. He healed dying people and even resurrected a couple of dead ones. It would be easy to regard those accounts as existing simply to prove that Jesus was set apart by God. But the gospel tells us sickness and death are more than occasions for Jesus to show himself strong. They are the consequences of the fall of mankind and the wages of sin. Jesus didn't come just to give us life after death. He came to ultimately end death. We weren't meant to die. We were meant to live—and to live in the presence of the maker and lover of our souls forever.

Examine

What do you think John means when he says of Jesus, "The light shines in darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it"?

What are some forms of "darkness" in your life that you want the light of the power of Jesus to shine into?

How does the fact that John wrote these words after Jesus's resurrection and not before strengthen John's claim that the darkness has not overcome Jesus? And what does this tell you about Jesus's ability to overcome the darkness in your life?

Pray

Recognize before God that one of the characteristics of darkness is that when it is present, there are things we cannot see—sins in our own lives we may not even be aware of.

Ask God to show you sins, idols, and fears in your life that are hidden in shadow.

Ask God to awaken in you a desire to have those hidden things exposed.

One Hundred and Fifty Gallons

John 2:1–12

Truth 4

Wine for a Wedding

Jesus's first public miracle—changing water into wine at a wedding—foreshadowed the relationship he would have with his church. He would be a groom and the church his bride. It would be an intimate, eternal relationship.

Read

On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus also was invited to the wedding with his disciples. When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." (John 2:1–5)

Consider

Mary couldn't know the passion her request would awaken in her son. To Jesus, she was asking for the world. Yes, he could do something about their lack of wine, but the reason he could was because he was equipped to address every deficit known to man. He had stepped onto a road he knew would lead to his glory being put on full display, but not before unimaginable suffering. He knew that when this was all finished, there would be a celebration—a wedding. His own wedding. (p. 37)

One hundred and fifty gallons of fine wine. That was Jesus's gift at the wedding at Cana. That amounts to over seven hundred bottles of wine. Think about that. In a sermon that Pastor Tim Keller preached on this passage, he asked, "What do single people think about at weddings? Their own wedding." Perhaps Jesus's response to Mary's request for help—"My hour has not yet come"—seems strange because he is thinking about his own wedding and his bride. This is his first miracle—his first public display of who he is. That means this is the first time he formally introduced himself to his bride—the church. Part of the mysterious sorrow we see in Jesus as he performs this miracle stems from a sense that this wine was meant for a different wedding, that it was part of his special reserve.

Examine

How would you respond if someone brought seven hundred bottles of wine to your party?

Do you suppose the guests at that wedding were drinking the finest wine ever to pass over the lips of man? Think about that.

Since this was Jesus's first public miracle, it was, in a sense, the first time he formally introduced himself to his bride. What is your earliest memory of encountering Jesus Christ? What significance does that memory hold for you?

Where in your life do you feel you are coming up short? What are you asking God to provide for you right now? What do you think that provision would or should look like?

Pray

Consider what you lack that only God can provide. Ask God to show you not only your need of him but also his provision for your need.

Destroy This Temple

John 2:13–25

Truth 5

Jerusalem as More Than a City

The people of Israel viewed Jerusalem, the site of the crucifixion, as the place where God chose to dwell. The fact that it was now occupied by Rome led many to wonder if God had abandoned them. For many of the Israelites, their ability to control the temple was directly connected to their confidence in God's faithfulness.

Read

Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking about the temple of his body. (John 2:19–21)

Consider

Jerusalem was beautiful. The palette of desert browns and tans, with traces of green in the olives and figs, could trick the mind into believing this city wasn't built, but grown. When the sun rose from behind, the limestone walls shone as though the city were wrapped in a ribbon of Solomon's gold while the structures reaching above the walls testified of the stonemasons David hired to execute the plans Moses drew up in order to realize Abraham's dream. Jerusalem was a promise kept. But now, she also stood to raise the question in the minds of God's people: "Is the promise broken? Has God abandoned us?" Few would come right out and say it, but many wondered. With the occupying forces of Rome patrolling their streets and the old wounds of the Babylonian and Assyrian exiles still healing, even the most devout among them had their doubts. (p. 41)

Jerusalem was more than a setting for the story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. It was, in many ways, a character in that story. Jerusalem was a sacred place, a landmark that reminded God's people of who they were. When Israel had control of the city and the temple, they were more likely to believe God was with them than when they lost control of the city and the temple. During Jesus's earthly ministry, the people of Israel had some measure of control over the temple, but it was still governed by Rome. Anyone who posed a

threat to peace in the temple might cause the Romans to take control of the temple from the chief priests. So when Jesus spoke of the temple being torn down, they would have heard that as a threat to peace and thus wanted to keep a close eye on him. The irony here is that the people of God are, in fact, suspicious of God's work among them and don't realize it.

Examine

What is one thing God could take away from you that would lead you to question his goodness or his presence? Why?

What do you look to in your own life to gauge the presence or absence of God? Does your confidence or fear come from depending on things God has promised or on things not promised but still expected by you?

How do the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus bring comfort and correction to you in the places where you've been looking to certain measurable outcomes for proof of God's faithfulness?

Pray

Ask God to bring to mind external proofs you require in order to trust that he is being faithful to you. Ask him to show you which of these external proofs you are justified in expecting.

Ask God to show you more and more of the breadth of his faithfulness to you in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Zeus and the Pharisees

John 3:1–21

Read

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.” Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?” (John 3:1–10)

Consider

In the eyes of many Israelites, the Hasidim were among the bravest, most self-sacrificing men in the land. Their devotion to the Lord led to the temple being purified and, in some measure, restored to the people of God. The Hasidim were heroes. . . . Eventually the Hasidim split into two groups—the Essenes, whose idea of fidelity to Scripture led them to live as separatists, and the Pharisees, who lived among the rest of Israel, committed to preserving adherence to the Mosaic Law in their communities. The Pharisees had gained the respect of their community not only because of their heroism, but also because they made such an uncommon effort to obey the law of God to the letter as ordinary members of their community. This was the band of hero-scholars Nicodemus had joined when he was younger. (p. 48)

Truth 6

The Pharisees as Folk Heroes

To many in Israel, the Pharisees were not the rigid legalists many Christians view them as today. Rather, at their origin, they were a remnant of folk heroes who fought to protect and preserve Israel's freedom to worship God.

The Pharisees are easy to pick on. When Jesus himself describes them as whitewashed tombs (Matt. 23:27)—beautiful to look at but full of death on the inside—we take our cues to regard them as foils to the heart of the gospel. Though we should not downplay the levels of self-righteousness many of them had ascended to, how this group of scholars came to exist remains a great cautionary tale. They came from a circle of men who wanted to hold on to the spiritual legacy of their fathers while facing the pressures of Hellenization in exile. They came from men who were ready to fight and die to preserve their faith. The Pharisees formed under the noble ideal of being faithful to God but then drifted into a life of congratulating themselves for doing a better job of this than the rest of their own people.

Examine

Is there an area in your life that started off as a devotion to something noble, such as fidelity to God, but has since become a source of pride and legalism in your heart? What is it, and how did that change take place?

How does knowing that the Pharisees are a complicated group with both nobility and legalism in their backstory help you deal with your own perceived “enemies”?

What are some ways a person might nurture a desire to be faithful to God so that it leads to humility and away from pride?

Pray

Ask God to show you where you have exchanged devotion for self-righteousness. Ask him to awaken in you a Nicodemus-like desire to have your heart and mind informed by the word of Christ.

Herod's Half Brother's Wife

John 3:22–4:3

Read

King Herod heard of [Jesus's early ministry], for Jesus's name had become known. Some said, "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead. That is why these miraculous powers are at work in him." But others said, "He is Elijah." And others said, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised." For it was Herod who had sent and seized John and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because he had married her. (Mark 6:14–17)

Consider

Not all who heard [John the Baptist] appreciated his candor. John didn't speak only about the sins of those who came to him. He publicly addressed the state of all things, including the sins of his people and also the sins of Rome. At the intersection of these two parties stood Herod Antipas, for whom John had strong words concerning his particular sins. Even though his father, Herod the Great, was an Idumean by birth, Herod Antipas considered himself a Jew by faith. He displayed this faith by investing in substantial building projects in and around Jerusalem, including the expansion of the temple. But his erratic and often violent temper, which resulted in the executions of many close to him—including his wife Mariamne—made the particulars of his true beliefs a blood-soaked riddle. (p. 52)

One of the claims Jesus made to the world during his earthly ministry was that no one would take his life from him; rather, he would lay it down of his own accord. Many of the details in Jesus's life—such as his relationship with John the Baptist, both familial and

Truth 7

John the Baptist and Praying for Our Enemies

One of the ways John the Baptist prepared the way for the coming of Christ was through his vocal opposition to the sins of Roman authorities. John's boldness in publicly calling Herod Antipas an adulterer made John's cousin Jesus more than just an ordinary religious leader to Herod. Herod thought Jesus was John the Baptist back from the dead.

spiritual—drew attention his way. Sometimes Jesus kept these details hidden while other times he called attention to them publicly. When John the Baptist sent messengers from his prison cell at Herod Antipas's palace to ask Jesus if he was the Messiah, Jesus sent back a message he knew would have been heard by more than John. In his answer, he claimed to be the Messiah and that the world should look for no other.

Examine

One way Herod tried to persuade himself and others that he feared God was by building elaborate buildings for the purposes of worship. Is there a version of this sort of behavior in your life? Are there things you do or works you build to assure others or yourself that your faith is genuine?

Read Matthew 11:1–6. If Jesus wanted to keep himself out of Herod's field of vision, how do you think he would have answered John when John asked Jesus if he was the one sent from God?

The story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus includes involvement from both Israel and Rome, from the destitute and the wealthy, from the sick and the well, from the known sinners and the self-righteous. How does knowing this help when we see God doing things we don't understand in or through people we might not have expected to hold any significance?

Can you think of a time God seemed to work in your life through the actions of an enemy?

Pray

Pray for your enemies.

Famous

Luke 5:1–26

Read

And he said, “Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his hometown. But in truth, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heavens were shut up three years and six months, and a great famine came over all the land, and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian.” (Luke 4:24–27)

Consider

With those words, Jesus reminded his hometown about how God’s people rejected Elijah during the famine years and how, when Israel rejected him, God sent him to care for the Gentiles. Even those who marveled at his words only moments earlier were now angry. That he would come into their house of prayer and tell them that God’s promises of freedom, healing, and peace were fulfilled in him—a local boy they’d know since he was a child—and then rebuke them for not believing him was more than they could abide. They pressed toward him to drive him out of the synagogue. “Let’s take him to the cliffs and throw him over,” some shouted. But Jesus slipped away and disappeared into the streets. So much of his past was tied to Nazareth—his boyhood friends, his family, the sawdust scent of Joseph’s shop, the cliffs looking over the Jezreel Valley. Close to three decades of his life happened in that town. But whatever Nazareth had been to his past, the people’s reaction in the synagogue raised the question of whether he could ever come home again. So Jesus and his disciples headed northeast to Peter’s hometown of Capernaum. (p. 58)

Truth 8

How Jesus’s Hometown Rejected Him

While Jesus’s popularity grew during his early earthly ministry, the people of his hometown rejected him. Jesus used this rejection to tell Israel that his ministry would reach past his homeland to the Gentile world.

One of the more untenable qualities of Jesus’s earthly ministry for many of the people of Israel was his insistence—seen both through his teaching and his interactions—that God’s saving mercy and grace would extend past the nation of Israel into all the world.

Examine

Try to relate to the people of Israel during Jesus’s time. Who might you have a hard time imagining God would want to pursue?

Today, many package theological ideas as “new” or “fresh” ways to look at old subjects. Jesus uses Scripture to make the point that the gospel was always intended to extend past the nation of Israel. In fact, Jesus relies heavily on the writings of the Old Testament to explain his mission. How do you think Jesus would have responded to someone who called his teaching “new” or “fresh?”

What are some character flaws or sins in your own life that you fear might disqualify you from God’s pursuit? Conversely, what are some inherent traits you, in your pride, might assume make you someone he might favor?

Pray

Pray for someone you cannot imagine would ever come to know the love of God and ask God to pursue them as he pursued the world beyond his hometown.

Ask God to show you places in your own heart and mind where you might think of yourself more highly than you ought.

Lord of the Sabbath

Luke 6:1–11

Truth 9

The Controversial Nature of Compassion

From the early months of Jesus's earthly ministry, it was apparent that he was quickly becoming a polarizing figure. One of the things that made him most controversial was how he showed compassion to the unclean. When Jesus pushed back against the self-righteous, it was an act of mercy, calling them out of their self-importance.

Read

And as Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples. And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" But when he heard it, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." (Matthew 9:10–13)

Consider

Whether it was by eating at Matthew's house or healing on the Sabbath, Jesus offended the Pharisees. Religious leaders were called to show the people how to be holy, separate from the filth of the world, clean. It wasn't that the Pharisees misunderstood what Jesus was doing by reaching out to the poor and broken. It was that they understood full well. Jesus meant to associate with the poor and wretched. That in itself might have been tolerable, except that he dared to insist that this was what God wanted from his people—the righteous drawing near to the unclean. His was a ministry of incarnation—touching the infected, dining with sinners, defending the defenseless. The sick needed a physician, and the Physician had come. (p. 68)

One historical tension for Christians everywhere centers on how we can be in the world but not of it. The way Jesus modeled loving the sinner but hating the sin led him into many situations that the most pious people of his day considered to be controversial at best and scandalous at worst. The way he pushed back against the indignation of the self-righteous was as much of a

mercy toward them as his ministry of presence was to the destitute and outcast. Both groups were stigmatized by having an identity that did not come from dependence on the mercy and grace of God.

Examine

Where in your life do you relate to the sinners and tax collectors gathered around the table with Jesus—people known by the flaws in their reputations?

Where do you relate to the self-righteous who passed judgment because Jesus wasn't doing what they expected a righteous person to do?

What do you think Jesus wanted the self-righteous to do with his statement that it isn't the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick?

Pray

Ask God to show you places in your life where you need the Great Physician. And ask God to show you places in your life where you sit in silent judgment of others.

Only Say the Word

Matthew 8–9

Truth 10

The Terrifying Nature of Miracles

Many people, including Jesus's own disciples, found his miraculous displays of power to be unsettlingly terrifying. But for those who had nothing left to lose, they were drawn to see his power on full display.

Read

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." And leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. And other boats were with him. And a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion. And they woke him and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. He said to them, "Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?" And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" (Mark 4:35–41)

Consider

Jesus looked at the raging waters as though they possessed a soul and a will. He rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Quiet. Be still." At once, the winds vanished and the sea grew still as glass. The men in the boat were still getting to know Jesus. They had seen him do many things that were hard to explain, and they had made room in their hearts for some of those mysteries. But as stillness overtook the deafening storm for no obvious reason except simple obedience to Jesus's words, they realized they had no category for this. They looked at him as though he had just handed them back their lives, but they didn't know if they'd gotten the safer end of that deal. (p. 72)

Ancient religions built around idolatry worshiped "gods" who were believed to have the power to give them what they needed and wanted. But those gods existed to serve lives and cultures that were already underway. Farmers needed rain, so they worshiped the god of the

skies. Parents needed to preserve their family line, so they offered sacrifices to the god of fertility. But Jesus's displays of power revealed a God who had come not to ultimately accommodate people according to how they were already living. He came to renew all things, which required supreme power over all creation. Every so often, he would perform a miracle (such as calming the storm) that would reveal a bit more of the extent of his power, and it left people with the impression that this power would never be theirs to contain.

Examine

In your own words, what exactly made the disciples so afraid after Jesus calmed the storm? If they had to write a paragraph describing that fear, what would they write?

Name an area in your life where you need the power of a sea-calming God to step in and rescue you.

Name an area in your life where you would be afraid if he did.

In what ways have you underestimated the scope of Jesus's power?

Pray

Ask God where you are at ease with an aspect of his power and might that you should fear more, and ask him to show you places where you are afraid of things that his power has overcome.

The Death of John

Mark 6:14–29; Luke 7:18–35

Truth 11

Co-opting Jesus to Our Personal Mission

During Jesus's earthly ministry, as with today, people tended to co-opt him into whatever mission or problem they themselves hoped the Messiah would fix.

Read

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." (Mark 1:14–15)

Consider

Jesus's ministry wasn't solely one of deeds, but also of words. He said, "I was sent for this very purpose—to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God." The concept of the kingdom of God was a part of Israel's national memory. Their prophet Daniel foretold that the God of heaven would set up a holy kingdom that would never be destroyed. Destruction, however, was mostly all the people of Israel had known since those words were first given. So to hear Jesus proclaim the arrival of the kingdom of God left many presuming (and hoping) that he was talking about the end of Roman rule in the Promised Land. But there were as many theories about what Jesus was after as there were theorists. (p. 76)

Since the dawn of Christianity, people have brought expectations to the reason for Jesus's earthly ministry that Jesus never expressed, whether it be a life free from suffering, prosperity in exchange for obedience, or a nation on earth that upholds the lordship of Christ.

Examine

Where have you co-opted Jesus into an expectation or dream you're holding on to? What are some of your expectations of Jesus that you are not sure were ever promised?

Can you think of a time God did not give you something you prayed for? How do you navigate that disappointment?

What do you believe God must do and be devoted to in order to be a God worthy of your worship? How does the story of Easter speak into or shine light on your set of expectations?

Pray

Are you holding on to a disappointment with God? Name it and ask him to lead you through that sorrow, pain, or unmet expectation to a place of trust.

The Storm Treader

Matthew 14:22–33; Mark 6:45–56

Truth 12

Imperfect Faith

Simon Peter wore his faith on his sleeve. Even though Peter—who was closer to Jesus than anyone—walked on water with his Lord, his faith still wavered. No one who followed Jesus during his earthly ministry did so with perfect faith.

Read

Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but the boat by this time was a long way from the land, beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them. And in the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, “It is a ghost!” and they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, “Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.” And Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, “Lord, save me.” Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?” (Matthew 14:22–27)

Consider

The disciples were seeing more and more that Jesus was sovereign over everything in the entire world, and nothing about this was simple. Though he had to walk, he could walk on water. Though he got hungry and had to eat, he could create food from nothing. For every new category he added to his identity, he seemed to take others away. He was a man, but not just a man. He was a rabbi, but he connected to God in uncommon ways. Jesus stood fully in their world, but as sure as he sat there among them dripping in the boat, they did not stand fully in his. And this moved them to fear as much as it moved them to awe. (pp. 85–86)

Simon Peter was one of the more central figures in Jesus’s earthly ministry and beyond in the birth of the early church. He was as close to Jesus as anyone, and his faith led him to ask Jesus to call him out of the boat and onto the surface of the Sea of Galilee. Still, even in an exhilarating moment like that, Peter’s faith was insufficient to keep him on the same plane with Jesus. It is not the strength of our faith that keeps us near to God. God himself keeps us.

Examine

What do you think it was like for Peter when he stepped out of the boat onto the surface of the Sea of Galilee and walked on the water? Do you think if you’d been in his position, you would have asked to step out onto the water?

Do you think a moment like that should have erased any further lack of faith or confusion in Peter’s mind about who Jesus was or what it meant to follow him? Why or why not?

What do you suppose failed with Peter’s faith when he walked on the water?

Pray

Ask God to show you places where you are counting on the strength of your own resolve to accomplish things only God can do. Ask God to show you what causes you to take your eyes off of him.

Bread of Life

Matthew 14:34–16:12; John 6:22–7:1

Truth 13

Being Fed to Awaken Hunger

When Jesus performed miracles, one of the main ways people reacted was by wanting more miracles. But Jesus didn't perform miracles to awaken a desire for more miracles. He performed signs and wonders so that people would desire him.

Read

When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, “Rabbi, when did you come here?” Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal.” Then they said to him, “What must we do, to be doing the works of God?” Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” (John 6:25–29)

Consider

The men from Bethsaida found Jesus teaching in the synagogue. They asked him, “How did you get here?” Jesus said, “What is that to you? You have come all this way because you want something from me. You are not here out of any true fear of the Lord. You are here because I fed you and you want me to do it again.” The people regarded him with a confused incredulity. Was it so wrong to want this man who could conjure bread from thin air to do it again? Was there some offense in wanting a king with unlimited resources to feed his own people in their hunger? Jesus said, “Did the miracle awaken nothing in you? You want the food but not its source. You're content to come again and again for your daily bread, without which you would perish. But you do not see that I give you more than bread. I give you life.” (pp. 87–88)

When we come to passages like this one, it could be easy to wonder how the people around Jesus were somehow too dense to grasp the obvious reality that the Christ was in their midst. But would we have been

any different? We come to this text with millennia of familiarity and libraries full of books making plain to us what was so new to the people in Jesus's day. But even with all the study and time that has gone into making sense of the gospel story, what we do share in common with the people of Jesus's day is that we too are just as prone to prefer the miracle to the one who performs it.

Examine

Aside from their rarity, why are miracles so intriguing? What do they awaken in people?

When Jesus tells us he will give us “food that endures to eternal life,” what do you think he means? What hunger is he saying he will satisfy?

How aware are you of the appetites that govern your desires and sense of need?

Pray

Ask God to show you places in your own heart and life where you prefer things God can give you over God himself. Ask God to awaken in you a deeper hunger for him.

You Are the Christ

Luke 9:18–36

Truth 14

Confession and Faith

Everyone who enters the kingdom will do so with some measure of wrong theology in tow. Even Peter, who had great moments of profound theological clarity, drew conclusions that were not grounded in the truth. For this, we must ask the Lord for ears to hear, eyes to see, and hearts to perceive.

Read

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.” (Matthew 16:13–17)

Consider

This marked the clearest language Jesus had used to describe himself up to this point. For all the focus on the exaltation of the Messiah the disciples imagined, the man before them endured an unexpected measure of humiliation and rejection. The fact that they themselves did not see this as a contradiction revealed that their understanding of the Messiah was evolving. But this change in thinking would not be enough to prepare them for what Jesus said next. He began to tell them that the Son of Man would have to suffer many things and be rejected by the leaders of his own people—the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes—and be killed, and after three days in the grave, he would rise from the dead. All this he told them in plain language. (pp. 93–94)

When Jesus started telling his disciples that he would suffer and die, it was Peter—the disciple who had just finished confessing his faith that Jesus was the Christ—who told Jesus not to go to the cross (Matthew 16:22). There is not a follower of Jesus alive who hasn’t embraced some beliefs they will discover were misguided.

Examine

Central to orthodox, confessional Christianity is this statement from Peter that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. Without this, there is no Christianity. What are some essential beliefs a person must hold to claim faith in Christ?

What are some types of theological convictions Christians have historically disagreed over that, though there must certainly be error involved since both sides cannot be right, will not disqualify them from eternity in God’s presence?

How does knowing that we likely hold on to beliefs that are not necessarily true motivate you in your study of Scripture? How about in your posture toward brothers and sisters in Christ who disagree with you? In your interactions with people who do not claim faith in Jesus?

Pray

Ask God to give you a deeper love for truth and a hunger for understanding. Also, ask God for the humility to admit there are things you do not understand or might be wrong about.

Pray for the grace to love those you disagree with even as you pray to have a life rooted in the immovable truth of God’s Word.

Before Abraham Was Born

John 7–8

Truth 15

Jesus and the Old Testament

Jesus never sought to distance himself from the Old Testament, as though what he taught was something new. He not only taught from the Old Testament; he told biblical scholars that he was the redeemer the Old Testament spoke of.

Read

[The Sanhedrin] answered him, “Abraham is our father.” Jesus said to them, “If you were Abraham’s children, you would be doing the works Abraham did, but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. You are doing the works your father did.” They said to him, “We were not born of sexual immorality. We have one Father—even God.” Jesus said to them, “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me.” (John 8:39–42)

Consider

Jesus continued teaching about himself and the coming kingdom of God. He did not back away from the issues that angered the Sanhedrin. Rather, he continued to defend his authority. He continued to display his mastery of Scripture, to laud his connection with the Father, and to espouse his view that the religious authorities were leading God’s people astray. (p. 101)

In Jesus’s day, as in ours, people were attracted to dynamic leaders who came along promising new ways of thinking. Jesus did not fit into this category, because he was not working to distance himself from the Old Testament. He taught to demonstrate that he was, in fact, the coming king of glory promised in the Scriptures. To miss this connection, Jesus said, was born out of a misunderstanding not of him but of the Old Testament itself. This means that Jesus’s earthly ministry was not meant to be seen as something new but as the fulfillment of something ancient.

Examine

What difference does it make to know that Jesus didn’t come to introduce a new faith but to fulfill an ancient one?

Can you think of an old, familiar truth you have abandoned for something new? What motivated the change?

Can you think of an old, familiar truth you abandoned at some point and have since returned to? What motivated the return?

Jesus said, “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here.” What does it look like to live out that statement in your own life? What does it look like to love Jesus?

Pray

Ask God to lead you through a season of deeper understanding of and love for the Old Testament. Ask God to show you places where you have left orthodoxy in favor of something new. Ask God to anchor your faith in the ancient and present truth of who Christ is.

Born Blind

John 9–10

Truth 16

The Wonder of Seeing Things
for the First Time

When Jesus heals the man born blind, we see a man come alive to the wonder of creation for the first time. The glory of creation was not new, but the blind man's perception of it was. This is a metaphor for what happens when we see through the eyes of faith—we see things too wonderful to comprehend. The metaphor extends also into the reminder that we also have an incredible capacity to become accustomed to the glory all around us.

Read

As Jesus passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. And his disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” Having said these things, he spit on the ground and made mud with the saliva. Then he anointed the man's eyes with the mud and said to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing. (John 9:1–7)

Consider

For a man who had never seen before, the simple act of looking at the world around him was clothed in an air of wonder and joy that made something in his neighbors' hearts ache, though they could not articulate what exactly stirred within. To see the world with new eyes, to be struck by the splendor of the infinite depth of the blue sky for the first time, to have so great a veil of darkness lifted and the splendor of creation unleashed on his senses all at once aroused an elusive jealousy in the hearts of those around him who, though they saw the same things, no longer saw their excellence. (pp. 103–4)

Examine

Why do you think Jesus made mud from his saliva and put it on the man's eyes? This act was symbolic of creation, of man being made from the dust. What does the blind man represent in the symbol? What does the mud represent? What does Jesus represent?

Can you remember a time when you saw something glorious for the first time? What is something you wish you could see again for the first time? Why?

What are some things you once found glorious that have now become ordinary? What would it look like to try to recapture a sense of wonder and awe?

Pray

Ask God to give you eyes to see the wonder of his love and work around you. Ask God to cause your heart to worship him more deeply as you come to see more deeply the wonder of the work of Christ on your behalf.

The Good Samaritan

Luke 10:1–37

Truth 17

The Inseparable Bond between
God's Power, Presence, and Love

The religion Jesus taught knitted the heart, the mind, and the actions of his followers together. Because God does not separate his presence from his power or his love, neither should we. A religion of the mind without love or service has missed the point of what Jesus taught.

Read

[A teacher of the Law], desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.' Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." And Jesus said to him, "You go, and do likewise." (Luke 10:29–37)

Consider

The lesson Jesus taught this teacher of the law belonged to the same truth his disciples struggled to understand when they saw God do mighty works through their hands in Jesus's name: God's power, his presence, and his love are inseparable. Theological knowledge without love is nothing but a clanging cymbal. And offers of his love that are not grounded in the truth of who he is lead to nowhere. Though he may try, man will never isolate the power of God as an impersonal force to be wielded by the will of man. To know God is to love him, to yield to his com-

mands, and to delight in his law. This cannot be done without loving others in reply. (pp. 112–13)

When this kind of love is present, the mercy and grace that flow from the heart of God through the hands and feet of his people can be both offensive and astonishing. And yet it is the way God demonstrated his love for us in Christ. It can be easy to choose a religious life that emphasizes the mind but not the affections or service, or a religion that emphasizes love and service with little regard for doctrine. All three matter, and when we pursue all three together, we come to understand each better.

Examine

Which of these three—love, doctrine, or service—do you tend to emphasize? Which do you tend to undervalue? Why do you think this is?

Have you ever been loved like the beaten traveller in the good Samaritan story? What was that experience like? Have you ever had occasion to love like the Good Samaritan? What did it cost you? What did it gain you?

Pray

Ask God to show you what you favor and what you neglect when it comes to a well-rounded faith. Ask God to surround you with good Samaritans who can care for you in your brokenness and for God to use you as a good Samaritan for those in your life who need care.

The Leaven of the Pharisees

Luke 11:29–13:35

Truth 18

Jesus and His Friendships

The Gospels present Jesus's relationship with the siblings Mary, Martha, and Lazarus as a friendship. He stayed with them when he was in Bethany, and all their recorded interactions were direct, personal, and affectionate.

Read

Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her." (Luke 10:38–42)

Consider

Though many of his followers regarded Jesus as someone to revere, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus counted Jesus as a friend. He regarded them in the same way and was just as happy to stay with them as they were to have him. They enjoyed the kind of friendship where they were known not only by the stories they told, but by their idiosyncrasies, joys, fears, and vexations. Martha was a doer with a heart for hospitality—sometimes to a fault. But she would go beyond the call of duty to make her friends feel welcome. Mary, on the other hand, loved to linger in conversation. Tears came easy for her, as did an uncommonly open-handed generosity of spirit. Lazarus was a fast friend—loyal, easy to be around, and just as easy to love. He was to Jesus, as the poet-king described long ago, one of the excellent ones in whom was all his delight. As long as Jesus wished to stay, their home was an oasis of comfort and refuge from the pressing crowds. (p. 114)

Mary, Martha, and Lazarus appear a few times in the Gospel story: in the passage above; when Lazarus dies

and is raised; and then when Jesus enters Jerusalem at the beginning of the Passion Week. He stays with Lazarus and his sisters in Bethany the night before the Triumphal Entry. Though we have only a few stories about Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, what we do have offers at least somewhat of a framework for what our friendships should look like. The friendship is affectionate but not without respect. It is direct but kind. They are emotionally invested in one another's lives but not manipulative.

Examine

As you read the story of Jesus at Mary and Martha's house with the understanding that they were not strangers to one another but friends, what are some characteristics you see that seem to mark that friendship?

What, in your mind, makes for a healthy friendship? What place does the freedom to correct one another hold? Who has been one of the best examples of healthy friendship in your life?

What do you think the "friendship" of Jesus should look like in the life of one of his disciples? What does it look like in your life?

Pray

Scripture always presents friendship with God as reverent. God is no one's "buddy." Ask God to deepen your understanding of what it means to have Christ as a friend in your life. Ask God to help you to navigate the relationship between affection and reverence.

Ask God to help you grow in the ways you navigate your existing friendships.

Lost Things Found

Luke 14–15

Truth 19

Seeing Ourselves as Broken and Desperate

It is easy to want to create the appearance that we have everything together. During Jesus's earthly ministry, those who worked hardest to present themselves as accomplished, powerful, or prominent were the ones most offended by Jesus's life and ministry.

Read

Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:25–27)

Consider

In a world where people worked so hard to establish their worth by way of position and rank, these followers needed to know they would find no honor in this world by associating with Jesus. Instead, they would find trouble, sorrow, and persecution. To do this, they would have to be willing to find their worth in no one but God alone. If they could not see themselves as needy and desperate, they did not see themselves as they truly were. As a result, Jesus attracted fewer and fewer of the prominent and powerful, and more and more of the sinful and broken. This itself was an offense to the teachers of the law. They were incredulous that tax collectors and sinners were drawn to him and that he received them and ate with them. (p. 122)

Jesus spoke with a directness that could be perceived by some as combative at times. But when Jesus confronts the self-righteous for their confidence in their own efforts to make them righteous, he isn't just fighting against a false belief. He is contending for the truth to take the place of that lie. We see in the gospel story a phenomenon that continues still today—self-righteous people do not like to be confronted with a call to humility.

Examine

Think of a time when your pride was wounded. What was the situation? What caused the pain—a word, an action, being overlooked? How have you teased out the wrongs done to you with regard to your own culpability?

What are some ways you actively try to present yourself as having everything together? Who is someone you trust that you could ask about this, and what would he or she say?

How does the Easter story—the story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as the atoning sacrifice for our sins—speak into our desire to appear as those who have no need?

Pray

Ask God to show you places in your life where you are working hard to appear that you do not need him.

Lazarus of Bethany

John 11:1–44

Read

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent to him, saying, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” But when Jesus heard it he said, “This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.” (John 11:1–4)

Consider

Lazarus and his sisters belonged to a generation who knew that any illness, no matter how small, could very likely end in death. Death had crept into most every home in Bethany at one time or another to claim both the strong and the weak, the young and the old. It was the way of the world. Of course there were remedies for certain maladies, and for those fortunate enough to succumb to one of these, their recovery could be at least somewhat predictable. But the other side of this cruel coin was that there were also illnesses everyone knew could not be stopped. When loved ones came under one of those, all that was left was to pray and try to make them comfortable. (p. 125)

It can be easy to project onto the stories of Scripture common characteristics of our culture and era that were not actually common back then. Likewise, it can be just as easy to overlook the cultural and technological differences. The picture of mortality we see in the Gospels is one where death and dying happen out in the open. Communities waited for the news that someone had gotten well or succumbed to death and then they either

Truth 20

A Community’s Interaction with Death in the First Century

With the advances we enjoy in medical care coupled with the procedures we have when a person dies, most people in our generation have little direct interaction with death. But those living in the first century dealt with it on a fairly regular basis.

rejoiced together or grieved together. And yet, though there are marked differences between the medical care then and now, the problem of mortality and the pain of death have remained constant.

Examine

What are some of the blessings and benefits we enjoy in light of today’s medical advances and care facilities, which were not present during Jesus’s earthly ministry?

What do you think is lost when a society limits its interaction with death and dying?

How developed is your own experience with mortality, and what factors have formed your experience with it?

Pray

Ask God to show you places in your life where you might need to grieve and haven’t yet.

Ask God to teach you how to mourn and grieve as someone who is holding on to hope.

A World Upside Down

Mark 10:35–45

Truth 21

Jesus's Prediction of His Death

Jesus told his disciples not only that he would die, but how it would happen. His disciples were slow to understand at first, but the longer they followed him, the more they understood where his ministry was headed. Even still, it seems his disciples never did fully understand what Jesus meant when, prior to the cross, he predicted his death.

Read

And as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside, and on the way he said to them, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem. And the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day.” (Matthew 20:17–19)

Consider

The disciples had heard Jesus speak like this before. Though at first they did not understand what he was talking about, their journeys with him and the conflict that followed began to bring his words into sharper focus, but only by a little. His words rested on them like a burden they could not name. (pp. 133–34)

There was an apparent contradiction that Jesus's disciple could not reconcile: Jesus taught that he was ushering in the kingdom of God, and he also insisted that he would soon die. Because these competing ideas did not fit together, the disciples never really understood the reason behind his intent to lay down his life. This truth serves as a humble reminder that God does things in our lives that we likely do not understand and cannot reconcile. But he tells us that his ways are higher than our ways and his thoughts are higher than our thoughts, which means a thing doesn't have to make sense to us in order for it to be perfectly reasonable to God.

Examine

Can you think of a teaching or two from Jesus that has never made sense to you? What do you think is at the root of your lack of understanding?

Where in your life do you feel God owes you some clarity?

If you are someone who wants to know the reasons behind why God does what he does, why do you think you want that information? What happens when you don't get it?

If you are someone who isn't really interested in knowing why God does what he does, why do you think you don't want that information? What happens when you know more than you wish to know?

Pray

Ask God to give you clarity about truths you have never understood but want to.

Ask God to give you peace about not knowing things he does not mean for you to comprehend.

The Living Legend

Mark 10:46–52; John 12:9–11

Truth 22

The Plot to Kill Lazarus

After Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, people began to put their faith in Jesus by the score. This made Lazarus a threat to the religious leaders in Jerusalem, so they hatched a plot to kill him.

Read

When the large crowd of the Jews learned that Jesus was there, they came, not only on account of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well, because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus. (John 12:9–11)

Consider

The temple authorities each tried to come up with a better solution to their problem. The most obvious felt murderous. But it seemed as if it might be their best option. The chief priest said, “Be assured: the influence of this Lazarus of Bethany needs to be contained. He is more than a man in the eyes of the people. He has become a rallying point for zealots and mystics. Passover is coming, and the last thing we need is a new folk hero.” (p. 139)

The irony of the plot to kill Lazarus was that he had already died and come back to life, and people, as a result, were impressed. The penalty for rising from the dead was death. When Lazarus had grown ill, Jesus had said that his sickness would not end in death but in the glory of the Son of man. Lazarus’s death and resurrection solidified the religious leaders’ determination to put an end to Jesus and his followers.

Examine

Why do you think the religious leaders wanted to kill Lazarus?

Can you think of a time something tragic or difficult happened in someone’s life that stirred a deeper faith in your own life?

Can you think of a time in your life when God let something happen that was terrible at the time but has since turned out to be crucial for your spiritual growth?

Pray

Read through the story of the death and resurrection of Lazarus in John 11:1–44. Ask God to show you how you are similar to Mary and Martha in the role they play.

Ask God to deepen your trust in the way he chooses to work in your life.

The King's Coronation

1 Kings 1; Luke 19:28–36

Read

King David said, “Call to me Zadok the priest, Nathan the prophet, and Benaiah the son of Jehoiada.” So they came before the king. And the king said to them, “Take with you the servants of your lord and have Solomon my son ride on my own mule, and bring him down to Gihon. And let Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet there anoint him king over Israel. Then blow the trumpet and say, ‘Long live King Solomon!’ You shall then come up after him, and he shall come and sit on my throne, for he shall be king in my place. And I have appointed him to be ruler over Israel and over Judah.” (1 Kings 1:32–35)

Consider

The people of Israel grew up hearing the stories of King David. They pictured Solomon riding his father's colt into Jerusalem as Nathan the prophet, Zadok the priest, and David the king received him as the Lord's next anointed ruler over them. The colt became a symbol of a royal coronation, and by extension a symbol of being under the caring provision of God. Jesus didn't just summon thoughts of Solomon as he approached Jerusalem on that foal. He also brought to mind the words of the prophet Zechariah, who told the people long after Solomon's reign to look for their future king to enter Jerusalem in this same way. Zechariah said, “Rejoice, daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; humble and mounted on the foal of a donkey. He is coming to bring you salvation.” (p. 145)

The path Jesus followed on that colt was the same route Solomon took into the city. And the people who gathered to lay down palms and coats to make a road were there, John 12:17 tells us, because they had heard what

Truth 23

Jesus's Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem

Jesus rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday in a manner that resembled Solomon's coronation. The comparison would not have been lost on the people in Jerusalem at the time. The Triumphal Entry was one of Jesus's most overt provocations, daring the religious leaders to take action.

had happened with Lazarus. Jesus entered during the last week of his earthly ministry, before the cross, out in the open, calling attention to his presence in Jerusalem, even though when he had last left the city, it was because the religious leaders were committed to putting him to death.

Examine

How does Jesus riding into Jerusalem in a way that attracted attention, knowing the religious leaders were seeking to put him to death, shine light on his earlier statement that no one would take his life from him but that he would lay it down of his own accord?

If the death of Jesus wasn't a result of his being in the wrong place at the wrong time, what was it the result of? What do you make of the fact that Jesus seemed to intentionally be out in the public view?

Why didn't Jesus attempt to keep himself hidden? To what trajectory was he committed?

Pray

The song the people sang over Jesus during the Triumphal Entry—Hosanna!—means “Come save us, now!” Ask God to shape the meaning and plea of that song in your own prayers leading up to Easter.

Hosanna

Luke 19:36–40

Truth 24

The Hour of Jerusalem's Visitation

There was nothing glib about Jesus during the last week of his earthly ministry. From Palm Sunday on, Jesus brought a deep sense of sorrow and lament to what was about to happen. The light had come to his own, and his own did not receive him.

Read

And when he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, "Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. For the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up a barricade around you and surround you and hem you in on every side and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you. And they will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation." (Luke 19:41–44)

Consider

This was the hour of Jerusalem's visitation. Jesus loved this city. He wept because what the people wanted and what they needed were so far from one another. He knew the full extent of the salvation these people required, and he also knew what it would cost. He knew salvation was unfolding before them in that very moment. The punishment that would bring them peace was about to be laid upon him. He knew that the religious leaders would play a role in bringing this punishment to him because they feared Rome more than they feared God. He knew they would be willing to kill one of their own if it meant preserving the privilege of worship that Caesar had granted. With tears in his eyes he rode on into the city and made his way to the temple while the people parted like a holy curtain, crying, "Please save us." (p. 150)

The story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is not of an impatient God getting fed up with a stubborn people. It is the story of a long-suffering Messiah moving toward a stiff-necked people in grace, compassion, and self-emptying love. At this point in the story, his arrest and crucifixion are immanent.

Examine

In Jesus's day, what the people wanted and what they needed were far apart. In what ways is this true in your own life?

John opens his Gospel saying that Jesus "came to his own, and his own people did not receive him" (John 1:11). What does it look like to receive Jesus? What must be received?

As the end of the Easter story approaches, what parts of this story are you most eager to reflect on?

Pray

Ask God to show you where what you want differs from what you need. Ask him to train your heart to receive from him what he means to give you.

The Vinedresser's Tree

Matthew 21:18–22; Luke 13:6–9

Truth 25

The Withered Fig Tree as a Lesson in Faith

The Monday after the Triumphal Entry, when Jesus cursed a fig tree for not bearing any fruit, was a call back to his parable about the vinedresser in Luke 13:6–9. The tree represented Jerusalem. What makes a fig tree significant is its fruit—figs. Jesus was raising the question: when there are no figs, what is the tree for? A life of faith bears fruit.

Read

On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. And seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see if he could find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. And he said to it, “May no one ever eat fruit from you again.” And his disciples heard it. (Mark 11:12–14)

Consider

The lesson with the fig tree was a lesson in faith. But Jesus was also telling a parable. That tree grew from the same earth as the city of God. The time of visitation had come for both, and both put forth an impressive display. But neither bore fruit. For three years the vinedresser had visited both for inspection but the results never changed. Jesus turned from the cursed tree to the city before them as if they were of the same substance. The stories Jerusalem could tell. The city was older than the collective memory of its citizens. Here Israel had housed the ark of the covenant, David had penned his psalms, and Solomon had hosted the Queen of Sheba. It was the destination of millions of pilgrims over hundreds of years, and it had the highways and the tombs to prove it. Its beauty was second only to its significance. Was there ever a more glorious place—the city of God, the city of man? (p. 154)

There was a certain solemnity to Jesus’s act of cursing the fig tree. It was, in a very clear sense, a judgment on Jerusalem and on God’s people for rejecting their call to be a blessing to the world. But the judgment of Jesus Christ does not end in hopeless condemnation but, rather, in a call to mercy and grace in the face of rebellion and disobedience.

Examine

Do you agree that true faith bears fruit? If so, what sorts of fruit are born out of true faith?

People were confused when Jesus cursed the fig tree. Do you find the parable of the vinedresser and the cursing of the fig tree a clear illustration or a confusing one?

How do you respond to teachings or parables that are confusing to you? Have you ever labored to understand a passage of Scripture you found confusing? How did you go about trying to understand? What was the result of your pursuit for clarity?

Pray

Ask God to show you places in your life that are not bearing fruit but should be. Ask God to show you places in your life where you are bearing fruit now.

Indignation

Matthew 21:12–17

Truth 26

Jesus Overturning the Money-Changers' Tables

On the Monday after the Triumphal Entry, Jesus went into the temple in Jerusalem and overturned the money-changers' tables. This was the second time he had done this. The first, recorded in John 2, came at the very beginning of his earthly ministry. These two occasions of cleansing the temple book-ended Jesus's earthly ministry.

Read

And they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. And he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. And he was teaching them and saying to them, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers." (Mark 11:15–17)

Consider

Jesus was indignant. This is not how God's people were supposed to be led. The temple was a sacred space, and worship was a holy matter. The propriety and dignity of approaching the presence of God had found in this visiting rabbi an advocate. Jesus had cleared the temple like this once before, back before anyone knew his name. Then he had warned the merchants to remove the money-changers' tables and stop making his father's house into a den of thieves. If the first time Jesus cleared the temple served as a warning, this time it served as a judgment. Whatever anyone might say, this was not an eruption of blind anger. This was premeditated. Jesus saw nothing today he hadn't seen many times before. He had even stood in this very place as recently as yesterday. Nothing he saw came as a surprise. He did what he meant to do. (p. 156)

Jesus's provocative actions in overturning the money-changers' tables all spoke to his deep concern for the way God's people had traded the work of loving God for a religion of economy. Ever since, he has been involved in the provocative work of overturning idolatrous hearts.

Examine

What do you imagine Jesus would want to overturn in your own life? Why?

Has Jesus ever upset you? What happened in that situation? How do you view that situation now?

In what ways is Jesus's act of overturning the money-changers' tables an act of mercy?

Pray

Ask God to show you places in your own life where you are trying to approach your faith as an economy and not as a relationship.

John's Baptism

Mark 11:27–12:44

Truth 27

John the Baptist's Baptism

On the Tuesday morning before Jesus's crucifixion, the religious leaders in Jerusalem demanded that Jesus tell them by what authority he acted upon when he cleansed the temple. His response exposed the duplicity of their motives and deepened their anger toward him.

Read

And they came again to Jerusalem. And as he was walking in the temple, the chief priests and the scribes and the elders came to him, and they said to him, "By what authority are you doing these things, or who gave you this authority to do them?" Jesus said to them, "I will ask you one question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. Was the baptism of John from heaven or from man? Answer me." And they discussed it with one another, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But shall we say, 'From man'?"—they were afraid of the people, for they all held that John really was a prophet. So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And Jesus said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things." (Mark 11:27–33)

Consider

This entire confrontation was an attempt to put Jesus in his place by forcing him to yield to the Sanhedrin's authority. But their judgment of Jesus made less sense with each passing day. Jesus asked smarter questions and gave clearer answers than his opponents. They tried to discredit his ministry, but there were people walking around in the temple who only days earlier had been blind and lame. When the Sanhedrin tried to question his motives, he exposed their hearts. When they attempted to intimidate him by coming to him in numbers, he never showed the slightest sign of backing down. He had literally turned the tables on them the day before, but today he had done it again—this time with further-reaching implications. When they demanded he submit to their authority, he exposed them as liars. If they had no integrity, they held no real authority. If they wanted to contain his influence among the people, they would have

to rely on more than warnings and bravado. They would have to remove him because he would not yield. (p. 162)

Examine

This story shows the strength of Jesus. What do you think Jesus is contending for in this confrontation with the religious leaders?

In this story Jesus does not give the religious leaders an answer to their question. Name a time in your life when you felt the silence of God. Why do you think God sometimes declines to answer our questions?

What would an honest answer from the religious leaders have looked like here?

Pray

Ask God to show you places in your own life where you are not dealing honestly with him.

The Scent of Opulence

Matthew 26:6–13; Mark 13:3–13;
John 12:1–8

Truth 28

Having the Name Simon the Leper

On the Wednesday of the week of Jesus's crucifixion, he went to the home of a man named Simon the Leper. It was there that a woman anointed his feet with an alabaster flask of expensive ointment. Though the story focuses on the woman's gift, the host's identity raises the question—what if we were known by our brokenness?

Read

Now when Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, a woman came up to him with an alabaster flask of very expensive ointment, and she poured it on his head as he reclined at table. And when the disciples saw it, they were indignant, saying, "Why this waste? For this could have been sold for a large sum and given to the poor." But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, "Why do you trouble the woman? For she has done a beautiful thing to me. For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me. In pouring this ointment on my body, she has done it to prepare me for burial. Truly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her." (Matthew 26:6–13)

Consider

Though Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday were filled with harrowing experiences that seemed to be drawing him ever nearer to his death, on Wednesday Jesus was still. He and his disciples had gone to the home of a man in Bethany known as Simon the leper. Simon belonged to a growing part of the population known not for their accomplishments, but for what was wrong with them. It was a difficult life, but also strangely liberating since the first thing people learned about Simon was his broken past. Simon lived among the few who did not have to pretend to be what they were not. He was Simon, the leper. People could choose his company or reject it, but that was who he was. (p. 167)

Examine

In what ways do you think your life would be different if some broken part of you was the first thing people learned about you?

What freedom do you imagine Simon the leper enjoyed that others whose brokenness was more hidden did not? What struggles do you think he had to deal with that others did not?

What name do you think Jesus would have given Simon the leper? What name would you go by if you were to be known by the thing that is most true about you? How does Scripture answer that question?

Pray

Ask God to show you the names you have taken for yourself, and ask him to deepen your faith in his healing work on your behalf on the cross.

Thirteen Men

John 13:1–35

Read

When it was evening, he reclined at table with the twelve. And as they were eating, he said, “Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me.” And they were very sorrowful and began to say to him one after another, “Is it I, Lord?” (Matthew 26:20–22)

Consider

These thirteen men had been through so much together. They had spent countless nights under the Galilean stars, eating, drinking, and laughing themselves to sleep. They knew each other—Thomas’s pragmatism, Simon’s love of politics, Nathanael’s endearing self-importance, John’s compassion, Peter’s ability to wield words like a blunt object. They knew the same battery of parables Jesus told when he entered a new town—the lost son, the sowers and the seed, the ten virgins, the friend at night, and Matthew’s favorite, the Pharisee and the tax collector. They assumed that though they were mostly strangers when they first came together, they were now more similar than different. The thought that one of them could be capable of the kind of betrayal Jesus suggested shook them because they had walked with Jesus long enough now to know that if any of them were capable of such treachery, they all were. (p. 175)

Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus, was a man who followed Jesus for years. And whatever could be said of Judas’s character, when Jesus told the Twelve that one of them would betray him, the other eleven did not guess that he was talking about Judas. We have an incredible ability to appear faithful for long periods of time even though we may know that we aren’t true disciples. The true disciple is concerned about his or her own ability to betray.

Truth 29

The Humbling of Jesus’s Disciples over Time

One mark of the disciples’ growing maturity is seen in their capacity to believe that they were capable of betraying Jesus. As the story of Judas’s betrayal begins to move more to the forefront of the Easter narrative, one curious thing is that when Jesus tells his disciples that one of them will betray him, the first question they ask is not, “Is it him?” but “Is it I?”

Examine

What is the worst betrayal you’ve ever committed? Who did it surprise? How far did that betrayal ripple out into your life and the lives of others?

Besides Judas, who else at that table in the upper room betrayed Jesus? What does this tell us about our ability to find mercy and grace in the face of our own failings?

In the upper room, Jesus sat at a table full of betrayers. What was he doing at that table in the first place? How does the significance of that meal speak into our fate in light of our worst failings?

Pray

Ask God to train your heart to want to see your capacity to betray him, and ask him to give you a sense of redemptive grief over your duplicity of heart and hope in the assurance we find in his saving work on the cross.

The Last Cup

Mark 14:22–42; John 14

Truth 30

The Strength of Jesus on the Night He Was Betrayed

Mark's Gospel tells us that the last thing Jesus did before leaving the upper room for Gethsemane was to lead his disciples in a hymn. We presume he led the song since he served as the host of the meal. That Jesus had the presence of mind and heart to pause to sing a hymn, knowing his arrest was only moments away, reveals incredible strength.

Read

And as they were eating, he took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to them, and said, "Take; this is my body." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, and they all drank of it. And he said to them, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly, I say to you, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God." And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. (Mark 14:22–25)

Consider

Then Jesus rose to his feet and asked his disciples to stand with him to sing a doxology over their suspended, unfinished Passover meal. Though Jesus's voice carried the tone of a troubled heart, he led them in the ancient song about the how the stone the builders rejected had become the cornerstone and how the steadfast love of the Lord endured forever. When they finished singing, Jesus led them out to the Mount of Olives to one of their regular meeting places, the garden of Gethsemane. (p. 179)

To pause and lead his disciples in a song shows the strength of Jesus's resolve to face his arrest and crucifixion. The Gospel accounts tell us that he started that Last Supper overwhelmed with sorrow, and that later in Gethsemane his sweat became like drops of blood. In the height of that tension, Jesus sang of the faithfulness of God.

Examine

If you were at that supper that night, and if you knew what was about to happen to Jesus in Gethsemane, would you have participated in the singing of a hymn before leaving the upper room for the garden?

What are some situations in which you feel that your life is falling apart? What are some places in your life where you are comforted by the strength of the Savior?

Pray

Ask God to show you places where you doubt he is strong enough to deal with your troubles. Ask God to show you a greater picture of the strength of Jesus as Lord and Savior.

Trial at Night

Matthew 26:47–68

Truth 31

The Arresting Party's Indifference to Jesus

In the gospel story, every person mentioned is a character we want to understand. Most of the arresting party that accompanied Judas to the garden of Gethsemane were just soldiers doing the job assigned to them when they reported for duty.

Read

While he was still speaking, Judas came, one of the twelve, and with him a great crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people. Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, “The one I will kiss is the man; seize him.” And he came up to Jesus at once and said, “Greetings, Rabbi!” And he kissed him. Jesus said to him, “Friend, do what you came to do.” Then they came up and laid hands on Jesus and seized him. (Matthew 26:47–50)

Consider

A couple of soldiers stepped forward and grabbed hold of Jesus as the rest spread out to flank the disciples to keep them from running. They were many, and they were armed. They were not here to argue. Big men in body armor had come to bring a wanted man into custody. Jesus and his disciples were clearly outmatched. The soldiers expected this arrest to take place without incident. They knew Jesus was a man of peace, and that his disciples were untrained in the art of war. Beyond that, they cared little about the man in the garden. He was an assignment on their duty roster—another zealot upsetting the festival in Jerusalem. (p. 183)

Jesus, at the moment of his arrest, meant nothing to the guards who came to arrest him. This is precisely how many people come to Jesus today—not even considering what makes him significant. Later in the story, we learn that some of those guards came to faith through what they witnessed and even participated in.

Examine

If you consider yourself to be a Christian, what made you see Jesus as someone more than just a man?

Do you think the guards in the arresting party bore a deeper guilt for the death of Jesus than the average person in Jerusalem that night? Why or why not?

If one of the centurions who took Jesus to the cross could come to faith in the height of that moment, what does that teach you about the relationship between past mistakes and the accessibility of God's grace in the present?

Pray

Ask God to show you places where you have grown indifferent to Jesus. Ask God to give you grace toward those you see doing spiritually damaging things to themselves and others. Pray for those people, especially if one of those people is you.

The Reckoning

Matthew 26:69–27:2; Mark 10:17–31

Truth 32

Peter's Inability to See His Weakness

Peter was a disciple who wore his heart on his sleeve. He regarded himself as a man of deep faith and, more than that, a man of unshakable loyalty. When people who hold their loyalty and faith in high esteem fail those they are supposed to love, it can shake them to the core.

Read

And Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" And the disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God." Peter began to say to him, "See, we have left everything and followed you." (Mark 10:23–28)

Consider

This is why it stung Peter when, earlier that night on their way to Gethsemane, Jesus told his friends that they would all fall away. He said they would do what the rich young ruler had done; they would walk away. They would be asked to hand over a treasure too great. Some would walk away sad, others perhaps in anger, others still in confusion. But to a man, they would all walk away. This was hard for them to hear. Peter was convinced Jesus had underestimated at least one of his followers. He said, "Even if the others fall away, I will not." Jesus looked at his friend—the rock, the mouthpiece, the leader. Peter believed every word that came out of his mouth. He believed he was the exception. He loved Jesus with abandon. But Peter did not know his own weakness. Self-confidence felt strong so long as it wasn't tested. But trial always seemed to yield the true verdict. (p. 190)

We can all relate to Peter on this matter. We all allow ourselves greater credit than we deserve. We can also relate to Peter when it comes to our great capacity to fail or find ourselves to be unfaithful.

Examine

Though Peter never imagined it was possible, he betrayed Jesus, just as Jesus said he would. Where are you perhaps too certain that you are above failing?

Where have you had your faith tested and found it wanting? What struggles go through your mind and heart when you fail or come up short?

Read Romans 8 and ask, When your faith is in Jesus Christ, is there a failure you could commit that would cause him to stop loving you?

Pray

Ask God to help you hold an honest view of the strength of your faith apart from his mercy, and ask for a deepening confidence in his strength being able to overcome your weakness.

What Is Truth?

John 18:28–19:16

Read

So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus answered, “Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?” Pilate answered, “Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?” Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.” (John 18:33–36)

Consider

Though Pilate didn’t understand what Jesus meant, he caught the implication loud and clear. Jesus did, in fact, claim to be a king—and not just any king. He claimed to be king of a kingdom higher than Rome, implying he was a greater king than Caesar. His kingdom would outlast Rome, and his rule would be defined by truth—the absence of which led him to this very conversation. Pilate was frustrated. He didn’t want to convict, let alone crucify Jesus. He brought Jesus in behind closed doors to give him an opportunity to persuade the governor to release him—something Pilate wanted to do. If Jesus would give Pilate what he needed, Pilate could spare his life and save political face. But Jesus would not cooperate, and Pilate was losing control of the moment. (p. 195)

Crucifying a religious leader who had served and healed so many during one of the highest holy weeks of the Hebrew calendar put Pilate in the position of appearing that he did not have control of the region he was appointed to serve. Pilate wanted Jesus to defend himself so he could release him. But Jesus would not cooperate and, in fact, said things that would force Pilate’s hand.

Truth 33

How Pilate Lost Control of Jesus’s Trial

Pontius Pilate was not happy about having to deal with the chief priest’s demand that Jesus be crucified. Pilate was charged with keeping peace and order in Jerusalem. Crucifying a beloved Hebrew religious leader during Passover week in Jerusalem was something Pilate would eventually ask Jesus to help him get out from under.

Jesus could not claim to be a king who ruled independently from Caesar without forcing Pilate to treat him as a treasonous threat. Jesus left Pilate no choice but to follow through with the crucifixion.

Examine

Where in your life are you putting off a decision you know you have to make but would rather have someone else make for you?

In your mind, what sort of character is Pontius Pilate in the story of Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection? Is he Jesus’s archenemy? Is he a pawn in a game? Is he an innocent bystander? Is he something else?

Who would you say are the primary enemies of Jesus in the crucifixion story? Why are they so committed to seeing Jesus put to death?

Pray

Ask God to give you a measure of compassion for those whose decisions made in fear cause harm to others.

Ask God to give you wisdom, integrity, and faith for the difficult decisions you must make.

Crucifixion

Luke 23:26–46

Truth 34

The Hardening of One Thief and
the Breaking of the Other

Everyone present for the crucifixion had to form an opinion of it. Some claimed Jesus was the hope of Israel—the Son of God dying at the hands of his own people. Others said he was a trouble-making zealot. For the two condemned men who were crucified with him that day, the polarity of their responses is strikingly metaphorical—one hardened in anger and the other broken down in repentance.

Read

Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. And Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” And they cast lots to divide his garments. And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!” The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” There was also an inscription over him, “This is the King of the Jews.” One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!” But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?” (Luke 23:32–40)

Consider

One of the thieves started in with contemptuous words of his own, saying, “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself. Save us!” But the gravity of the scene settled on the other thief. Jesus took the brutality of his captors to God in the form of a prayer for mercy. He gave his own grieving mother his treasured friend. The crowds mocked the idea that Jesus could have been a king, and yet he endured this travail with a strength for which no one could account. Seeing the grace by which Jesus received this death, the second thief broke into sobs, saying to Jesus, “Forgive me. I am here for the wrongs I have done. But you have done nothing. Please, remember me when you pass from this place into your waiting kingdom.” (p. 203)

The reactions of the condemned men crucified on either side of Jesus tell the story of every man when it comes to what we make of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Desperation can be a powerful force God uses to either shake someone loose from their resistance to him or leave them to anchor their hearts in their own hardened bitterness.

Examine

When you are in a desperate position, are you more likely to repent or dig in?

Would you agree with the statement that everyone must do something with the story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ? If not, why not? If so, what are the main options people have for what can be done with the Easter story?

What is your response to the Easter story—the story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ?

Pray

Ask God to show you places where you are dug in to your own hardness of heart, and ask him to show you places where you need to confess and repent of sin.

The Forgotten Day

Matthew 27:51–66

Read

The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate and said, “Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while he was still alive, ‘After three days I will rise.’ Therefore order the tomb to be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples go and steal him away and tell the people, ‘He has risen from the dead,’ and the last fraud will be worse than the first.” Pilate said to them, “You have a guard of soldiers. Go, make it as secure as you can.” So they went and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard. (Matthew 27:62–66)

Consider

The chief priests went and sealed the stone that had been rolled over the mouth of the grave and the guard stood watch. If anyone wanted to come and tamper with this tomb, they would have to get through the soldiers and the seal. But even with these layers of security the chief priests never quite felt that the tomb was entirely secure. They had seen too much to dismiss Jesus. They were prepared for anyone who might have wanted to tamper with the tomb from the outside. But what if a seal and a Roman guard were not enough to keep this tomb from opening? What if the real threat lay inside the tomb? If Jesus did what he promised—if he rose from the dead—who could guard against that? (p. 209)

The entire week leading up to the crucifixion was filled with moments in which Jesus’s power, strength, wisdom, and authority led many to reconsider what they

Truth 35

The Only Full Day in History When the Body of the Son of God Lay Dead in a Tomb

The Saturday before Easter is utterly unique in history; it is the only full day where the body of the incarnate Son of God lay dead and buried in a tomb. The religious leaders who oversaw his crucifixion were deeply concerned that something bad would happen if his tomb lay unguarded, so they asked for and got a dispatch of soldiers to guard the tomb. They were prepared for anyone who might want to tamper with the tomb from the outside.

thought about him. He did not go easily; he forced many—including the religious leaders, Pontius Pilate, and his twelve disciples—to show what they were really made of. His uncommon strength, coupled with the supernatural darkness that settled over the land during his crucifixion, set on edge those who wanted him dead once they succeeded. A resurrection would cause people only to believe in him more.

Examine

In Matthew 27:64 what do you think the religious leaders mean when they say, “The last fraud will be worse than the first”? What is the “fraud” they are worried about? What are the implications if the “fraud” they are talking about turns out not to be a fraud after all.

Have you ever gone to great lengths to attempt to stop something you realized later you couldn’t have stopped despite your efforts? What drove you to try to stop it?

Has God ever brought a situation into your life that exposed something you either did not know or did not want known by others? What was the value of that experience?

Pray

Give thanks to God in prayer for the sacrifice of Christ, and ask God to give you a deep hunger for worship on Easter and in the days leading up to it.

He Is Not Here

Matthew 28:1–10; John 20:1–10

Truth 36

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ

Early Easter morning, an angel dressed in lightning came down and rolled away the stone covering the mouth of Jesus's grave, causing the guards on duty to faint with fear. The angel did not roll back the stone to let Jesus out, but to let the women in to see that Jesus was no longer there, as he said.

Read

Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified." (Matthew 28:1–5)

Consider

The women stood in stunned silence. The angel knew why they had come. He knew their fear, their sorrow, and their mission to anoint their friend. But the women could not make sense of what was happening. If the angel had just now rolled away the stone to reveal an empty tomb, then the angel did not open the grave to let Jesus out, but to let the women in. Jesus apparently left the tomb in another way at another time. This whole display was too wonderful for them to behold. "He has risen, just as he told you. Come see where he lay," the angel said. (pp. 211–12)

Every instance in Scripture where an angel meets with people involves a human response of fear. This encounter was certainly no different. This encounter Easter morning mirrors when the angel appeared to the shepherds outside Bethlehem to tell them that a Savior had been born unto them. To the shepherds, the angel came to announce that Jesus had come to them. To the women at the tomb, the angel came to tell them he had left them—but that he would appear to them soon.

Examine

If you were with the women who found the angel and the empty tomb, how do you think you would have reacted? What would you have wanted to know?

That moment involves a collision of heaven and earth. Why do you think God sent an angel to be there to greet the women?

What is comforting about the angel's words to the women that Jesus is not there, "just as he said"? How does the fact that Jesus foretold his resurrection comfort and inspire his followers?

Pray

When the women at the tomb encounter the angel, they experience both fear and affection for God. Ask the Lord to deepen your reverence for his power and your affection for his kindness and gentleness.

Flesh and Bone

Matthew 28:11–15; John 20:11–29

Read

Now Thomas, one of the Twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.” Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.” (John 20:24–27)

Consider

“My Lord and my God!” Thomas said. And he began to weep, as though a dammed up river of hope had been released. This was the fight of faith. There were many things in Thomas’s life that he wanted to believe, but he knew that it was a dangerous thing to put his faith in something for no other reason than that he wanted it to be true. Madness lay down that road. For a man belonging to a people who had taken the name of a God they had never seen, based on covenant promises that same God had made hundreds of years before, Thomas knew the dangers of blind faith. What good was the hope of freedom when he lived in a land ruled by godless tyrants? What good was faith in a God who was living and active when the best candidate for the Messiah he had ever seen was arrested and put to death by God’s own people? It wasn’t that Thomas didn’t want to believe. It was that he didn’t want what he believed in to expose him as a fool. (p. 219)

Truth 37

The Better Parts of Thomas’s Doubt

“Doubting Thomas” seems an unfortunate name for a man whose appeal to touch Jesus’s wounds was grounded in a desire to believe in the reliability of the resurrection.

Thomas’s doubt was not so much a failure of his faith as it was a test. Most professing believers, if the truth were known, would be more like Thomas than unlike him. Many believers’ questions about the validity of the resurrection find at least some measure of resolution in Jesus’s invitation for this other skeptical disciple to touch his wounds.

Examine

What is the role of doubt or questioning in the life of a believer in Jesus Christ? Is there a valid place for asking hard questions? If so, why? If not, what would be your reason for denying their validity?

What are your deepest doubts or questions about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ? Does Jesus’s encounter with Thomas bring any help to you as you face your own uncertainties? In what ways?

Why do you think Jesus invited Thomas to touch his wounds? Was this solely for the purpose of convincing Thomas he was really there, or was there something Jesus was contending for that went beyond that moment?

Pray

Ask God to show you where you doubt like Thomas. Ask God to reassure you in your faith and, in the places where that is not what he has for you, to give you peace with unanswered questions.

Do You Love Me?

John 21:1–23

Read

Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, “Children, do you have any fish?” They answered him, “No.” He said to them, “Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in, because of the quantity of fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved therefore said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment, for he was stripped for work, and threw himself into the sea. The other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, but about a hundred yards off. When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire in place, with fish laid out on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.” So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, 153 of them. And although there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” (John 21:4–12)

Consider

Jesus did not make this breakfast and recreate the scene of the first time Peter left everything to follow Jesus just so Peter could return to his life as a fisherman with a clear conscience. He had come to reinstate him. He was saying to Peter, “I told you I was going to make you into something you were not—a fisher of men. I meant it. Regardless of your failures, my love for you stands and so does my call on your life.” Peter’s heart changed. The reach of Jesus’s

Truth 38

Jesus’s Reinstatement of Peter
on the Shores of Galilee

After his resurrection Jesus reinstated Peter, who had denied knowing him, by recreating the moment early in their friendship when Jesus told Peter he would become a fisher of men. In that early encounter, Jesus told Peter to cast his nets one more time after a night of catching nothing. They caught more fish than they could haul in. Peter fell at Jesus’s feet, and Jesus told him he would make Peter into a fisher of men. Now here on the shores of Galilee, Jesus recreates that moment as the way he chooses to tell Peter that his call on his friend’s life still stands.

resurrection was beginning to show. Jesus didn’t go through all that suffering just for his own victory over the grave. He did this for the rescue of those who would believe in him as well. Through the messy lives of those who could love him and fail him in the same breath, he would bring rivers of the grace of God to a thirsty world, and their stories would be eternally, inextricably joined to his, world without end. (pp. 224–25)

Examine

Have you ever done something you fear disqualifies you from the love of God or, at the very least, from ever being of any significance to his work on earth? How does Peter’s story speak into that fear?

John 21 tells us that Jesus cooked breakfast for his friends. Holidays often center on good food. Why do you think God used meals—Communion, Passover, this breakfast on Galilee’s shores—to gather and teach his people?

Is there a connection between our ability to fear that we can fail our way out of God’s love and the call he gives his people to gather around tables to celebrate and eat good food?

Pray

Ask God to show you where you fear you might be disqualified from his love. Ask God to use the fellowship that happens around a good meal to remind you of his love and affection for you.

Behold the Man of Sorrows

Isaiah 53; Luke 24:1–35

Truth 39

The Door Jesus's Suffering Opens to Joy

Isaiah 53 tells us that the Messiah would be a suffering servant who could offer up his life as a ransom for many. Hebrews 12:2 tells us that Jesus Christ endured the cross for “the joy that was set before him.” For the joy of returning to his father’s presence and for the joy of seeing those who would be eternally in the presence of their God because of his atoning sacrifice, “he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed” (v. 5).

Read

Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him;
 he has put him to grief;
 when his soul makes an offering for guilt,
 he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong
 his days;
 the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand.
 Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and
 be satisfied;
 by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my
 servant,
 make many to be accounted righteous,
 and he shall bear their iniquities.
 Therefore I will divide him a portion with the
 many,
 and he shall divide the spoil with the
 strong,
 because he poured out his soul to death
 and was numbered with the transgressors;
 yet he bore the sin of many,
 and makes intercession for the
 transgressors. (Isaiah 53:10–12)

Consider

Before his accusers, he did not open his mouth to defend himself. Like a lamb to the slaughter, he did not resist the will of his father. Under the darkness of oppression and deceit, he was led away, cut off from among his own people. They humiliated him, killing him like a criminal, though he had committed no crime or spoken a word of deceit. He did all of this because it was the Lord’s will to crush him. His soul would become an offering for our guilt. But

on the other side of all this suffering, he would find the satisfaction of being the righteous servant of the Lord who would make many to be accounted righteous. He was numbered among the transgressors, but he bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to our sin and live in the freedom of his righteousness. Though he was in the form of God, he came to us as a tiny baby, born in the likeness of man to a poor mother in a stable outside of David’s town. He made himself nothing, taking on the nature of a servant, and humbled himself through his obedience to the will of his father, an obedience that led him to his horrific death on the cross. (p. 230)

Examine

If the suffering of Jesus was meant to lead us to joy, what does that tell us about his posture toward our suffering?

How would you explain the reason for the suffering of Jesus? If the wage of sin is death and Jesus was without sin, what wage did his death pay? For whom? And was it sufficient? What would make it sufficient?

Pray

Thank God for his extravagant gift of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, given to you by grace through faith in Christ.

Ask God to help you see your present sufferings through the lens of his suffering and triumph over the grave.

Behold the King of Glory

Philippians 2:5–11; 1 Corinthians 15:3–49; 1 Peter 1:3–9; Romans 8; Revelation 21

Truth 40

Jesus as the Appointed King over All Things in Heaven and on Earth

If Jesus has not risen, those who trust in him are to be pitied because their hope extends no further beyond their wishful thinking. Their faith is futile, and they remain in their sins. But if Jesus has risen, then his disciples are born into a new hope, because just as death entered the world through one man, Adam, now resurrection has done the same through the incarnate Son of God, who has prevailed over the power of the curse. The last enemy, death itself, has been destroyed.

Read

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. (Colossians 1:15–20)

Consider

Jesus's resurrection opened a door between the fallen, groaning world into which he was born and the renewal of all things. That door was a stone rolled back by the very finger of God from the mouth of a grave outside of Jerusalem. Jesus Christ, God's eternal Son, present at creation, came in the flesh to be the mediator between God and man. He lived the life of perfect righteousness that all men have failed to live. He died as a lamb led to the slaughter, offering himself up as the perfect sacrifice to atone for the sins of the world, once and for all. He rose from the grave defeating death itself. Bearing all authority in heaven and on earth, he lives as the appointed heir of all things. He rules over every corner of creation, putting every enemy under his feet while making alive by his grace through faith those who were dead in their sins. (p. 232)

Examine

Colossians tells us the ministry of Jesus was meant to bring us peace. What does that mean? What sort of peace, and why do we need it?

How has your view of Jesus and your understanding of the story of his life, death, and resurrection grown as a result of spending time in this study?

Is there anything you have learned through this journey through Scripture that you believe has changed you in a lasting way? What is it?

Pray

Thank God for the sinless life of Jesus, which is for you by grace through faith.

Thank God for the substitutionary death of Jesus, which is for you by grace through faith.

Thank God for the death-defeating resurrection of Jesus, which is also yours by grace through faith.

Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.

John 21:25

But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

John 20:31