

DEVOTED TO JESUS PROLOGUE

WHY READ ABOUT JESUS?

That is probably the \$10,000 question. Of what value is it to today's person to read about someone who lived so long ago? Isn't anything that happened in the 1st century absolutely irrelevant in today's fast paced world? The common thinking is that the church has become almost an obstacle given the way we live today. So each person reading these devotions has to come to grips with this central question. Why should I read about Jesus?

The answer to that central question lies in the fact that people in today's society have even less ability to cope with life than those say 50 years ago. I suppose that is because the world we live in continually depersonalizes us as individuals. It's all about information and efficiency. While it is true that we have more information, you have to ask yourself the question, "So what?" There has never been a correlation between happiness and knowing more. With the Earth's population surpassing 6 billion people, each person has much less significance than those who lived in the 19th century.

It is also true that we've become more efficient. We can beam out thoughts over the internet and have it half-way around the world in a matter of seconds, but does that make us happier? I'm reminded of a line in the movie, "Sabrina," where the main character says, "More isn't always better, sometimes it's just more."

So how is Jesus relevant? The truth is people haven't become any more adept at coping with life than they ever were. One only has to look at the increases in suicides, divorce and crime to understand that this flood of knowledge doesn't automatically give us a successful life. One has only to look at our failures at human relations, our inability to get along with others or even ourselves, to understand the need for the answers that Jesus gives us. As I write this I find that today's social media has made us less polite and less able to find the good in others. Because the internet is largely anonymous, our society has found that we can tear each other down and not have to bear any consequences.

So what can we find when we approach Jesus Christ? I suppose the bottom line is that we find answers. We find the answer to our guilt when Jesus said, "'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.'" We find peace of mind when Jesus said, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you." As the population of planet earth grows, we find a new way to live with other people in the examples that He set in his daily life.

Each day that you read this devotion, you are going to be challenged to apply what you read about Jesus into your daily life. After all, that is really where it counts isn't it? If you just read about Jesus, what good does it do? It isn't good readers that Jesus desires, it is disciples. I just have the feeling that God is not going to be that impressed with what I know when I stand before Him on the last day. If that were true, God would be really impressed with the Scribes and the Pharisees of Jesus' day, yet Jesus had a lot to say about people who talk about the truth, but don't live it. I would challenge you to read a

portion of this book each day with an open mind and an open Bible. Each day there will be scripture for you to read and then we will talk about what you are reading. At the end of the day as you meditate on what you have learned, you will be asked to write down the answers to a couple of questions. The first is to write down the things you learned about God that day. The second asks you to write down the changes you sense that God is telling you to make with what you learned that day. It is my prayer that you will not only learn something about the life and times of Jesus Christ, but also that you will allow God to change you in the process. You cannot come into the presence of Jesus Christ without being changed. That's the work He did the few short years He was here. That's the work He continues to do today. So I invite you to take this journey with me. I have always believed it to be a journey worth taking. I believe you will also benefit from this year long journey in ways you cannot now imagine.

Ray Tuttle

WHAT WILL WE BE READING ABOUT THIS MONTH?

Over the last 3 years of Jesus' ministry on earth, He changed the way we look at God and the way we worship God. As we read last month, if you want to know anything about the God who created us, just look at Jesus. What we will read and talk over the next 31 days changed the entire way we relate to God. Before Jesus, if you wanted to be acceptable to God, there were a whole lot of rules to obey and if you didn't measure up an animal would have to give its life to pay the penalty due for your stubbornness. That all changed with the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. With the sin issue finally taken care of once and for all, we can approach a holy God at any time we want. There is not a single time when God will be too busy or uninterested to have a relationship with His beloved creation.

As we daily go through all of the events of Jesus, as He closes His ministry on earth, it is my prayer that you will have a deeper and more meaningful understanding of all He went through to buy your true freedom. If you think about it, that's what Jesus did on the cross. He purchased our freedom from guilt, shame and the sense that we don't quite measure up. Thanks to the blood of Jesus Christ, we measure up just fine.

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THE FINAL DAY
December 1st

Peter and John
John 18: 12-14

The first stop on Jesus' road to the cross was the house of Annas. Now Annas was first appointed High Priest by Quirinius, the governor of Syria in 6 AD. Although the High Priest was supposed to be appointed for life, Annas was deposed by Valerius Gratus, the Roman procurator in 15 AD. After a couple of High Priests came and went, Valerius finally appointed Caiaphus to the position of High Priest. It could probably be said that most people in Israel still considered Annas to be the High Priest. That might explain why Jesus was first taken there. Another explanation for the stop would be that all was not ready for the main trial which would occur at the Palace of the High Priest. If you compare John 18: 12-27 with the other gospel writers, there appears to be a change in venue from verse 12 and verse 15. In Verses 12-14 John talks about Annas and by verse 15, the scene appears to have shifted to the house of Caiaphus.

When we left the Garden of Gethsemane, both Matthew and Mark noted that the disciples fled the scene. Remember we said that the Jesus had divided the disciples into two distinct groups. The mob went straight for Jesus, which meant that nine of the disciples were on the fringe and probably outside the limited lighting of the torches. It would have been easy for them to back out and escape into the night. It is also obvious that James, the brother of John also was able to make his escape. Only Peter and John went with the crowd to Annas' house and then to the Palace of the High Priest. No other

disciple is ever mentioned by any of the gospel writers until after Jesus had risen from the dead. So we want to take a look at both of these men because they truly do make up quite a contrast in characters.

These two men had known each other for a long time. They were business partners, they were both disciples of John the Baptist, yet they were complete opposites in temperament. Dr. Alexander Bruce in his book, *The Training of the Twelve*, says, “Neither John nor Peter was mature as yet, but immaturity showed itself in them in opposite ways. Peter’s weakness lay in the direction of indiscriminate cordiality. His tendency was to be friends with everybody. John, on the other hand, was in no danger of being on familiar terms with the all and sundry. It was rather too easy for him to make a difference between friend and foe.”

It was James and John who had wanted to call down fire on that Samaritan village just a few months ago. Peter would never even have thought to do such a thing. John felt himself too good to be outside with the common rabble. He knew the High Priest personally and so went right in the front door, and so provided us an eye-witness account of what went on inside the house. John would not even have given that servant girl the time of day, much less answered her question.

Each man grew up quite a bit after the Day of Pentecost. John became more loving and accepting of people; so much that he could write about the amazing love of God in his first letter and could be known as John the Beloved. Peter grew up to learn the

difference between friend and foe. To the friend, Peter became his old, loving self. To the enemy, Peter became a staunch defender of God's truth. The Peter we see in the first half of the Book of Acts is a much different Peter than the one we are witnessing on this night. So what's the difference? Peter got to know his God and that makes all of the difference. When you know God intimately, you can't help but come back changed in some way. As the relationship grows, it is you who change, not God. God is the same, yesterday, today and forever.

So the secret to spiritual change lies in getting to know God better and more completely as you walk with Him. I would like to tell you that there is a magic formula or secret password that will bring you quickly to a position of spiritual maturity, but that just isn't the case. Every time you venture out in the world to do a task for God, you end up learning something about Him and the way in which He works. Add up all of those experiences over a life time and you will see real spiritual growth occurring within your life. So, I guess the true secret is to keep on serving Him and allowing God to use you as a tool to progress His kingdom across the world. You will be different for the experience and all of the effort.

What did God teach you about Himself today?

Do you think you are more spiritually mature today than 5 years ago?

Peter's Denials
Luke 22: 54-62

I suppose that every one of us has one dark secret that very few people know about. I'm talking about a lapse in judgment or that time you said something you shouldn't have said. I'm sure that if there were one moment in time that the Apostle Peter wished he could do over, it would be this one. The difference is that Peter's mistake was broadcast by some of his closest friends for the entire world to see over the next two millennia. Even in this account of one of Peter's greatest failings, we see the kind of man Peter became later in his life. You see it is widely believed that it was Peter who gave his son in the faith, John Mark, a lot of what was written in the gospel of Mark. Rather than gloss over this embarrassing time in his life, Peter wanted you to know about it. I believe that this evening was one of the most pivotal moments in Peter's life. This event propelled Peter to even greater spiritual heights. His defeat here stands as a testament for each one of us.

As we talked about yesterday, Peter and John had followed on the edges of the mob that night. They had followed as Jesus was taken to the house of Annas and then on to the Palace of the High Priest. John, who was known in the influential circles of Jewish society, went inside Caiaphus' house but Peter had elected to stay in the outside courtyard. The Gospel of John tells us that as John was inside, he suddenly noticed that Peter was no longer by his side. So he went out and had the servant girl, monitoring the gate, let his friend inside to the inner courtyard. It was that servant girl who was the first

to ask if Peter were one of Jesus' disciples, to which he gave his first denial of the evening.

We're told that it was a rather cold night. So Peter availed himself of a charcoal fire that was burning in the center of the courtyard. I'm sure he joined in on the banter that occurs around such fires. It was at that point that another servant girl asked, "This fellow was one of them." As the men around the fire started agreeing that Peter was one of them, Peter adamantly states, "Man I am not." Unfortunately for Peter one of the men gathered around that warm fire happened to be a relative of Malchus, the man who had his ear lopped off by Peter's sword. This man challenged Peter, "Didn't I see you with him in the olive grove?" It is at that point that Peter becomes really agitated and begins to call down curses upon him as he proclaimed, "I don't know the man."

As the sound of those words died in the air, a rooster sounds off with three distinct crows. Luke records that at that moment Jesus, from inside Caiaphus' house, looks directly at Peter. Peter remembering his Master's words, just a few hours ago, fled outside and into the night air. Three of the four gospels record that Peter wept bitterly. I'm sure that it quite an understatement. One can only wonder what went through the mind of Peter at that moment. Everything that his life had been up to that point was now being called into question in his own mind. Years later, if you were to ask him of the lowest point in his life, I'm sure this would be it. From this moment through Sunday morning, Peter's presence is noticeably absent from all of the events that occurred.

Every one of us has failed God at some point in time. I believe there is not a single person alive who cannot identify with this moment in Peter's life. Yet the real lesson here is the man that Peter became after this event. So what made the difference? I've known people who have lived with the guilt of some past mistake for years and they have let that event defeat them for the rest of their life. What made Peter different from others I have known? I believe the answer lies in the idea of forgiveness. In his first letter to the Corinthian church, the Apostle Paul writes, "For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve." Paul is telling us that even before Jesus appeared to the disciples as a group, He appeared to Peter. I believe it was at that point in time Jesus told Peter about the extent of God's forgiveness. It was at that point that Peter understood that when God forgives someone, the event is forgotten forever.

Yet that is only half the battle. While it is great that God forgives us when we have failed Him, it is also necessary for us to forgive ourselves and move on with life. Sometimes that is the truly hard part. For me that ability to pick myself up and get on with my Christian walk has always revolved around the fact that I know and understand that God has completely forgiven me. If I were to continue to wallow in guilt over what I did, it would be like slapping God in the face and saying His forgiveness didn't matter. The secret is that you have to believe in forgiveness with all your heart. You have to believe with all your heart that there is not a single thing that you could possibly do that God cannot forgive. You may be saying right now, "But you don't know what I've

done.” That is a true statement, but I do know my God and the extent He loves you. It is never about how bad you are. It is always about how good God is and how complete His forgiveness is. The alternative is for you to continue to live a defeated life that God cannot possibly use. Who do you think would like nothing better than for you to continue to live like that? Guilt is Satan’s greatest weapon to neutralize God’s children. Are you going to allow him to win or are you going to give yourself over to God and live a victorious life?

What did God teach you about Himself today?

Is it finally time to take that dark secret and lay it at the foot of the cross?

THE FINAL DAY
December 3rd

The Trials of Israel

I have read a lot of opinions in which the trial of Jesus Christ is likened to something akin to a kangaroo court. You know like one of those trials in Russia during the Cold War where the outcome of the trial was known ahead of time, and the only reason to even have a trial was to show the citizenry what happens when one opposes the government. As I have read over each of the gospel accounts of Jesus’ trial, I have come to the conclusion that it would be a mistake for us to view the trial in that light. While it is true that there were some things that happened that were clearly against Jewish law, as

practiced in that time, there seems to be a definite undercurrent of legality behind the entire proceedings. In order to understand the entire evening, it is necessary to have at least some knowledge of the Jewish legal system in the first century.

The entire legal process began when one or more witnesses brought the accused before a judge, who was considered to be an expert in the written Jewish Law. In Israel, they didn't have a police force as we know it. It was the task of the ordinary citizenry to bring the miscreants of society to justice. While it is true that the High Priest did have a cadre of temple guards at his disposal, these men were there to enforce peace within the confines of the temple proper. They did not operate as a police force. Of course, Roman law was enforced by the garrison of soldiers that was housed just outside the temple.

In the Jewish legal system, there were three types of testimony that were allowed in all trials. The first was called vain testimony. This is the type of testimony which was irrelevant and was immediately rejected by the court. The second was standing testimony which was a more serious and was provisionally accepted by the court until it was confirmed or rejected. Today we would call this kind of testimony circumstantial evidence. Finally we have what was called adequate testimony. Adequate testimony was the testimony of at least two eye-witnesses and was held in that time to be the absolute truth of a matter. It is hard for us to believe that Jesus would have been convicted and sentenced to death on anything less than adequate testimony, yet that is exactly what happened.

As we look at the trial of Jesus Christ, we see the first abnormality in the fact that soldiers and a mob of people were sent out to make the arrest. As we talked about before, that was the job of the witnesses only. Now you could make a case that all of the people who went on that errand had heard Jesus speak and I suppose could be considered to be witnesses in the case, yet there was no mention of all of them testifying at the trial.

The second abnormality that we find in this case is the fact that we have a trial that involves the death penalty that was done in the dark of night. The normal Jewish practice was for a trial that involved the taking of a life could be done only in the daylight hours when all who could give testimony, either for or against, would be able to be present. Jewish law did allow that trials for money damages could be done at night, but never a trial on a capital offense. Now you could argue that the extreme urgency and the importance of the matter to the future of the nation of Israel could warrant an exception in this case, but the law was quite clear on the matter. This trial was clearly illegal according to Jewish law.

We will see other cases of abnormalities as we look more closely at the trial, and I will point them out as we go along. Yet I will go back to my original statement that, overall, there is an undercurrent of legality that is present in all that is done. After all, the ruling of this court had to get by both the Sanhedrin and Pontius Pilate if the Jewish leadership was to be successful in their efforts to rid the world of this troublemaker.

It seems that expediency can lead us down a path that it is not wise for us to take. The temptation is to take the quick and efficient way out of a dilemma. “Cut the corners in order to get the job done,” seems to be our battle cry. In Jesus’ trial expediency led to the execution of God’s own Son. Think about the last time you were tempted to take the quick and easy route. Where did it eventually lead you? Perhaps it would be wise for us to immediately pull back from the “quick and easy” way the next time we are faced with it. Some things in life need to be brought out into the daylight so that the correct course of action can be seen plainly and considered carefully.

What did God teach you about Himself today?

Do you tend to go for the quick and easy?

THE FINAL DAY
December 4th

First the Trial
Mark 14: 53-64, Matt. 26: 63

In 1985 Lawrence and Mark Kasdan co-wrote and produced a truly great western movie by the name of Silverado. This movie had everything in it that made the western popular. It had one of the main characters kissing his horse. It had the gun fight on Main Street. It even had a cattle stampede. It did lack, however, the beautiful damsel in distress, but you can’t have everything, I guess. Anyway, one line I always think of when I read about the trial of Jesus that comes from that movie was said by the corrupt sheriff,

played by Brian Dennehy, where he tells one of the good guys, “First you’re gonna have a fair trial, followed by a first class hangin’.” I don’t know, I guess I just love that line. Why does it remind me of Jesus’ trial? I suppose it is because that line could have been uttered by Caiaphus that night to Jesus. What we will now see is that Caiaphus had about as much trouble fulfilling that prophesy as the corrupt sheriff did in the movie. The only difference lay in the victim. If Jesus had not willingly given Himself up to be crucified, there would not have been an execution.

I believe that Mark 14: 53-64 gives the best description of Jesus’ trial of any of the gospel writers, so I’m going to concentrate on Mark’s account. From Mark’s account we see witnesses making various charges against Jesus. Yet none of those charges are named. He only reports that the standard of two agreeing witnesses was not met in any of those charges. Finally Mark records that someone stood up and gave, what Mark labels as false testimony, that Jesus had said that their beloved temple would be destroyed, but that He would build another not made by man in three days. Yet even that testimony failed to gain the necessary agreement from another witness. I’ve always found that interesting because Jesus did make that statement. Take a moment to look up John 2: 19 and you will see that Jesus did say something similar. It’s just that He didn’t say that He would be the one doing the destroying.

That’s why I said yesterday that I believe that this trial is anything but a “mock trial.” If you were going to set Jesus up, it seems to me that the easiest thing in the world would be to arrange your witnesses. It is obvious here that Caiaphus was not free to do

his own will in this court. There appears to be a force present that ensured that everything was done above board.

At this point in Jesus' trial, we find our villain, Caiaphus, was in quite a dilemma. By Jewish law, he must now let Jesus go free, but we already know that he wanted Jesus dead in the worst way in order to avoid what he described as a bloody clash with Rome for which he would be blamed. Letting Jesus go here would have been disastrous for his cause. The problem was Caiaphus needed a case that would give him indisputable grounds for the death penalty from both the Sanhedrin and Rome. The only promising charge he had at this point was in Jesus' alleged plot to destroy the temple, which involved sorcery and sacrilege. While that charge would play well in the Sanhedrin, it might have a problem making the grade with Pilate. His prosecution of Jesus had just fallen apart. There was only one thing he could do. It was illegal, but he was desperate.

The question Caiaphus asked Jesus was carefully crafted and masterfully executed. We see it best in Matthew 26: 63 where the gospel writer records that Caiaphus asked, "I adjure you by the living God that you tell us if you are the Messiah from God." In the Hebrew culture there is no question more solemn or sacred. Jesus, as a law abiding Jew, had no alternative but to answer the question truthfully. Jesus answer, "You have said so," is in the traditional form that a cultured Jew would answer a question of such grave import. Courtesy forbade a direct yes or no to such a question. At this point Jesus was convicted, not by witness testimony, but by his own admission. Caiaphus believed that he now had what he wanted, a charge that would get the death penalty from both the

Sanhedrin, and also from Pilate. Caiaphus knew that his Roman boss always acted decisively and with great force against anyone who dared challenge the rule of Rome.

Before you think that I am a believer in all kinds of conspiracy theories, we cannot ignore God's hand in all that happened that night. It's just that there are times when He does His will through the sinfulness of His creation. For example, take a look at 1 Kings 18 and ask yourself if God might have used Ahab's rebellious attitude to bring the nation of Israel back to their God. Whether He stretches out His mighty hand or He uses His own creation, God's will is done. I just like to rejoice sometimes in the cleverness of the way God sometimes chooses to work His will.

What did God teach you about Himself today?

Have you ever had God work in your life through an unlikely source?

THE FINAL DAY
December 5th

Overcoming Guilt
Matt. 27: 1-10

A follower of Pythagoras once bought a pair of shoes from a cobbler, promising to pay him on a future day. That day came, and he took the money. But finding the cobbler passed away, he secretly rejoiced that he could retain the money and gets a pair of shoes for nothing. But his conscience would allow him no rest; so he took the money and he

went back to the cobbler's shop. After casting his money on the counter, he said: "Go thy way; for, though he is dead to all the world, yet he is alive to me." Today's title contains a double meaning and I suppose both will be our topics of conversation for today. There are times, like in our story, where we can be so overcome by guilt that we will do anything and risk any ridicule just to be rid of it. That is called overcoming guilt. There is also a way that the Bible describes where one can overcome the pangs of guilt. The difference between the two meanings of overcoming guilt lies in idea of repentance, which is the turning away from bad behavior and embracing God's cleansing forgiveness so one can move on with life.

In Matthew 27: 1-10, we see the final outcome for Judas Iscariot. As you read this section of the Bible, you are almost tempted to have one of two reactions. Either you feel sorry for Judas and wish things could have turned out better for him, or you feel that the man got what he deserved. I believe that if you were to ask Jesus His feelings for Judas, He would feel sorry for him and the choice that he made.

Now before we go too far, I know some of you are wondering if I am going to handle the apparent differences between Matthew's account of the end of Judas' life and the one the Apostle Peter gives in Acts 1: 18. I try never to back away from a Biblical challenge, so I will attempt to offer at least the best explanation that I can for the differences between the two verses. When dealing with controversies such as this, it really makes a difference what you believe about the Bible. For example if you believe that Bible is full of errors, you will tend to point to these verses as proof positive for your

position. If you believe that the Bible is infallible and totally free from errors, then you begin to look for ways where both accounts could be true. The best explanation that I have run across comes from the Preacher's Outline and Sermon Commentary where they say, "He was haunted and saw no hope. Left alone with his thoughts, he felt his sin was too terrible to be forgiven. He felt God could never forgive him for so great a sin. So he took his belt, and as Peter seems to indicate, tied it to an overhanging rock on a mountain precipice and hung himself. The belt broke and Judas fell headlong, bursting his body asunder." Such a theory would adequately explain what both Matthew and Peter described.

The important fact that exists in this story was that Judas felt remorse for what he considered to be a grave sin. The problem was that he dealt with his remorse in exactly the wrong manner. The sin that Judas committed was against God directly and yet that is that last place that he turned to find forgiveness. He tried to undo his wrong by returning the money to the Jewish leadership. When your friends are only there for what they can get out of you, they will often turn on you when they no longer need you. These Jewish leaders were not going to reverse their verdict and let Jesus go free based upon the fact that Judas returned their money and now felt bad about his behavior. Their eyes were cast on what they considered to be a bigger prize. They just put the money to good use by buying a potter's field in order to have a place to bury the poor, and went about their normal lives as if Judas' guilt meant nothing to them.

So how does one go about dealing with the crushing burden of guilt? When do you confess wrongdoing to God and when do you make amends with others? The answer lies within the wrongdoing itself. There are times when your actions or attitudes harm other people. At that point the Bible clearly teaches that you are to go to the people harmed and attempt to make amends as much as it is possible. This was not true in Judas' case. Judas' sin was against God alone. In that case, the issue was between he and God alone. There is no real need to involve others unless you need the support and accountability of others to help you to deal with some of your issues and to give you the strength to move away from that particular wrongdoing. Judas did not do that and so found himself crushed by the weight of his guilt. It's too bad he chose this route. There was still a loving God waiting anxiously for a lost soul to come home. Am I saying that God would have even forgiven Judas for betraying His only Son? Absolutely that is what I am saying. I believe God when He says there is nothing that I can do that He cannot forgive if I go to Him and honestly repent. There is no way that anyone can "out sin" God. When we understand who God is, we see a God who is infinite in every aspect. One of those aspects is He is infinitely able to forgive sin.

What did God teach you about Himself today?

Who holds you accountable?

THE FINAL DAY
December 6th

On to Pontius Pilate
John 18: 28-32, Luke 23: 2

After a quick rubber stamp of the trial's verdict by a majority of the Sanhedrin, the next step in the plan was a trip over to Herod's Palace to see the Roman Procurator to get authorization for a crucifixion. As you read through the gospel writer's impression of Jesus' time before Pilate, one gets the opinion of a man who is trying to get out of making a decision in this case, so he tries to foist it off on someone else. All of his life Pontius Pilate had lived by Roman law. At this very moment, he is being asked to rubber stamp a verdict for a people he didn't respect or understand on a point on their own law that he didn't agree with. Perhaps he could have just said yes with a wave of his hand, but then there was that note of warning from his wife. Perhaps he should just tell these Jews no, and be done with it. Yet he didn't feel he could do that. After all, it was Passover and there was the very real possibility of a riot right here, right now. Oh how his Roman overseers hated the idea of riots. A good riot right here could really derail his promising career.

Caiaphus, likewise, was emotionally tied up. He knew that he really didn't have a charge against Jesus that would guarantee a Roman death penalty. He didn't really believe that Pilate would take the idea that this man wanted to be the new "King of the Jews" very seriously. He knew that such a charge would break down very quickly if Pilate even took a moment to examine the evidence. Perhaps he thought the Roman Procurator would honor his agreement the night before and merely rubber stamp the Sanhedrin's opinion and they would be on their way.

As we read in John 18: 28-32, any hope of a Roman rubber stamp was dashed by Pilate's opening question, "What charges are you bringing against this man?" One can almost see a challenge to Roman authority as well as the disappointment in the Jewish reply, "If he were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you." Pilate understood and recognized this attempt to bypass and marginalize him by these Jews. One can see it in his dismissive, "Then take Him yourselves and judge Him by your own law." It's almost as if Pilate is saying, "How dare you attempt to dismiss my opinion in this case and think that I am just your lap dog whose sole purpose is to do your bidding." It is at this point that the real trial that will determine Jesus' immediate future really begins.

Luke records the next part of the action in Luke 23: 2 as he describes the Jew's initial charge, "We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Christ, a king." With these words Pontius Pilate finally has a charge that he can understand and deal with. If there is one thing that he knows it is insurrection, so he takes Jesus inside and begins to examine Him.

What we see here in the opening of Jesus' trial before Pontius Pilate is a collision of two very different ways of thinking. Yet I feel that these two forces are more alike than they are different. They both believe that their way of thinking needs to be promoted so that it endures for future generations. To the Jew, things must continue to go on as they always had. Israel must continue to exist within the reality of Roman rule. They saw

Jesus as a threat to the continuation of their way of life. Before this day, Pilate probably hadn't considered Jesus at all. While I am sure the miracles and teachings of Jesus Christ had not escaped his notice, there is no evidence that Pilate ever considered Jesus a real threat to Roman power or influence. After all, Jesus had no army or weapons that could hurt Rome. Yet Pilate knew that he needed to continue to placate the Jews if he were to remain in a position of power.

As I write this today, our nation is once again looking at various people who want to be our next President. Each candidate, in their own way, tries to court the vote of Christians in order to give them a leg up on their rival candidates. After all, the Christian Right does represent a large chunk of American voters. There are people within the church of Jesus Christ in America, who insist that we must bond together in order to bring about God's righteousness on earth within the political arena. If that were the way of Jesus, why do we see Him remain silent as He stood before Pilate? Jesus was part of a battle that was much larger than the collision between Caiaphus and Pilate. His course was set as He followed a much higher King. Jesus understood that it was more important to deal with righteousness as it needs to exist within the heart of the individual than worry about what laws are passed in a nation. Perhaps there is a lesson in all of this for you and me?

What did God teach you about Himself today?

Where do you stand in the area of Christian activism?

THE FINAL DAY
December 7th

Crucifixion Matters
John 18: 31, 32

Yesterday, we began to take a look at Jesus' time before Pontius Pilate. We've already talked about the fact that Pilate had agreed to hear the case with the kind of restrictions the Jews felt they needed in order to still eat of their Passover. I've always tended to pay closer attention to John's account of these events because John was right there viewing it all. So as we continue to talk about the events that happened that morning, you might want to open your Bible to John 18 and we will begin at verse 31.

The first thing that leaps out at us in verses 31 and 32 is the answer to the question, "Why did the Jews even need Pilate's rubber stamp on their verdict?" It was never a question that Jesus could not be killed unless Pilate gave his approval. The Jews had people killed all of the time. If you have any doubts about this, take a look at the 6th and 7th chapter of the Book of Acts. There is no record of them taking Stephen to any Roman authority before he was executed. As you read in John 18: 32, what was important to the Jewish leadership was the manner of death that Jesus was to experience. They wanted Jesus crucified. They needed Roman approval because the Jews had no right to crucify anyone.

Moses had said in Deuteronomy 21: 23, “You must not leave his body on the tree overnight. Be sure to bury him that same day, because anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse.” The Jewish leadership wanted every person present in Jerusalem for Passover to witness the fact that Jesus was being cursed by God. It was not merely their wish to get rid of Jesus, but they also wanted to discredit Him in the eyes of the people and so get rid of this popular notion that He was somehow God’s Messiah.

What the Jews had failed to see was another episode in Moses’ life. Much earlier in our study, we were taking a look at a secret meeting in an upper room that took place between Jesus and a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin by the name of Nicodemus. In John 3: 14, 15, Jesus said, “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.” Here we find that Jesus, early on in His ministry, had known what manner of death he would have to endure and the reason that He would have to endure it. Rather than being looked upon as being cursed by God, Jesus understood that His crucifixion would be the source of salvation for not only the Jewish nation, but the entire world. He understood that the bronze serpent that Moses had put on a pole that day was the only way Israel would survive the serpent’s bite, and that it was also a symbol of what would later happen at Jesus’ death on Calvary.

I find it interesting that God can take something as awful as crucifixion and turn it into something so wonderful that the world still has trouble comprehending it. Can you imagine the outcry today if any nation in the world announced that it was now going to

employ crucifixion as its primary mode of execution? Yet this was the method that God had chosen for His only Son since the beginning of time. It's almost as if God is giving His creation permission to throw its worst at His Son so that in the end the love of God can have its most dramatic and powerful showcase. What we see in the death of Jesus is a group of people brutally doing all it can to destroy God and ridding Him from their lives. What we don't understand is after all of the violence that is heaped upon God's beloved Son, why the Creator would still want to have a close relationship with His creation. The justice that exists within all of us would like nothing better than for God to throw enough thunder and lightening their way so as to cause those responsible for this reprehensible act to disappear in a wispy thin cloud of smoke.

The most challenging aspect to the Christian life for me has always been to view people the way God views them. I still struggle with it, but as I get to know God better, I find that even that struggle becomes a bit easier than it was yesterday. Seeing things the way God sees them is not an easy thing to do. It just takes a lot of time and practice.

What did God teach you about Himself today?

Are you able to view people the way God views them?

THE FINAL DAY
December 8th

No One like Him
Luke 23: 5-25

“This was one for the record books,” Pilate thought as he was finally finished with a really grueling day. This was supposed to be a holiday, but there were no holidays for those who ruled for Rome. As he allowed himself to look back on his day, his thoughts drifted to the hauntingly strange man he had allowed the rabble to execute. Of all of the men that Pilate had passed judgment on, there was no one like Him. He had seen men grovel and he had seen men cry in an attempt to save themselves the agony of the cross. He had even seen those who stood tall in their anger at what they saw as the oppression of Rome. Yet even those people had broken as the Roman lash laid open their backs. No, this man was much different.

He had agreed the night before to hold the trial outside from his balcony. After all, he had to placate these silly Jews and their even more ridiculous rules less there be a riot during their holiest of holidays. One would think, though, they would have brought before him a stronger case. Even some witnesses would have been nice. Instead they tried to insult his intelligence by waiving some vague charge that this Jesus fellow was leading some violent uprising against the might of Rome. Pilate had seen a lot of rebels in his days. He never saw the look of defiance in the man’s eyes that he had seen in the Zealots that he had condemned before. When he gazed into the eyes of Jesus, Pilate saw nothing but peace. This Jesus seemed to be able to look right through Pilate, straight at his heart. Who was this different sort of man?

Pilate had tried to foist the whole matter upon Herod. After all, the accused was from Galilee. It should have been Herod's case to begin with, but Herod only sent the man back after seeing nothing in Jesus that warranted death. As Pilate had begun to really examine this man about the charge that he claimed to be Israel's true king, he found that Jesus didn't claim to be king in this world at all, but some other world. He was just about to come to the conclusion that Jesus was insane when those eyes pierced right to the depth of Pilate's soul and Jesus said, "Everyone on the side of truth listens to me." Did this man honestly believe that the great Pontius Pilate would become a follower? Even now, the thought of the stirrings within his own soul made him more than a bit uncomfortable.

A smile came to Pilate's lips as he recalled giving the crowd a choice as to who would be released as his normal Passover gesture. Pilate had chosen Bar-Abbas with particular care. After all, the man's name did mean "Son of the Father." Surely the crowd would choose Jesus over this bad boy. Most of Bar-Abbas' crimes had been against them. What had truly surprised him was the crowd insisting that he give them Bar-Abbas and crucify Jesus. This unruly mob wasn't even satisfied after Pilate had ordered Jesus to be scourged. Pilate thought sure that the sight of Jesus beaten half to death would stir some kind of sympathy vote among the population. Instead it only made them thirstier for blood.

As Pilate recalled the events of the day, he realized that he had no other alternative than to give them what they wanted. Pilate looked upon himself as a reasonable man and

would never condemn the innocent, but he was also a practical man. If it came down to giving up Jesus in return for peace, he would do it. Pilate remembered the basin of water that was brought to him and the feel of its coolness as he ceremonially washed himself of the blood of this innocent man. “Let his blood be on us and upon our children” was the crowd’s cry as they led Jesus off to Golgotha.

How many times do people trade the expedient for that which is eternal? In this busy existence we call life, there just doesn’t seem to be enough time for there to be a truly deep relationship with Jesus. One wonders if you asked him today if Pontius Pilate would still choose temporary peace over eternal peace what answer would you get. It is true there wasn’t a riot in Jerusalem that day and Pontius Pilate had lived to rule another day, but I just don’t think that after two thousand years in a place of extreme torment that is Hades, I doubt he would make the same decision as he made that day. When Jesus is present speaking in our heart through the Holy Spirit, He is offering us something that has eternal value. What do you have on your schedule today that can compare with that? Perhaps it is time that you slow down and listen?

What did God teach you about Himself today?

If you were Pilate, would you have handled things differently?

THE FINAL DAY
December 9th

The Scourging

Mark 15: 15, John 19: 1

Society as a whole tries very hard to inflict its punishment on those who truly deserve it. At least that's what it claims to do until you read a newspaper story about someone who has experienced society's punishment for something they didn't do. It is at that point that we mentally recoil and reexamine our own priorities and long for the day when only the guilty will receive punishment. Legislatures and agencies set about to create new rules and procedures to attempt to right the wrong and see that "this doesn't ever happen again." Unfortunately the same sentiment did not exist in first century Rome. Once Pontius Pilate received the case, there were procedures that were set in motion that occurred anytime someone was crucified. The first of those procedures would have been the process known as scourging.

Scourging was also called "the first death." It was designed to reduce a person's time on the cross by rendering such a beating that the body would be severely weakened. It was thought that in such a weakened state, the body would die more quickly. Both in Mark 15: 15 and John 19: 1, it is recorded that Jesus was scourged. In the timeline that John gives us, the process occurred before Pilate had issued his final judgment as a way of appeasing the blood-lust within the crowd that day. He was under the mistaken impression that if the people saw Jesus bloody and beaten, they would deem that to be punishment enough and would be satisfied.

In his book, *Crucifixion, It's Origin and Application to Christ,* author John Mattingly says, "The adjudged criminal was usually forcefully stripped of his clothes, and then tied to a post or pillar in the tribunal. Then the awful and cruel scourging was administered by lictors or scourgers. Although the Hebrews limited by their law the number of strokes in a scourging to forty, the Romans had no such limitations, and the victim was at the mercy of the scourgers." One can only imagine what these men did to someone who thought He was God.

The instrument of choice for the scourger is known as a Cat-O-Nine Tails. It was exactly what you picture it to be, a rope handle with nine cords protruding out from it. Imbedded in the cords were pieces of glass, broken pottery and sharp bits of metal. The scourger would flick the instrument so that the sharp objects would embed themselves into the victim at the base of the neck. With a sharp downward motion, the back would be lacerated. Bishop Eusebius of Ephesus, writing in the third century says concerning the Roman practice of scourging, "The sufferer's veins were laid bare, and the very muscles, sinews and bowels of the victim were open to exposure."

John Peter Lang in his book, *The Life of the Lord, Jesus Christ,* conjectures that the scourging of Jesus Christ surpassed the severity of what was normal for the time. He notes that instead of using professional scourgers, Pilate had Jesus turned over to Roman soldiers, whose vileness and cruelty were well noted.

If this was what Pontius Pilate would do to what he considered an innocent man, one wonders what would have happened to someone Pilate was really angry with. I have never been of an opinion that any of this was completely in the hands of man. Truly God was in control even at this point. Whenever I find myself tempted in some area, I think back to this scene and it helps me to remember what it cost Jesus to pay for what I am about to do. Somehow that seems to help me steer clear of a lot of things I have no business doing. At the very least, today's reading should drop us to our knees with a prayer of gratitude over what it cost Jesus to provide us with the "free" gift of eternal life.

What did God teach you about Himself today?

How does it affect you to understand what Jesus went through for you?

THE FINAL DAY
December 10th

Hail, King of the Jews
John 19: 2, Luke 22: 63-65, Mark 15: 20

There is no one better at ridicule than children. I'm not sure why that is true, but I am sure you still have vivid memories of times as a child when you were the object of that kind of ridicule. In the biography of Tom Brown, the great British theologian, the author writes, "A new boy had come to the school, and on his first night, in a room where there were twelve beds and boys, he knelt down to say his prayers. Tom Brown's head was turned just in time to see a heavy slipper flying through the air toward the head of the

kneeling boy. When the lights went out a little later, Tom Brown thought of his own mother, and the prayers that she had taught him to say, but which he had never said since he came to Rugby. Then and there he made a decision that the next time he went to bed, he, too, would say his prayers. When that next night came, the other boys in the room, ready to laugh and scoff at this newcomer who said his prayers, were amazed to see Tom Brown, whom they all respected and feared, kneel down at the side of his bed and pray. The boy's courageous prayer, in spite of ridicule, at length won him the respect of all his companions, and he rose to be one of the most distinguished men of the Church of England.”

In John 19: 2, there is recorded a time when Jesus was the object of such ridicule. We sometimes tend to overlook such a small episode in the middle of a much bigger picture, but then we might miss an important life lesson, and that would be a mistake. We had talked yesterday about the renowned cruelty of the soldiers who served Rome. One cannot assume that these men gently laid the crown of thorns upon the brow of Jesus. My feeling is that they jammed the crown with such force that the thorns would have bitten deeply into His scalp causing intense bleeding.

John also records that the soldiers placed a purple robe upon Jesus. What you have to remember is that Jesus' back was, by this time, mostly exposed muscle and bones. Such contact with the purple cloth would have caused waves of intense pain on the open wounds. It was at that point that I believe the soldiers began the game that was a cruel variation of our own “Blind Man's Bluff” as recorded in Luke 22: 63-65. They would

have gathered in a circle with Jesus blindfolded and standing in the middle. As the soldiers went up to Jesus and punched Him in the face, they would have demanded, “Prophecy! Who hit you?” It could be said that by the time Jesus reappeared before Pilate for His final judgment, he would have been unrecognizable.

As the blood would have started to clot, it would naturally cause the robe to adhere to what was left of Jesus’ back. Mark 15: 20 records that the purple robe was forcibly removed as Jesus was led away to be crucified. To add to the suffering of Jesus, there was placed on top of a bruised and bleeding shoulder a large and heavy piece of lumber which would have been the cross member of the cross that Jesus was to be hung from.

The point of all this is to not spoil your appetite, honest. When I read about all of the ridicule and physical abuse that was heaped on Jesus by these men, it makes me appreciate all the more what Jesus went through on my behalf. If ever there is a time when I doubt God’s love for me, I reread the descriptions of Jesus on His way to the cross. These Bible verses remove any doubts that I have. The reality is that God loves me enough to witness His only beloved Son experience this kind of abuse. I don’t understand it at times, but I am awfully glad He truly loves me.

What did God teach you about Himself today?

How do you react when someone ridicules you?

THE FINAL DAY
December 11th

The Road to Golgotha
Luke 23: 26-32

There are a lot of people who believe that the reason Jesus could not carry His own cross up the hill to Golgotha was as a result of the severe beating that He was given by the Roman Soldiers. I have always believed that to be an accurate statement. Located in the crowd was a man by the name of Simon. Matthew, Mark and Luke give us the man's name and Mark even tells us the name of his children, which have lead people to believe that this man and his children were well known in the early church. Whether that is true or not, I can only imagine what it would have been like for a rather large finger to point at you and a loud voice shout, "You, come over here and pick this thing up." For that one piece of effort, this Simon's name has endured for centuries. We are in Luke 23: 26-32 if you would like to read this section to make yourself more familiar.

We are told that Simon hailed from the City of Cyrene. Cyrene was the capitol city of the Roman province of Cyrenaica in Northern Africa. The region also controlled the island of Crete. It is believed that Simon was a part of the rather large Greek speaking population in that region who followed Judaism to the point of traveling the long distance over to Jerusalem for Passover. It is also believed that this particular Simon later believed in the one whose cross he now carried and is the same man that Luke refers to in Acts 13: 1. It is also believed that Simon's son, Rufus, is the same man Paul mentions in

Acts 16: 13. Of course without last names and lacking any parenting references for this man in the Bible, it is really difficult to be sure about any of this.

Another group of people that figure prominently in Luke's account are a group of women who followed the procession to the place of execution. These women also were touched by the cross of Jesus. The original Greek words that Luke used here means to be cut to the core of their hearts, or to be literally feeling each painful step that Jesus took on the road that day. There is, however, a large difference between a follower of Jesus lamenting of what had happened to their Master and someone who hates to see other people suffer pain. Given Jesus' response to their lamenting, it appears that these were members of the latter group. They would have lamented no matter who was on the road that day.

Even in all of the pain and torment that Jesus was feeling at the moment, He still makes the effort to give a word of warning to these women. The event He, no doubt, refers to will happen some thirty years after that day when Titus lead the Roman army into town to violently put down the great Jewish rebellion. Given what historians, such as Josephus, tell us about that awful time, Jesus words of warning were right on the money. In verse 31, we see what is thought to be a proverbial saying of the day. Jesus' warning to Israel is obvious. If Rome treats a green tree like this when it is full of the sap of life, what will happen to Israel when its sap is gone and the only benefit for Rome will be the heat it would give off as firewood?

When I read this section of the Bible, I am struck by the fact that even after all of the beating and pain, Jesus still thinks enough of His creation to give them another warning for them to change the course of their lives. There is just no way that I would ever be so generous. He had the power to stop this whole nonsense at any point, yet He chose not to do so. At the sound of His voice, the earth would have suddenly ceased to exist. He didn't do that. Instead He endured everything that His creation could throw at Him. That is love in its purest form.

What are we going to do with all of this? Today we saw God that continually reaches out to establish a relationship with His creation. Even beyond His last breath, Jesus continued to reach out to people. I have met people who for some reason or another thought they were beyond the forgiveness of God. One can't read today's Bible verses without understanding that no one, no matter how bad, is beyond the forgiveness of God if they just ask for it.

What did God teach you about Himself today?

Who have you given up on when it comes to salvation?

THE FINAL DAY
December 12th

Crucified
Matt. 27: 32-44, Mark 15: 22-32, Luke 23: 33-43, John 19: 16-27

There are two pivot points on which hinge the entire history of mankind. One pivot point is the crucifixion of Jesus Christ; the other is His resurrection. Since the crucifixion of Jesus Christ is important, all of the gospel writers gave record of its events. To gain a complete understanding of the events of the day, it would probably be a good idea for you to read Matthew 27: 32-44, Mark 15: 22-32, Luke 23: 33-43 and John 19: 16-27.

In my studies over the years, I have read both that crucifixion was invented by the Assyrians and the Phoenicians. Though there seems to be some disagreement about its origins, all agree that it was the Romans who perfected its use as a political deterrent. The only record of the Jews using this method of ending a life can be found in Josephus where he describes the Maccabean King Alexander, who apparently lacked a sense of human decency and a sense of his own religion, when he had eight hundred of his enemies crucified at the same time. During the final siege of Jerusalem in 70 AD, it is said that so many Jews were crucified that the Romans ran out of wood to make the crosses.

It cannot be overemphasized that the suffering crucifixion brought was intense and severe. Frederick Farrar, in his book, "The Life of Christ," says, "For indeed a death by crucifixion seems to include all that pain and death can have of horrible and ghastly; dizziness, cramp, thirst, starvation, sleeplessness, traumatic fever, tetanus, shame, publicity of shame, long continuance of torture, horror of anticipation, mortification of untended wounds, all intensified just up to the point at which they can be endured at all, but stopping just short of the point which give the sufferer the relief of unconsciousness.

The unnatural position made every movement painful; the lacerated veins and crushed tendons throbbed with incessant anguish; the wounds, inflamed by exposure, gradually gangrened; the arteries, especially at the head and stomach became swollen and oppressed with surcharged blood; and while each variety of misery went on gradually increasing, there was added to them the intolerable pang of a burning and raging thirst; and all of these physical complications caused an internal excitement and anxiety, which made the prospect of death, the unknown enemy, at whose approach man usually shudders most, bear the aspect of delicious and exquisite release.”

First the cross member was laid upon the ground to which Jesus’ arms would have been bound by ropes. Then the soldiers would have pounded two sharp nails into first the right hand and then the left. The cross member was then hauled into place up the vertical member, which had previously been placed in a hole used solely for that purpose. When Jesus reached a suitable height, the cross member would have been either tied or nailed into its place and His feet nailed to the vertical beam. The nailing of the feet was done to enable the victim to breath and so prolong the agony. When Jesus needed to take a breath, He would have to put weight on his feet to raise his chest enough to be able to take in air. The very act of breathing would then send shots of pain throughout His body. The final stage of crucifixion would have been the placing of a sign above the victim’s head that listed the charges for which He was condemned. I never cease to be amazed at the depths of the cruelty that mankind can attain. Who could have ever imagined or thought up such a cruel way to put someone to death?

At this particular moment in history, I can imagine that there was a great party going on as Satan and his fallen angels believed they had good cause to celebrate. They were busy declaring victory as God's son, who had tried to challenge Satan's control of the earth, was hanging there waiting to die. The devil is also a created being, and as such, does not have the power to see the future. He could not see that in three days all of his hopes of escaping the wrath of God for his rebellion would forever be crushed. Sometimes it is a good idea to wait until the last chapter is written before one declares victory.

What did God teach you about Himself today?

What would you say to someone who thinks that people are basically good?

THE FINAL DAY
December 13th

The Seven Sayings

Matt. 27: 46; Luke 23: 34, 43, 46; John 19: 26-28, 36

Over the last thirty or so years that I have known Jesus I have found today's topic to be a favorite for some of the pastors that I have sat under. I suppose the attraction lies in the idea that the last words that a person says on earth are important enough for us to sit up and take notice. When the words spoken come from the lips of God's only Son, that makes those words all the more important. Today, we will be taking a look at those words in order to gain some insight into what Jesus was thinking in those final moments

of His time here on earth. Since to find these final seven sayings, you have to look in three of the four gospels, it is impossible to say with any degree of certainty their exact order. Yet I've never felt that the order is as important as the words themselves.

The first words of Jesus that we will take a look at can be found in Matthew 27: 46 where Jesus says, "My God, why have you forsaken me." I have heard it said that the crucifixion was no big deal. Anyone can endure pain for a brief time. I believe that these words represent the real torture that the cross held for Jesus. It is at this point in time when Jesus is bearing the sins of everyone who has accepted His free gift of salvation, that God turns His back on His only Son for the first and only time in all of eternity. According to the prophet Habakkuk, "God's eyes are too pure to look on evil." (Hab. 1: 13) That is true even when it involved Jesus Christ. We have noted before that the one constant that appears in Jesus' life was that He walked in lock-step with God, the Father. The communication and the fellowship between the Father and the Son was only broken at this particular moment. The loss of that fellowship by Jesus would have been torture for Him of the most extreme magnitude.

Jesus' second words can be found in Luke 23: 34 where He asks God to forgive those mocking Him as they didn't know what they were doing. Stephen, when he was being stoned to death used similar words (Acts 7: 60). In Isaiah 53: 12 it was predicted that Jesus would pray for the sins of others. This represents a fulfillment of that prophesy. As I have said before, the attitude of Jesus here is a wonderful illustration of

just how much God loves His creation. To see Jesus, after enduring the torture that His body went through, still love these creatures is more than I can understand.

The third saying was directed at one of the other men who were being crucified along with Jesus. In Luke 23: 43, we see the assurance of paradise for this man who had lived his life in rebellion against God only to turn at the final moments of life to the only one who could save him from the surety of God's punishment. These words tell us that no one is beyond hope when it comes to the forgiveness of God. This man had time in his final moments, however, to ask God to forgive him. That doesn't always happen.

The fourth saying is directed at two people who were the closest to Jesus during His life here on earth. John 19: 26, 27 say that both Jesus' mother and the Apostle John were present at the foot of the cross that day. Here we see that even in a moment of intense pain and suffering, Jesus was still thinking of others. Any supporter of Jesus who stood at the cross ran the risk of ridicule and arrest. Still these two stood by Him simply because they loved Him. He had done so much for them that they were willing to stand by Him no matter the cost. Here the Apostle John is commissioned to take care of Mary's future.

The fifth saying is also found in John 19: 28 where Jesus declares that He is thirsty. We have already said that the process of crucifixion produces a blazing and unquenchable thirst. These words prompt some soul to send up a sponge of wine vinegar

in case Elijah showed up suddenly. At least this guy would be seen helping matters and might escape any punishment that might be meted out.

The final two sayings were undoubtedly said at the same time. John 19: 36 say that Jesus declared, “It is finished.” Luke 23: 46 records that Jesus said, “Into your hands I commit my spirit.” It is with those words that Jesus voluntarily gave up His life and died. These words represent a great victorious purpose in which Jesus’ life ended. God’s plan was now complete. Jesus had accomplished everything that had been planned since the beginning of time. These were not the words of a martyr. These were the words of a victorious conqueror.

Well that’s the list. My point is not to merely list these final sayings. If you will allow these final words to seep into your heart, you will find they will produce a profound effect. In my mind, they sum up the words and the works of Jesus Christ while He was here on earth. What these words will do within your own heart is between you and God.

What did God teach you about Himself today?

Which of the saying of Jesus struck you the most?

THE FINAL DAY
December 14th

Was Jesus Dead?

John 19: 31-37, Mark 15: 39-45

Why would we even entertain such a thought as this? Probably because one of the more prevalent theories used to explain away the resurrection of Jesus Christ lies in the supposition that He really wasn't dead, but had only fainted. To answer this question, we will be turning to several eye-witness accounts that will show beyond any kind of doubt that Jesus was, in fact, dead. Of course if you are dealing with eye-witness accounts of Jesus' crucifixion, you have to start your investigation with the Apostle John. As we have said before, John was physically present throughout Jesus' crucifixion. He writes the things that he actually saw and describes them in the minutest detail so that all who read his words might believe in the One whom he loved and followed. So why not take a moment and read John 19: 31-37 and we'll get started.

John records that it was a concern of the Jewish leadership that there not be any bodies left on the crosses that would otherwise mar a perfectly good Passover. That being the case, they went to our old friend, Pontius Pilate, and asked that the legs of the victims be broken so that death would come quickly and the bodies could then be removed. You have to remember that Golgotha was on a hill and could be seen from quite a distance. The sight of the tortured agony of these men might distract from the importance of Passover. As I said a couple of days ago, the only way to breathe on the cross was to stand on one's nail-pierced feet. Once the legs were broken that could no longer take place and the men would quickly suffocate and die. John records that the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first thief and then the other. When he came to

Jesus, the soldier did not break the legs because he saw that Jesus was already dead. This soldier was a professional who knew death when he saw it. So our first witness that Jesus was dead was this soldier.

The second bit of evidence comes when another soldier sticks a spear into Jesus' side in John 19: 34. John describes exactly what happened when Jesus' side was pierced. Did you notice that John did not say that the blood came pulsing out? That would indicate either the spear failed to strike an artery or Jesus was already dead. To determine which we turn to the second thing John records. John also describes a scene where both blood and water came out of the open wound in Jesus' side. The spear must have been thrust into Jesus' heart to verify death. There have been several pathologists who have stated that the phenomenon that John records only happens when there is a rupturing of the heart muscle. In that case the blood within the heart and the fluid within the pericardium surrounding the heart both come out separately. In other words, Jesus literally died from a broken heart.

A third bit of evidence that Jesus was dead comes from Mark's account. In Mark 15: 39-45, after Jesus' death Joseph of Arimathea went boldly to Pilate to ask for Jesus' body. Pontius Pilate was surprised to learn that Jesus was already dead. It was at that point that he summoned the Centurion in charge to verify the fact that Jesus was dead. If this professional had not verified that Jesus was dead, His body would never have been released to Joseph.

So there you have it. If a fact is established by the testimony of two witnesses, this one is more certain because we have three different eye-witnesses concerning the death of Jesus. Since two of the three witnesses had nothing to gain by telling a lie, we can be completely certain that Jesus was, in fact, dead.

I suppose there are those who are saying right now, “What is the big deal?” As Paul told the Corinthian church, Christianity rises or falls over the fact of the resurrection. It is so important that over the next several days, we will be taking a close look at what surrounded the greatest miracle in history. Since the resurrection of Jesus Christ is so important, it is important that you understand the entire scene. To my way of thinking that makes it a really “big deal.”

What did God teach you about Himself today?

Do you believe Jesus died on the cross?

RESURRECTION
December 15th

The Tomb
1 Corinthians 15: 12-19; Matt. 27: 57-61

The Apostle Paul wrote in the first century to the Corinthian church, “But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ

has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.” (1 Corinthians 15: 12-19) It is the fact of the resurrection of Jesus Christ that sets Christianity apart from all other world religions. You can go to the tombs of all other religious leaders. It is only Jesus who boasts an empty tomb.

If you start with the premise that what Paul told the Corinthian church is true, then it become really important for Christians to understand the historical records that lie behind this most important of world events. I have always been one whose faith needs to be underpinned with facts. My heart and mind must be united if I am going to give my life to any cause, no matter how worthy. So it is with that need that I first began to do my own investigation into the facts of the resurrection. I started my journey by devouring Josh McDowell’s masterpiece, “Evidence That Demands a Verdict.” This book has been a great anchor for my faith. Next I read Paul Little’s book, “Know Why You Believe.” This is also a great book if you need some facts to back up your faith. I highly recommend both books for anyone wishing to gain an anchor with which to pin your newfound faith in Jesus Christ. That being said, let’s get on with our look at the historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus.

It was normal custom for a crucified individual in Israel to be buried in a common grave. The three individuals who died that day would have been thrown into the same pit. I say this was Jewish custom because the Roman custom was to let the bodies rot on the cross until they were devoured by the birds or by beasts. Remember the Romans used crucifixion as a deterrent for major crimes such as rebellion. It was Jewish law that demanded the burial of all its people. In this case in order to keep the peace, the Jews won out.

If you take a look at Matthew 27: 57-61, you see that Jesus was not thrown into a common grave. As we talked about yesterday, Joseph of Arimathea had requested and received the body of Jesus in order that He might be buried in a private tomb that Joseph had previously prepared for himself. Matthew describes this tomb as being carved into a large rock. We get the idea that this tomb was in a garden setting from John 20: 15 where Mary Magdalene thought the risen Jesus was the gardener.

I have read that such tombs were hollowed out from solid rock at great expense. In the center of the burial chamber there was left either coming out of the floor or cut into the walls a stone couch or niche. The couch was level, with a two inch indentation its entire length, large enough for the body to rest in. There was a raised part at one end of the couch to support the head and serve as a pillow. Matthew also records that there was a large stone in the shape of a disk or saucer that was rolled down a groove to a place

where it would cover the entrance into the tomb and keep it safe from animals and robbers. We'll talk more about that stone later.

We spent today talking about the tomb because it is important to understand that Jesus' tomb was set apart all by itself. It was not in a graveyard as we know it. This plot of land had but one purpose; to hold the body of Joseph and his family. Joseph willingly gave it up so that mankind would have adequate proof of what was about to happen.

What did God teach you about Himself today?

What would you say to someone who believed everyone went to the wrong tomb?

RESURRECTION
December 16th

The Burial of Jesus

Mark 15: 33; John 19: 39, 40, Matt. 27: 61

There are two reasons why the Jews buried their dead immediately. The first is the warm climate that is present in Palestine. Such climate tends to speed the decaying process along. The second reason for quick burials is the belief that a dead body is unclean and unacceptable to God. So for both reasons bodies were not left around any great time. What we will talk about today is to first talk about the normal burial practice in first century Israel and then the difference between the norm and what took place with the body of Jesus Christ. That is because the differences do play a role in our story.

When someone died in Israel, the first thing that was done was to wash and straighten out the body. Next the body was coated with a gummy, sticky substance such as nard, an expensive fragrance derived from the root of the herb, *nardostachys jatamans*. Next the body was wrapped in foot wide strips of linen cloths. They would start just under the arms and would wrap around the body right down to the feet and then they would wrap each arm separately. In between the strips of linen was placed a mixture of myrrh and aloes. Myrrh was an aromatic gummy substance and aloes was an aromatic wood that was ground into a powder. The combination of these two ingredients would cause the linen strips to be bound together to form a rather tight cocoon around the body that wasn't going anywhere. Finally the head and hair were anointed with more unguent and wrapped in more linen similar to a turban we see today. That was the normal custom for Jewish burial.

What separated Jesus' burial from the norm was the role time played in our story. According to Mark 15: 33, Jesus died at approximately 3:00 PM. The participants had to be finished with their task by 6:00 PM, the beginning of the Passover celebration. You also have to allow for time for Joseph to go to Pilate to ask permission to take the body, and you have to allow for the time it would take to get Jesus' body off the cross and carry it over to the nearby tomb. Jesus' body would have been quickly washed. John 19: 39, 40 say the body was wrapped in linen strips with the myrrh and aloes between the layers but no unguents were used to seal the body. That is what the ladies were bringing to the tomb on Sunday. (Mark 16: 1) Their intent was to finish the job of burying Jesus.

It should also be noted that John 19: 39 tells us the amount of myrrh and aloes they used to seal the body of the Lord. The original language John uses says that the men brought a hundred litra to do the job. Now a litra is twelve of our ounces. Some modern translations tell us they used about seventy-five pounds. Even the great Jewish teacher, Rabban Gamaliel, was only buried with eighty litra. This shows the great love and respect that was held for Jesus by both Joseph of Arimathea and our old friend, Nicodemus.

Another thing also needs to be brought to our attention. We already know that Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus knew the location of the tomb. Matthew 27: 61 says that the two Marys were also present and could easily find the tomb again. That is important because both of these ladies were part of the group who headed back out to the tomb that first Easter morning.

How much do you love Jesus? For these men their love for Jesus was shown by their generosity. Do you shudder each time the offering plate passes by? Are you tempted to reach in and grab some money because you are sure that others must be better off than you? To be sure Joseph and Nicodemus were wealthy men, but they recognized that whatever they had belonged to God and nothing was too good for Him. They also had a sense that whatever they had earned in their lifetimes came as a direct result of God's favor and actually belonged to God. When it came time for them to give back to God, they only gave the best that they had. It would not have been good enough for them

to reach in their pocket for a little “spare change.” They saw the need and went over and above to meet that need. Why not take a moment and review your giving record with God. Perhaps there is something that God wants you to do with His money. Just remember that when you obey God and give what He directs, He will pay you back with a whole lot of interest.

What did God teach you about Himself today?

Are you willing to invest in God’s work?

**RESURRECTION
December 17th**

**An Exercise in Futility
Matt. 27: 62-66**

A few years ago there was a really funny commercial that centered on a group of cat herders. I found the piece totally hysterical because for most of my life I have lived in close proximity to at least one cat in my house. Based upon my experience, you can’t get a single cat to consistently do what you want much less a whole group of cats. To me the entire idea of herding cats would be an exercise in futility. While we are not going to enter into a discussion about the idiosyncrasies of the cat, we are going to be talking about another exercise in futility that was done on the evening following Jesus’ crucifixion. That would be the attempt by the Jewish leadership to place a guard around the tomb of Jesus Christ in case He tried to escape.

In Matthew 27: 62-66 we read about the Jewish leaders once more appearing before Pontius Pilate requesting that a guard be placed at the tomb to ensure that the disciples didn't steal the body and claim it to be a fulfillment of Jesus' prophesy that He would rise from the dead. I suppose that for there to be a missing body on Sunday would be a bit embarrassing for the Jewish leadership. Still, if you think about it, I suppose their actions were perfectly logical given what they knew to be true. If you believed Jesus to be a mere man, then the only way He would disappear would be if someone stole His body.

There is a bit of confusion in this section of the Bible revolving around Pilate's response in verse 65. The literal translation of the original language can either mean "You have your own temple guard, use them", or it can mean that Pilate was granting the Jews their request for Roman soldiers to guard the tomb. Most people that I have read believe the guard to be Roman. They cite that if the guard were temple guards, then the whole episode that surrounds Matthew 28: 13-15 makes no sense. That's where Mathew records that those same guards, who had failed at their task of guarding the body and were now at risk for their lives, went right to the Jewish leadership because that was their only hope.

Assuming these men to be Roman, they would have been made up of at least four heavily armed and trained soldiers. Each of them would have carried with them a Roman pike, which is a javelin like spear six feet in length. Each of them would also carry their sword, a dagger and a large shield. The other thing that you can say of these men is that

there is no way they would ever fall asleep. Falling asleep at an assigned post was punishable by death, a punishment rigorously enforced by Rome.

When these soldiers got to the tomb, they immediately sealed it. That means they placed a cord across the stone which was attached at each end by a large chunk of wax. Into the wax on each end a signet ring was used to leave a mark which was a symbol of Rome's power and authority. To break that seal was to put the full force of Roman rule against you. The guards had no care as to what was inside that tomb. They had a duty to perform. Only the seal that lay across that stone was sacred to these men.

The largest problem that we see here is that for all of their preparations and precautions, the only thing the High Priest and the Pharisees accomplished was to give the world absolute proof that Jesus rose from the dead. These men could not have done a better job if they had actually set out to do just that. That's what happens when you close your mind and refuse to acknowledge God. He is going to accomplish His will and there is nothing that anyone can do to thwart the working of that will. The only thing that you do is to put yourself in a position of being in opposition to God and being made to look the fool. In my opinion that's not a very pleasant place to be.

So when do we find ourselves in this kind of predicament? We can easily find ourselves working against God when we arrogantly believe that we know all there is to know about God. We proceed on that assumption and only later find out that we really don't know God very well at all. That's what happened here. The Jewish leadership

could not conceive that their knowledge of God was wrong. They believed they had all of the answers and they acted accordingly. The problem was that they actually knew very little about God. I said it a month ago. You will never act differently than you think deeply. Knowing God is a life long process. I find that when I am in a learning mode when it comes to God that He begins to show me things that I never knew before. That learning and growing stops when my pride takes over and I think I have it all down. There is so much about God to know that it takes a lifetime to only scratch the surface. My advice to those of you who are reading this today is to dedicate yourself to a lifetime of learning about God, and never allow yourself to believe for a second that you know everything there is to know about God.

What did God teach you about Himself today?

Do you consider yourself just a learner when it comes to God?

**RESURRECTION
December 18th**

A Very Special Morning

Matt. 28: 1-10, Mark 16: 1-8, Luke 24: 1-12, John 20: 1-18

In his book, “The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah,” Alfred Edersheim draws a parallel between the way Jesus entered the world and the way He left it. If you think about it both are a bit unusual. To understand the significance, try to look at each event as bookends of a life that was in most respects unique. In some ways it is true that Jesus

lived much the same way we live. He got up in the morning. He ate. He slept. Yet His life was very much different from the one that I currently lead. I have never healed anyone or walked on water. Thinking in those terms, the resurrection of Jesus becomes all the more believable. At the same time that we look at the resurrection as a physical event, we cannot fail to look at it in its spiritual context. The resurrection of Jesus has to be viewed as an event that guarantees our own entry into the Kingdom of God. That's why the resurrection is so important.

As we talked about before, the resurrection is what separates Jesus from all others in the history of man's search for his creator. One would expect that the event would be recorded in each of the four gospels and that would be right. As we read the accounts in Matthew 28: 1-15, Mark 16: 1-8, Luke 24: 1-12 and John 20: 1-18, what we read are not four very similar accounts of the same event, but there are differences as each writer gives his own take on the events that occurred on that very special morning. There is only one of the gospel writers who actually walked into the empty tomb that Sunday morning. That would be the Apostle John. John records that Peter also was with him and entered into the tomb, yet the Gospel of Mark, for which tradition says was given to Mark by Peter, does not mention Peter even being there. That is why I made the statement that the only way one can get a complete picture is to read all four accounts and attempt to piece together all of the events that day, and that is what we will attempt to do.

As dawn breaks and the sun is just beginning to peak over the horizon, we would see a group of ladies quietly walking through the morning mist. They carry jars of spice

that would be used to properly prepare their dead Savior for His final rest. Some of the women are named, like Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the Less, Salome and Joanna. The other women in this somber party are not named. The only conversation that we are given is over the logistical problem of how they were going to get the heavy stone moved out of the way so they could complete their task.

As the women arrive at the tomb, their worry about moving the stone proves moot as they find the stone already rolled up the incline and the door to the tomb wide open. Matthew gives a sort of parenthesis in his account by telling us that there was a violent earthquake and that the stone was rolled back using angelic force. The earth wasn't the only thing shaking that morning. Matthew also tells us that the Roman guards were doing a bit of shaking. He records that these Romans were witnesses to the heavenly visitors, and that their appearance was like lightening and he even describes their glistening white attire. They could only drop in silence and shake with fear at this sight as they became like dead men. The fact is Jesus didn't really need the stone rolled away. That was done for our benefit.

The women were on their way to lovingly deal with a dead Savior. His earlier words about rising from the dead were not yet living within their hearts. The same thing is true of anyone who approaches Jesus from a strictly historical perspective. There are some who like to view Him as a good teacher or as someone who came and changed a bit of history. That way we can tuck him in some forgotten corner of our mind and are free to go about living our lives the way we want to. What these women saw that morning

changed all of that. The same thing needs to be true in our own thinking. Jesus is just as alive today as He was that morning. He requires that we get away from the idea that we serve Him out of habit each Sunday morning as if He is some relic in a dusty museum. Rather He is someone who must be dealt with every day and in all circumstances. That's what you do with living Saviors who are present with you always. You live your life differently. You live each day with a sense of wonderment at just what Jesus will have you do today. Are you currently living like that? If not, why not?

What did God teach you about Himself today?

In what ways is Jesus alive to you right now?

RESURRECTION
December 19th

The Living Among the Dead
Luke 24: 1-12

After the Sabbath, a group of somber women finally arrived at a garden tomb area that was formerly owned by a prominent member of the Jewish Sanhedrin by the name of Joseph. They had come with the express purpose of doing the final preparations for one they all believed to be Israel's great hope. Each one of them was remembering all of the times Jesus had looked in their eyes and how He had revealed things that they had believed to be long hidden. Each of them remembered the times He had relieved the suffering, both within them and within a large number of the population. They

remembered how their hearts burned when He explained all of the mysteries of the Torah. Yet their hearts were deeply saddened as they remembered the cross. How could their people have done such an awful thing? Why didn't they understand? Why hadn't the Jews accepted Jesus as they had done?

As they arrived at the tomb, they were more than a little startled to see that the large stone, covering the entrance into the tomb, had been rolled away. They had talked on the way about how they were going to gain entrance into the tomb. One of them had even offered that they would have to go looking for some strong men if they were to be able to complete their task. It's just that they never expected the job to be done and the tomb to be already opened.

As the women entered into the tomb, their eyes struggled to adjust to the darkness. They truly hoped that they would see the body of their Lord. Suddenly from their right a great light burst forth. Turning towards the source of light, they found that the tomb was suddenly lit by the very presence of what they believed to be two men. Yet these were not ordinary men, for their clothing was so white they produced a glow that now filled the entire area. A fear like nothing they had ever known gripped their hearts as they found themselves bowing down; their faces buried in the ground. One of these strange men said, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified. He has risen. He is not here. See the place where they laid Him." "Remember how He told you, while He was still with you in Galilee that He must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised

again.” As they thought back, each of these women could picture Jesus as He had said those very words to them. They could remember being quite puzzled at the time, but to see the sight that was before them and to hear the words of these men, made that puzzlement go away. What replaced it was only the beginning of understanding. While they had heard the words of these angels, they still didn’t grasp their true meaning.

The women hurried away from the tomb feeling a mixture of confusion and great joy as they ran to tell the other disciples. After all, it’s not every day that you get to hear from angels. They found the disciples right where they expected to find them, hiding in a secret room within the walls of Jerusalem. Each disciple had been quietly dealing with their own betrayal of their Master and Lord. He had been there so often for each of them, yet they had run like scared rabbits when confronted by the might and power of Rome and their fellow Jews. As the women told their tale, most of the men dismissed it as mere ramblings of terrified women. Only Peter and John, led by Mary Magdalene bolted out the front door and raced to the garden tomb that morning.

Why do you look for the living among the dead? I have never been able to understand the great attraction. Why does someone choose dead ritual and rules over a relationship with a living savior? Is there that much comfort in rules? I suppose there is some sense of security in rules. If you obey them, you do feel like you’ve accomplished something, but nobody gets it right all of the time. It is true that relationships are much harder especially when one is dealing with the creator of the universe. Yet I have always found that relationships are far more fulfilling. They have to involve a lot of

communication and are filled with a sense of the unknown as you enter each day. How about you? Do you understand it? Do you tend to live each day by a set of rules? Perhaps it would be a good thing for your first thought of each day to be something like, "Good morning, Lord, what are we going to do together today?"

What did God teach you about Himself today?

Do you consider your faith living or dead?

RESURRECTION
December 20th

A Foot Race
John 20: 1-10

Author Griffith Thomas writes, "When the great missionary, John C. Paton, was translating the Scriptures for his South Sea Islanders, apparently there was no word for "believe" in their native tongue. For a long while he was well-nigh baffled. One day a native came into his study and, tired out, flung himself down on a chair, rested his feet on another chair and laid back full length, saying as he did so something about how good it was to lean his whole weight on those chairs. Instantly Dr. Paton noted the word the man used for 'lean his whole weight on.' The missionary had his word for 'believe.' He used it at once and thereafter in translating the Scriptures. Try it for yourself and see, in any verse that uses the word 'believe.'"

The Apostle John gives the world a unique perspective on the events of that first Easter morning. As you read John 20: 1-10, you find out that Mary Magdalene went right to Peter and John to tell them of her discovery of an empty tomb. Notice that she didn't yet know the answer as to what had happened to her master, but she knew that His body was gone. What you have happening next is a foot race between the two Apostles. John runs faster and arrives at the tomb first. He says he bent over and peered into the tomb, but did not go in. I don't know. Perhaps he feared disturbing something or that someone would object to him entering the place. Peter suffers from no such reluctance. When he finally arrives he goes straight in and at that point John follows Peter into the darkened tomb.

As you read these verses, did you notice that John describes when he saw inside the tomb twice? Whenever something is repeated in the Bible, it's because it is important. John says that he saw the linen strips lying there. If they were not on the burial couch, he would have noted it, so we have to assume his description is exactly where the burial clothes were located. John also notices that the head cloth was rolled up and lying in its original place. What John says next is more important to what we are talking about. John says that he saw and believed. That belief was not because of any great knowledge of the Old Testament. He now had the ability to lean his whole weight upon the fact of who Jesus is and the fact that everything His Master had told Him was the absolute truth.

Before we think about this whole idea of belief, let's take a moment to think about what Peter and John did not see in the tomb that day. Notice John does not say that the

linen strips were missing as would have been the case if the body were stolen. Notice that the linen strips weren't disheveled as if a tomb robber had entered the tomb. John doesn't even say that the cloths were rolled up and tossed in a corner. If you were in the tomb at the time at the exact moment the resurrection happened, you would have seen Jesus' body simply disappear. The linen cloths would have collapsed under the weight of all of that myrrh and aloes. The head cloth that was wrapped around the head would have simply rolled up upon itself. That is exactly how John describes the scene that he witnessed that morning.

Professor Henry Latham, in his book "The Risen Master" writes, "There lie the clothes, they are fallen a little together, but are still wrapped, fold over fold, and no grain of spice is displaced. The napkin, too, is lying on the low step which serves as a pillow for the head of the corpse; it is twisted into a sort of a wig, and is all by itself. The very quietude of the scene makes it seem to have something to say. It spoke to those who saw it, and it speaks to me when I conjure it before my mind's eye, with the morning light from the open doorway streaming in. What it says, I make out to be this: All that was Jesus of Nazareth has suffered its change and is gone. We, grave clothes, and spices, and napkin, belong to the earth and remain."

What does it say to you? What are you now going to lean your whole weight on?

What did God teach you about Himself today?

What are you now going to lean your whole weight on?

RESURRECTION
December 21st

Mary, the Magdalene
John 20: 11-18

There has been a lot of conjecture about Mary Magdalene over the centuries. Was she married to Jesus, as some say? All I can say is that I have always found it best to stick to what is said about her from reliable sources. The Bible only says three things about this Mary. The first is that she is from the Galilean town of Magdala. Magdala was located on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee and was known for its manufacture of fine woolen cloth and its dye making factories. Second we know that she was one of the women Jesus counted on for financial support for His ministry. Finally Luke 8: 2 says that Jesus had cast seven demons out of her. That's all we reliably know about Mary.

In John 20: 11-18 we see the first of many post resurrection appearances by Jesus. The first thing we notice is that Mary was crying. The original language indicates that Mary was wailing loudly, such a lament that can only come from deep within her own soul. She pauses her crying to gaze intently into the empty tomb. As she did so, the tomb no longer seemed so empty. John tells us that there were now two angels sitting in the place where Jesus' head and feet had been a bit earlier. These angels had been sent for her in particular for they were not there when Peter and John had peered in a few

moments before. These angels are messengers from God with quite a message. They asked, “Why do you weep?” Is there a reason for such mourning? In Mary’s response we see the essence of practicality. All she wanted to know was where Jesus’ body was. Mary was seeking a dead Savior who was like all other men; frail and powerless to do anything about life, death, eternity or heaven.

As Mary was speaking to the angels, she sensed another presence. She turned around and saw someone standing there. The question has to be asked why she didn’t recognize the One to whom she had been so close? It is possible that she was so into her grief that she would not have recognized her own mother at the time. It is possible the answer lies in the fact that her eyes were full of tears and had just gone from the darkened tomb to the bright sunlight. Some have even speculated that Jesus’ post resurrection appearance was different than how He looked in life.

Jesus asks Mary the same question the angels asked her, but adds another question. He gives all of us a great lesson in dealing with grief. There must be a limit. All too often we see the dead and get so wrapped up in our grief that we forget the risen Lord and the great hope He gives us. Mary could have and probably should have seen her Lord far sooner. It is not until Jesus calls her by name that her eyes were opened. Mary calls Him Rabboni, a title that has far more honor than Rabbi. She is acknowledging Him as her Master and putting herself in a position of being but a humble follower.

In her joy, Mary tries to cling to Jesus and is rebuked. Another question we have to ask at this point is why did Jesus do that? The answer lies in the fact that the relationship had changed. The Jesus that Mary knew no longer existed. He was no longer just her Rabboni. He was her Lord and her God. She wanted to cling to the relationship that she had always enjoyed with Jesus. That relationship had changed a bit as Jesus was soon to ascend back into His Father's presence. Now was not the time for clutching and clinging. Besides she had another job to do. She must run and tell everyone of her great discovery. Obediently she goes to tell the others of what had just happened to her.

Grief affects each of us a bit differently. Earlier this year my father died and I am still, at times, touched with sadness. What if it had been my wife or one of my children, how would I respond? Jesus gives me a hope in this passage that, like Mary, He would lift me out of the paralysis of grief by giving me a glimpse of the bigger picture. We have talked a lot about living every moment for Him. The same thing has to be said when we are dealing with grief. For even in death, Jesus gives us hope and a peace that passes all understanding.

What did God teach you about Himself today?

How has God helped you deal with grief in the past?

RESURRECTION
December 22nd

The Guard's Dilemma

Matt. 28: 2-4, 11-15

Rome was indeed proud of her great army and they had good reason to feel that way. It was that army that had allowed them to conquer the known world. Rome's power and influence stretched around the Mediterranean Sea. All who had resisted her had been ruthlessly crushed by that great army. For most historians I have read, the strength of the Roman army lay in its organization and discipline while fighting. In other words, they fought as one. As we take a look at this one particular segment of the Roman army on guard at a garden tomb, we don't see any of the organized might that people in the first century had come to fear.

In Matthew 28: 2-4 we see that before the sun came up, there was a violent earthquake and the sight of an angel alighting on the stone covering the tomb of Jesus Christ. We can imagine that the sacred Roman seal was snapped easily as the stone was mightily rolled away from the entrance. The guards didn't rally to meet the opposition with the usual fierceness that they were known for. Rather Matthew records that they fell to the earth like dead men. That could mean that they were either rendered unconscious by the awesome power of God or they pretended to be. In either case, they knew they were no match of that kind of power. They were sent there to protect the tomb from thieves, not from the Creator of the universe.

Now as the tomb lay empty and the Roman seal broken, these men are in serious trouble. As I said before, in failing to do an assigned task, the Roman soldier was subject

to the same punishment that those they guarded were to face. Since this was a death penalty case, their failure would have been punishable by death also. That is why these Romans went to their only source of salvation, the Jewish leadership. After all, it had been at the request of that leadership that they had been assigned their task in the first place. If they went back to their commander, they knew what would happen.

Matthew 28: 11-15 records that these soldiers reported to the Jewish chief priests everything they had witnessed. The chief priests were baffled by the situation and quickly devised a plan. They bribed the guards to say that while they were asleep, the disciples came and stole the body. Of course the explanation was a stretch. After all, if the guards were asleep, how could they know what happened? Yet it was the only course of action that came to these men. The chief priests also told the guards that if they played ball, they would be kept out of trouble with their Roman commanders.

In verse 15, Matthew records that the theft theory was widely circulated among the Jews for the next thirty years. Actually you will still run across it at times when people try to discredit the facts that surround the resurrection. Unfortunately this explanation doesn't stand up to the facts of the matter for four different reasons. First the enemies of Jesus had no motive to remove the body. Second the disciples of Jesus had no power to do so. The third reason the theory doesn't hold up is the witness of the grave clothes. It is highly unlikely that someone would sneak in past sleeping Roman soldiers and take the time to unwrap the body. Finally we see the reality of the changes that happened in the

lives of the disciples as a result of what happened that night. Men do not die for a cause they know to be a lie.

If one is going to discredit Christianity, it has to start at the resurrection. For if this event actually happened, it creates quite a dilemma. The guards turned to human sources for their salvation. To be sure, these men's lives were saved, but only for a short time. The alternative would have been for them to believe what their eyes had seen and turn to God for their salvation. People like to think of themselves as somehow better than these soldiers. Yet, how many times I do the very same thing they did. I rely on my own intelligence and my own skills for the answers to life's everyday problems. What I get is usually a workable solution for the issue at hand. What I should be doing is to rely more on God and less on me. That way I not only get a far more lasting solution, but I also get to see God at work in my life. Of course, knowing it and doing it are two different things. So I guess I will try again to let God do His will in my life today and see where that takes me.

What did God teach you about Himself today?

Who do you rely on?

RESURRECTION
December 23rd

Emmaus

Luke 24: 13-35

In the first century if you were to travel the road west of Jerusalem for about seven miles, you would arrive at the city of Emmaus, a name that means “hot baths.” Today the exact sight of the city is not known. As we zoom in on that road at the exact moment Luke describes, we see two men walking. Upon closer inspection we can see them deep in thought and discussion with a pronounced sadness present in the tone of their voices. We know one of the men is Cleopas because Luke 24: 18 tells us his name; the other man will forever remain unknown. Their discussion was dipped in disappointment; for they had so hoped that Jesus was the promised Messiah. Now everything they had ever hoped for was dashed to bits by a Roman cross. Totally unknown to these men, there appears a third man and joins the two in their journey. They are quite unaware of His presence until He asks the question, “What are you discussing together as you walk along?” Surprised that anyone on the planet would not know about the recent events in Jerusalem, they began to describe what happened over the last couple of days. They also included an account of the incredible report from the women about Jesus’ body being missing.

Jesus responded to their sadness and disbelief with a gentle rebuke, “How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” The words Jesus used in the original language that are translated “did not” appear much stronger than the English equivalent. The Greek indicates that it was a great imperative, a necessity for the Messiah to die and to be raised again. There was no choice in the matter for such things had been in God’s plan since the time of Adam. Then from Moses throughout all of the

prophets, Jesus began to explain what each one had said of Jesus and how each one of those prophecies had now been fulfilled. How I would have loved to be in that discussion. It's as if these men had a lesson in soteriology and didn't even have to pay a seminary to get it.

As the group arrived at Emmaus, Jesus kept on going as if He were continuing along in His journey. It's not as if Jesus were pretending to travel on. He doesn't do that. God only goes where He is invited. The two disciples obligingly invite their traveling companion to stay with them for the evening. They still weren't sure why, but they knew they had to have more. That's just like Jesus responds to us today. He never goes where He is not wanted, but will always respond to your invitation to allow Him to enter into your life. As the Apostle John said, "Behold I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in." (Revelation 3: 16) If these disciples had not urged Jesus to stay, I believe He would have continued on.

It was only at the evening meal, after Jesus had taken the bread, broken it and had given thanks, that God opened these men's eyes and they recognized just who it was who had spent so much time with them. Almost at the same moment that recognition came, Jesus vanished from their sight. It was also at this point in time that light bulbs went off in their heads and they understood the reality and the importance of the resurrection. Such important news could never go unannounced, so these two quickly traveled back to Jerusalem to tell the others of what they had seen.

The news these two disciples returned with was only confirmation of what the group now knew for Jesus had already appeared to Peter. One can only imagine the rejoicing that happened in the room that night as each of them recalled the words of their Master and how those words had been fulfilled right before their eyes. They all still had an imperfect knowledge of all that their future would hold, but their trust in Jesus had been enlarged a hundred-fold.

The same thing that happened to these two disciples is still happening today. Each of them had spent a life time studying the Torah. They knew its words and its stories, but that knowledge did them no good. It was only as they took a new look at them through the eyes of Jesus that the words began to take on real meaning. You can go to church and read your Bible your entire life and still miss it. One thing I have learned as I have written this book is that until you begin to look at the entire Bible through the eyes of Jesus, you are just reading words without meaning. It's the person and work of Jesus Christ who puts the meaning into the words of both the New and the Old Testament. These men had to invite Jesus into where they were staying that night for their eyes to be opened and they were able to recognize Him for who He is. So it is with you. The writer of Hebrews says, "And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him." It all starts and ends with faith. Once faith happens, then Jesus will make sure you get to know Him.

What did God teach you about Himself today?

Have you come to a point where you are looking at everything through the eyes of Jesus?

RESURRECTION
December 24th

Ten Astonished Men
Luke 24: 36-49

That night the mood in the room was electric. As Cleopus had finished his story of what the Lord had said to them in Emmaus, the entire room seemed to burst forth with astonished excitement. How could this possibly be true? Nothing like this has ever happened in the entire history of Israel. Even Elijah, who had been taken up into heaven, had not come back to tell about it. What could it all mean? It was all so unbelievable except that there were just too many witnesses to believe otherwise. Peter was present recounting his visit with Jesus. There was Mary, the Magdalene, not to mention the other women who had seen the Lord. Now there come the two disciples just back from Emmaus telling their story. More than one in this room was, no doubt, thinking why they had not had the privilege of a personal visit from Jesus.

It was recorded in Luke 24: 36-49 that Jesus chose that very moment to appear in the room. It was eerie. No one saw the locked door open; He was just there, standing among them. The mood in the room changed immediately from astonished excitement to one of abject terror. Are they now being visited by a ghost? Jesus' greeting of peace was intended to bring calm. Jesus said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts

rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.” As the amazement continued at least the terror subsided as each of them witnessed their Lord as He ate some of the broiled fish they had been snacking on all night.

It was at that point that Jesus went into the real purpose behind His visit that night as He opened up to those present the three great divisions of the Torah, the Law, the prophets and the poetic books, to show how all of it told of what each person in the room now were privileged to witness. It was as if a great darkness was lifted and was replaced with light. These men saw for the first time God’s plan for the salvation of all of mankind. He gave them that plan in three distinct stages that very night.

The first stage was that it was absolutely necessary that the Messiah must suffer, die and rise from the dead. Jesus had said it so long ago in His Sermon on the Mount when He said, “I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.” There were to be no short cuts, no easy way. What these men witnessed was predicted throughout the entire Torah.

The second stage was that repentance and forgiveness must be preached to the entire world. The message was to begin right there in Jerusalem and expand until everyone on the planet has heard what these men were privileged to witness. That would be the task of everyone in that room and the task of everyone who would come after

them. They must be a witness of all that they had seen, touched, tasted and heard. How else could salvation come to everyone on the earth?

The final stage was that the group was to wait in Jerusalem until they were clothed with power from on high. We now know that Jesus was referring to the Holy Spirit that was due to arrive in a few weeks time. From the Day of Pentecost until today all believers are to be equipped by God with everything needed to do the task that He has assigned. When God gives an assignment, He always provides everything that is needed to accomplish that assignment.

Since that very evening these three stages have been in place. There have been no changes made to God's plan for the salvation of mankind. It was complete at that point. All those who have entered into the Kingdom of God have the same task that was given that night by Jesus, Himself; to give witness to everyone we run into concerning all that God has done for us. Finally the Holy Spirit has not retired. He is still just as active today as He was then. We just need to daily appropriate His power to do the work God needs us to do. It's all there. So what is stopping us?

What did God teach you about Himself today?

What is stopping you from witnessing to others about what God has done for you?

A Defining Moment
John 20: 24-29

We now come to a point in the Bible where we see a defining moment in the life of Thomas. For the next two millennia, Thomas will be known as “Doubting Thomas” as a result of what you will read today. Why not take a moment and read John 20: 24-29 and we’ll get started. The name Thomas means twin. You will also see him referred to as Thomas also called Didymus, which is another name of twin. It seems that he had a twin brother at one point in his life. We don’t see a lot of Thomas in the gospels, but we do get a picture of a man who tended to be fiercely loyal at some times and really slow to get things at other times. This episode represents one of those “slow to get it times” for Thomas.

The reason I say that is that the empty tomb was there for anyone to go take a look at. Thomas could have walked over to the garden and taken a look inside at any time, but there is no evidence that he did. Peter and John believed when they walked into that empty tomb. Thomas could have done the same thing. Yet he didn’t. It is possible that Thomas was a bit angry that he hadn’t been the recipient of a personal visit from the risen Lord. I mean why are Peter and Mary so special? Yes, there is a bit of Thomas in all of us. We see others blessed by God and give a rather annoyed look into the heavens and ask, “Why not me?”

The other question that we have to ask about Thomas is why he wasn't with the other disciples a week earlier. As I said earlier, it could be that he was a bit ticked off because he didn't get a personal visit from the Lord. It could also be that he was too afraid of getting caught by the Jewish leadership, perhaps he was still sorting things out or felt alienated from the group because he didn't "buy" their story of a risen Lord. The reality is, he wasn't there for the appearance a week earlier, but he had changed his mind and showed up this night. So, why didn't Jesus come to Thomas earlier? One thing that is consistent about Jesus is that He always comes to people when they are ready to receive Him. He never forces His way into anyone's life. It is obvious that Thomas was not ready to come face to face with his risen Lord before that night.

As we look at verse 25 of our scripture today, we see Thomas' demand for physical proof that Jesus was now alive. Have you ever felt this way? I suppose if we were truly honest with ourselves, we could use, at times, a personal visit with some physical proof that our faith is for real. Notice how Jesus deals with Thomas' doubt. He gives Thomas what he needs in order for him to believe because belief is a very important thing. Jesus revealed that He knew all about Thomas' doubts as He used Thomas' very words in His offer to allow him to place his fingers on the wounds that were present on His hands and feet.

The Apostle John says that Thomas dropped to his knees and proclaimed, "My Lord and my God." To my thinking, that represents Thomas' true defining moment because it literally changed the course of his life forever. If you read Fox's Book of Martyrs, you

will find this written, “Called Didymus, preached the gospel in Parthia and India, where exciting the rage of the pagan priests, he was martyred by being thrust through with a spear.” The Thomas we read in verse 25 would have neither gone to India nor died for the truth and the privilege of seeing more people with him in the Kingdom of God. Isn’t that what a defining moment is all about?

As you take a look back at the events of your life, what would you say are your defining moments? For some people, they can look back on several occasions in their life where there has occurred a great change in direction. Henry Blackaby in his book, “Experiencing God,” calls these events spiritual markers. These are times when God touches you and there is a change in course as you align with His will for your life. Of course there are other times when your life is touched by God and you just go on with life as if God never spoke to you. Do you ever wonder what would have happened if you had just obeyed at that point? You can’t go back and redo the past. The only thing you can do is to do your best to remain sensitive to the Holy Spirit the next time you sense that God is calling you. After all, there is only One who knows what your next defining moment will bring?

What did God teach you about Himself today?

What was the last defining moment in your life?

RESURRECTION
December 26th

Signs
John 20: 30, 31

There are people who always want to know the “why” of things. It is not enough for them to understand that something happened; they have to know why it happened. For those people, the Apostle John wrote John 20: 30, 31. John waited almost thirty years after the other three gospels were circulated throughout the churches to write down his own thoughts about the life of his Lord. Did John think they had left out something important? As we have seen a lot of what John writes can be found in the other gospels, so that’s not it. Well, we don’t have to conjecture. He tells us exactly why he took the time to write his gospel. So let’s take a look at those words and see what they teach us.

The first thing that I notice is that John calls the things Jesus did while He was on the earth, miraculous signs. Now most times a sign is there to tell us something that is supposed to be important. You may not always think so, but there is someone out there who paid good money for you to see what’s posted on his sign. Can the same thing be said of Jesus? Actually John records only seven of Jesus’ miracles. It was never John’s intent that the account of these seven miracles be a catalogue of all that Jesus did the three years He ministered among His creation. They were only present in his gospel to act as signs to point you to his overall goal in writing his account of Jesus’ life.

Miracles are important to us. It seems that it is built into the human make up a need to believe that there is more to life than what we can physically sense. Arnold Toynbee

says that believing in miracles is a basic necessity of mankind: "The fundamental need of our world today is a rebirth of belief in the supernatural. If this rebirth is not forthcoming from the more progressive creators of our mechanical culture, it may come from the "backward" peoples like the natives of Africa and Asia, to those who have not yet become victims of the proud materialism of the Great Powers." It turns out that we need miracles if we are to believe in things that we cannot experience with our five senses. In other words, if we are to believe what Jesus said about Himself and how He describes an invisible Kingdom of God, then we need Jesus to do things that only God can do. The miracles were signs to us that validated everything He said. Even to the unbelieving Jews, the signs were real. We talked earlier about how they felt free to reject Jesus once they erroneously determined that the source of Jesus' power was not God.

Jesus provided mankind with enough evidence to convince the reasonable skeptic. There were days in Jesus' life when He did miracles from sun up until well after the sun had set. He put the doctors of His time temporarily out of business as He healed all of the sick in whatever town He was in. Yet these miracles were only signposts to point people to the real reason Jesus came. It is the real reason for Jesus' coming to which John devotes verse 31. He says the real reason he wrote down his own observations about the life of the Lord of His life is so that you would read it, believe it, and have life as a result of that belief. That's it.

So as we have said so many times before, it all comes right back to the idea of belief. What do you believe to be true about Jesus Christ? Believe because in Jesus you

sense God’s tenderness and warmth. As Paul said, “But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions; it is by grace you have been saved.” (Eph. 2: 4, 5) Believe because you know you have a deep need for morality and Godly character in your life. As Paul said to the Galatian church, “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.” (Gal. 5: 22, 23) Believe because of the inner witness of your heart as Paul wrote to the Roman church (Romans 2: 15). Believe because the world around you tells you there must be a God. (Romans 1: 20) Believe because of all or none of the above. The important thing is that you just believe.

What did God teach you about Himself today?

Do you have an absolute belief in Jesus?

RESURRECTION
December 27th

Miracle Fish
John 21: 1-14

In John 21: 1-14, we see that a few days later the disciples had returned to Galilee as Jesus had directed them. John records that seven of them decided to spend the evening out on the Sea of Galilee doing some fishing. It is probable that they were still in hiding from what they perceived to be the threat of imminent arrest. There are a lot of

possibilities as to why the events of that night transpired. Perhaps they were just uncomfortable sitting around waiting. They had no idea what they were to be doing at that point. For the last three years, they had followed Jesus. They didn't have to think about each day's events. Now they were on their own. Jesus had given them some direction, but nothing specific.

There is a real danger in Peter's remark, "Let's go fishing." It is a great temptation to go back to what is familiar when you are in times of great stress or uncertainty. The same thing happened to me when I was about to lose my job. I began to think about going back to what was familiar and comfortable to escape the stress of the unknown. We tend to think only of the good things that surrounded our former life, and not the whole picture. Well on this occasion, these men got a glimpse of the real life of fishing as they spent the night doing some serious work only to have nothing to show for all of that labor.

Another thing I notice is the similarity between this night of fishing and the one Luke records in Luke 5: 4-7. While I know that the two events were at different times in Jesus' ministry, there are remarkable similarities. It's almost as if God were saying, "You didn't get the lesson I gave you the first time?" As morning began to break on the horizon, these disciples were on their way back in, probably tired and more than a bit depressed. On the shore there appeared to be a man. In the shadows of early morning, they can't make out who it is, but they can definitely see someone. The man calls out, "Friends, haven't you any fish?" At the stranger's suggestion, they cast their nets one

more time to the right of the boat. What happened next is that they couldn't haul in all of the fish that got stuck in their net.

John knew by now that the stranger was Jesus. Though it was John who acknowledged the man as Jesus, it was Peter who jumped into the water to swim to shore. The boat just wasn't fast enough. As Peter arrived dripping upon the shore, Jesus already had breakfast cooking over some coals. As they dined on bread and fish, their thoughts must have drifted back to other times they had shared the same meal with their Lord. There was the feeding of the five thousand and later the feeding of the four thousand across the Sea of Galilee in Decapolis. On each of those occasions, the lesson had been the same. The lesson on both occasions had been to prove Jesus' deity and to show the world that God is a provider of man's needs. On this occasion, the lesson was the same.

It could not fail to escape their notice that their efforts without God would be much less successful than when they went with God and allowed themselves to be used by Him. As soon as they allowed God to direct their paths, they were successful beyond their wildest imaginations. Isn't the same thing true today? There are times when I get way too caught up in what the world deems to be success. I get busy about doing what I think is an important even noble ministry and then I am expecting God to bless my efforts. It just seems that like Peter, I get things a bit backwards. If God is supposed to be in charge of my life and what I do on a day to day basis, shouldn't He take the lead in directing me to what I need to be doing?

If you are honest with yourself, you probably find yourself in much the same predicament. What I appreciate most about God is the fact that it is in those times that He is most active in bringing me back to where I need to be so I can better serve Him. Just like with Peter, Jesus is there on the shore of our lives and directing the actions of His children. Like Peter, He will use scriptures like our reading today to reinforce the idea that He has a much different view of success than we have. He has promised us that He will always be there and will always direct our paths. Our job is to stay in the boat and obey what He has to say.

What did God teach you about Himself today?

When was the last time Jesus interrupted your plans for the day?

RESURRECTION
December 28th

Do You Love Me?
John 21: 15-18

We know from the first part of the Book of Acts that Peter will take a leading role in the establishment of His church. The problem was the man sitting at the fire that morning was anything but a leader. There are a lot of opinions out there that will tell you that John 21: 15-18 is where Jesus restored Peter after the man had denied that he even knew the Lord only a few days earlier. As we have talked about earlier, Jesus had already met with Peter to accomplish that task. Peter was restored at the point where we

pick up our story. So what was Jesus' purpose here? Peter's leadership had to be reinforced publicly among the disciples if he were to be effective in the role that God needed him to fulfill. All the disciples knew of Peter's betrayal. The other thing I believe is that Jesus is teaching here an essential fact of Christian leadership that we can apply to our lives right here, right now. None of these men, not even the charismatic Peter, could ever minister to the people of God unless they truly loved God's people. It is never about one's talents, abilities, commitment or personality that makes any difference in God's eyes. It is always about belief, obedience and love.

Notice how Jesus gets Peter's attention. He addressed the man by his formal name. It's like your mother yelling all three of your names. You knew you were in trouble. It also reminded Peter of his humble beginnings. He came from common stock. As is true of every one of us, Peter's status in the Kingdom of God came only from his relationship with Jesus.

Jesus appears to ask Peter the same question three different times. Jesus appears to ask Peter each time about his commitment to Him. Yet the world has always been a puzzled by what Jesus meant by "these." When Jesus said, "Do you love me more than these," was He pointing at the fish? Was He pointing at the other disciples? Perhaps Jesus wants us to fill in our own blanks to that question. If Jesus asked you that question, what would He be pointing at? The other confusion surrounding this passage is that the English language does not capture what Jesus was asking. He used the Greek word agape the first two times He asks His question. Agape is the highest and purest form love can

take. Each time Peter responds using the Greek word phileo, meaning a brotherly love, much less than the agape that Jesus was talking about. Finally, the third time Jesus asks the question, He steps down to Peter's level and uses the word phileo. There are some who like to add the word, "even," in this third and final question. Do you even phileo me? That thought is not in the original language recording the question Jesus asked.

Each time Peter responds in the positive, Jesus gives Him a command to take care of His church. Now you can go into the subtle difference between the wordings Jesus uses each time, but essentially He is directing Peter to take care of the church of Jesus Christ. You can even speculate about the increase in emotion that Peter gives each time the question is answered as if he is trying to convince the Lord of his love and devotion, but that doesn't subtract from the lessons Jesus is teaching here. As we look to apply Jesus teaching here to our own lives, there are three things we need to take a look at.

The first is that God is always a God of second chances. He knew from the beginning of time each occasion where we would fail Him. He also knows each occasion we will succeed. God knows our end and He knows all of the steps we will take in between. God is always more concerned about who we will be than who we are right now.

Second, our love for God has to be always moving towards agape love. A Christian has to be able to look back over the years and see that his love for God has been

increasing. To be sure there will be peaks and valleys as there are in any relationship, but the overall direction needs to be that your love for God is on the increase.

Finally, it is God’s will for us to be in the business of caring for His church. If you love Jesus, you are required to love His church. There is no other option; no other “Plan B.” Well those are the lessons to be found in this section of the Gospel of John. The only thing left is for us to begin applying these lessons into our lives from this moment until He returns.

What did God teach you about Himself today?

If you were in Peter’s shoes, how would you have answered Jesus?

RESURRECTION
December 29th

Commitment
John 21: 18-23

Commitment is one of those words that people in my country don’t want to address very much. As a people, Americans have always had an independent streak and we don’t like anyone telling us that the path of our life is set for the rest of our days. Yet the secret to commitment always lies in what or to whom you are committed. I’ve been committed to the same woman for over thirty years and I don’t feel a bit trapped. That’s because of who she is and the relationship that we’ve built over the years. As Peter closes his time

with the risen Jesus, we are given another lesson about commitment from the Master. It can be found in John 21: 18-23.

When we start to read verse 18, Jesus is talking about Peter's younger years when he felt free to take any path that he chose. Then Jesus apparently reveals to Peter how it will all end. The early church writers tell us that it was the Roman emperor Nero who sought to have Peter's life ended. When word reached Peter of Nero's intentions, his friends urged him to flee Rome. As he was leaving the city, it is written that he saw the Lord coming to meet him going in the opposite direction. When Peter asked the Lord where He was going, Jesus replied, "I am going to be crucified once again." By this Peter understood that he was to return to the city and walk the path that Jesus had set out for him.

Writing late in the first century, Clemens tells us that on the way to be crucified, Peter was accompanied by his wife, whom he attempted to comfort by exhorting her to always remember the example of her Lord. It is the early Christian writer Jerome who tells us that, at Peter's request, he was crucified upside down. It seems he still bore the pangs of his earlier denials and still felt himself unworthy to die in the same manner as his Lord. Yet as Peter walked the path that led from Jesus' cross to his own, he never wavered. He stayed the course and completed the task that the Lord had given him by the Sea of Galilee.

As we return to verses 20 and 21 we see that Peter now understands the course of his own life, he wants to know about his friend, John. To that question, Jesus gives him a polite, but firm, “it’s none of your business.” Jesus’ call is personal. It is just between the Lord and His servant. It doesn’t involve anyone else. When we begin to look at another’s life of service and ministry, it tends to distract us from our own. We longingly gaze at someone else and perceive that they have a more glamorous ministry. We end up wishing that it were ours, or we alter our own ministry to more conform to another’s style of ministry.

The lesson that Jesus had for Peter is the same one He has for us today. Concentrate on your own call and task. Let that be the whole focus of your energy and don’t waste time looking at someone else. We need to realize that God knows us better than anyone ever can and He knows where we can best serve Him. That is the call that He has given us. Once we get comfortable with the role God has for us, we are better able to stay the course and to be effective with the brief time we have on earth. To be sure it is possible for us to view the lives of great Christians. I am a great fan of biographies. They provide a great source of inspiration for me to continue down the path that God has given me. The danger lies in trying to be someone else. The secret to avoiding a life of failure as we try to be someone we are not, lies in the realization that each of us is uniquely created by God, Himself. We need to be as comfortable with who we are as God is most certainly comfortable. So your challenge today is to make sure you know the path that God has set out for you and then to stick with it until He changes it. When God wants you to do something different, He will let you know. All you need to do is to

keep the lines of communication open and keep walking and trusting. Let God do all the rest of the work.

What did God teach you about Himself today?

What path does God have you walking today?

RESURRECTION
December 30th

The Great Commission
Matt. 28: 16-20

The attainment of wealth and power is to some almost hypnotic. It becomes an all consuming force within people. Why do you suppose that is? What is it about power that would cause people to go to great lengths to attain it? If you think about it, that definition of power is nothing more than the ability to control the actions of others. We tried to live that way as children, but most of us found that our parents were there to show us that sharing with others is a better way of living. Even if I had a level of power where I could direct vast amounts of people to do things my way, it would not measure up to the kind of power that Jesus is talking about in today's scripture. If you turn in your Bible to Matthew 28: 16-20, we'll get started.

One of the first things you notice is that this event takes place somewhere in Galilee. The disciples had gone up into a mountainous area as they had been instructed

by Jesus, and there they waited to hear from Him. On such an important occasion as this, more than the remaining eleven disciples were present. That is what is behind Matthew's statement in verse 17 that indicates that there were still some doubters in the crowd. That wasn't the case when Jesus had appeared to the eleven in the upper room. All of them had been convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jesus had risen just like He said. So who are these doubters that Matthew talks about? In Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church, he talks in 15: 6 that Jesus appeared to more than five hundred people at the same time. I believe this to be that occasion. That being the case, it would be no surprise in such a group of people that the day began with some of them having doubts about this whole resurrection story.

As the group is assembled, Jesus suddenly appears right in their midst. The first thing He talks about is that present in Him now is a new power. To be sure, Jesus exhibited a great deal of power when He walked the earth during the years of His ministry. Now, as He stands there, the power He had before was but a fraction of all that He possesses from that point in time until today. Notice how Jesus says that all power, both on heaven and on earth, have been given to Him. He has regained the kind of unlimited and awesome power that we read about throughout the Old Testament. He has the power to set planets in motion. He has the power to create. He also has the power to save the human race.

It is on that basis that Jesus gives all of His disciples, past and future, their marching orders. We call it the Great Commission. Without the ability to access the

awesome power of God, the Great Commission would be a great impossibility. With access to that power, the Great Commission becomes a great privilege. Jesus is telling everyone who calls Him Lord to venture out into their world and make disciples. It is not enough for us to share Jesus and talk them into saying a prayer. The idea here is that we attach ourselves to people the same way Jesus attached Himself to those He came in contact with. As you become attached to Jesus, you will find that your life changes radically. This is far different than a shot gun approach where there is no follow up. We are talking about more than just notches on our gun handle.

As you look at the words of Jesus, you get the idea that there must be a three-step process in order to complete the task Jesus has assigned to us. We must testify to others about the reality of God and all that He has done for us. We must convincingly share God with others so that they will follow Him into the waters of baptism. After that is finished, we must continue to teach them all that Jesus taught during His life here on earth. What Jesus is talking about here is the discipleship process of win, build, and send that we need to follow. There doesn't appear to be any short cuts.

Today is a time of reflection as we understand the kind of life that Jesus wants for each one of us. Jesus is always with us to help us to complete His task. He said exactly that in verse 20. We just have to trust in His presence and His power to be with us as we go forth to complete the task at hand. The alternative is to spend all of our time trying to gain the kind of power that so many people around us spend their life striving for. That kind of power may be able to influence others for a short time, as long as they believe it

to be in their best interest to follow us. What Jesus offers here is the ability to affect people for all eternity. Perhaps God is telling you to spend more of your life working for eternal goals and less time working on gaining the power to influence people temporarily.

What did God teach you about Himself today?

How are you doing at the Great Commission?

RESURRECTION
December 31st

The Ascension
Luke 24: 50-53, Acts 1: 9-12

The final act in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ was His final ascension into the clouds as witnessed by the disciples. Of all of the gospel writers, only Luke records the event. Luke talks about Jesus' ascension in both Luke 24: 50-53 and Acts 1: 9-12. So why was Luke the only one to record this event? Matthew was standing right there as was John and most likely even John Mark witnessed the event, yet only Luke records it. Unfortunately you will have to wait until you get into heaven and ask them. The other question has to be; why talk about the event at all? To that I have at least a few theories to spur your thinking. You may think of others, but these are the reasons that come to my mind.

The first thing that comes to my mind is that the ascension puts a period on Jesus' ministry on earth. Luke records in the first words of his history of the early church that the risen Jesus appeared to His disciples for a period of forty days. At that point, the disciples follow Him up to the Mount of Olives and witness His final ascension. There are no recorded events of anyone seeing Jesus on earth after that point. To be sure, the Apostle Paul heard His voice and John saw Him in heaven, but the reports of seeing the risen Lord walking on the earth end right at that point. It marks a turning point in God's dealings with His creation. From that moment on everything changes. In a little more than a week from His ascension, the Holy Spirit will come and the church age will begin. The dramatic scene that unfolded right before their eyes told each one standing there that things were going to change from that point forward.

Second, the ascension makes the Great Commission of Jesus very real. If the world is going to be shown the reality of God's love for man, the job had to be started by the people standing on that hill and later by all who would believe in their witness, right up to the present time. Jesus would no longer be physically present on earth to do the job. Every one of us has been tasked with that assignment.

Third, it gives the idea that everything Jesus said about what would take place when He returned to heaven would now begin. The event marks the point where Jesus would now be seated at the right hand of God, the Father, making intercession for us as Paul talked about in the 8th chapter of Romans. It marks the beginning of a transition for these disciples. They were forced to deal with God as He really is, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Up to that point, they had only concentrated on Jesus as He was the one that they saw on a day to day basis.

Fourth, it gave these men something of an idea of what it would be like when Jesus comes back to earth again. In the Book of Acts, Luke records that after Jesus had disappeared, two angels appeared and said, "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven." The prophet Zechariah, talking about the day when Jesus returns to earth writes, "On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem, and the Mount of Olives will be split in two from east to west, forming a great valley, with half of the mountain moving north and half moving south." In the 19th chapter of John's Revelation, we see John's vision of that day and his glorious description of it. Jesus does come from above to once more step on our own planet with quite a different agenda in mind. I wonder if the words of Zechariah came to their mind at that moment. If they did, I'm sure the thought would have caused them to tremble a bit.

Of course what the ascension of Jesus meant to these people, who witnessed it, is all together different than what the ascension means to you and me. We look at the event from a completely different perspective. While their minds were filled with a lot of questions, ours has the benefit of the entire New Testament to give answers to a lot of those questions. They viewed the events of that day with more than a bit of uncertainty. It is true they trusted their Master completely. Still, change is hard on most of us. We

are able to look back at this event as the starting point in a life that, from my point of view, has been well worth the living.

What did God teach you about Himself today?

If you would have been present that day, how would you have been affected?
