

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 even a century before.

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?

Like all good teachers, I like to begin at the beginning. Jesus didn't appear on earth in a vacuum. He lived in a specific time and place among people who reacted to their surroundings in much different ways than I do. Unless that time and culture are understood, we will miss the point for a lot of what Jesus said and did. With that in mind, we will be talking about the major players that lived in Jesus' time, both political and the spiritual leaders in Israel. We will talk about who they were and how they thought. That will give us clues as to how and why they reacted to Jesus the way they did.

After that, we will get into the beginning of the story as we talk about Zechariah and Elizabeth, the parents of John, the Baptist. No story about Jesus would be complete without spending time with Joseph and Mary as they prepared to welcome a most special child.

As January ends, we will arrive at the early stages of the ministry of John the Baptist as he appeared on the scene in the wilderness just outside of Jerusalem. It is said that all great journeys begin with a single step, so let us begin...

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INTRODUCTION January 1st

Who is Jesus? Colossians 1: 15-20

This is a good question you might say. It is certainly one that has been much talked about and debated over the centuries since Jesus walked this planet. One of the great sources for all great questions is the Bible, God's Holy Word. Take a moment to put this devotion aside and look in your Bible to Colossians 1: 15-20. Notice what Paul has to say about the subject. Now if you know anything about the Book of Colossians, you know that the letter was written to combat a wave of Gnosticism that had threatened to overrun the church at Colosse. Gnosticism comes from the Greek work, "gnosis," which means knowledge. In its most basic sense, Gnosticism is a worship of knowledge for its own sake. That's probably an over simplification, but you get the idea.

Anyway, notice how Paul initially presents Jesus. The New Living Translation says that He is the visible image of the invisible God. The original Greek word used there means that Jesus is an exact replica of God. In other words if you saw Jesus' reflection in a mirror you would be looking at God. It is exact in every detail. The opposite is also true. If you want to know anything about God, you merely take a look at Jesus.

Notice also what Paul has to say about the role that Jesus played in the creation of the universe. He was not only there, but an active participant. The Jesus Paul describes created not just the physical things that one can see, but He was also the creator of all things in the political arena as well. Think of all of the ways our government touches our lives each and every day. All of that was created by Jesus Christ in the beginning of time. Hard to believe, isn't it? Paul goes on to say that not only did Jesus create everything at the beginning of time, but He has the continual job of sustaining His creation.

When you consider that the Gnostics were questioning the fact it was even possible that God could become a man, Paul's writing goes right to the heart of their teaching. He doesn't leave a lot of room for alternate theories. He draws a clear picture between truth and error. That is, of course, if you believe Paul. Well if Paul's writing is true, then there should be other writers who agree with him, right? Turn in your Bible to the 1st chapter of the book of John and read the first 5 verses and then read verse 14. Doesn't John essentially say the same thing? Now we know that Paul wrote his letter to the Colossians at least 30 years before John wrote his gospel. That would tell you that the truth that Paul wrote about 30 years after Jesus died, was the same truth that was believed 30 years after that.

So what about you? Jesus, when He was on this Earth, asked a very poignant question, "Who do you say that I am?" To my thinking, there is no more important question in life. If Jesus was standing right in front of you at this very moment and asking this question, what would you tell Him? Now before you answer that question, take a moment to think about it. Remember, He knows you even better than you know yourself. What if you put on your best theological face and answered that He is the Son of God? He might just pull out your date book, or worse your check book, and give you evidence to the contrary. So how would you really answer His question?

Of course the answer you give today is going to be a much different answer than the answer you will give a year from now when we have finished looking at Jesus' life. So it might be a good idea for you to write down your answer and leave it right here in the book so you can refer to what you wrote in the beginning of our journey with how you would answer the same question at the end.

Who do you say Jesus is?

What do you need to change as a result?

INTRODUCTION
January 2nd

The Historical Setting

I know there are some out there who have some really bad experiences with the subject of history. They remember their history classes back in high school as a time when they would rather be asleep than listen to their teacher drone on and on about things that happened in the past. The problem in our setting is that it is impossible to fully understand the life of Jesus Christ without understanding what was going on around Him. That is because Jesus' life was a lot like yours and mine. It was lived within the context of other outside influences like culture, geography and most especially, the political climate of His day. This was especially true whenever He taught the crowds. He always used things that were familiar to His listeners. If you don't understand what would have been familiar to His listeners, you won't pick up the message that Jesus was trying to teach them. Oh, you may think you have it right, because we tend to interpret what we read in light of our own world. Yet, the Bible wasn't written in the 21st century, nor was it written expressly to people living in your neighborhood. The first century Jew looked at his world a lot differently than we look at ours.

Jesus arrived on the scene at a unique time in history. It was the one time when a great deal of the known world was ruled by Rome. That meant there was a single language and political climate that hadn't been there before. While it is true there were great empires

in the world before Rome, those that came earlier did not have the size or the scope that was the Roman Empire. This was important because the stability that Rome provided was essential in order for the message of Jesus to be easily spread throughout great areas of the world at that time.

Right before Rome ascended into its position as a world power, there were the Greeks who held great sway over the way people in that part of the world thought. The Greek philosophers like Aristotle and Plato were still influencing the way the people of that world reacted to things. The Greek language became the language of Rome and the Greek culture was what Rome aspired to become. The Roman Empire thought of themselves as the people who would combine the Greek way of life with the political strength and stability that would change the world they lived in.

The Roman Empire ruled Israel as a result of a dispute between two competing sons of Alexander, king of Israel. As John Hyrcanus II and Archaelus fought between themselves to rule after their father, there arose at the time a powerful man by the name of Antipater. He manipulated John Hyrcanus II, the older brother, to solidify his power base. In order to do that, it was Antipater who invited the Roman general Pompei into Israel. Later the older brother was mysteriously killed leaving Antipater to rule Israel under Roman guidance. Unfortunately Antipater was poisoned soon after so rule of Israel passed to his son, Herod. That was the same Herod the Great who we will talk about a lot during the birth of Jesus.

We know from Matthew 2: 15 that Herod died soon after Jesus was born. Now just before he died, Herod had changed his will for a 3rd time leaving his kingdom to 3 of his sons. He left the rule of Judea and Samaria to his son, Archelaus. Galilee and the region of Perea in the east was to be ruled by his son, Herod Antipas. Bashan on the north eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee was to be ruled by his younger son, Philip.

It is also important to understand that the family of Antipater, who ruled Israel, was not Jewish. They actually came from a tiny country called Idumea, which was to Israel's

south. Since they were never really accepted by the Jewish leadership, they had to rule Israel like any other king; through the ruthless slaying of anyone who dared challenge their authority. In order to placate the Jewish leadership and keep the peace that Rome expected of its territories, Herod the Great spent a lot of money building a magnificent temple for the Jews in Jerusalem. It was in that temple that so much of Jesus' ministry was set.

This is not the only time when God used a completely ruthless king to further His own Kingdom. In Psalm 2, David writes, "Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One. 'Let us break their chains,' they say, 'and throw off their fetters.' The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them." The Bible describes God as One who can use any government to further His cause among His creation. So it is not much of a stretch for us to believe that He can unite a good part of His world under a single language and culture so that the ground would be a fertile place to receive His son into that world with the express purpose of changing it.

What did God teach you about Himself today?

When you think of the role of government in the world, where does God fit in those thoughts?

They Were Sad You See

If you were living in first century Israel, your life would have been dominated by 3 groups of people, the Scribes, the Sadducees and the Pharisees. Each of them would have influenced the way you looked at almost everything that you experienced. We all live in a country dedicated to the idea that the political arena must be completely separated from the spiritual arena. We call it the separation of church and state. That is not true when you take a look at that nation of Israel in the first century. You cannot separate Judaism from its government. To the Jew, they only recognized a law that came from Moses. The Supreme Court of Israel in the first century was known as the Sanhedrin. This group's main task was to interpret the Mosaic Law in light of whatever situation came before it. Now the fact that the Sanhedrin was made up of Pharisees, Sadducees and Scribes made life in Israel interesting. We will spend the next 3 days looking at each of these groups in order to understand why Jesus reacted to each in the way He did. We will also look to understand these 3 ways of thinking and how they still exist in today's world. In fact, you may know someone who thinks exactly the way these groups thought.

The first group of people we will talk about are the Sadducees. The Sadducees are the aristocratic party. According to the Jewish historian, Josephus, Sadducees were wealthy people of rank and largely were associated with the Jewish priesthood. In other words, the High Priest of Israel was a Sadducee. As such, the Sadducees found themselves dealing a lot with the Roman civil authorities. Now the Roman government was heavily influenced by Greek culture. In order for the Sadducees to keep their power, they had to find a common ground between Judaism and the Greek influence promoted by their Roman Masters.

Hellenistic or Greek thinking had already begun to take hold within Judaism by the time Jesus arrived on the scene. For years there had been a school of Hellenist Jews centered in Alexandria, Egypt. It was this kind of Hellenistic thinking that had caused a shift in traditional Jewish belief. In order to bridge the gap between Greek culture and Jewish dogma, the Hellenist Jews began to seek a deeper, spiritual and hidden meaning within

the messages found in the Torah. To no one's surprise that deeper, spiritual meaning just happened to agree perfectly with what the Greek philosophers of the day were saying. That way the Jewish leadership could tell their Roman masters, "We really don't believe differently than you." Now I will warn you, these people still exist today. If ever you hear someone telling you that there is a deeper meaning in a particular passage in the Bible that God has given to them, my advice to you is to run away as fast as you can.

Though Sadducees were not considered at the time as Hellenist Jews, we see that by the time Jesus arrived on the scene, the way they viewed things had taken a dramatic turn in that direction. For example, the Sadducees didn't believe in anything in the Bible that was supernatural. That means they didn't believe in a resurrection and they didn't believe in angels. Sadducees also pointed to the first 5 books of Moses as their only source of truth, meaning they tended to ignore the oral traditions that were passed down and they held that the rest of what we refer to as the Old Testament was just history, nothing more. Finally, they emphasized man's free will. In other words, they held that man was free to do whatever he wanted. That's why I said earlier that he Sadducee had stripped down traditional Judaism so that it better fit in with the Greek thinking they had to deal with on an every day basis.

So does this kind of belief describe anyone you know? There have always been those who hold on to a form of religion because it gives them wealth or power over people. What about you? If you were really honest with yourself, why do you attend church? If you go because of what you will get out of it, then you are not that far from being a Sadducee. If you are not quite sure about all of this miracle stuff that's found in the Bible, perhaps you really have the heart of the Sadducee. Without miracles or a hope of eternal life, that is what really makes a Sadducee sad, you see.

What did God teach you about Himself today?

Why do you attend church?

INTRODUCTION
January 4th

The Pious Few
Matthew 23: 1-36

One of the groups that get a lot of attention in the gospels is the Pharisees. One of the most famous speeches that Jesus gave to a group of Pharisees can be found in Matthew 23:1-36. Take a moment to read this passage. After reading this passage, do you find that Jesus' words sound really brutal? While Jesus doesn't mince words in his criticism of Pharisaic thinking, his criticism was quite mild when compared to what other rabbis were writing at the time.

So why does this group of people seem to be singled out for such abuse? The Pharisees first appeared during the Maccabean era, specifically during the reign of John Hyrcanus I. As the Maccabean kings drifted away from their spiritual purity towards the maintenance and expansion of their own political power, the Pharisees began to organize with the express purpose of keeping Israel firmly rooted in their understanding of Judaism. The very word, Pharisee, means "separated ones." They held themselves up to the common people of Israel as the only true source of Judaism.

According to Josephus, the famous Jewish historian, the Pharisees numbered about 6000 at the time of Jesus. They were laymen, and not part of the priesthood. The object of this fraternity was two-fold. The primary focus of the Pharisee was the strictest obedience to the traditional law, the oral traditions and all aspects of spiritual purity. The second focus of the fraternity was the payment of the tithe, and all religious dues.

As far as their religious beliefs, they held that all souls are perishable, believing in a system of rewards for those who devoted themselves to virtue and purity, and punishment for those who were devoted to vice. They believed in angels, and everything supernatural, which often put them at odds with the Sadducees. Finally, they believed in pre-destination; that everything depends upon fate and God.

Due to their appearance of piety, the Pharisee held great sway among the masses. All acts of public worship, prayers and sacrifices were done with their influence clearly felt. Their popularity meant that they could gain an immediate audience with the High Priest at any time. It is also written in Jesus' day the Sadducees adhered to the demands of the Pharisees because, otherwise, the multitude would not have tolerated them. If you read the gospels, you will find that the Pharisee always takes center-stage in any dialogue with Jesus. As you read through the life of Jesus Christ, you begin to realize that the main reason the Pharisee came to oppose Jesus was because of His apparent rejection of the oral traditions that they held so dear.

Now if we are truthful, we all have a bit of the Pharisee in our heart. I imagine everyone likes to be admired for their Christian faith. The problem lies when we try to approach God with an attitude that we are so good, God should be grateful to even know us. We have a bit of the Pharisee in our heart when we think that Christianity is about what we do, not who we are. We have a bit of the Pharisee in our heart when we try to make our faith into a set of rules, and reject others because they don't follow our rules the way we do. Yes, Pharisaism runs deep within today's church. How deep does it run in your heart?

What did God teach you about Himself today?

As you examine your own heart, do you see a Pharisee?

INTRODUCTION **January 5th**

Scribes, They're Not Just for Writing Anymore **Ezra 7: 1-8**

I suppose like most people, my picture of a scribe used to be some guy hunched over a wooden table writing with a feathered quill that has to be dipped occasionally in ink. I know that is not a real modern view, but we are talking about the first century here. Anyway, early in the Old Testament, a scribe was exactly that, he was used to record events. He would be like the town clerk. He would be the one to write down the events in Elijah's life so that we could read about it today. He would also make copies of the Torah, the Jewish Old Testament. Over time the more he wrote, the more expert in the Jewish Law he became. By the time of the Jewish return from their Babylonian captivity scribes were taking on more of a leadership role. For example, Ezra was called a scribe in Ezra 7: 6. By the time of Jesus, the position of scribe was used to describe a teacher of the law.

As we enter the time of Jesus' life, scribes can be seen linked with Pharisees we read yesterday in Matthew 23: 2, or Sadducees as seen in Luke 19: 47. Scribes were the first people to be given the title, "My Master," which was later shortened to Rabbi. They became an independent class of scholars who held great sway over the lives of everyone in Israel. The rabbi's utterances were considered total authority over all matters of Jewish law.

So what did a scribe do for a living? First, he developed the law so that it would apply to a changing world. You only have to look at our own Supreme Court to understand what the Rabbi did. If there wasn't a clear provision in the Law to cover a particular circumstance, the scribe would look to existing law, to precedents (called oral traditions)

and other legal decisions and come up with a ruling that would work in a particular situation. Second, the Rabbi's job was to teach the people. Since it was tradition that everyone needed to have a working knowledge of God's Law, the Rabbi could usually be seen surrounded by a group of pupils. Finally, it was the Rabbi's job to pass sentence in the courts. Since he was the expert in the law, it was the Rabbi who meted out punishment when those laws were broken.

What did the scribe believe? Well, obedience to the Mosaic Law was an absolute condition of membership. The 5 books of Moses were considered by them to be dictated by God, Himself. Later that level of authority was given to the historical and prophetic books of the Torah. They became experts in the oral traditions as their responsibility was to pass them down through the generations.

Do you see scribes in today's church? These would be the people whose sole desire is to study God's Word. That's not to say that studying God's Word is bad. It's just that if you study to the exclusion of all else, the result can be bad. For example, the reason the scribes rejected Jesus was because they felt that the Messiah would be revealed through their study of the Torah, not come from a filthy manger in Bethlehem. Remember, it's the relationship to God that matters, not how much you study. Sometimes we get the two confused.

What did God teach you about Himself today?

Do you think you might be studying the Bible too much?

INTRODUCTION

January 6th

The Accuracy of the Four Gospels

Not that long ago, the American church came through a time where everyone had their faith tested. I am talking about the time right before Dan Brown's "The DaVinci Code" was released as a motion picture. If you recall it was a time when the whole church felt the need to defend itself against the onslaught that they felt the book and movie would cause. One of the most critical issues of faith that had to be looked at was the existence of "other gospels." Now these gospels have existed for centuries, but no one paid them any mind until "The DaVinci Code" tried to tell us that these "other" gospels were true stories of Jesus' life. Yet the more I dug into the background and compared them to the four gospels in my Bible, the more I became impressed with the authenticity of the writings of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. To my thinking, only these 4 books stand up to historical scrutiny.

Now let's expand our thinking to the entire New Testament. The question begs to be asked as to why these 27 books are in my Bible and not other works that were supposedly written around the same time? Why are these books the only ones that are authentic representations of the spiritual message of God? I suppose it is because these books passed the test that is known as the "rules of canonicity." The test these books passed in order to be included in the Bible was 1.) They were known to be written by or influenced by the Apostles of Jesus, 2.) They were written with the power of God behind them, 3.) They agreed with the rest of the Bible as God cannot contradict Himself, and 4.) They were universally accepted by the people of God in the early church.

I think the most telling argument for these 27 books being in the New Testament was that these were the writings that were used and considered sacred by the earliest church fathers. If you look at the writings that still exist from a man by the name of Clement of

Alexandria, who lived from 70 to 156 AD. You will find Clement uses over 2400 quotes from all but 3 books of our present New Testament. If you look at the writings of Polycarp (70 – 145 AD), Tertullian (160-220 AD), Hippolytus (170-235 AD), Justin Martyr (died 133 AD), Origen (185-253 AD) or Cyprian (died 258 AD) and you will find 32,000 citations from the same New Testament that you have in your living room. You won't find a single mention of any other writings of that time in any of the early church writings. I have always felt that if people who lived less than a decade from when Jesus walked the Earth believed in only these 27 books, that is good enough for me.

So why is this important? Is this just some kind of academic exercise to stretch the mind? I suppose there are people reading this, who think that it is faith that is important, not all of this intellectual stuff. To them I say, "Amen." Yet there are those who want concrete answers before they believe in this "faith" stuff. To those people I say, read today's piece over again because it is truly important. If the writings of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are what they claim to be, then the message that they contain is too important to miss out on. Over the next 4 days, we will be talking about each of these 4 men and the gospels that they wrote. Each of them wrote from a different perspective to a different audience. One of these men wasn't even Jewish. I suppose the reason for having 4 accounts of the life of Jesus Christ is that the message of Jesus reaches across time, cultural issues and every other kind of difference that can exist between people. The life of Jesus Christ is for all of mankind. As Jesus said, "you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." The only question, then, that remains to be asked is are you ready to be free?

What did God teach you about Himself today?

How did today's reading change your view of the 4 gospels?

INTRODUCTION
January 7th

John Mark's Writing
Mark 10: 45

I suppose some of you are asking why it is important to understand about each of the gospel writers and their work. In my experience a lot of misinterpretation of scripture comes about because the reader doesn't understand where the writer is coming from. The more you know about the background of the writer, the more you can understand his writing. The more you understand about his audience, the better able you are to research the life of that audience so you can understand the assumptions the writer has made when he wrote to that audience. For example, it is much easier to understand the parables of Jesus, when you understand the background behind the story. If you assume that lending institutions are the same today as they were in the first century, you might make some bad errors reading the Parable of the Talents.

The gospel of Mark is generally assumed to be written by John Mark, as found Acts 12:12. If you will look that particular scripture up in your Bible, you will also find out that the apostles were meeting at his house in Jerusalem the night that Peter was miraculously rescued from prison. Now we see that John Mark in the Bible was sometimes called by his Jewish name, John, and sometimes called by his Greek name, Mark. If you look up Colossians 4: 10 and find out that his cousin was a man who was known as Barnabas, a major person in the early church. Acts 12: 25 will tell you that he accompanied Paul and his cousin Barnabas on their first missionary journey into what we now know as the nation of Turkey. Turn in your Bible to Mark 14: 51, 52. My research

tells me there are a lot of people who believe that the young man described here is none other than Mark, the first Christian flasher.

Most of my research tells me that this gospel was written sometime between 60 and 70 AD. Some even place the writing in Rome shortly before Peter was executed by Emperor Nero around 64 to 68 AD, and that it was Peter who supplied the vast majority of Mark's information. That being the case, the gospel is generally believed to be written to a Roman audience. In order to appeal to his Roman audience, Mark wrote his account of Jesus' life as a short, concise and to the point approach to describe Jesus' life that was popular with this particular audience.

The theme of the Mark's book is Jesus, the servant. That is seen in the key verse in the book, Mark 10: 45, where Mark quotes Jesus saying, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." That is why there is no genealogy included. Such things are just not important to a servant. Also because Mark wrote to the Roman mindset, they are not interested in Jewish prophecies, nor would they put a lot of credence in Old Testament quotes. The main emphasis for the entire Gospel of Mark is on the deeds of Jesus rather than His words.

What can you take out of all of this? First, that Mark's gospel can be trusted. Its source is Peter, who was at the very center of Jesus' ministry. Second, it is a short summary of the life of Jesus. If you want to find out about Him in about an hour or so, Mark is a good source to consult. Third, it gives a picture of Jesus in very human form. Fourth, it gives a description of a servant, who had no business serving anyone. After all, He did create the universe and everything in it. If Jesus served the needs of His creation, what excuse can we possibly have when we fail to act in that manner?

What did God teach you about Himself today?

In what ways do you exhibit the nature of a servant?

INTRODUCTION
January 8th

Matthew, the Publican

So we'll talk today about Matthew, the second of the synoptic gospels. When I say synoptic, I am talking about the 3 gospels, Matthew Mark and Luke, which were all written about the same time, somewhere between the years 60-70 AD. The gospel, of John, which we will talk about later, was written 20-30 years after synoptic gospels. Now Matthew's gospel appears first in our New Testament. That is true even though he was not the first person to write about the life of Jesus.

Matthew tells us in chapter 9 of his gospel that he was a tax collector or publican, which as in today's society, was not a very popular job. Yet these guys were even more hated than our own I.R.S. Publicans paid a fee to gain their position, and were left alone to collect as much tax as they could. In fact, there is rabbinic writing from around that time that suggests that they were even free to make up taxes as they went. Since every account of a tax collector in the New Testament shows them to be very wealthy people, you get the idea that not all of the taxes they collected found its way into Roman coffers.

I have read accounts that Matthew had a booth on the toll road from Damascus to Capernaum. There are also historians who believe he occupied a booth at the port of Capernaum, where he would tax the fish as they were brought ashore. I tend to believe that Matthew worked at the Port of Capernaum because it was more likely that it would

be there where he would often encounter the One who would change his life forever. Since we'll deal with Matthew's conversion later in this book, let's just say that when Jesus called, Matthew immediately gave up his title, his position, and his wealth and followed a new Master.

Matthew is not mentioned much in the Book of Acts, except in the first chapter. Holman's Bible Dictionary says that he traveled to Ethiopia and was a spiritual advisor to the same Candace mentioned in Acts 8: 27. Foxes Book of Martyrs tells of his martyrdom in Ethiopia.

Now as Mark was written to the Roman mind, Matthew was directed to the Jewish mind. As such, the things that would be important to the Jew are present in this gospel. There are some historians who believe that it was even written in Aramaic and some who think it was written in Hebrew. Since the original manuscript is lost, we don't know for sure. In any event, the gospel is filled with Old Testament references and how Jesus fulfilled all of the Old Testament Messianic prophecies. Even the opening of Matthew is strictly Jewish as Matthew traces Jesus' lineage down from Abraham, the father of the Jewish Nation.

The other thing that you have to understand when you read Matthew is that in Jewish thinking, chronological order is not important. They thought that events should be ordered for dramatic effect. Turn in your Bible to Matthew 4: 1-11 and read about the temptation of Jesus. Now turn to Luke 4: 1-13 and read about the same event. Do you notice that the final two temptations are in a different order? Matthew is putting them in an order that would increase their dramatic effect. Another thing to notice in Matthew's gospel is that it is very much set up like the Pentateuch, the first five books of Moses. You have early history first, much like Genesis. Next Matthew gives us Jesus' summary of the law in chapters 5-7, like the books of Exodus and Leviticus. Finally Matthew finishes the story.

So what can you get out of Matthew? Matthew represents Jesus as a king, the long awaited Messiah. Sometimes we tend to think of Jesus as a friend, and we forget that He is also the King of Kings. It helps to read a book like Matthew to remind ourselves of just who Jesus really is. That way we can get a proper perspective on the One who changed the history of mankind forever.

What did God teach you about Himself today?

Do you make it a habit to worship the king?

INTRODUCTION
January 9th

Doctor Luke, the Gentile Writer
Luke 19: 10

Now Luke introduces something new to gospel writing; words written from a non-Jewish mindset. His gospel is generally viewed as the third gospel written chronologically. So what do we know about Luke? We know from Colossians 4: 14 that he was a physician by trade, though how he became one is not known. We also know that his gospel is not an eyewitness account. In Luke 1:2 he says that his gospel comes from eyewitness accounts. That means he interviewed people who had actually witnessed the events he describes. Luke's gospel is actually half of a much larger work. Both the Gospel of Luke

and the Book of Acts make up a complete investigation of the birth of the early church which Luke compiled for a man by the name of Theophilus.

We know from the Book of Acts that Luke was a frequent traveling companion of Paul. We know that, not because Luke ever mentions himself in Acts. The only way to track Luke through the book of Acts is in his use of pronouns. He used the word, “we”, when he was part of the group he was describing and the pronoun, “they”, when he stayed behind in a particular city after Paul had been run out of town on a rail. That’s how we know that Luke joined Paul in Troas on his second missionary journey, sailed with him to Philippi, but was not jailed with Paul and Silas. He doesn’t appear to be with Paul again until the third missionary journey at Philippi. That leads some to believe that Luke stayed in Philippi and was possibly its first pastor. At the end of Paul’s life, Luke was constantly with his old friend. Holman’s Bible Dictionary talks about an early source supplying a fitting epitaph: “He served the Lord without distraction, having neither wife nor children, and at the age of 84 he fell asleep in Boeotia, full of the Holy Spirit.”

When Luke writes about Jesus, he emphasizes a more human side of God’s Son. The title, Son of Man, becomes a key phrase in this gospel. If you want to take a look at the key verse in the entire gospel of Luke, turn in your Bible to Luke 19: 10 where Jesus said, “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.” That verse summarizes the entire book of Luke. Now since Luke was a Gentile and most believe an educated Greek, one would not be surprised to discover that his writing style and words that he used are in what is considered classical Greek. In other words, He wrote in a very cultured style, his education and background seem to appear constantly in his writing. Subsequently, Luke writes to that mind that is complete, orderly and steeped in the Greek culture. In that way, his gospel is very different than either Matthew’s or Mark’s writing.

Actually, it is Luke’s preciseness that has caused his gospel to be attacked over the centuries. Luke is considered one of the great historians of the ancient world. In earlier times, he was attacked because of his supposed historical inaccuracies. Yet the field of Archaeology has been a great friend to Dr. Luke, proving that he really did know what he

was talking about, and that his critics just lacked the archaeological findings that later proved Luke to be right all along.

What I really take out of my study of Luke's gospel is that we go back to that ancient epitaph you read earlier. It was said about Dr. Luke, that he served the Lord without distraction. I wonder if my epitaph will say the same thing. I will leave you to wonder what your epitaph will say.

What did God teach you about Himself today?

What do you think your epitaph will say?

INTRODUCTION
January 10th

The Soaring Eagle of John
John 20: 30, 31

A couple of days ago, I said that John's gospel was written well after the other three gospels. Most believe that it was written about 90 AD either while John was in Ephesus or perhaps while he was in exile on the island of Patmos. We know that John was the son of Zebedee and Salome and had a brother named James, who was also a disciple of Jesus. He grew up in Bethsaida on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. We also know that he came from a family of substance. That's because the Bible mentions that he had hired servants (Mark 1: 20) and had his own house (John 19:27). We believe that his mother was part of those women who financially backed Jesus ministry (Luke 8:3) and he was

acquainted with the High Priest of Israel (John 18:15). He was part of a fishing partnership that included both Peter and Andrew. Historians tell us that the fishing trade on the Sea of Galilee was extremely lucrative. John started out as a disciple of John the Baptist and joined Jesus the day he came back from the wilderness temptations. John, together with Peter and James, made up the inner 3 disciples, and it was John who was referred to as the disciple whom Jesus loved.

As to why John writes his gospel, the answer is real easy because he tells us. Open your Bible and read John 20: 30, 31. John writes so that you may know that Jesus is the son of God. His gospel is for the church. By the time of its writing the church had been well established. John gives us a picture of Jesus that has been described as a soaring eagle. In other words, you will always find Jesus in a high and lofty position when you read the Gospel of John. There are exactly seven miracles mentioned by John and he spent half of his effort covering the last day of Jesus life. Everything John does and says is all for his stated purpose. That differs from the other gospels where Jesus' miracles demonstrate his mercy. The miracles that John included in his gospel are all designed to cause a person to believe that Jesus is who He says He is. That's why the seeker and those who are new in their faith are sent first to this book. The words of John will always convince the doubter and solidify the faith of a mind and heart that has been recently changed.

As you will see later, John uses quite a number of names to describe his Master. In the Book of John, you will find Jesus referred to as the Bread of Life, The Light of the World, The Good Shepherd, The Way, The Truth, The Life and The Vine. Each of these names is at the heart of some of the great discourses that Jesus spoke and John recorded for us.

Finally, it is John who gives us an actual eye witness account of the trial and crucifixion of Jesus Christ. No other disciple was there. Now I know you will tell me that Peter was there, but only for a short time. John stayed to the bitter end. Read all 4 accounts of the crucifixion. You will not see a single reference that any of the other disciples were present. That's because they were all in hiding. It was John who staked out a place at the

foot of the cross so that we could know for a fact that Jesus died on that day. It was John and Peter who were the first to enter the empty tomb. It was John who wrote for us what he saw inside that tomb and as a result he believed.

I have always been inspired by John, the Apostle. Perhaps it is his style of writing that grips my soul. As John wrote, “He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.” Do you also find that those words grip your soul also?

What did God teach you about Himself today?

Have you believed and received Him?

BIRTH TO BAPTISM
January 11th

Priestly Duties
Luke 1: 5-7

We turn now to the events leading up to the birth of Jesus. It was the time of the morning sacrifice. On the highest pinnacle of the temple, a priest is standing watching intently for the coming dawn. As the sun breaks the horizon there would be a three-fold blast of his trumpet to awaken the City of Jerusalem. The Levites and some chosen laity are already gathering, for they will act as the representatives of all Israel in the sacrifices and prayers of the day.

Down below the superintending priest had already summoned to their sacred functions those descendants of Aaron, making up the priests of Israel. These men had been up for quite some time and had already completed their ceremonial washing. Each day saw about fifty priests divided into two groups. The first group would make the inspection of the temple courts by torchlight and had already gathered in the Hall of Hewn Stones, one of the great meeting areas in the temple compound. The second group had begun the drawing of lots to select those who would perform the main ceremonial duties of the day.

As we join that second group of priest, we see them gathering for a time of confession and faith before they would have begun the drawing of lots in order to avoid disputes over who got to do which tasks. It was felt that the drawing of lots was the best way to determine God's will as to who would participate in the Holy functions. A piece of wood was pulled from one bag with the name of a priest on it. From another bag was pulled a stick with the name of a task written on it. That was the way priests were chosen to stir the ashes on the great alter to a fresh flame, or who would trim the golden candlesticks or who would offer the daily incense.

Finally a lot was cast to determine who would be honored with the highest mediatory acts of the day. Only once in a lifetime could a priest be chosen for this position. Henceforth that priest would be known as "rich." The year was approximately six BC. The priestly house of Abijah was on duty that week. There sitting in that group of priests was a man by the name of Zechariah. Zechariah was at least sixty years old that day and was well known in the temple as he had ministered there many years.

Zechariah was different from other priests in that he did not live in the great priestly centers of Jericho or the Ophel quarter of Jerusalem. He lived in the historic hill country south of Jerusalem. We are told in Luke 1: 6 that Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, walked blamelessly before the Lord and observed all of the commandments and regulations blamelessly. Their piety was what the Pharisees hoped to attain, yet always seemed to fall short. Even though the couple was considered by most to be good people, still talk around town was that there must be something rotten hidden somewhere. After

all, how else could you explain the fact that God had cursed them by causing them to remain childless all these years?

As I write the opening scene to our story, I can't help but be impressed by the coordinated effort that it took so many people to set up and hold the daily service in Israel's great temple each day. I have been a part of the coordinated effort that many churches hold each week in order to present an effective worship service. It takes a lot of people a lot of hours to set up each service. Now these people could be doing a lot of other things with their lives. Yet each week finds them serving faithfully because they believe that what they do matters. Just as in Zechariah's case, they will one day stand before a Holy God and I believe that service will be praised. So if you are one of the few who works tirelessly each week, keep at it. If you are not, you might be sensing a call of God on your life right this moment to get involved in serving Him.

What did God teach you about Himself today?

What do I sense God telling me to change in the way of my service?

BIRTH TO BAPTISM
January 12th

Zechariah, the Rich
Luke 1: 8-17

For the first and only time in his life, the lot had fallen to Zechariah to be the one who offered the incense within the Temple of the Lord. Every thought must have been

directed towards the task at hand. Zechariah would have chosen two of his closest friends or relatives to assist him. The first person would have removed what ashes were left from the night before. He would worship and then retire backwards. The second would then come to the altar of incense and spread to the outer rim live coals from the burnt offerings done outside. He would then worship and retire backwards. Standing before Zechariah was the great veil that separated the Court of Priests from the Holy of Holies.

Zechariah stood waiting for the signal that all was ready outside. When the signal came, he would step to the Alter of Incense and spread the incense as close as he could to the Holy of Holies. Meanwhile outside the priests and people were prostrate before the temple offering prayers for mercy and worship. The incense was thought to mingle with the prayers as a fragrant offering to God that would predispose Him to answer the prayers of His people. Zechariah waited until he saw that the incense was kindling, and then he would have bowed in worship and reverently withdrawn. It was at that very moment that something arrested the ceremonial process.

Luke 1: 11-17 tells us that to Zechariah's right stood what he could not fail to recognize as an angelic presence. As he looked, Zechariah's eyes gazed upon a glowing white form of this a messenger from God. It was later that Zechariah would come to know that he was now in the presence of the angel, Gabriel. The angel's words awakened in Zechariah the many years of prayers that he and Elizabeth had made. What startled him was that Gabriel was telling him that those prayers were now going to be answered. Thoughts of Abraham must have raced through his head. The child that would be born was to be given the significant name of John, which means "God is gracious." His son was destined to be a much greater source of joy than to his family. What Gabriel told him next can only be described as a great ladder which took Zechariah right into the heavens, as he began to understand the significance of the child he would be charged with raising.

Gabriel told him that his new son was to be great in the sight of the Lord, for he was to be a Nazarite. Zechariah's mind raced to other Nazarites in the Bible, like Samson and the

great prophet Samuel. This young lad was to be filled with the Holy Spirit from birth. That meant that he would be strong both on the outside and the inside because God would be constantly with him. It would be Zechariah's son who would be the instrument that would finally turn the nation of Israel back to their God. Gabriel spoke of this child as being the forerunner so long prophesied who would act as the great prophet Elijah in preparing the way for Israel's Messiah.

One can hardly imagine what was going through Zechariah's mind at this point. There are only two responses that he could possibly make; belief or unbelief. In Henry Blackaby's book, *Experiencing God*, he talks about those times when you hear and understand God speaking to you. He says that what you do in the next moment says more about what you believe than anything you could say. I believe Mr. Blackaby to be absolutely correct. Have you ever sensed God showing you a direction or giving you a task He wants you to do? How did you respond? Perhaps you obeyed and went on to do a great thing through God's power. Perhaps you shrank from the responsibility and the honor of doing God's work was given to someone else. The great thing about our God is that He is a God of second chances. The only question you have to ask yourself is what are you going to do the next time God comes calling?

What did God teach you about Himself today?

What do you need to change for the next time God comes calling you?

BIRTH TO BAPTISM
January 13th

Zechariah, the Mute
Luke 1: 18-25

The angel Gabriel's message must have overwhelmed the aged priest. One can only imagine what was racing through the priest's mind. This was not how he had always imagined the job to be. Yet in those times of greatest distress what comes forth is always what resides deep within you. For we see an element of faith in the response that he gives the angel. He knew what Abraham had done when Isaac's birth was promised. Zechariah knew the response of Manoah when Samuel's birth was announced. Yet Zechariah does the truly Jewish thing of asking for a sign so that he would know that what the angel had spoken of would, in fact, take place. The sign the angel gave Zechariah was a kind of punishment for his lack of faith. Yet that sign was not only to Zechariah but it stood as a testament to all who came in contact with him that something special happened that day. He was made to be silent from that moment until the prophesy concerning the birth of his son was fulfilled.

Luke 1: 21-25 records the reaction of those waiting outside for Zechariah. After all, a great deal of time had elapsed since the signal had been given for the incense to be placed on the altar. The prayers had been offered. The people would have glanced expectantly at the temple door watching for Zechariah to emerge. At that point they could get up off their knees and resume that day's ceremonial sacrifices. Finally, after what seemed to be an eternity, Zechariah emerged and took his place at the top of the stairs. At that point, Zechariah was to have given the priestly benediction. Unfortunately it was also at that point that Zechariah realized the sign he had asked Gabriel for was granted and that the vision was real. As Zechariah spoke, nothing came out. He was left only with waiving his hands and attempting to make some signs that would tell the congregation that something unusual had happened.

Zechariah returned home after his two weeks of temple service were up. Luke records that it was shortly after that Elizabeth finally became pregnant. Luke also makes an interesting statement; that Elizabeth hid herself for her first five months of pregnancy. In my mind It would be an injustice to believe that she hid herself because she was ashamed or didn't believe that the baby was actually real. No, I believe Elizabeth secluded herself to inwardly prepare herself for the raising of a very special child. She undoubtedly spent a great deal of that time in prayer. Zechariah also spent a great deal of time in prayer and meditation as his role in raising John would be equally important. After all, how else could a man who couldn't speak spend his day?

What an incredible example for today for anyone who has sensed God's calling to do something special. Both of these great saints of God spent the next few months in quiet reflection to prepare themselves. All too often, I have known people who have heard from God and wanted to jump right in. Yet how many of the Bible characters we have read about immediately went out and turned the world upside down? There are many answers to that question. You could use the words zilch, zip, none, nada or zero. It still says the same thing. Every time God calls people, there is a time of preparation. Think about Elijah by the brook in the Kerioth Valley being fed by ravens. Think about Moses working for years tending sheep. Think about the disciples following Jesus for those years before His death. There is always a time when God wants to prepare us for the task ahead.

How about you? Are you ready for His call? Remember to take some time before jumping in to get yourself spiritually ready for the tough road ahead. That's the blueprint that God has always used in the past. It's not real likely the He will abandon that blueprint the next time He taps you on the shoulder.

What did God teach you about Himself today?

What do you need to prepare to serve God better?

BIRTH TO BAPTISM
January 14th

Highly Favored One
Luke 1: 26-38

There was not much to be impressed with when one looked at Mary. To be sure, she was young, but as a poor resident of Nazareth, there was nothing special that anyone in Israel could have put their finger on. If she would have been a man in that society it might have been different. After all, she could trace her family tree right back to King David (Luke 3: 23-37), and she could also trace the family tree on her mother's side right back to Aaron, the first priest of Israel. Such a double honor, too bad she was just a girl.

Yet Mary was fortunate in that she was engaged to be married to a local carpenter by the name of Joseph. He was also born into David's lineage and was quite a catch by local standards. She could still remember the betrothal ceremony. It was a simple affair as her father could not afford much in the way of extravagances. It was just a poor dowry and celebrated by a single cup of wine drunk by both of them. There was to be no sumptuous feast for such a poor girl. Even though the betrothal ceremony was simple, the fact was she was as good as married. That's the way the nation of Israel looked at it. There was no date set as of yet, but that was just a matter of time.

She was just minding her own business that day. It is not every day that you are confronted by the presence of an angel sent from God. The greeting the angel Gabriel gave her troubled her more than the presence of the angel itself. He had said that she was highly favored and that the Lord, God of Israel was with her. What could that mean?

She didn't believe that she was special enough to warrant such a heavenly visitor. She was just a simple peasant girl.

As the angel described the baby who would be born, she grew greatly troubled. What was being described was a physical impossibility from her perspective. Yet the angel told her that the child who would be born would be as a result of the Holy Spirit. Surely God would not be so cruel to ruin her marriage plans. Yet deep down within her something said that things would work out. She knew the God of Israel well enough to know that He would always take care of her.

According to Gabriel, the child was going to be Israel's long awaited Messiah. She had known that He would be coming some day. Her rabbis had always taught that, but surely Messiah's coming was going to be through someone more important. Even now, she could still hear the angel call their Messiah by the name of Jesus, a name meaning, "He is savior."

Mary didn't ask for a sign. She thought it would be rude to not believe such a heavenly messenger. Yet the angel, Gabriel, gave her a sign anyway. Her cousin, Elizabeth, dear long-suffering Elizabeth, was going to have a baby too. This was too much for her humble soul to bear. Even as she traveled to the hill country of Judah to visit, the angel's words still echoed in her memory. She knew that eventually she would have to tell Joseph, but that was a worry for another day.

Did you notice the difference between the responses of Zechariah and Mary to visits from the same angel? Perhaps the difference lies in the fact that there was a great difference between the two servants of God. One was older and male; the other was young and a female. Zechariah was highly educated, Mary probably wasn't. One was forced into silence; the other was on her way for a long visit with her cousin. Each of us hears the voice of God differently and each of us responds differently to that voice. Both of the players in our drama were looked upon with favor by God. Isn't it comforting to know

that thanks to Jesus, I am loved by God for exactly who I am? It shouldn't surprise me. After all, He was the one who made me. He is the one who saved me.

What did God teach you about Himself today?

What comfort can you take with what you read today?

BIRTH TO BAPTISM
January 15th

A Visit to the Southlands
Luke 1: 39-56

Luke describes the arrival of Mary at the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth. He uses an interesting word that describes her visit as one done with an earnest purpose to it. This was no vacation. I suppose Mary needed to verify what the angel said as well as to seek comfort from someone older that she respected a great deal. Luke 1: 39-45 records the events of that day. As we read about the visit, we realize that Elizabeth would have understood the spiritual significance of carrying the one who would precede Israel's long awaited Messiah, but she could not know when or to whom that Messiah would be born. There was nothing in Gabriel's message to Zechariah that gave any inkling about her cousin Mary.

As Mary enters the house and greets her hostess, we notice an immediate reaction. Luke tells us that two things happened at approximately the same moment. The baby inside Elizabeth leaped and the Holy Spirit came upon Elizabeth. There have been differing

opinions as to how Elizabeth knew that Mary was even pregnant. Now I am the father of two children. I can remember when my wife was pregnant with each of them and feeling them leaping within her womb. That event almost always happened when we retired for the night. The only thing that it told us was that my wife wasn't going to be able to get to sleep until the child inside her calmed down. I do not believe there is anything spiritually significant about a baby leaping inside the womb. The Holy Spirit, however, is something altogether different. I believe that it was the Holy Spirit who revealed to Elizabeth the identity of who was in Mary's womb. That's because it is the usual task of the Holy Spirit throughout the Bible to reveal God to people. That's one of His major jobs.

The other thing I notice in this scripture is that the first person, outside of Mary, to know of the arrival of the long awaited Messiah, immediately begins to praise Mary and the baby she bore. To me, it is fitting that the first words upon the arrival to Earth of God are words of praise and adoration. Perhaps that's because I believe that's the way it ought to be.

Mary's response to Elizabeth's declaration of praise is to offer her own praises to God. The verses that follow Elizabeth's greeting (46-55) are commonly known as "The Magnificent." That's because of the Latin translation of the word with which she begins her statement. There have been a lot of people who have compared Mary's words with those of Hannah, written in 1 Samuel 2: 1-10. While similar, there are major differences. In Mary's words we see the idea of God having mercy on His people, an idea that would have been totally foreign to Hannah. Read over this wonderful testimony to the greatness of our God. Let Mary's words seep deep into your soul.

Have you ever felt like Mary did that day? There have been occasions where I have felt as she did at that moment. It usually has been after God has done something wonderful in my life, as He did in Mary's life, like at the birth of each of my children. While it is easy to praise God when He does something truly wonderful in your life, it is no less significant. While God should be glorified at all times in our life, it is really important to

give Him all of the glory and credit after something truly miraculous happens. We should not be embarrassed or bashful in proclaiming that He rules and that His provision is all that we need. How else is the world to know that God exists? In a world that easily celebrates the accomplishments of men, it comes like a fresh breeze on a warm day witnessing someone praising God openly and loudly. I believe this is the greatest lesson that comes out of Mary's statement that we read today.

What did God teach you about Himself today?

What are you going to do differently the next time God works in your life?

BIRTH TO BAPTISM
January 16th

Joseph's Dream
Matt. 1: 18-25

After three months visiting Elizabeth, it was time for Mary to go back home and face the first of many consequences that her condition would have brought. She had to tell Joseph. We are not told about the conversation. All Matthew says is that Mary was found to be with child. After having two children of my own, I know that after three months, it is fairly obvious. Take a moment to read Matthew 1: 18-25 before we get started.

Matthew tells us a lot about what was going on in Joseph's mind that day. I'm sure there was disappointment and anger all mixed together. There was probably some

embarrassment because he knew he would have to face the local townspeople. After all, Nazareth was still a small town and people do tend to talk. We also notice what was not there. We don't get a sense that Joseph was so angry that he wanted to take revenge on Mary for what he perceived as her betrayal of his trust. Matthew says that he resolved to divorce her quietly. Yet even that action required that he round up a couple of friends to be his witnesses.

Once his path was set in his mind, he was able to sleep peacefully once again. Yet even that was not to be, for that night he had a dream. The fact that the announcement came in a dream would dispose Joseph all the more to believe it. In those times, a good dream was popularly regarded as a sign of God's favor. In fact, it was said that if someone went a week without a memorable dream, he would be considered accursed by God.

We can easily imagine that the angel who appeared to Joseph was Gabriel, as he was the messenger to both Zechariah and Mary. Gabriel revealed the origin of the child, the name he would be given and his mission. While Matthew says that Joseph took Mary home to be his wife, Luke 2: 5 seems to indicate that they were not yet legally married when she gave birth to Jesus. I guess we'll have to ask when we get to heaven. In any event, the stage was set for the greatest event in human history.

Courage is defined in Webster's Dictionary as that mental or moral strength to venture, persevere and withstand danger, fear or difficulty. I have always believed that courage can be seen in Mary and Joseph. In a nation where millions of teenage girls get pregnant out of wedlock, Mary's predicament may not seem so unusual. In first century Israel and the small town of Nazareth, the news that the angel gave her could not have been welcome. Jewish law treated the betrothal the same as the actual marriage. To become pregnant by someone else was considered adultery and the punishment was death by stoning. Then they had to endure the 9 months of awkward explanations, the lingering scent of scandal. If you think about it, it is highly unlikely that Jesus would have been born at all if she were living in our culture. Mary's pregnancy, in this age of family planning clinics, would have been a prime candidate for early termination. I mean her

being of poor circumstances, father unknown and this talk of the Holy Spirit impregnating her. “We can’t have the mentally ill having babies you know.”

For Joseph this was also no picnic. You can imagine Joseph’s doubts through the intervening months; the constant explanations, the embarrassment. You wonder if Joseph began to question his own decision to marry Mary. “Was the dream real, or did I just eat some bad fish?” he might have thought.

We do not often think about what these two went through in the months leading up to Jesus’ birth. These were courageous people when it came to doing what God wanted of them. As such, they should be lifted up as shining examples of a faith that is not afraid of the consequences of following God. That’s what happens when you look only at God and forget all of the influences that surround us. What I see here is a great example of what I need to do the next time God give me a task to accomplish.

What did God teach you about Himself today?

How did you show God at work the last time you went through a trying time?

BIRTH TO BAPTISM
January 17th

The Birth of John
Luke 1: 57-80

The birth of John the Baptist is described in Luke 1: 57-80. As you read this section of scripture, you notice that Luke takes the most time to describe the events that took place eight days after John's birth. We are attending the ceremony of circumcision where the child would take upon himself the yoke of the Mosaic Law. This ceremony was where the baby's father, Zechariah, would offer his son to God in gratitude and love.

For Zechariah and Elizabeth, this ceremony would have taken on a special meaning. I suppose that would be because of the unusual circumstances surrounding John's birth. Their time of meditation and preparations that would have surrounded the birth of this special child was over and now the hard part was about to begin. They would have to raise the boy. I am sure that Gabriel's words concerning this tiny baby were still echoing through their minds.

We enter into the scene at the close of the ceremony, as the final cup of wine was being taken. It was at that point that the boy would officially receive his name in a prayer of benediction. It is at that holy moment, so steeped in tradition and ceremony, that Elizabeth interrupts the prayer with a most unusual request. The presiding rabbi would have automatically given the child his father's name. That was the custom that was handed down for centuries, but that wasn't the name the angel had given this child. It seems that Elizabeth was insisting the boy be given the name John. All eyes now turn to Zechariah, who still can't utter a sound. Zechariah asks that a tablet of stone and a writing instrument be given to him. You can almost hear the gasps from all those in attendance that day as Zechariah writes, "His name is John." At the very moment that Zechariah finishes writing the child's name, his voice immediately comes alive.

I have always found it interesting that the last words that Zechariah spoke were words of doubt in the truthfulness of an angel's words. The very first words out of his mouth at this point are words of praise and adoration. If you look at the speech he gave that day, you will notice that it is strictly Hebrew in its tone, for it closely follows Old Testament prophesy. It also closely follows and spiritualizes a great part of the oldest Jewish prayer called the 18 Benedictions. The response of the people to all of these events is one of

abject terror. You have to remember that we are dealing with an extremely superstitious people who didn't react well to the supernatural invading the normal flow of life. Yet all in attendance agreed that this child would, indeed, be special. They had all been witness to that.

If you still have your Bible open, take a look at the final verse in today's reading. This is the only glimpse we get into the childhood of John the Baptist. Yet there are several things that we can glean from this verse. The first is that as he grew, he became strong in the spirit. We can almost sense from Luke's description that as John grew up, he became more firmly anchored to the relationship he had with God. When he finally began his ministry, dynamite couldn't separate John from his God or his mission. Jesus later described John as being someone not swaying in the wind, meaning his course would not be altered by public opinion. I believe that path was forged during his childhood.

The second thing the verse says is that he grew up in the deserts of southern Judah. The desert is a place of solitude and quiet. It is in those kinds of places, away from the hustle and bustle of city life, that one can truly develop a close communication with God. We are reminded of Elijah's life, when he heard God while standing in the cleft of the rock. It is from that section of scripture that we understand that God often speaks to us in a quiet whisper. A quiet voice requires that we withdraw to quiet surroundings in order that we may hear it. Perhaps that is why we seldom hear God. We don't take time to retire to a place of quiet in order to listen to His gentle voice.

What did God teach you about Himself today?

What time today are you going to spend some quiet time with God?

BIRTH TO BAPTISM
January 18th

The Wrong Messiah
John 5: 39, 40

I debated quite a while as to whether or not to include this chapter in the devotional. While I know for some this will be boring, I also know that whenever I teach on the ministry of Jesus Christ, I always get a question concerning why the Jewish leadership rejected Jesus as Messiah. It all goes back to expectations, doesn't it? If you truly expect something in your life to go a certain way and it doesn't, you usually have two reactions. First you feel a sense of disappointment and then you reject the result and keep on looking. That is what happened to the Jewish Leadership. They hid whatever disappointment they felt, rejected Jesus, and kept right on looking for a Messiah who would follow their own agenda.

Some rabbis believed that the Messianic announcement would come from learned investigation that originated out of one of the great rabbinic schools in Jerusalem. Other rabbis looked for Messiah to come through some miraculous appearance in the temple. The fact that the announcement came from an obscure rustic priest by the name of Zechariah would only be something the Jewish leadership would laugh about. Judaism of Jesus' day could not even conceive of the Messiah coming from a Galilean virgin betrothed to a common worker. Take a moment and read John 5: 39, 40 and you will see Jesus pointing out the same truth about His generation. In short, there was nothing past, present, intellectually, religiously or even nationally to attract the Jewish leadership to Jesus.

No objection was ever made by the rabbis to Jesus' fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. What you have to realize is that the rabbis did not look at the Old Testament

as a group of unrelated prophesies. They saw the entire Old Testament as one story line. They only saw God establishing His kingdom here on earth under the authority of Messiah. They believed only in a physical kingdom where Israel would rule the world. They saw all of the miracles and deliverances done by Old Testament figures would be duplicated on a grander scale by the Messiah. That's why the crowds got so excited when Jesus fed the five thousand. They saw it as a Moses and the manna kind of recreation.

Jewish establishment had no need for a Messiah who would die for the sins of all mankind. That was because they didn't believe in the idea of original sin. To them, Adam's fall was caused by the envy of the angelic host. The rabbis taught that the angels never wanted man to be created in the first place. When they couldn't stop it, they caused Adam to sin and fall from God's favor. They believed that the seven things that Adam lost as a consequence of his sin were ultimately restored through the actions of seven righteous men from Abraham to Moses. Now you can't find that anywhere in the Old Testament, but that didn't seem to stop them. The rabbis also taught that when Israel took upon them God's law at Mt. Sinai, they became the inheritor and judge of all the earth. By their account, the only reason Messiah hadn't come by now was the presence of national sin, the idolatry of former times, the prevalence of crimes and vices within Israel, the dereliction of God's ordinances, and the lack of study of God's law. The rabbis felt if Israel could just get it right for just one day, the Messiah would miraculously appear.

Another problem the Jewish leadership had with Jesus lie in the entire idea of the Holy Spirit and man coming together as God's son. They couldn't even conceive a baby, born in a stable, as any kind of way that their precious Messiah would enter this world. For in their writings we see they believed that the Messiah would just appear as someone above both man and angels, but lower than Jehovah God. That is why Jesus' claim of equality with God was another idea that was totally rejected by the Jewish leadership of Jesus' time.

Mankind has always had various ideas about the personality and nature of God. Everyone's actions concerning God are always based upon the way they view God. If you believe God to be some benevolent grandfather in a white beard, then that idea will seep into your behavior. If your view of God is that He is a giant ogre ready to squash you like a ripe grape, then your life will be skewed towards a forced obedience. If you believe God as a loving, heavenly Father, then your life tends to be one of service as a token of gratitude for all He has done for you. Yes, what you believe about God goes right to the core of how you live your life. So the only question that remains to be asked is; which God do you believe in?

What did God teach you about Himself today?

What personality does your God exhibit?

BIRTH TO BAPTISM
January 19th

Jesus' Birth Day
Luke 2: 1, 2

When most people are asked to name Jesus' exact birthday, the answer that is usually given is that He was born on December 25, 0000. That was the traditional date of His birth when Pope Gregory VIII, on February 24, 1582, approved the conversion of our measure of time from the old Julian calendar, which was used since the founding of Rome to the measure of time we still use today. In 1582, it was determined that Jesus was born in the year 754 AUC. The Gregorian calendar used that date as the delineation

from B.C. to A.D. Now the only reason that I bring this up is that the Roman Empire kept its records using the Julian calendar. As I read various writers on this subject, I believe that Jesus probably wasn't born in the year 0000. In case you were wondering what AUC means, they are the Latin initials for the phrase, "from the founding of Rome."

From a historical perspective, Roman records that have been unearthed since 1582 show that Herod the Great died in 750 AUC, which would translate to 4 BC using our current calendar. That would put a definite crimp in the story if Jesus were born four years after the death of Herod the Great. Historians now believe that the census, that Luke refers to in Luke 2: 1, 2, most likely occurred in 5 or 6 BC. Additionally there is the evidence from John 2: 20. Take a moment to look up that verse. According to historical records, Herod began work on the temple in 733 AUC. If you add 46 years to that date and believe that Jesus was approximately 30 years old when He began His ministry, the math will give you a birth year of 749 AUC or 5 BC. Now given the fact that the temple could have been under construction for more than 46 years and Jesus could have been slightly over 30, it is possible to get back to the date of 6 BC for the year of His birth. You could also make a case for 4 BC from that verse.

If those arguments are not enough, let me add one more. One of the great aspects of man's study of astronomy is the fact that the stars and planets follow an extremely predictable pattern. Astronomers can use this predictability to chart astronomical events back in time. Alfred Edersheim, in his book *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, quotes a number of astronomers who have used that predictability of the movement of the planets to discover that on three occasions in 7 BC, there appeared a conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in the constellation Pisces. They also calculate that Mars would have entered into the conjunction with Jupiter and Saturn in the spring of 6 BC. The result would have been a star so bright that it would have been visible even in the day light. Star gazers at that time believed that the constellation Pisces stood for the house of the Hebrews, and that Saturn ruled over the destiny of the Jews. They surmise that it was this bright star that would have brought the Magi to Herod's doorstep

While all of the evidence is interesting, it doesn't change the fact that Jesus was born at some point in human history. There is more historical evidence for the birth of Jesus Christ than there is for any other person born in that era. More people have written about Jesus, more people have quoted His words, than any other person who ever existed. Yet, over the next several days, I am going to challenge some of your long held beliefs about the events that surround the entrance of Jesus into this world. Please remember what is important in all of this. Even if some of your long held and treasured beliefs about the first Christmas aren't true, it doesn't affect the fact that Jesus did come. That fact is historically verified. It doesn't change the eye witness testimony to the events that happened in His life. It just means that sometimes we allow tradition to get in the way of historical fact. So hang on to your hats, and we'll take this journey together.

What did God teach you about Himself today?

Are you willing to allow God to change your view of His birth?

BIRTH TO BAPTISM
January 20th

Trip to Bethlehem
Luke 2: 1-7

Joseph and Mary had endured months of quiet whispers and town gossip. I'm sure that it was almost with a sigh of relief that they prepared for the journey to Bethlehem. The order had come down from Herod that the entire nation was to return to their cities of origin for the purpose of registration and taxation. While taxation is never a pleasant

topic, there didn't seem to be much leeway in the order for the people to get on the road. Of course we know there was another reason for the journey. It was hundreds of years before that the prophet Micah had predicted that the Messiah would be born in the City of David, Bethlehem. It was also predicted that the Messiah had to come from David's descendants. I'm not sure that Joseph or Mary understood the significance of their return to Bethlehem, or they might have made room reservations and looked up the right doctor to attend to the birth of their child. All right, so they didn't have such conveniences, but you get my point.

Now the very fact of the census has been one that has been debated over the centuries. The critics have always been quick to point out that there is no evidence that the Roman government even had a census. The criticism lasted right up until the time that a couple of ancient papyrus documents were discovered in Egypt. One of them documented the fact that a census did occur every fourteen years from its origin by Augustus Caesar in 22 or 23 BC. Another papyrus document dated around the same time said, "Because of the approaching census it is necessary that all those residing for any cause away from their homes should at once prepare to return to their own governments in order that they may complete the family registration of the enrollment and that the tilled lands may retain those belonging to them."

Now given that communication in those days took some time to accomplish, it is easy to understand that this undertaking could take a year or so to accomplish in first century Israel. It is noted that the census that did occur in Israel had a distinctly Jewish cast to it. This is easily understandable since Herod would naturally seek to placate his Jewish population while at the same time obey his instructions from Rome. To do that, he would naturally conduct the registration according to Jewish custom. The registration was done by tribes, families or clans, and right down to the house of their fathers.

As I said earlier Joseph and Mary were of the house and lineage of David, they would have been directed to travel south from Nazareth to Bethlehem. In most accounts of the journey, we see Mary seated on the back of a donkey being led by Joseph. While we

don't have any eye witness accounts of these ideas, it is easy to assume that was the way it occurred. Mary, being visibly pregnant, would not have been able to endure a sixty mile hike.

One can only imagine the total bedlam that was Bethlehem at that time. The influx of people had overwhelmed all of the normal places where a traveler would be able to find lodgings for the night. The only room would have been in a small cave, probably just outside of town, that was used to shelter livestock from the weather. Yet even this would have been a welcome place for our tired couple. Remember the purpose of the gospels. They were never intended to be a biography of Jesus' life. The exact time of the arrival of Jesus is not known. The gospels draw a curtain of privacy over the birth of Jesus. We are awed by the great humility that surrounds the birth of the savior of the world. When you compare His birth with the splendor that Jesus left in heaven a few moments before, the circumstances behind His birth are all the more remarkable.

What did God teach you about Himself today?

As I look at Joseph and Mary what lessons can you take from their experience?

BIRTH TO BAPTISM
January 21st

The Shock of Their Life
Luke 2: 8-20

A very long time ago, I used to be involved in the Christmas productions at my church. That year we were doing a musical by Jim and Carol Owens called, “The Glory of Christmas.” I was cast as one of three shepherds who did a song that was taken from the time just after the account that Luke gives in chapter 2, verses 8 through 20. We spent hours with a choreographer rehearsing, not only the words of the song and the harmonies involved, but an intricate set of dance steps. When the lights came on, the three of us were directed to be first seen in a frozen position of total terror. I can still remember how difficult it was to maintain that freeze when the audience began laughing.

I have always thought that that song, “Shepherds Beside Themselves,” to be an accurate portrait of how these men would have reacted to the events of that night. Just imagine yourself gathered around an open fire with the exciting job of keeping a bunch of sheep from killing themselves. This would be just the kind of job that I went to college to find. To be sure, on most nights the job was totally boring, but not on that night. I can only imagine what it would have been like to see the night sky split with the light of myriads of angels stretching from horizon to horizon, all singing in the most marvelous harmonies. Well, at least that’s how I have always imagined the events of that night.

That the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem was a forgone rabbinic conclusion. It was also believed that His birth would be revealed to the world through the Migdal Eder, which is Hebrew for “The Tower of the Flock.” This Migdal Eder was not the keeper of an ordinary flock of sheep. These shepherds all year looked after the sheep that were raised solely for the purpose of being used in temple sacrifice. I have always thought it fitting that the one who would be the final atoning sacrifice for the sins of the entire world should have His birth announced to those He would be putting out of a job.

Luke describes the reaction of these shepherds as total and complete terror. Yet the announcement that these angels came to bring was not one of judgment or punishment, it was one of great joy. It wouldn’t be hard for us to imagine that the principal angel announcing Jesus’ birth would have been the same Gabriel that had announced His arrival previously. His words are simple, yet profound. For centuries Israel had been

waiting for this evening to come. Every person had been taught by the school of the rabbis all about how life was going to be when Messiah came. Now during this extraordinary evening, these lowly shepherds were given the task of announcing the long awaited event.

It was only natural that the shepherds would want to visit the place where this event had occurred. Luke doesn't tell us if they had to do a search of all of the mangers surrounding Bethlehem, or they were just directed to the right one by the Holy Spirit. He only says that they found the place and were able to give a first hand account that what the angels had spoken of, actually happened. Leaving this sacred scene, they spread the word, so that all who heard of it were amazed.

At the center of it all, there was Mary. After months of gossip and ridicule, a newborn was now sitting in her lap. The promise had become a reality. The savior of the world was right there doing all of the things that normal babies do. Sitting there exhausted, she could only ponder the path that her life would take from that moment on. She could not know that in a little over three decades from that moment, she would be standing at the foot of a cross, watching this tiny, innocent one die.

What did God teach you about Himself today?

Mary was willing to take God one day at a time. Are you?

January 22nd

A Pigeon or a Turtle Dove

Luke 2: 21-38

Jesus' circumcision ceremony must have been without controversy for Luke only takes a single sentence to describe it. That was when He was given His heaven directed name of Jesus or Jeshua as He is called in the Hebrew language.

Luke has much more to say about Mary's purification ritual in Luke 2: 22-38. According to Jewish custom, purification took place at least forty-one days after birth and had to take place in the temple. Since the couple was temporarily still residing in Bethlehem, it wasn't even a long walk to get to Jerusalem. Purification was developed to deal with the Levitical defilement symbolically associated with the birth process. The burnt offering was meant to signify a complete restoration of Mary's communion with God.

As Mary entered the Court of Women, she would approach a priest on duty before thirteen trumpet shaped chests that held the day's offerings. The priest would inform her of the current price of the sacrifice. The money would be used for the purchase of a pigeon or turtle-dove in the case of the poor. Mary would have dropped her money into the third chest, which was the one designated for the poor.

As she waited, a trumpet would sound to signal that the incense was about to be kindled upon the golden altar. Mary would have joined the crowd as they pressed against the wicker fences on either side of the Nicanor Gate leading to the Court of Israel. As she stared through the gate, she could see all of the Levites, face down, prostrate before the Lord. The pigeon would have been already sacrificed. The only thing left would be the prayers of the Levites for her forgiveness that would ascend into heaven borne on the scent of the incense as it rose skyward. Now all stain would be removed. Mary could, once more, partake in the sacred offerings of Judaism.

As they left the temple area, the young family was accosted by two individuals, who spent their final days hanging around the temple waiting for the coming of the Messiah. The first we are introduced to is Simeon. The Holy Spirit had told Simeon that he would not depart this planet until he saw the Coming One. This day that promise would be fulfilled. His words of praise come straight out of the Torah. We know these verses as Isaiah 42: 6 and 52: 10.

The second visitor was Anna. Anna has always been a bit of a mystery. That's because her tribe supposedly no longer existed. The tribe of Asher had been part of the Northern nation of Israel that had been carted off and lost during the Assyrian captivity. Luke tells us two things about this woman. The first is that she had been a widow for quite some time and the second is that one could find her every day in the temple waiting for the Messiah. In the cases of both Simeon and Anna, it was the Holy Spirit who revealed the identity of this little baby. As was true of Elizabeth before them, the identity of God's son is revealed by God, Himself. The words of praise spoken by these saints of the living God would have been done in whispers as they were standing right in the middle of the City of Herod and in the stronghold of Pharisaism.

What impressed me most about this section of the Bible is the elaborate ceremony that Mary had to go through just to resume her worship of God. I have always been grateful that Jesus died on the cross to free us from all of this ceremony. Human beings seem to enjoy ceremony. Every time a religion is added to our repertoire, there seems to be more ceremony. Yet in what we see throughout the life of Jesus, there doesn't seem to be a lot of ceremony. You can't find a single episode in Jesus' life where He spent time instructing His disciples on all of the ceremonies He required. For that reason I praise the Lord that the way has been made clear to worship the Lord without all of the work involved in ceremonies to purify us so that we could be made worthy to worship God. It is the blood of Jesus that does all the work, once and for all time. Thanks to Jesus we can walk boldly to the throne of Grace, as the Apostle Paul said, and have an audience with the King of Kings.

What did God teach you about Himself today?

Do weekly ceremonies allow you to worship God or can you do it any day of the week?

BIRTH TO BAPTISM
January 23rd

We Three Kings
Matt. 2: 1-8

I can't tell you the amount of confusion I went through when I first realized that all I had known about these three kings that was a part of my Christmas tradition was wrong. For most of my life, these kings graced every nativity scene I had ever seen. They were always dressed in rich looking clothes and carrying jeweled chests that carried the gifts they gave to the baby Jesus. Then I read Matthew 2: 1-8 along with a number of books that gave me insight into what the ancient writings said about these men.

My first misconception was that these men were kings. The Greek word translated Magi is also used in the Septuagint (The Old Testament in Greek), by Philo and by the Jewish historian, Josephus. In each case, Magi describe a person who practiced magical arts, and is usually used to refer to the eastern or Chaldean priest-sages of ancient Babylon. The Sacerdal castes of the Mede and Persian Magi were, by Jesus' birth, spread all over the east. So where these men came from is totally unknown. One thing is certain; they weren't kings and probably didn't come in magnificent robes. Perhaps churches need to change the costuming for their next Christmas pageant.

The second thing I notice is that there were not necessarily three of them. Matthew doesn't give us a number. We assume there were three because that's how many gifts are given, but the number of them is unknown.

My third error was that they visited the Christ-child on the same night as the shepherds. They arrived months later and went straight to Jerusalem and inquired about the newborn King of the Jews from the current King of the Jews, Herod. As Herod is confronted with the news that there might be another King born, he acted with his usual cunning. The historical account that Josephus wrote told us that Herod had already ordered the execution of three of his own sons for allegedly plotting to overthrow their father. He was not about to let someone else take his spot before he was dead.

There are two things that Herod needed to know in order to protect his legacy. The first involved the location of the birthplace of this child-king. The second question would be when the Magi first saw the star that drew them to his kingdom. Herod gets the answer to the first question from the chief priests and scribes. The only answer they could give him was the one found in Micah 5: 2 that this new king would be born in tiny Bethlehem. The answer to the second question, he ascertained from the Magi. To seal the deal, he makes a request of the Magi that they should come back to him and report where this new king is located so he could go there and "worship" this new king. Of course, we understand Herod's kind of worship would involve a sword, but the Magi wouldn't have known that.

There is no other time of the year when tradition plays such an important part in our lives than Christmas. Take a look at your own life during the holidays. How much of what you do revolves around what has transpired over the years during the Christmas season? We do take great comfort in our traditions because there is a tremendous sense of security that we get from knowing what this time of year will hold. Yet, how many of those traditions revolve around Jesus Christ and what Matthew and Luke say about His arrival? If we had to analyze all that goes on in our lives during the last month of the year, how many of the things that we do glorify Jesus and how many things are just plain fluff? My

challenge to you is to resolve next December to take some time to look at all of the events and feelings that revolve around this time of year. Take a hard look at each of them and ask this question, “Can I picture Jesus, or any of the Apostles, doing this?” Does what I do glorify God, or do I do them just to make myself feel better? The last step is to take each of them to throne of grace and be prepared for God to do a bit of adjusting. Somehow I have a feeling that what you will have left in your tradition bag will lead to far more satisfaction and joy than the “stuff” that gets tossed out.

What did God teach you about Himself today?

What changes is God telling you to make next Christmas?

BIRTH TO BAPTISM
January 24th

Out of Town Guests
Matt. 2: 9-12

We are right in the middle of looking at a visit that Joseph and Mary had by some mysterious men from the east. While I know how much disruption is caused by visiting relatives, these men were not even related and they walked in unannounced. It was probably a good thing that they brought expensive gifts.

According to Matthew’s account of this event written in chapter 2 verses 9 through 12, the star that these visitors had seen in the east once more appeared. I assume that to be the case because if they had been following this star all along, why would they make a pit

stop in Jerusalem? This light leads them to the house where Joseph and Mary were living at the time in the village of Bethlehem. The Greek word that Matthew uses here to describe Jesus is properly translated “child.” The word indicates that Jesus was at least six months old when these men arrived.

Matthew describes two elements that made up what happened during the visit by these men. The first was that they paid the humblest of eastern homage to the new king. They bowed down and worshipped Him. It’s hard for some to understand why God would reveal the identity of His son to these Gentiles. We know from past discussions that the identity of Jesus is always revealed through His Holy Spirit, so we can guess that God’s Holy Spirit had once again been at work. We can regard these men as being representatives of the entire Gentile world to welcome God’s son into the world. You see, contrary to Jewish thinking at the time, Messiah was not just a Jewish thing. God’s Messiah would be for the entire human race in the sense that all of God’s creation would be permanently affected by His coming.

The second event that happened during the visit was a presentation of gifts. These gifts are given to us by Matthew as gold, frankincense and myrrh. We can assume that these gifts represented the products produced by their country. A lot of conjecture has been made over the centuries as to why these gifts and for what were they used. Who knows, perhaps if these guys showed up today, they might present blankets, a pacifier and 6 months of free diaper service. There have been some who conjectured that the myrrh that was given was later used as a burial ointment to bury Jesus. To my thinking, it is a little hard to believe the substance was kept that long. Also burial is not something a new parent thinks about when living with a newborn. I have always felt that it was these gifts that would have been used to cover the living costs for the family during their short sojourn in Egypt. Now if you really want to be amazed, take a look at Isaiah 60: 6, written hundreds of years before the events of this night where he said, “Herds of camels will cover your land, young camels of Midian and Ephah. And all from Sheba will come, bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the Lord.” The word, “Sheba,” means a place of overflow. Also the Midianites were always associated in Israel as

meaning “people of the East.” Hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus, God’s prophets were already talking about people coming from the east in order to provide an overflow so that His son would be taken care of.

God is still in the “providing” business. As you look throughout the Bible, you will never find a time when God gives an assignment and then fails to provide all that is necessary to complete that assignment. God knew that He was taking Joseph out of a place where the man could support his new family. You just don’t start a business from scratch in a foreign land where you don’t even speak the language. Yet God knew that His son would have to come out of Egypt as a symbol of what had happened to Israel under Moses, so He sent some men out of Chaldea to see that His son and His chosen earthly parents were well taken care of. That’s the kind of God we serve.

The next time you hear from God about a job that He wants you to do, don’t get hung up in the logistics of it all. If you do that you will never get up off your couch and get to work. Instead begin the task by trusting that God will provide all you need to complete His task. That way you will have even more to glorify God over when the job has been completed.

What did God teach you about Himself today?

Can you tend to trust God for the details or do you get hung up on all of the logistics?

January 25th

Slaughter of the Innocents

Matt. 2: 13-18

I once heard a story about a Sunday school class who was busy doing an assignment to draw a picture about the Bible story that they had just heard. The teacher had spent the morning telling the class about the miraculous events surrounding the birth of Jesus. As this teacher began gliding through the class inspecting her busy children, she happened upon little Johnny busily drawing a picture of a jet airplane. She noticed that Johnny had all of the parts of the plane in their perspective places and was, in fact, a rather fine drawing if the assignment were to draw different modes of transportation. The teacher said, "Johnny, I thought I told you to draw a picture about the birth of Jesus." Johnny looked up and said, "I drew about the part where you talked about the baby Jesus' flight to Egypt." Then the little boy pointed to a stick figure that was sitting in the cockpit of his plane and said, "And this is Pontius pilot."

Sometimes we get things a bit confused when we hear stories about various things. That is not what needs to happen when we are talking about God coming down to the earth to let His creation know about their creator. So let's take a look at Matthew 2: 13-18 and get a clearer understanding about the events that followed shortly after Jesus' entry into this world.

The Jewish historian, Josephus, tells us exactly how Herod the Great dealt with those who would dare to challenge his rule. As we talked about a few days ago, Herod had already executed three of his sons for allegedly wanting to rule Israel before their father was ready to give it up. I suppose that is how one hangs on to power when you are not the popular choice to rule. So it is no wonder that Herod now seeks to take the life of Jesus before He can gain any momentum towards usurping Herod's control over the population. The last thing that Herod needed was the population rallying around some infant and kicking him out.

It was not God's plan to put His son in jeopardy through these men from the east, so He warned them in a dream not to report back to Herod as they had promised. Notice Herod's reaction as recorded in Matthew 2: 19-23. It appears that not only had the Magi failed Herod, but his own spy network failed to give him the exact identity and location of his newborn rival. That is why he ordered the indiscriminate slaughter of all children in Bethlehem two years old and younger. Of course the real reason for Herod's action was that it fulfilled two prophecies that are recorded in Jeremiah 31: 15 and Hosea 11: 1. Yet the fulfillment of ancient prophecy would not have been much comfort in Bethlehem that day. I have read estimates that approximately twenty children were murdered by Herod's men.

It was predicted by the prophet Jeremiah that there would be much weeping in Bethlehem. Before we go too far, you might be a bit confused with the prophecy that Matthew quotes from Jeremiah 31: 15. Ramah was the traditional location of Rachael's tomb. It was an ancient city in what was then the land controlled by the tribe of Benjamin, the youngest son of Rachael. After conquering the "land of milk and honey," Joshua gave the tribe of Benjamin the area that later contained both Jerusalem and Bethlehem. What Jeremiah described is fulfilled by what happened in Bethlehem that day. If you read the verses in Hosea, you will notice that he merely prophesied that it would be out of Egypt that God would call His son. Matthew, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, tells us that Jesus' time in Egypt fulfilled the words of both men.

In the second Psalm, David asks this most basic of questions, "Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the LORD and against his Anointed One." I still run into people who believe that they are somehow wiser than God, stronger than God or more cunning than God. As I read the Bible, it doesn't take long to understand that the God that is described within its pages is beyond men's wisdom, strength and cunning. Men are not going to outsmart God. Herod thought he could do it, but in the end, God did exactly what He intended, and nothing this side of heaven was going to prevent it from happening. Perhaps you have the mistaken notion that you can outsmart God. First, it

can't be done, and second, it is an extremely dangerous road to travel. Perhaps it might be wise for you to rethink your position?

What did God teach you about Himself today?

What is God telling you about your attitude towards Him?

BIRTH TO BAPTISM
January 26th

Return from Egypt
Matt. 2: 19-23

I have read a number of articles lately about the importance some people put on getting their children into exactly the right schools. I wish I were reading about some prestigious Ivy League college, but these articles were talking about pre-schools. The articles quote parents who believe that only the right pre-school will prepare their children for the right private schools later in life so that they can walk seamlessly into the right colleges. It is as if this is seen to be the only pathway that our children can take to greatness. While I have always been a great proponent of quality education, I have never believed that the greatness of a person is determined by the name of the school they attend. It seems to me that greatness in a child is more bound up in who they are on the inside than the outer trappings parents provide for them. What was more interesting was the fact that one of the articles I read also talked about the fact that stress disorders were appearing in these children at a far earlier age than one would normally expect.

If parents could guaranty greatness simply by the careful choosing of the right school, then one would have expected Joseph and Mary to undergo the same kind of thought process. These two had charge of the one who was to be Israel's long awaited Messiah. Surely that would warrant sending Him to the best schools in the land. In that particular period in history, the new family would have no other alternative but to move into a suburb of Jerusalem, the center of Jewish thinking and religious life and the location of the great schools of their day. As we read in Matthew 2: 19-23, God had the family move back to their hometown of Nazareth in the region of Galilee. For the rest of Jesus' life, the main criticism of Him and His Messianic claims would lie in the fact that the He came from Nazareth.

Now Matthew records that the great tyrant, Herod the Great, had died. Josephus records his death and from that description it is believed that Herod suffered from a case of dropsy, which is a vast gathering of fluids in the body, which was probably caused by cancer. Doctors today describe Herod's demise as a most painful way to die, but I guess God wasn't too pleased with the man at that point. Before his death, Herod had changed his will at least three times. The final will, which was eventually validated by Rome, was to leave rule of the nation of Israel to three of his sons. Herod Antipas was given rule over Galilee and Perea, Phillip ruled Bashan in the north and Archelaus was given Samaria, Judea and Idumea to the south. Archelaus began his reign by ruthlessly crushing all resistance by the wholesale murder of anyone who dared oppose him. He is believed to have orchestrated the deaths of over three thousand of his opponents in his short, but violent reign. Alfred Edersheim describes Archelaus as "far surpassing his father in cruelty, oppression, luxury, the grossest egotism and the lowest sensuality, and all of that without possessing the talent or the energy of Herod." His reign was a brief six years, but I'm sure it seemed a lifetime for those who had to endure the man. For his crimes, the emperor in Rome removed him from power and banished him to Gaul.

Matthew tells us that Archelaus was the reason God directed Joseph and Mary to go back home to Nazareth. Yet Matthew also tells us that it was prophesied that Jesus would be called a Nazarene. I found the statement curious as I looked through the Old Testament,

because Nazareth is never mentioned. The answer to my puzzlement came as I discovered that the town's name can be traced back to the Hebrew word, netzer, which means a small twig, sprout or sucker. It was then that the words of Isaiah came to my mind where he wrote, "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit." I believe that the words of Isaiah are the very words that Matthew was talking about.

Jesus was raised among family and long time friends in the confines of an obscure town in Galilee. While I am sure that He took His place among the boys of the town to be schooled by the local rabbi, He did not advance to the great universities of Jewish thought in Jerusalem. That is not the path that God chose for His Son. After all, it wasn't man's wisdom that Jesus needed. I believed Jesus possessed God's wisdom His whole life. In Jesus' entire time on earth, He never sought after man's stamp of approval for He had His Father's approval. Jesus' road to greatness lie in the relationship that He always had with God, the Father. It was never about what pre-school he attended.

What did God teach you about Himself today?

How will the attitude that you have towards your children going to change today?

BIRTH TO BAPTISM
January 27th

Passover in the First Century
Luke 2: 41, 42

As we move from Jesus' infancy into His childhood, little is known except for a brief description Luke gives us of an event that happened when Jesus was twelve. It is found in Luke 2: 41 and goes to the end of the chapter. A lot had happened in those years within the nation of Israel. To be sure, the Romans were still very much in control of the civil functions within the nation. As we talked about yesterday, the three sons of Herod the Great were busy consolidating their power base to rule the areas they had been given by their father. Rome had only allowed the boys the title of Tetrarch and had not allowed them to possess the unlimited power of being the king. As we also talked about yesterday, Archelaus had already proven himself unworthy of even the responsibility of being the Tetrarch of Judea and had already been banished. In his place Rome had appointed a series of procurators who ruled in Rome's name. These would be citizens of Rome who had proved themselves worthy to advance to such a high position of power. The reason none of them stayed around too long was that Judea was not an easy place for any Gentile to rule. As the center of Jewish religious life and thinking, the inability to "think like a Jew" doomed most of these men to a quick dismissal for their failure to keep the peace in Israel.

We come now to the spring of 8 or 9 AD, as we have come to calendar it. Coponius, the current Roman Procurator, had already removed Joazar as High Priest. In his place, Coponius had appointed Ananos, the son of Seth. This is the famous Annas of New Testament fame, who will later play an important role in the life and ministry of Jesus. It marked a time of relative peace in the land. The National Party of Zealots had been put down by Herod the Great. While they were still in existence, their influences had waned during this period of time. They would later regain power, but for now, life in Israel was calm.

The entire nation was deep into preparing for the journey to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. It was one of the few times Israel as a nation would gather together in one place as it was required that the serious Jew attend the ceremony in Jerusalem every year. There were sacrificial animals to acquire, ceremonial cleansing to be done, as well as the normal preparations for a journey of that length. Jews from Galilee would cross the

southern shore of the Sea of Galilee into the largely Greek influenced nation of Decapolis to the east and then travel south to the town of Bethabara where they would once again cross the Jordan River and take the road into Jerusalem. To be sure this lengthened the journey by quite a number of miles, but such a detour was necessary in order to avoid becoming unclean by stepping on the soil of hated Samaria.

Families and whole towns would travel together, both for safety and companionship during the long journey. So if you were among the spectators, you would see vast groups of people and animals clogging the roads during the week. Inns would do great business housing the people during the night. There would be roadside stands all along the way selling sacrificial animals and changing the various kinds of coins in circulation into Jewish Shekels for the necessary offerings. To be sure, it was a most festive of journeys for the average Jew.

In the first century, one always sees the Jewish nation as a whole and never as individuals. When God created man, he was made to be a social creature. Man needs the interaction of people for a great many reasons. It's just that people can be a whole lot more effective together than they can ever be individually. That's the way God made us. Over the centuries, it has only been as a whole that the church has had any lasting impact upon its society or the lives of its people. That is why the writer of Hebrews says, "We should not stop gathering together with other believers, as some of you are doing. Instead, we must continue to encourage each other even more as we see the day of the Lord coming" (Hebrews 10: 25 GW). That is why we gather together. As a group, we can encourage one another to be better people for God.

What did God teach you about Himself today?

Has your attitude towards church changed as a result?

BIRTH TO BAPTISM
January 28th

My Father's House
Luke 2: 43-52

The narrative that Luke gives us takes place at the end of the seven required days that made up Passover. After the Passover celebration, there began what was known as the “half holy” days. At that time, a family could begin the long journey back home. All official government and religious activity continued to be closed, but the population of Jerusalem slowly became more normal. It was at that point that Joseph and Mary would set out for home with all of their family and friends.

One wonders why it was that Jesus would have been unaccounted for during the entire first day of travel. That’s because we don’t understand that in that time women traveled together and men traveled separately. For the most part, the women took care of the children and they would keep watch over them to protect them from the dangers of the road. Jesus was, at this point, twelve years old. In Jewish culture, He would have already had His Bar Mitzvah, at which time He would have formally been declared a man in Jewish Society. As such, it would have been natural for Mary to assume that her son was traveling with the men. Joseph was, undoubtedly not used to having his son with him and would have assumed that He was with His mother. It would not have been until the family gathered at the evening meal that the shock and horror of what had happened would have hit them.

I can only imagine the emotions that played through each of their minds on the journey back to Jerusalem. To be sure, there were many in the city who would have wanted their

son dead. Jesus always did have that effect on the power structures of His time. After a search of everywhere they had been during the holidays, they finally found Jesus under one of the porticos of the great Herodian temple.

The temple was the primary location for the great rabbinic schools of Israel. During the Holy days of Passover, they would have been closed. Yet it was custom for quite a number of the legal experts to be seen in the porticos holding unofficial classes for anyone who wished to attend. It was at one of these informal gatherings that we find Jesus discussing theology with the Jewish law professors. Luke records that the Jewish professors were amazed at the answers that came from this unschooled boy. This event should not surprise us. Jesus always amazed people with the things that He taught. That was because He never quoted the great rabbis of the past, as was common at the time. He just told people about what God had originally intended in the first place. That was always what was so different about what Jesus had to say.

After three days of frantic searching for the boy, one can only imagine the emotions that swept over Joseph and Mary at the moment they finally spotted their son. I'm sure that their words have been somewhat paraphrased by Luke. Yet Bible readers have always been impressed with the "matter of fact" nature of Jesus' response. From His words we can see how challenging raising this child truly was. Even from childhood, Jesus followed the wishes and desires of His Heavenly Father. If that conflicted with His earthly parents, Jesus' actions always were to obey God rather than men. That's what He always taught. The remainder of Luke's narrative tells us that Jesus continued to grow strong, both physically and in His faith. The work of the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, continued to be prominent in His life.

So, how about you? Who gets your obedience and loyalty? The answer to that question probably depends upon the time of day and what is currently happening in your life. For Jesus, the answer to that question was always the same. It didn't matter what was happening in His day. It didn't matter what time it was. Jesus was always about His father's business. Isn't that a great example for us to follow?

What did God teach you about Himself today?

Who gets your obedience and loyalty?

BIRTH TO BAPTISM
January 29th

Beginnings of All Things
John 1: 1-18

In reading the first five verses of the Book of John, there is no loftier set of thoughts in the human language. These verses have been read, studied and analyzed by the best of scholars and they have been read and memorized by the least of scholars. One such scholar said that these verses represent a “summit” in human thinking and reasoning. These words are how John chooses to begin his account about the One who changed his life forever. The opening line that John writes reminds us of another opening line; the one used by Moses to open the Book of Genesis. It is fitting that both books open with essentially the same idea; that God is at the beginning of all things.

Yet John is writing to a church that was largely Gentile by that time. They didn’t have a life full of teaching about Israel’s Messiah behind them. They couldn’t understand the significance of Jesus from the Jewish perspective. They did, however, understand the Greek word LOGOS. They could thank the ancient Greek writers for that. For the Greek mindset understood that in that small word was the crux of all human existence.

Heraclitus thought LOGOS was the principle that controlled the entire universe. Marcus

Aurelius believed LOGOS described that which is at the heart of all nature. To the Hebrew mindset of the time, LOGOS was taught as that which described the very manifestation of God. I believe John had all of this in mind when he set out to pen his account of the life of Jesus.

It becomes readily apparent that the LOGOS that John describes is not an abstract idea or a principle of life. This LOGOS is a real person who was touched, hugged and listened to. As you read through the first chapter of John's Gospel, the eternal LOGOS became flesh and that those in John's circle of friends spent a considerable time with Him. To be sure the LOGOS that John describes is, in fact, God. Who else could be described as the creator of all living things, the creator of all matter and even the creator of life itself?

As you read through the first chapter, John slowly reveals that this LOGOS is also none other than Jesus Christ. Given that revelation, John gives us some really remarkable ideas concerning Jesus that are not found in the other gospels. For while the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke allude to the fact that Jesus is God; John starts out by spelling it out for the reader. He leaves us no room for debate about who Jesus was, is and will always be. To be sure men have always chosen to believe these words or not to believe them, but there is left no doubt as to the major thrust behind what John communicates to us. For who else but God has always existed? Who else but God created everything that one sees around this planet? Who else but God is the originator of life itself? Who else but God could bring His creation the light of truth?

In the very beginning of man's existence, he had the light. Adam had the unique ability to walk and talk with God as you talk to your best friend. Adam's relationship with God knew no limitations. His world was filled with the kind of light that only God can give. Yet over time, Adam and every one who came from him have chosen darkness. We chose to reject the light as too confining, no fun, not important enough to take time out of our day. Now, the light could have chosen to turn His back on us and allow us to destroy ourselves in our selfish ambition to control our own destiny. Instead, the light chose to pursue His creation in order to reclaim what was rightfully His. He chose to come down

to earth in human form in order to bring that light back into our lives. He chose to come to this earth as Jesus.

For every reason that is important, God chose to give His creation the freedom to choose His light or continue to live in the futile darkness. You who are reading this right now have this choice. Some of you have chosen to live in light. Oh, sometimes we abandon the light for a time. We wander from the light and look up only to find ourselves right in the middle of darkness, but the light has always been there to show us the way out of the darkness. There are also those reading this right now, who are still walking around in the darkness. Perhaps you don't even know that there is a light. If that describes you, take a moment to go back and read the first chapter of John with a prayer in your heart that God would allow His light to shine through the words on the page. Once His light enters your life; you will never again understand why you wandered so long in the darkness.

What did God teach you about Himself today?

Have you allowed God to shine His light on you today?

BIRTH TO BAPTISM
January 30th

A Voice Cries Out
Luke 3: 1-6

In November every even numbered year, the people of the United States of America get the joy of experiencing at least a larger than normal election. During the months and

even years preceding this momentous event, we have the privilege of being bombarded by every media source that exists and our mail boxes are jammed with all sorts of groups and candidates wanting our support. Everyone who is running for office shows themselves to be the ultimate American who is fully deserving of our vote. It seems they all want to appear as if they are cut from the same cloth from which Betsy Ross sewed the original stars and stripes. After all of the hype, the promises and the negativity, I wonder where John the Baptist would have fit into all of this were he to be living today.

My thinking is that John would have been so low in the polls that it would have taken a microscope to even find him on a ballot. For John wandered in the wilderness and would not be seen wearing a power suit with his hair neatly coiffed, his shoes shined and his smile whitened. It's not that things were any different in the times in which John the Baptist lived. People have not really changed over the centuries. It's just that John came wearing clothing made out of coarse camel's hair and ate locusts and honey. There is nothing in that description that would have attracted people in the first century any more than the average man on the street would be attracted today. People of that sort have always been looked at as if they were a bit off kilter.

Yet John's announcement drew the multitudes out into the desert. So you have to ask yourself, "What was it about the message that was so compelling that it would cause someone to leave the comforts of home to visit a barren desert?" The Jewish nation had seen the Egyptians, the Syrians, the Greeks and the Romans each come and rule their lives. The Maccabees had come and gone, and now they had to endure Herodian rule. Even within Judaism itself, Pharisaism was having its own way with all of its rules and restrictions. If you had lived at the time, I'm sure you would have thought that Israel was a long way away from what you were told it was like during the rule of David and Solomon. Now, suddenly, there arose a voice coming from the desert a few miles away the cry, "The kingdom of Heaven is at hand." The people came out to John by the thousands. Each thinking and hoping deep down inside that what the voice said could somehow be correct.

We are in the year 25 A.D. It is a Sabbatical year (see Leviticus 25: 1-7) so that the people would have been released from the responsibilities of business and agriculture. John's ministry was just a short walk from Jerusalem to Bethabara on the Jordan River. Bethabara was the best known of the fords across the river separating Judah from Perea in the east. It was at this time and this location that John the Baptist had set up shop and was preaching the message that God had given him from birth.

The voice spoke a message that said that the kingdom was at hand. As such, this message was a prelude to what Jesus would later come to proclaim more completely. The voice reminded Israel of the future when Jehovah would rule Israel. It was a time spoken of by the entire Old Testament; for without understanding this kingdom, the Old Testament makes no sense. The voice coming from the desert shook the nation at its very core.

As I stop and think about all of the prophets that God used down through the times, they were all seen as a bit unusual. There never was one whom you would call a "regular Joe." None of them ever hung around with the "cool kids." I suppose that was because they heard a different voice. I guess once you have heard the voice of the creator of the universe, the mere thought of trying to impress the girl next door would seem to be immaterial. Once you have felt the call of God on your life, a relentless pursuit after the temporary trappings of wealth doesn't seem to be worth it. Did you ever wish you could be like these unique men of God? If so, it might be wise for you to count the cost before you dream too big. To be sure, the reward is well worth the sacrifice, but God's call always involves sacrifice. Yet as the martyred missionary, Jim Elliott, said, "He is no fool who gives us what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

What did God teach you about Himself today?

What would you have to give up in order to serve God more?

BIRTH TO BAPTISM
January 31st

Not Politically Correct
Matt. 3: 1-6

In looking at the life and ministry of John the Baptist, one could say that he really could have used a lesson or two in political correctness. That's at least the impression that I get whenever I read Matthew 3: 1-6. The message that John had for the nation of Israel was blunt and to the point. What he gave was God's own appraisal of where the nation of Israel needed to go. He didn't beat around the bush or try diplomatic persuasion.

If you really want to get the impact of John's words upon his hearers, you have to understand the typical Jewish mindset of his day. If you asked the average Israelite on the street about where their nation stood spiritually, the answer you would probably get was that they were the favored race. That is what they had always been taught by their rabbi. Israel lived with a false sense of security in its own righteousness. To be sure, they believed that the wrath of God was coming, but it was not going to rain down on Israel. They believed that the fire of God's wrath was reserved specifically for the Gentiles, and especially those Gentiles of Roman descent. When John warned them that God had the ability to raise up more children from the very stones that lay at their feet, it shook them up a bit.

I can remember a psychology professor in college who taught me that any deeply held philosophical belief tends to imbed itself into our very nature. He said that when any of

those philosophical beliefs are threatened the result tends to be either violent or will be automatically rejected. I have always found it interesting that John's message was accepted as well as it was, given the spiritual bent of the people. Granted, as I said yesterday, it was a Sabbatical year and people tended to have more time on their hands when they were forbidden to work at their normal tasks, but there must have been something more to it than that. There must have been something deep down inside their hearts that was telling them that what John was saying might be true. That, of course, was not true of the entire nation of Israel. Leadership was very much entrenched in first century Israel. Yet this sudden surge of attention by the people was apparently noticed by those at the center of Jewish power at the time.

I believe the same thing is true today about how man deals with a holy God. When we look at how someone deals with God, there is a great difference between our outer personality and our inward thoughts. The outward response usually mirrors the response that my psychology professor talked about. We either ridicule anyone with the audacity to question our purity, or we express our disgust by depositing our fist into the guy's nose. Yet inwardly, in that place where no one goes, it is quite a different story. We begin to wonder if there might be any truth behind what was said. That's the imprint of God that He built right there in our heart.

I don't care what culture you visit or what place on the planet you go, you will always find a universal morality. How can you explain it except that it was placed there by our creator? The people of Israel felt God pull at their hearts when John the Baptist spoke his warnings. That's why they trekked out into the desert to see this weird looking guy in strange clothing. You feel it every time someone calls your attention the fact that your actions might be a bit questionable. John offered Israel the hope that with the coming Messiah, that feeling would soon go away. Jesus, who was Israel's promised Messiah, offers you the promise that you can be immediately healed of your guilt. All you have to do is stand at the foot of the cross and accept His payment for all of your rebellion against what God wants of you, and away goes your feeling of guilt. What replaces that guilt is a peace that the Bible describes as passing all understanding. The choice is yours to make.

You can live with the heavy weight of guilt holding you down, or you can appropriate a peace that will overcome you with a sense of well being.

What did God teach you about Himself today?

Are you walking around with a burden of guilt? What will you do about it?
