

Zechariah 2 – April 1

Zechariah 2 captures the prophet's third vision: A man with a measuring line. Now, to be frank, I think that "a man with a measuring line" is a terrible title for this chapter. Zechariah 2 captures absolutely *stunning* realities and we're going to name it, "a man with a measuring line"? Not on my watch.

In fact, we encounter two stunning realities in this chapter. 1) the reality that heaven and earth will one day collide and God will once more dwell *fully* with His people 2) the reality that God already lives among us *partially* in the coming of Jesus and the residing of the Holy Spirit.

Zechariah 2 ought to be titled something like, "A Vision of Redemption" or "All Things New" or something that at least attempts to touch these soul-transforming realities! But, regardless of the lackluster title, let's do our best to grasp these realities for ourselves today.

Reality #1: God will once more dwell fully with His people. This is something that has not happened since before the fall, okay? This is a BIG deal. Verse 10 says, "'Shout and be glad, Daughter Zion. For I am coming, and I will live among you,' declares the Lord." Verse 11 says it again, "...I will live among you...." Family, I can't make this hit you with the weight that it should, but I am praying right now as I write that it will. This is the time that John speaks of in Revelation 21 when he says, "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain...." This is what gives us hope! This is what we are waiting and working for! For a time when our space and God's space are one. No amount of suffering in this life can take this future away from us! For Christians, our best days are *always* ahead. Remember that. God fully dwelling with us again is a stunning reality.

Reality #2: God's mission of re-dwelling with us started when Jesus came to earth and it continues to progress as the Holy Spirit dwells in our hearts and the Kingdom of God spreads across the earth.

I love looking forward to the redemption of all things. As I just said, it's what gets us through! But that doesn't mean that this present life is all gloom and doom. That doesn't mean that we should give up on this world and let it go to pits. On the contrary! We have hope that God will one day finish what he has started *precisely because* we know that he has indeed started something. Let me put it this way: if we had no idea if God had started anything or not, what would make us think He's going to finish something He hasn't started?? I hope that makes sense. We know He's going to complete His plan because we've seen Him begin His plan.

The bible calls Jesus the "first-fruits." What that means is that because we have seen the first apple of the season, we know more apples are coming! Jesus' resurrection is a preview, a foretaste, a first-fruit of what will happen to us. And the Spirit's work in us is the same. We see how the Spirit is changing us *now* and it gives us a glimpse of what life will be like in the New Garden-City. Think on these things and have hope. Persevere. Stand Firm. Love one another.

For these are stunning realities, indeed.

Zechariah 3 – April 2

Just like yesterday, I think that the titles (in my bibles, at least) for Zechariah 3 are extremely underwhelming! In Zechariah 3, we get an HD picture of the coming of Jesus and His sacrifice on the cross and the little mustard-seed beginning of the Kingdom of God, but these fools want to entitle it, “Clean Garments for the High Priest” and “A Vision of Joshua the High Priest.” How about, “A Foretaste of Deliverance” or “The King is Coming”? Maybe I should go into the chapter-naming business...

Anyways, as I mentioned above, Zechariah 3 is a pretty clear prophecy about Christ and his atoning death on the cross and the new world that slowly but surely unfolds as a result of Christ’s resurrection. In other words, THIS IS A GREAT CHAPTER.

You probably never knew it before, but Zechariah 2 and 3 are phenomenal chapters to hang on to in times of suffering, or even just in seasons of waiting. But anyway...

The reason why I can say that this chapter is actually about Jesus and not really about Joshua the High Priest is because of verse 8, “Listen, High Priest Joshua, you and your associates seated before you, who are men *symbolic of things to come*: I am going to bring my servant, the Branch.” That’s the key to this chapter! Joshua and his fellow priests are just a sign! Just like the whole sacrificial system, and the Levitical priesthood, and King David himself—they are signs, shadows if you will, of the true sacrifice, the true priest, and the true king, Jesus Christ. This is not the first time the Messiah is called a Branch. Think back to Jeremiah 23 and 33.

And what is it that comes along with the Branch? A stone that signifies a removal of sin in one single day. I don’t know about you, but in my mind that is pretty clearly a reference to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, the righteous branch. And, even further, what happens “in that day”? Verse 10 says that neighbor will invite neighbor to sit under his vine and under his fig tree. That is just simply a reference to a day of perfect peace and prosperity.

If you think back two days, March 31, I told you that Zechariah is a book mostly focused on the future. You see what I mean now? What’s so ironic, though, is that these first 8 chapters are typically brought under one title of “encouragement for the present.” That’s because nothing encourages in the present like hope for the future! And like we saw yesterday, it is hope for the future that gives us hope for the present! Our work and our waiting and our sufferings and our victories aren’t going to waste! They will one day be finally fulfilled and vindicated when all things are made new.

That’s why we shouldn’t just cast this world aside. God is using our good work in this current world to prepare the way for His perfect world. Everything in this world is a taste—a taste of what’s been lost or a taste of what’s to come. When we feel the weight of glory lost, we persevere by knowing that glory is coming back. When we see a glimpse of that future glory, we are encouraged to persevere and work all the more to usher in the Kingdom! Keep planting, keep watering, keep cultivating and multiplying and keep hoping in the righteous branch.

Zechariah 4 – April 3

Today, we're moving on to the fifth vision of Zechariah, "The Gold Lampstand and the Two Olive Trees" (NIV Zondervan Study Bible). This little chapter can be sort of confusing at first glance. It was for me, at least. But, never fear! With a little help from some quick research we can understand why the Spirit inspired Zechariah to record this vision.

What this vision centers on is the rebuilding of the temple. This is confirmed for us in verse 8, "the hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this temple; his hands will also complete it."

Knowing that this vision centers on the future completion of the temple, let's interpret the more confusing aspects of this vision (the lampstand and the olive trees) in light of the clearer focus on the temple. So, let's hear what D.A. Carson has to say about this chapter: "The main driving force behind the completion of the temple will be God's Spirit [verse 6] as he rouses the people to action through the preaching of the prophets. This side of the coming of Jesus, God builds his temple the church in exactly the same way: by his word through his Spirit." In short, what Dr. Carson says is that this chapter is not just about the rebuilding of the physical temple all those years ago, but also about how God builds his people throughout all of history: by his word through his Spirit.

So, that helps us to see that this chapter, though somewhat confusing, is overall about how God relates to his people. What is the temple but the place where God dwells among his people? Right? That helps us to understand a little about the other parts of the vision. For instance, on verse 12, R.C. Sproul says, "some aspects of the vision are not obvious, but the function of these elements is clear: to transmit an endless supply of oil from the [olive] trees to the lampstand, ensuring that the lamps will never go out. The Lord's favor toward His people is eternal and His blessing inexhaustible."

Zechariah 4 ends up being truly a blessing to read. It reminds us that God has a plan to once again dwell with his people, a reality that we exulted in yesterday! It reminds us to not despise small things or slow beginnings (see verse 10). It reminds us that the work of building the Kingdom is ultimately reliant on the Spirit of God, not on people (see verse 6). On verse 6, R.C. Sproul says something helpful for us: "God's people are repeatedly told not to depend on military power and foreign alliances to accomplish their calling." Relying on military power and foreign alliances is something that Israel did all the time! Verse 6 is a reminder for Israel (at the time) and for us now that our ultimate trust needs to be in the Lord.

As we wrap this up let me say: I don't exactly know what precise thing the lampstand represents and the olive trees and the oil and all that. All we can do is research and read and pray. What I do know is that this chapter reminds us of beautiful realities nonetheless and that's good enough for me.

Zechariah 5 – April 4

Today we will read about the flying scroll! This vision makes me think of The Flying Pig, a BBQ restaurant in Midlothian, VA that is simply fantastic. Okay, now I'm getting hungry. Nevertheless, BBQ is good, but it can't compare to the bread of God's Word, amen? Let's feast on the Word of the Lord today.

Fun fact of the day: the flying scroll is "20 cubits long and 10 cubits wide" which equals 30 feet long and 15 feet wide. So, this flying scroll is more like a flying carpet! I think that its size is simply indicative of the comprehensive size of the "curse" mentioned in verse 3. In fact, verse 3 goes on to say that the curse will cover "the whole land." Speaking of the curse, in verses 5-11 a woman in a basket is depicted as wickedness and the wickedness is carried out of the land and into Babylon.

In my opinion, what these two brief visions represent is a day when all evil and wickedness is taken away from this world and the New Jerusalem is "brought down out of heaven like a bride adorned for her husband" (Revelation 21:2). Or, to be more specific, the first vision about the flying scroll talks about the judgment brought on by the breaking of the law and the second vision talks about the forgiving of that judgment, or the taking away of the wickedness (which inherently involves forgiveness).

Another fun fact: the first vision is actually echoed hundreds of years later in Revelation 5:9 and 6:12-17 where Jesus judges his enemies with a scroll in his hand.

Back to the point: both of these visions are warnings, to be sure, but they are also quite encouraging. For Christians, followers of Christ, justice is exciting! I am looking forward to the day when God sets the world to rights. When evil is banished once and for all. When the glory of the Lord covers the earth as the waters cover the sea. This passage, especially the second vision, is a vision of good news! Like we've already talked about for the last couple days, Zechariah is a future-focused book and this chapter is really no exception.

Also, as you know, the point of the Emmaus Road is to help us see how Christ is the central figure throughout the whole Bible and Zechariah 5 clearly follows suit. We see in the second vision that the wickedness of the world will be taken away and the natural question is: How?

Ding* *Ding* *Ding

I hope the buzzers are going off in your head right about now! It's Jesus! Jesus is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! (John 1:29). Zechariah's vision would have been rejoiced over and cherished by the Israelites for years as a reminder of the salvation that was coming. What the Israelites knew by faith (that a Messiah was coming), we know by name: Jesus of Nazareth. Behold! The Lamb of God!

Zechariah 6 – April 5

I won't lie to you all, the first part of this chapter had me stumped for a minute. Thankfully, I've got two trustworthy study bibles, the internet, and fellow Christians at hand, so never fear!

Let's start with the basics: this vision is about judgment. We can safely assume that God is sending these chariots and horses out to judge the nations. We can assume this for a few reasons. 1) Chariots and horses are usually not signs of peace, but war. 2) A scene of chariots and horses driven by Jesus and judging all the earth is depicted in Revelation 19:11-16. 3) We read in verse 7 that the horses are straining to get out and begin their quest and it doesn't sound like a peaceful quest. 4) Verse 8 says that the Lord's Spirit will receive "rest" in the land of the north and we know that the land of the north is Babylon a.k.a Israel's enemies. 5) It makes sense, then, that the rest of the nations and Israel (the Lord's people) will have rest when Babylon is destroyed.

Well, that actually pretty well sums up the whole vision! At this point, you might be wondering: Well, what is the application here?? First off, calm down and don't be so greedy for application. Studying the bible and applying it to our lives takes time. There is no quick fix or simple 3-step process to get application fast—it takes time and effort. Raking is easy, but all you get are leaves. Digging is hard, but that's how you strike gold.

The application seems to be that, once again, Zechariah is envisaging a day when peace and justice finally reign. This theme actually fits very well with the next vision about Joshua's crown. The next vision speaks of a day when the temple will be rebuilt by the Branch who will shoot up in the place of Joshua. Okay, at this point it should be quite obvious that the Branch has messianic implications. Others were raised up as signs to point to the Messiah, such as King David and all the prophets, but none of them could do what Jesus had to do. It had to be the God-man, the Christ! And this hope that the Israelites clung to is what we call a messianic hope—a hope for the Messiah. We can finish today as we did yesterday: rejoicing in the fact that we know Jesus! And now we know how ridiculous it was for the Pharisees and others in the gospels to keep asking for signs. Jesus told them that the people of the Old Testament—who we're reading about right now! —had so much less "proof" to go off of yet they waited and hoped in a Messiah anyways. Unlike them, some got to see Jesus in person though 2,000 years ago and we get to have His Spirit and read about His whole ministry now! We have so much more "proof!" I pray that we steward it well.

Believe in Jesus today and stop asking for another sign. You've got His Word right in front of you. Repent and believe for the kingdom is at hand! The day that Zechariah envisioned over and over again is drawing ever nearer. Let us look forward to it with great anticipation.

Zechariah 7 – April 6

I'd be really interested to hear what the title of this chapter is in your bible. In my NIV study bible, it's "Justice and Mercy, Not Fasting," which is quite the provocative title if you ask me.

Anyways, the first thing we should note is that this section, chapter 7 and chapter 8 (which we will read tomorrow), serves as a sort of bridge between the first 6 chapters and the last 6 chapters.

The main theme of Zechariah 7 (and 8) is a move from fasting to feasting. So, in these past 6 chapters, we've talked a lot about future hope. But, we've talked about future hope in light of the judgment that Israel was going to receive. The second portion of the book, however, is really even more future-oriented than the first part! So, the first 6 chapters talked about judgment, and it reminded us of the hope that would come later, but the next section (chapters 9-14) talk more directly about that hope. It's about to be less work for me, you might say!

Now, let's get to chapter 7. This chapter seems pretty clear to me, but what do you think? The Lord, through the prophet, is asking some rhetorical questions. He says in verse 5, "ask all the people of the land and the priests, 'when you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months for the past seventy years, was it really for me that you fasted? And when you were eating and drinking, were you not just feasting for yourselves?'"

Quite simply, the Lord is accusing them of hypocrisy. They claimed to be fasting at times and eating and drinking at other times, all for the Lord, but God saw through their facade. These people act like they don't know what Amos had written about them! Remember how intensely focused on justice Amos was? Amos was all about living out one's faith, not just talking about it and checking the boxes. Zechariah picks that mantle right back up! Look at verse 9, "This is what the LORD Almighty said: 'Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor. Do not plot evil against each other.'" That's pretty clear!

I've got to be honest with you, though. I can't just write out that verse and leave it alone. It's too easy for us to nod our heads, say "amen," underline the verse, and keep moving. We have to understand that it takes more than mental agreement to be a follower of Christ. Or, as James 1:27 says, to have "pure" religion. Let me close with an example: the Israelites, in this chapter, were like people who called themselves Christians, but were part of the KKK. Those two things cannot go together. I don't care if they went to church. I don't care if they said prayers over meals. Frankly, I don't care if they "believed" God created the world and Jesus died on a cross. The real question is: was there real fruit *from* their beliefs? In other words, did they administer true justice? Did they show mercy and compassion? Or did they oppress and plot evil? Examine your hearts and lives today because the fruit reveals the root. What you believe is very important, to be sure, but what you *really* believe is shown in your actions regardless of what you say you believe. A faith without works is a dead faith. A sham, not a shame. Good for nothing, not better than nothing. Yet, thank Jesus that even hypocrites aren't out of reach!

Zechariah 8 – April 7

Who knew that the book of Zechariah was such an encouraging book? Here in chapter 8 we have yet again a prophecy of future restoration. We've spent a few days already talking about the blessed eternal future that awaits the children of the King, but let us spend today talking about something a little different. And here's why I want to talk about something a little different...

I feel like most of us that read the Emmaus Road Devotions together are pretty unified on what awaits us in eternity, right? We've heard it preached about millions of times and we've probably thought about it quite a bit on our own! (I just can hear the band, Mercy Me, singing "I Can Only Imagine" right now) So, I don't think talking about that again today is the wisest use of our time.

What I want to focus on, rather, is *how* that future day of restoration comes about. I don't want to set our ambitions too high because this is just a one-page devotion and we've already used about half the page. Nonetheless, I want to remind us of at least one simple yet foundational truth.

Regardless of how exactly we think the world is going to end and God's Kingdom is going to be fully "installed," we all know and can agree on the fact that God's Kingdom *began* with the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Here's why that matters so much. It's easy to read chapters like Zechariah 8 and long for that final day. Nothing's wrong with longing for that final day, to be sure, but if that longing for eternity makes us less salty Christians here on earth, well, then something's gone awry. See, our job isn't to escape this earth. Our job is, quite the opposite actually, to be the *salt and light* to this earth. That's a big task! And it's a task that can't be completed if we are just counting down the seconds until we "fly away." Does that make sense?

Let me connect this back to Christ. When the virgin birth took place and God took on flesh something really big happened. It wasn't just a little blip in history; it was the dawning of a new age. Christ's entrance into this world was no less than the infantile beginning of a new world. So, don't be so focused on getting out of this world that you miss the work we are supposed to do in the here and now! God's work in this world has already started! Don't miss out! Think about the beginning of the Lord's Prayer. We say, "Your kingdom *come*, your will be done, *on earth* as it is in heaven." We are praying for this earth to look more and more like God's kingdom! And we are to work to that end as well!

Now, of course, we aren't under the illusion that we will successfully create a utopia, a perfect world. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't strive towards that end. Think about the example of marriage. Will you or I ever be a perfect spouse? Of course not. Does that in any way mean I should give up and stop trying to be a better spouse each and every day? Of course not! Long for the day when God's Kingdom will be here in full *and* keep working 'till you get there!

Zechariah 9 – April 8

Today, the long wait is over: we now begin the second half of the book of Zechariah. Okay, maybe it was just me that was super excited, but either way!

One reason that I'm excited to get into this portion of Zechariah is because the gospel writers (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) quote no other Old Testament source as much as they quote Zechariah 9-14 to explain Christ's suffering and death. In fact, you might've recognized a very clear prophecy about Jesus in verse 9 of our chapter today.

Zechariah 9:9 says, "Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

This prophecy's fulfillment is recorded in Matthew 21:1-11, Mark 11:1, Luke 19:28-38, and John 12:12-19. When Jesus did this around AD 32 (give or take a couple years), the Jews must've have gone nuts! Some in worship and some in anger! When we read the bible nowadays, we must train ourselves to step into the minds of the Israelites at times and into the minds of 1st century Jews at other times. The Jews knew their Scripture well, so when they saw Jesus riding in on a donkey and people saying, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" they knew that, at the very least, this man was claiming to be the Messiah, the Son of God! And we must understand nowadays how enormous of a claim that was and still is! If Jesus really was the Christ, well, that changes everything! Doesn't it? It's changed your life, am I right?

C.S. Lewis said Jesus must either be a liar, a lunatic, or Lord. If he was a liar or a lunatic, well, we can just go about our day. We can "eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die!" But, if He is Lord, well then, we must submit to His rule and reign in our lives and on this earth. And not only must we submit, we must also joyfully join in His mission to extend His Kingdom until every knee is bowed and until His glory covers the earth like the waters cover the sea.

Jesus riding in on a donkey was a pretty big deal, huh?

Now, just imagine for one more brief moment what hearing this prophecy would've meant to the Israelites? I can hardly try without tearing up—seriously! Think of the hope that Zechariah's words would have instilled in their hearts! And that's just the first part of today's chapter! The second part (verses 14 or so through 17) are even more explicitly about Christ.

What good news is contained in Zechariah 9:9 really isn't the point of this chapter, but let me close with a brief application and invitation. We read over and over again about the good news of Christ's imminent return. Friends, all "sharing the gospel" is, is inviting people to accept the good news and join in the good work. It doesn't have to be complicated and we shouldn't keep it to ourselves! Let's exult in this good news that we've been reading about in Zechariah, but let's invite others to rejoice in it to! It's *good* news and it's *good news for everyone*.

Zechariah 10 – April 9

According to Dr. Eugene Merrill, one conclusion we can take away from the book of Zechariah is that, “the promises of the Lord are sure, and what He has begun in world redemption He will bring to ultimate and magnificent conclusion.” In Zechariah 10, our chapter for today, we read of this very truth.

It can be said truthfully that the whole bible is the story of how God is reconciling all of creation to himself through Christ Jesus. Every book of the bible points to this truth one way or another. All throughout the story, we get glimpses and tastes of how God is doing His reconciling work. For instance, the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt is a picture (and the beginning of) God creating a redeemed people for himself. We see pictures like that all throughout the Scriptures, from God saving Noah and his family during the flood to God gathering His people from every “tribe, tongue, people, and nation” in Revelation 5. Our chapter for today, Zechariah 10, is no exception.

Verses 8-12 seem to echo Moses’ prophecy in Deuteronomy 30:1-10. In that passage, Moses is telling the Israelites that God will one day gather them from all the nations and make them a blessed people once more. Here in Zechariah 10:8-12, the same thing is being said! It’s as if the Israelites’ exodus from Egypt was a foretaste of their ultimate and final exodus from the world to God’s Kingdom—Zechariah 10 is a reminder of this!

Chapters such as Zechariah 10 have many applications and implications, to be sure, but one of the biggest things (perhaps *the* biggest thing) we ought to walk away with is the truth of the above quote from Dr. Merrill. When we read a chapter such as this, we are very clearly reminded that 1) God has a plan 2) it’s a good plan, and 3) He’s got the power to see it through to completion!

Only when we realize this central truth can we begin to make proper application to our lives. In fact, this truth is really the good news of the gospel! That God, in Christ Jesus, is setting the world to rights. And we know of course that the resurrection serves as the pinnacle of that plan! The resurrection, even more than the parting of the Red Sea in the first exodus, showed God’s power and God’s goodness. God’s good and powerful plan, enacted through Christ, is the good news, the gospel. Because of God’s powerful and good plan, that we see here in Zechariah 10, we can be forgiven and freed from sin and saved from the wrath to come. Just as we see in our chapter for today, those who reject the good news of the gospel will face justice. Justice is good news for those who submit to the king, but extremely bad news for those who continue in rebellion.

Let’s trust today in God’s good and powerful plan seen most clearly in the face of Christ Jesus. Let us submit to His plan, live in freedom, and invite others to do the same!

Zechariah 11 – April 10

Zechariah 11:12-13: “I told them, ‘If you think it best, give me my pay; but if not, keep it.’ So they paid me thirty pieces of silver. And the Lord said to me, ‘Throw it to the potter’—the handsome price at which they valued me! So, I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them to the potter at the house of the Lord.”

Matthew 27:3-4, 6-8: “When Judas... saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. ‘I have sinned,’ he said, ‘for I have betrayed innocent blood’... The chief priests picked up the coins and... decided to use the money to buy the potter’s field as a burial place for foreigners. That is why it has been called the Field of Blood to this day.”

That instant, recorded in Matthew 27, a prophecy that had been declared almost a thousand years before came true. Is that a coincidence? Does that happen by chance? I don’t think so, my friend. God has a plan. It’s a good plan and He’s got the power to see it through—and thank God that He does! Do you know what a mess we would make of things if everything was left up to us? I don’t know how highly you think of yourself, but I know my own heart and I know that I wouldn’t have loved God had He not loved me first (1 John 4:19-21). I know my flesh and I’m thankful that God saved me not *because* of who I am and what I’ve done, but *despite of* who I am and what I’ve done.

But this isn’t a devotion on the sovereignty of God, though that is a beautiful thing. This is a devotion on the plan of God. The plan of God to purchase and redeem the very ones that nailed him to a tree. The plan of God to reconcile all things to himself through Christ Jesus our Lord.

In Zechariah 11, we see the prophet playing the part of two very different shepherds (vv. 4-14; 15-17). In verses 4-14, we read of Zechariah playing the role of the shepherd that represents God. We see that God led his flock with the staffs of “favor” and “union” and that he drove out the evil shepherds from among His people. But, as you can imagine, the people rebelled. In verses 15-17, Zechariah plays the part of the bad shepherds. Verse 15 records God telling the prophet to “take again the equipment of a foolish shepherd.” This is God’s judgment on the people. God was telling them, through Zechariah, that He was going to raise up kings and priests to rule harshly over the people (which we read about all through 1 and 2 Kings and 1 and 2 Chronicles).

How this plays into the redemptive plan of God is, you guessed it, related to Jesus Christ. Do you think it’s a coincidence that in John 10:11-18 Jesus refers to himself as the Good Shepherd? That’s something we can easily pass over in our time, but to his original audience it would have been quite controversial! A statement like that was Jesus saying, “Guys and gals, I AM THE PROMISED ONE. I am the Branch, the Messiah, the King, The great High Priest, the Good Shepherd.” I’m so grateful that we have the Word of God with which to learn about God’s plan!

Zechariah 12 – April 11

Just as a heads up, I want to make a note for you that the rest of this book is basically one speech from the prophet. Or, one “oracle,” you might say. Chapters 12 and 13 focus more on judgment and then chapter 14 ends with a bang—the salvation of God’s people and one final celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles. Lest you grow weary of this pattern of salvation through judgment, of sacrifice then reward, of pain then glory, let me remind you that this is in fact the very pattern of our lives. Here in America, we can get so comfortable that we forget that suffering is actually a pretty normal part of this life. We see this pattern throughout history and we should notice it in our day-to-day lives. You’ve heard the saying, “no pain, no gain.” Well, that’s actually kind of a biblical statement. I go on this little rant to encourage you to not get tired of reading about the incessant cycle of judgment and salvation. What all this reading about that should actually do is help us to fall into God’s rhythm. It should shape us subconsciously so that we begin to naturally expect the cycle of pain and then gain. That’s how our faith grows! We see God work time and time and time again and we learn that He is faithful! We know that the light is always coming after the dark. So, when you get tired of reading about the cycle of judgment then hope, just remind yourself that you’re training your mind and heart to walk in rhythm with God’s.

On a different note, I’d like to ask you a question. Without the use of google or your study bible notes, did you notice anything about this chapter that points to Jesus? To be honest, I didn’t at first. But look with me a little closer at verses 10-14.

Verses 10-14 paint this picture of someone very important getting killed. Whoever the deceased is, He must have been well-known and well-loved because everyone is mourning for him! We also know that His killers are the ones mourning, feeling regret and remorse. It seems like it’s His very own people that have murdered Him (verse 10).

This seems strangely similar to Acts 2 in which God’s Spirit was poured out on the Jews, the very ones that crucified Jesus, and they were (metaphorically) cut deeply and filled with regret and remorse.

It also reminds me of Revelation 1:7, “Look, he is coming with the clouds, and ‘every eye will see him, even those who pierced him’; and all peoples on earth ‘will mourn because of him.’ So shall it be! Amen.” In fact, this verse in Revelation is actually directly quoting Zechariah 12!

I had noted at the beginning of the book that no other Old Testament book is quoted as much as Zechariah is when the New Testament talks about Jesus. Jesus is the point of history! I really hope we learn and believe that more and more as our lives go on. Pray to Jesus. Hear from Jesus as you read Scripture. Drop all that you have and follow Him! Or, better yet, re-direct all that you have to bring Him glory!

Zechariah 13 – April 12

Zechariah 13:1, “On that day there shall be a fountain opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness.”

Immediately, I hear the old song, “There is a fountain filled with blood, drawn from Immanuel’s veins; and sinners plunged beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains.” You know, that song is so good, let me quickly write the other verses for us. Don’t discount the devotional power of song!

That great song goes on to sing, “The dying thief rejoiced to see that fountain in his day; and there have, though vile as he, washed all my sins away. Dear dying lamb, thy precious blood shall ne’er lose its power; ‘till all the ransomed church of God be saved to sin no more. E’er since by faith I saw the stream thy flowing wounds supply; redeeming love has been my theme and shall be ‘till I die. When this poor lisping, stammering tongue lies silent in the grave; then in a nobler, sweeter song I’ll sing thy power to save.”

Those words capture the beauty of Zechariah 13:1 far better than I ever could. As for the rest of the chapter, Philippians 2:9-11 capture it perfectly. “Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

Jesus has offered forgiveness and hope for His people here and now. And one day that hope will be fully consummated, it will come to fruition. When it does, no one will be left unjudged. Those in Christ will be judged righteous by the merits of Christ and those who have rejected Christ will be judged justly as the rebels that they are. As our chapter for today says, the names of idols will be cut off and remembered more.

I’ve used a song and a bible passage to sum up the points of today, but allow me one more. Nothing sums up the final hope and joy of history like the very last verse of this chapter:

“And I will put this third into the fire, and refine them as one refines silver, and test them as gold is tested. They will call upon my name, and I will answer them. I will say, ‘They are my people’; and they will say, ‘The LORD is my God.’”

Yes, God will say it and we will respond. What a day of rejoicing that will be!

Zechariah 14 – April 13

Let me quote for you someone much smarter than me regarding this chapter.

“God will return to his people to save them from their enemies and bring in a new creation. Zechariah uses well-known images from Israel’s past and present to picture God’s future kingdom. The [New Testament] applies the language and images in this chapter to both the first and second comings of Jesus. Hence there is a “now and not yet” perspective on the fulfillment of this chapter. The kingdom has come with Jesus’ death and resurrection and will come at His return.” –D.A. Carson

I wanted to take this opportunity to balance out what I have been writing for the last two weeks. Lest I make us think that everything in the bible is only for the future, I want to say it is actually for the present *and* the future.

I’m sure the Smyrna pastors have written and/or preached about it before, but have you heard of the “already/not yet” distinction? It is a way that people refer to the fact that we live in the middle of two realities right now. On the one hand, Jesus has come and *started* his Kingdom, so to speak, through his birth, life, death, and resurrection. So, there is some level of victory in this life. However, Jesus’ Kingdom isn’t *fully complete* yet, so to speak, so we still experience suffering and loss (whether physical or spiritual or whatever). So, we live right in the middle of this tension.

Unfortunately, some people want to ignore the tension and live like Jesus never came *or* that Jesus has already come a second time. The people that live like Jesus never came are those that still want to cling to Old Testament traditions. The people that live like Jesus already came a second time are those that Paul was writing against in some of his letters. They act like the resurrection has already happened and so they think the bodies we are in don’t matter. They want to turn everything “spiritual.” These people were called Gnostics, but we can get into that some other time.

The point is, even though it is hard and messy and leaves us with questions at times, we must grapple with the reality that we live in two realities!

So, as we close out this book of Zechariah, let me encourage you to live in the present while always looking forward to the future. Stay balanced! Don’t let one overtake the other—that’s the cause of many, many mistakes. We must work for the glory of the Lord in the here and now! That means sharing the gospel *and* fighting for justice for the poor and oppressed. We must also live in light of the future. That means having a realistic view of what we can accomplish on earth before Jesus comes back.

So, as Paul says, “Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong. Do everything in love.” 1 Corinthians 16:13-14.

Malachi 1 – April 14

We've reached the final book of the Old Testament together! Congratulations on hanging in and presumably growing in your knowledge and maturity along the way as well. Malachi is a book that will have many familiar themes to the Bible student. To be sure, each prophet operates in their own specific time and utilizes their own personality to communicate God's truth however the opinion and issues of God do not change. In this case, as we pick up in Malachi 1, we come to the realization that God's people are asking a rather ironic question. In spite of God's grace, power, mercy, and longsuffering the people want to know if He loves them. In God's answer, He cites His covenantal faithfulness to them through His electing love of Jacob's descendants. It is because God loves them that they are still in existence and it is because of God's faithfulness in the days ahead that they will have a future!

However, the meat of this chapter is found in verse 6 and following as God turns the table. You see, while God's people wrongly question His love for them in light of His faithful preservation of their heritage, God can rightly call into doubt their affection for Him. He does so by pointing out their lackluster, half-hearted, pseudo-religious exercises which still adhere to the outward appearances of piety while neglecting the heart level desire to worship and glorify God. God provides numerous examples of this kind of transgression. For instance, He declares that the people offer sacrifices that are blemished, lame or sick. Instead of giving their very best to God they skimp by with the worst they have to offer.

As we close today, I want to do so with two ascending thoughts. First, what characterizes your worship? We live in a day when God often gets the "left overs". That might be our leftover time on Sundays (or during the week) when we don't have other more pressing "commitments". It may be our leftover resources, instead of providing the first fruits of our income or possessions to the Father we are often guilty of waiting until all of our obligations are paid. This communicates a lack of faith in God (failing to live in accordance with His wisdom and neglecting to trust in His provision) and, perhaps more importantly, a lack of affection as well.

Second, and more importantly, I want to remind you of the strong contrast between our depraved hearts and God's good and sacrificial plan. While His people gave their very worst in worship of Him, God gave His very best to redeem His true people. The provision of God is none other than Jesus Christ the true unblemished Lamb of God. This sacrifice came at a great cost and brought the Father much pain while demonstrating His deep and unending love for His people. Among other things, God's willingness to offer His Son on the altar to atone for our sins should be the very ground of our worship. After all, what else could elicit praise and adoration? What other act can signify God's commitment to provide for all of our needs?

Malachi 2 – April 15

Sometimes when we read such unfortunate accounts of the state of the people in the Old Testament, we might wonder how things digressed so severely. How is it that the people descended to such depths of wickedness and spiritual apathy? The Old Testament gives many detailed reasons for their sinful state but perhaps chief on the list is the infidelity of the priests.

The priests were supposed to be, among other things, the very mouthpiece of wisdom for the people as they possessed and taught the law. God details the way this office was to be fulfilled faithfully through the example of Levi. It was the priest Levi who feared God and stood in awe of His name. Levi walked with God in peace and uprightness and taught what amounted to true instruction. All of these are characteristic of the faithful mouthpiece of God and they were the exact antithesis of the modern-day priests at the time of Malachi. Instead of loving God, they tolerated Him at best. Their actions displayed a total lack of fear due Him and their lives were marred with corruption and superficial religiosity. These men taught falsehoods and half-truths and the condition of the people was an exact representation of their leadership.

I suppose we could take this devotion in a number of directions but I want to focus on a few applications today. First, the character and fidelity of God's leaders (formerly priests now in the New Testament church elders or pastors) is critically important. As you study the history of the church you will see that time and again the church thrives when its preachers are faithful and it falters when they forsake the Bible. There is no more crucial factor in the church's health than leadership who loves and fears God causing them to speak with boldness and clarity what He has said.

Second truth, God in His mercy provided for us a priest who could totally fulfill His calling. While Levi was undoubtedly an honorable man who did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, even he had shortcomings and sin. He fell at times and could not totally live up to his lofty charge. This is true of all men by the way, no one is able to live in total submission and obedience to God at all times... except One. Christ came to fulfill the entire law so that He could rightly stand before God as our priest or representative. His Words are totally reliable as there is not a hint of equivocation or falsehood in them. He feared God, He obeyed God fully, He loved God and He faithfully taught the Word of God. As we look for the example to emulate and the authority to obey look no further than the example and teachings of Jesus Christ!

Malachi 3 and 4 – April 16

Malachi 3 and 4 are beautiful texts of hope and future for God's people. It begins with a prediction of the coming "messenger" who would seek to prepare the way for Christ. We now know of course that this messenger was none other than John the Baptist (Matthew 3:3) whose goal and mission was to proclaim the arrival of the kingdom of God as he prepared the way for Christ's ministry and ultimate sacrifice. What I want to focus on today though is the effect of Jesus' presence and work.

Malachi 3 states that this coming Messiah is one "in whom you delight" (v. 2), but this is only true if you're on the right side of history. As Malachi goes on, he informs the readers that Christ will have a twofold effect on the people. In short, some will love Jesus and others will be repelled. His presence will have a refining effect on the people where the "good" or precious are kept and the dross or waste is disposed.

Malachi begins with the good, stating that Christ would "purify the sons of Levi and refine them" (v. 3). These "sons" of Levi, like the offspring of Abraham, are those who would love, follow and fear God. These men (and women) will be purified allowing them to bring offerings in righteousness before God. Now, we may read a text such as this and skim over it, but there is so much gospel truth in this idea! You see, it is because you and I have been purified by Christ and His blood has atoned for our sins that we are now able to bring offerings into His presence in righteousness. Theologians have often spoken of our righteousness as an "alien" righteousness. This does not mean that it comes from Mars! Instead, it means that it comes from outside of ourselves. The righteousness we enjoy is placed upon us by God in His grace and it purifies us in His sight and allows us to fulfill the mandate of offering ourselves to the Lord!

Second, the Messiah will judge the rebellious. Jesus' presence and teaching acted as a "swift witness" against the sins of the people. They were exposed in His presence both by words and actions and they despised Him greatly for it. It has been rightly said that those who are corrupt despise the light. They operate much more comfortably and efficiently in the darkness but when Christ came on the scene, He illuminated the sins of the wicked for the world to see. This is what drove the Pharisees nuts and it is what ultimately led them to crucify our great Savior.

Now, we must understand the wisdom of God in this. While the people were discouraged and even defeated by the crucifixion of Christ (see the Emmaus Road, Luke 24) we now know that the plan of God all along was for the Son to be killed. God had ordained that Christ would purify His people through His sacrificial death (look at Isaiah 49-53 for example) and this death would take place by His Sovereign design at the hands of the wicked whom He exposed. What a wonderful, mighty and wise God we serve!

The last chapter of the Old Testament ends in a very fitting way as it speaks to a recurring subject, The Day of the Lord. God promises that a day is coming when all of the arrogant and evildoers will be judged for their iniquity. This will be a day of great tribulation and anguish for those who have not repented. Malachi 4:2 provides some glorious hope saying that those who fear "my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings."

You will recall in John 1:4-6 that John refers to Jesus as the "light of the world." In fact, Jesus refers to Himself as the "light of the world" in John 8:12. Both of these texts are important to understand and interpret Malachi 4 as they speak to the truth that the light will bring healing in its wings is none other than the light of Christ Himself. It is through a realization of Jesus' identity and work that you and I are healed and made whole. Christ alone is the instrument of healing and we praise God for His grace in providing Him.

As we close the Old Testament today, I would ask you to reflect on just how central Jesus is to the teaching and truth of this portion of Scripture. I pray that you have seen how the two Testaments fit together in light of God's plan and how they do not contradict one another but rather compliment each other as they unite to tell the same story of God's Sovereign plan. Indeed, Jesus is the center and apex of all God has given us in His Word. May he be glorified forever, amen.

Matthew 1 – April 17

After 2 years 3 months and 17 days, welcome to the New Testament. Slightly more than 400 years passed between the final event of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New Testament. There was no recorded prophetic word from God during this period and so it is sometimes called the “silent years.” As John MacArthur wrote, “However, the history of these years followed the pattern predicted in Daniel (2:24,45; 7:1-28; 8:1-27) with exact precision. Though the voice of God was silent, the hand of God was actively directing the course of events during these centuries.” Never doubt that God is always at work.

During this intertestamental period, the Babylonians had fallen to the Medo-Persians, then they fell to the Greeks, and then they fell to the Romans. Life wasn't terribly bad for the Jews under the rule of most of these nations. They were allowed to practice their religion but found themselves increasingly more tempted and enticed by the pagan worship all around them. The Greeks were a sophisticated people whose way of life was attractive and appealing to the Jews. The problem was that their way of life was completely secular and ungodly. Things went horribly bad for the Jews beginning in 175 B.C when Antiochus Epiphanes IV became ruler.

Antiochus IV desecrated the temple in Jerusalem in 170 B.C., ordered the Torah to be destroyed, forbade them from keeping their laws and festivals, and idol worship was set up in its place. The Maccabean revolt took place beginning in 166 B.C. and lasted until 142 B.C. This revolt against Antiochus was led by a priest and his 5 sons. The Jews won some independence in part because of Rome's rising pressure on surrounding nations. Under the guidance of Rome, Herod the Great who was virtually a Greco-Roman was installed as king of Judea in 37 B.C. and was “the king of the Jews” when Jesus was born. Thus, begins the age of the New Testament.

Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament, contains these words, “Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming” (Mal. 3:1). Isaiah prophesied in chapter 40:3 these words, “A voice is calling, clear the way for the Lord in the wilderness; make smooth in the desert a highway for our God.” Beloved, even though God was silent, His perfect plan of redemption was unfolding. The book of Matthew begins with the genealogy of Christ, and within that we see the beautiful hand of God preparing a young virgin woman named Mary and a fine, godly man named Joseph for the privilege and responsibility of raising Jesus as their son. The stage is set, the people are chosen, the angel appears, and the Christ child enters our world. “But when the fullness of time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons” (Gal. 4:4,5).

We are so excited to begin our journey through the New Testament but please never lose sight of the value and importance of the Old Testament which pointed us to our Redeemer, Jesus Christ. “Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures” (Luke 24:27 – on the Emmaus Road).

Matthew 2 – April 18

Fulfilled prophecy is often used as a means to substantiate the validity of the Bible. Chapter 2 certainly falls in that realm. The devotional thought that I want to share with you today revolves around the reality that even when circumstances seem strange, disconnected, or random, they are not. You will see many such events unfold in this chapter that, in the moment, likely felt like inconveniences or troubled times. The truth is that God was orchestrating events so that His plan and its related prophecies would all be fulfilled to the word.

You likely recall that Mary and Joseph ended up in Bethlehem, where Jesus was born, because of the census that was decreed by Caesar Augustus. That seemingly unrelated event was directed by God to assure Christ would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). The story continues with an angel of the Lord appearing to Joseph with instructions to go to Egypt to escape the murder attempt by Herod the king (v.13). Joseph and Mary do so and as it turns out, Herod dies and Joseph was told it was time to leave Egypt thus fulfilling the prophecy of Hosea 11:1 which said, "Out of Egypt I called My Son." A horrible event, that of course happened before Herod died, is recorded in this chapter also. When Herod realized he had been duped, he orders all baby boys 2 years and younger of Bethlehem and surrounding areas killed in an attempt to possibly kill the new baby king in the process. That terrible event had been prophesied by Jeremiah (31:15) centuries earlier. As mentioned earlier, Joseph and Mary listened once again to the angel of the Lord and left Egypt with Jesus only to learn that another evil man, Archelaus, was reigning in Judea. Instead of going back there, they went to the region of Galilee and settled in a town called Nazareth. This is why Jesus was referred to as a Nazarene (v.23).

Friends, the reason I take the time to point out these four prophecies that were fulfilled in this chapter alone, is that I want you to know that events are not unfolding randomly nor haphazardly. God is ALWAYS in control. You and I must learn to trust Him when we cannot see what He is doing. We must know that He has a plan and it is unfolding. Nothing can stop His plan and every circumstance in your life is a part of the puzzle that is His plan for your life and His Kingdom. God is never surprised by events and is never trying to figure out what to do in light of what has happened. For me, that is a great source of encouragement. I never have to worry if the train has come off the tracks. I never have to worry if an event has wrecked God's plan for my life. I can rest knowing that every single occurrence is part of a larger plan – and it is a good plan because He is a good God. What divine sovereignty has decreed, divine power will accomplish. You can take God at His Word.

Matthew 3 – April 19

Have you ever wondered about John's message? It begins with, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (v.2). At this point there was not Jesus to turn to. Oh, I know that He was born but His publicly ministry was only about to begin. John's message none the less is repent. Repent means to turn from your sin. Remember now that John was, "To make ready the way of the Lord." I take this to mean that his message was meant to cause people to stop sinning. It was kind of a 'put it in neutral' message.

You see, what I am getting at is that true conversion is comprised of two components. In order to be truly saved, a person must first exercise faith in the finished work of Christ on the cross AND secondly repent - which means to turn from sin. The question is, "What do you turn to after you've turned *from* sin? The answer is of course to Jesus. So, what I am saying is that John was telling them to stop sinning because the One to whom they need to turn is about to show up. One point here is that if you don't stop sinning (repent) you can't turn to Christ. Don't misunderstand what I just said. I am not implying that you have to get "all cleaned up" first. I am saying that for salvation to be real, you must run from your sin and run to Christ. In other words, it is not enough to say, "I believe in Jesus" all the while you stay comfortably content in your sin. That would be to say I can exercise faith (if your want to call it that), while not repenting of my sin and still be saved. That is simply not true. The other side of the coin is to think that you can just stop bad behavior without placing faith in Jesus Christ. That would be nothing more than moralism and you would still remain lost in your sin.

You see, it takes both faith in Christ and repentance from your sins to be truly saved. By faith in Christ I mean adherence to Him as Lord, to His ways, His Word, and to walk in His steps. By repentance I mean sincerely turning from your sins in agreement with God that those actions are wrong. Certainly, we know that we will not move forward perfectly as we all still wrestle with our old sin nature but there will be progress in sanctification and evidences that we have a new heart and a new nature. This is what John is talking about in this chapter when he says, "Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance" (v.8). As I mentioned above, the fruit will be evidenced in both faith in Christ and a new way of living.

Beloved, let me close by reminding you that there is no neutral ground when it comes to trusting in Christ or not. If He isn't Lord of your life, He is your Judge. For those who believe, He baptizes with the Holy Spirit and you are saved. For those who reject Him, He baptizes you with fire and that means you are judged and condemned (v.11-12). Notice that it says the wheat (believers) will be gathered into the barn and the chaff (unregenerate people) will be cast into the unquenchable fire. Repent and believe dear ones as the kingdom is at hand and His winnowing fork is ready for the harvest. He is the only way and the Father is well pleased with His Son (v.17). I hope you are too.

Matthew 4 – April 20

Have you ever felt like there is no way Jesus can know how we really feel down here on earth because after all, He was God in the flesh? Well, if that thought has crossed your mind you are not alone. The Bible addresses that avenue the devil might take trying to cause you to think less of Christ in Hebrews 4:15 where it says, “For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin.” It also says, “Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation (satisfaction) for the sins of His people. For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted” (Heb. 2:17,18). So, you see dear friend, He is absolutely able to intercede for us from a first-hand knowledge of what this journey of ours is like.

Chapter 4 of Matthew is the well-known text wherein Jesus is tempted in the wilderness by Satan. Don’t fail to see that it was the Spirit who led Him out there for this necessary showdown (v.1). After Jesus had fasted for forty days and nights, and was a bit weary and certainly hungry, Satan showed up to do his bidding. I find it fascinating and telling that he used the same approach with Jesus that he used on Eve. This might be a good indicator that his approach in your life will be the same so be on guard (1 John 2:16). The three-fold attack was upon “the lust of the flesh” (vv.2,3), “the lust of the eyes” (vv.8,9), and “the pride of life” (vv.5,6).

Jesus was hungry. The old flesh was surely saying, “Feed me.” Can you recall the times when all you could think about was eating, resting, watching TV, or whatever else you wanted? Maybe it was a soft drink, a cup of morning coffee, etc. (vv.2,3). You get the point. Maybe you have felt the tug on your heart and mind for worldly gain. You’ve looked at what everyone else has and wished that it could be you. The old devil gave Jesus a look at the “things” of the world and offered them to Him (vv.8,9). Maybe you’ve been challenged to prove that you’re all of that to someone who stirred a bit of pride up in you. You know, those times when you want to prove yourself and shut somebody up. Yeah, Jesus felt that one too (vv.5,6). Let’s go back to Eve for a moment in the book of Genesis.

The devil approached her first of all with a subtle touch on her pride. He said, “Oh go ahead and eat from the tree and you will become like God.” He enticed her to look at, eat and see that it was good. Her eyes lusted for the forbidden fruit. Her flesh longed to be satisfied with the touch and taste of that which was just out of her reach. She was willing to give in and fell. Jesus did not! Jesus did what Eve could not do and He did what Adam could not do. Where the first Adam fell, the second Adam (Christ) did not (Romans 5:18,19). A little closing remark for the sufficiency and the need for the Scriptures – Jesus used the written Word of God to ward off the devil every time he tempted Him. Why should we think we can fight him off with our own means apart from the Word? Read it, study it, learn it, know it, and live it. Thank God today for the privilege of knowing that Christ did what we could not and left us His Word to guide us here on earth all the while He prays for us with understanding and mercy in heaven.

Matthew 5 – April 21

The greatest challenge in writing this devotion is deciding what not to write about. There is so much wonderful teaching from the Lord in this and the next two chapters. We refer to chapters 5-7 as the Sermon on the Mount. There are five discourses that Jesus preaches over these chapters and all of it is both extremely hard to live out but invaluable for the follower of Christ. In this chapter, Jesus expounds the truth of the Law masterfully and reveals the deeper meanings behind the words of the Law. He shows us clearly how legalism is hopeless and how we all stand desperately in need of grace and the righteousness of Christ.

Beloved, read this chapter and pray that it will soak into your core. Nearly every verse is packed with theological truths that the Christian needs to understand and live. I would submit to you today that none is more important than verse 20. Here Jesus says, "For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. I could just imagine Peter and the other disciples saying, "Lord, then who can be saved?" (Mark 10:26). Jesus gave the answer that must resonate with us as we read Matthew 5:20. He said, "With people it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God" (Mk. 10:27). Now, the question that you should be asking is the same one they asked when He first spoke this truth. The question – How in the world can my righteousness surpass theirs?" The Pharisees were legalist to the max. They forsook so much in life and were as devout in regard to the letter of the Law as any in their day. They denied self in many ways and pursued a "religious" life that looked better than the lives of those around them. They read and memorized Scripture, prayed, and practiced religion more than all the rest. How can we possibly top that?

Friend, this is at the core of the Gospel. You cannot! The truth is that for all of their pious outward displays of religiosity, they were far from God. You should know by now that we cannot earn salvation by works and there is no way we can become righteous by merit or effort. This chapter ends with this verse, "Therefore, you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (V.48). Who can measure up to that one? The answer is none other than Christ Himself. This is why we must place faith in Him, His life, His righteousness, His substitutionary atonement and His acceptance by the Father.

What He is doing in this chapter, in this sermon, is teaching us what the Law truly meant. It revealed a standard that we cannot measure up to. Jesus is aiming at the heart, where true adoration for and worship of God takes place. It is not simply refraining from committing adultery, it is being faithful to your spouse even in your thoughts, your mind, your heart. You see, the Law was not to be abolished or done away with (v.17-19), it was to be fulfilled completely. That is what is required of us if we are going to enter the kingdom of heaven. The problem is that we can't do it. The Good News is that Jesus can, He did, and He offers us entrance through His perfect life. 2 Cor. 5:21 says, "He took our sin and gave us His righteousness." That is our one and only hope. Fortunately, it is all that we need. With God, our salvation is indeed possible.

Matthew 6 – April 22

So often when I think of the 6th chapter of Matthew, I think of The Lord's Prayer or that well known passage "Seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you" (v.33). We are told not to worry as we consider God's amazing provision for the flowers of the field and birds of the air (vv. 26-29). These are indeed wonderful truths that have helped me greatly through the years. As I sat reading this text and thinking of what would make for a good devotional, I began to see an overarching truth in this chapter that I want to emphasize today.

The entire chapter from verse 1, "Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them" all the way to verse 34 where it says, "So do not worry about tomorrow" all deal with fear. Friends, as we think of this magnificent chapter today, pause and consider what God is telling you. He is saying don't be driven by fear. In the first part of the chapter it is fear of rejection or an unhealthy need to fit in. The youth of our society are not the only ones trying to live up to everyone else's expectations. The motivation behind so much of what Jesus warns against in verses 1-18 is simply don't live your life trying to impress others. I am reminded here of the admonition in Luke 12:4-5 where we are told not to fear those who can only kill the body, rather fear the One who can kill the body and send you to hell. That of course would be God.

So, whether it is "giving" to be noticed by men (vv. 1-4), praying to impress others with our great "churchy" vocabulary (vv. 5-15), or religious piety (fasting in this case) for show, we are told not to live that way. All of those things are good for sure. Being generous, praying, and practicing spiritual disciplines like fasting are all commendable and desirable characteristics for every believer but the motive behind them is what makes all the difference. Here, Jesus is simply saying if it is to put on a show before men then you are wasting your time. Now, my question is why would you want to put on a show other than you are driven by a deep need to impress people in order to be accepted or thought well of. Underneath all of it is fear. As the passage goes on you will see it more and more – fear is the underlying sin in this chapter.

Think about it, why would you hoard worldly things rather than storing up treasures in heaven? Do we truly not have enough faith to trust that if we live according to God's Word that He will take care of us like He said He would? You cannot serve God and wealth (v.24). Is it actually money and material possessions that give you security? Are you scared to live by faith in Christ alone? Fear and unbelief in His promises is what drives this way of living. Finally, Jesus lays it out crystal clear in verse 25-34. The whole point is that we are too easily driven by fear or worry about life apart from Christ. Whether it is being thought well of by others, wondering if we have enough money in the bank, or how are we going to pay for everything we think we need, the ingredient missing in that type of living is faith in Jesus and His love for you. He is enough so don't worry.

Matthew 7 – April 23

This final chapter of the “Sermon on the Mount” is packed full of truths that must have had their heads spinning. Let’s start with a few points of clarification in regard to what this chapter does not say. There are at least two lessons that Jesus teaches in chapter 7 that are grossly misunderstood and horribly abused. If there is an understatement in the Bible it may be verse 28 where it reads, “When Jesus had finished these words, the crowds were amazed at His teaching.” I can picture them sitting around the table talking about all that He had said and trying desperately to understand it and the implications for their daily lives. Let’s start with verse 1.

This may be one of the most abused verses in the Bible. People use this verse basically to ward off any attempt by another to admonish them for ungodly living. Let’s assume for a minute that if I were to approach you concerning an obvious sin in your life, that I was doing it from a place of genuine love, concern, and responsibility. Now, if I proclaim that something in your life is a sin, the default for many is this verse. We often hear, “Who are you to be judging me?” Well meaning believers quote this verse as if we have no right to declare something a sin against God. Please understand that the declaration that an act is sin is not determined by the person levying the charge but against the One who established the standard to begin with. A judge merely applies the Law to a situation. In other words, God is the One who decided what is sin and what is not. We are simply to proclaim His standards of right and wrong.

Notice please that the next verse says that the way in which we judge will be the way that we are judged (v.2). The standard or measure is to be God’s Word not our personal preferences. So, we are to judge based on God’s set of standards not our own (John 7:24). An even more obvious example that we are indeed to judge is found in verse 5. We are told to first take the log out of our own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye. You see, we are to address the “speck” that is in another’s life but only after we have dealt with the reality of sin in our own lives. So, the Bible does not teach that we should not judge others. We must judge but we must do it with the guidance and standards of God’s Word. We are to be gentle, understanding, patient, and aware that we too are sinners saved by grace. The only way you could live life without judging is to truly be okay with “anything goes”. That may be what the world is pushing for but not God.

One other area of misunderstanding in this chapter is verses 7-11. These verses are not a license and guarantee that you can ask for anything you want and be sure to get it if you have enough faith. This passage must be understood in light of the rest of Scripture that clearly teaches the only way this is true is when you are walking intimately with God and are asking in accordance with His will because your heart is attuned to His (1 John 5:14). There is so much in this chapter. Read it all and meditate on it. Like the first hearers, you must dwell here for a long time and ask the Holy Spirit to change your life while He illuminates your heart and mind with these amazing truths. Live out the Sermon on the Mount and you will build your life on a ROCK.

Matthew 8 – April 24

As Jesus begins His public ministry following the awesome sermon that He had just preached, He performs many miracles. Beloved, I firmly believe that the Lord has the power today to perform miracles if He so chooses. I believe that the greatest miracle, of which is usually overlooked as such, is salvation. The fact that the Holy Spirit moves in a lost person's heart and awakens them to life in the same manner in which He raised Jesus from the dead is astounding. Yet, for the most part people don't see this as a miracle that is actually greater than turning water into wine or making a lame man walk. The lame man, if he is lost, will eventually die and still go to hell while the one who has been quickened to life will live forever in the presence of the King. You tell me who was really made whole.

In this chapter, you begin to see Jesus perform many miracles but you must understand that they were to validate His ministry and to point to His divine nature. We believe that it is a mistake to think of these miracles as normative. People make the mistake of believing that by faith they can heal people and cast out demons because Christ did. The problem with that is that we aren't Christ. He could walk on water – I cannot. He could turn water into wine – I cannot. He could raise the dead – I cannot. He could feed thousands with meager amounts of food – I cannot. You get the picture. Remember in chapter 16 of this Gospel that after an extended period of time with His disciples and many demonstrations of His deity He asked them in 16:15, "Who do you say that I am?" My point is that the miracles were to convince them of His claim. In our day, we have all the testimony of Scripture to validate who He is and so must now be satisfied with the final and complete revelation of God in Christ through His Word as illuminated by His Spirit. We don't need a show; we have the Word this side of the cross. Dear friends that should be enough.

The reason that Jesus told the leper not to tell anyone about his healing (v.4) was because He knew it would draw a crowd that would follow for the wrong reasons and it would hamper His ministry in the cities (Mark 1:45). Jesus told him to show himself to the priest and obey the Mosaic Law at that point to show them that He was not abolishing the Law but fulfilling it. At this point, He was not ruffling feathers unnecessarily. Beloved, the faith that Christ is looking for is a faith that rests in who He is and what He says. The centurion in Capernaum was one who demonstrated what real faith looks like. He knew that if Jesus simply willed his servant healed then he would be healed. Like the leper who knew that if Jesus was simply willing it, it would be done. There didn't need to be a show rather just a word. The centurion is demonstrating a faith that believes that Christ has all authority over all things and that creation must obey His command. Notice over in verses 23-27 that even the wind and waves must obey. So, the centurion knew that sickness must obey too. This my friend is the power of Jesus Christ and we can rest in Him. The disciples were afraid in the storm while the centurion was not. Who had the most genuine faith? I want to make Jesus marvel at my faith (v.10) not accuse me of little faith (v.26). How about you? He is trustworthy so rest in Him.

Matthew 9 – April 25

This chapter begins with Jesus healing a paralytic who had been brought to him by some of his friends. It is interesting to me that the Bible says, “Jesus seeing *their* faith healed the man.” “Their” certainly can include the paralytics too but I am encouraged when I consider Jesus’ kindness and pity towards those who help others who can’t get to Christ get there. Not only is Jesus willing to extend mercy, grace, and forgiveness to people, He is also able to restore in every way; He can even speak to the wind and waves and they must listen because He is their Creator too.

Notice that in this chapter He is able and willing to cure a body that is ravaged by sickness (vv.2-8). The same is true in regard to literally giving life to a ruler’s daughter (vv. 18-20, 23-26) as well as healing a woman with a blood issue (vv.20-22); He gave sight to a blind man (vv.27-31); cast the devil out of one possessed (vv.32-34); and healed all manner of sickness (v.35). More important than those things is the fact that He reveals in this passage that He cares for the soul of people in forgiving sins (v.2). I guess we could say that He is the faithful Physician for both body and soul. We serve an amazing and wonderfully kind Savior.

Now Beloved, I want you to consider today a biblical truth that we must believe, defend, and rest in. In this chapter, Jesus Christ forgives a man of his sins. Please, think about it. Only God can forgive sins so the Pharisees were absolutely right to accuse Him of blasphemy – if He were not God. What they failed to recognize is that He is God and thus was not blaspheming. Have you ever stopped to consider that the only One who can be sinned against is God? I know that may sound strange. We can be hurt and we can be wronged but we can’t be sinned against because the standards are God’s.

When David committed adultery with Bathsheba and murdered Uriah, if you recall in Psalm 51, he states, “Against You, you only, I have sinned” (v.4a). My point is simply that the only One who can declare someone forgiven is the One who made the rules that are sinned against. Simply put, Jesus Christ is absolutely God and if He were not then He could not have forgiven this man of his sins and to do so would have been blasphemy which would be sin. This would mean that Christ was not sinless and therefore not a sufficient substitute for our sins. So, you see, the whole plan of redemption falls apart if this one verse is wrong or if Jesus sinned. Surely, you can understand that doctrine matters greatly. This is no light thing to deal with. The next time Jehovah Witnesses come by your house and try to tell you that Jesus is not God you remember all that is riding on the fact that He must be.

In case you think I making too much of this, please know that this is part of the reason the Pharisees wanted to kill Jesus. They seriously consider Him a blasphemer because they knew exactly that He was not only here but in many places in Scripture absolutely claiming to be God. You and I better be thankful that He is and will always be the second Person of the Trinity – The Son, God in the flesh.

Matthew 10 – April 26

I didn't speak to it in yesterday's devotion so let me mention it here. As chapter 9 closes, Jesus tells his disciples to pray that workers be sent into the fields for harvest (9:37-38). The reason is that there are few who are harvesting. This is certainly a wise, necessary, and noble means of advancing the Gospel but it is not meant to stand alone. Surely, there are some who cannot get up and go because of various restrictions but for most of us that is not the case. Friend, I don't want you to think that all you are called to do is sit in the comfort of your safe little environment and leave the field work to everyone else. Your rationalization may be that you are praying. Well, let's look at today's chapter to see what the next move was for the disciples. Remember now that Jesus had just told them to pray for more workers to go into the fields.

Chapter 10 begins with Him talking further to His disciples at which time He gave them never before experienced power to spread the Gospel. He was extending His ministry through them as the advancement of His Kingdom was about to take the next step forward in God's plan to save the nations. After providing us with a list of the names of the original 12 disciples, we see their marching orders into the fields. My point today is that it is true they were told to pray but that is not all. We see now that they are to be a part of the work force too. Until this stage of history, Jesus had ministered alone. We are called "co-laborers" for a reason. Beloved, we must give ourselves directly to the work of spreading the Good News as well as pray. Its one thing to pray in solitude but it is another thing to be in the hot, dirty fields. No longer were the disciples to simply be observers or recipients of Christ's ministry, now they were to be actively involved in it.

Folks, this chapter reminds me again of the honesty and transparency of the Scriptures. Christ certainly does not sugar coat ministry as He sends the 12 into the battle. After giving them some basics of ministry (vv.5-15), He clearly tells them of the realities of ministry and the reactions that they will encounter from people as they go to them with the Gospel (vv.16-23). To be told that you are being sent out as sheep in the midst of wolves (v.16) is not the most encouraging words to hear. He ends this chapter telling them of what ministry will cost them and those who choose to follow Him as Lord (vv.24-42).

Friends, this chapter diametrically opposed to the unbiblical and harmful feel good gospel that so many proclaim today. No where in this chapter does Jesus talk about if you have enough faith everything is just going to be peachy-keen. Ministry is hard as we step into a hostile world that is not our home. We have a very real enemy who will oppose everything we do to glorify God and advance His Kingdom. Yet, we must not fear the enemy nor the opposition (vv.23-28). He loves us dearly (v. 31) and prepares us to go into the world with our eyes wide open and fully aware of the grave challenges. The grace that He extends to save us is not cheap and answering the call to serve Him is not easy (vv.37-39). But it is worth whatever it takes to walk with Him to the end of our days (v.22).

Matthew 11 – April 27

This chapter has always given me hope and encouragement. Why you may ask? Well, it is not because I am glad that John the Baptist is imprisoned solely because of his faithfulness to the Gospel. It is because it begins and ends with hope for the struggling soul. One of my favorite verses in the Bible is Psalm 23:3 which simply says, “He restores my soul.” I am so grateful for that truth because through the years I have needed His gentleness and compassion so much. He is faithful and it makes me love Him more.

The chapter opens with John in prison because he had taken a stand against Herod for taking his brother Phillip’s wife. John had the nerve to call sin “sin” and he paid the price. I want you to think for a moment about John’s life to this point. He was a loner who lived outside of the city in wide open spaces breathing fresh air. Imagine being a country boy or girl and being placed in the crowded, noisy, hustle and bustle of New York City. It would be tough, wouldn’t it? Well, here we find John not only in “town” but in prison. He is trapped inside four tiny walls with stale air and little to no light from the outside. He has been faithful and it has landed him in prison.

In this situation, you may be more inclined to cut him a little slack for a moment of doubt. It is likely that John was looking more for confirmation about his faith in Jesus as the Messiah. I think he was more likely confused by the events that were unfolding than he was doubting who Jesus was. The part of the story that encourages me has to do with Christ’s response to his question. John asked, “Are you the expected One, or shall we look for someone else?” Yes, even John, the one who had witnessed the Spirit descending upon Jesus at His baptism. Yes, the John, who had pointed others to Jesus with the declaration, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” Now, in a place of despair, he is wondering. He is lonely and a little confused and he needs some encouragement and confirmation. What does Jesus say?

Jesus doesn’t just say, “Tell him yes I am and stop doubting.” No, He says, “Tell him all that you see and hear. Tell him of all that I am doing. He will know that these are indicators that I am the Messiah.” I am so grateful that Jesus doesn’t get mad at him for struggling with his belief a little. I’m so glad that Jesus doesn’t tell him he didn’t go the distance and that He was disgusted with him. Jesus went on to say in the following verses that John was more than a prophet and was the one prophesied about from Malachi 3:1 (v.10). He even said he was the greatest child born to a woman (v.11).

Beloved, we live in a world that is opposed to Christ. We live in a world where bad things happen to God’s children. We live in a world where for some people it will never be enough and it doesn’t matter what we do, they will never like it or be satisfied. There are people around us who will always find something to complain about (vv. 16-19). I have quit worrying about those folks. You should too! Like John, if you are weary or heavy-laden, run to Jesus. There you will find rest and learn that He is gentle and humble in heart (v.28). There you will find rest for your souls.

Matthew 12 – April 28

I think we would all agree that remembering the Sabbath is important if you understand that the point of the Sabbath was to rest and to worship God. There is even an element of faith that is demonstrated by observing the Sabbath. When you recognize that you can trust God with your life, and that you don't have to work all the time to make ends meet then you are exercising faith in God. In other words, we are prone to think that we can't afford to take a day off because unless we go after that dollar we aren't going to have enough. To rest in obedience to the Word of God is faith. Don't forget however that as Christians we don't actually worship on the Jewish Sabbath, we worship on the Lord's Day which is Sunday not Saturday. The point is the same however which is to take time to rest and worship. We should understand that we are no longer under the obligations of the old covenant and its signs; we are under the new covenant. Worship for us should be 24/7!

How does this align with what Jesus teaches in Matthew 12? The Pharisees missed the true meaning of the Law once again; many still do. Consider for a moment the heart of God. The Bible says that "God is love" (1 John 4:16). It also says that the greatest commandment is that we love God AND love others as ourselves (Matt. 22:37-40). That passage ends by saying the entire Law is summed up in this. So, you see, the entire Law is lived out, if you will, by loving God and others. We are never more like God than when we are genuinely and sincerely loving Him and others. Can you imagine our great God getting angry with us because we ate a few grains of wheat on the Sabbath? Keep in mind that the disciples were walking with Jesus in obedience. They were literally following Him as His servants who had likely just come back from ministry in the fields of harvest (chapter 10). Do you really think God would judge them harshly because they ate some wheat because they were hungry?

Galatians 5:22-23 is a list of the "fruit of the Spirit." The fruit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Verse 23 ends with this statement, "Against such things there is no law." Family, do you see how this speaks to the issue in Matthew 12? Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath? The question that we should ask is, "What would love have me do?" The answer is of course YES. If you have the chance to extend genuine love to another person in need then you should. If you can be kind, good, and gentle to another soul you should do it. Against these acts of godliness, there is no law to prevent it or stand in judgment over you. The Pharisees missed the point and spirit of the Law altogether.

For clear and accurate exposition on verse 22-30, please listen to Pastor Joe's sermon online dated January 27, 2019. For verses 31-32 give a listen to Pastor Aaron's message dated March 17 and for verse 38-42 his sermon dated February 10. For a sermon on verse 43-45 listen to my (pastor Robert) sermon dated February 3. Our website is www.smyrna1897.org.

Matthew 13 – April 29

This begins the third discourse of Christ in the book of Matthew and contains 7 parables about the Kingdom of God. A parable was a fairly long analogy often told as a story to communicate certain truths to the hearer. Parables typically took more explanation and often obscured truth (v.13) from those who chose to remain in darkness (John 3:19). I may be about to answer a question that no one is asking but in case you are wondering, I'm going to address it seeing that the disciples wrestled with the same question.

The disciples approached Jesus after he had told the parable about the different types of soil (vv.3-9). Their question to Him was, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?" His answer may surprise you. Jesus said, "To you it has been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted" (v.11). Then He goes on to say that to those who have more will be given much and those who don't have even what they have they will lose (v.12). He goes on to quote a passage from Isa. 6:9,10. What does this mean and why would Jesus seemingly hide truth from some?

Sometimes dear friends, it is not my responsibility to explain things to you but rather to simply state truths. There are certain realities about God and how He works that no person can fully understand (Deut. 29:29). In those cases, the right thing for a preacher or teacher to do is simply to state what the Bible says without trying to explain why it says what it says. I believe that election is one such truth. The Bible is very clear on this matter and yet there are aspects about this doctrine that are beyond human explanation. So, let me simply state what the passage says. Jesus said that to some it has been granted to know the mysteries and to others it has not been granted. The unfortunate tendency is for us to imagine God purposely blinding the hearts, minds, and eyes of some so they cannot see, hear, or understand. We get an unbiblical picture of a hateful God who is keeping people who long to know Him away from Him. That is simply not the truth.

Why God chooses some to understand and others *He leaves in their natural state* is beyond me. But note that I said He leaves them in their natural state. He does not change them nor does He force His will upon them in any way. He simply leaves them to their own desires, wants, will and ways. For those who are, by grace, given understanding He simply opens their eyes to truth by giving them a new heart and nature. With this new heart, their very desires change, and they then, by their own freewill, choose to follow and obey God. They choose Him because He gave them a new nature. You see, in verse 15 where He is quoting Isa. 6:10, "Otherwise they would see..." what He is saying is that *if they had* not closed their eyes and become dull of heart they would see and understand and He would heal them. He does not delight in people's destruction (Ezek. 33:11). Praise God that He promises that He will build on your knowledge of Him and give you more and more understanding as you go – by grace (v.13). Because He has given you a new heart, it will produce fruit (v.23).

Matthew 14 – April 30

Proverbs 29:25 says, “The fear of man brings a snare.” The tragic ending of John the Baptist’s life may be the clearest example of that reality in the Bible. Herod’s fear of man got him into a snare that cost John his life. Herod was known as a spineless, coward of a man. History records that most of his decisions were based on what people would think of him. It is ironic that he was so worried about maintaining his reputation when in fact he was already bad to say the least. He was a man easily manipulated and controlled by fear of man. Guilt caused him to think that Jesus was John the Baptist raised from the dead. He knew that he had an innocent man executed and figured, in his pagan mind, that John was returning for revenge.

This story that we have read today in the first 12 verses of this chapter are a flashback to the arrest of John which had occurred about a year prior to this point (4:12). Verse 5 tells us that Herod wanted to put John to death but he feared the crowd so he put him in prison instead. It is interesting that John’s life stood in such contrast to Herod’s. Whereas John seemed to fear nothing, Herod feared everything. John seemed to fear no one (Matt. 3:7), Herod feared everybody. He feared the multitude, he feared John, he feared his wife, and he feared his peers (v.9). Beloved, true godly boldness is not driven by the consequences. A faithful person must confront sin and be obedient to the Word of God regardless of the power people might have over them – even if it is power to take their life. A. T. Robertson once said, “It is better to have a head like John’s and lose it than to have a head like Herod’s and keep it.” I agree.

So, Herod, in fear of what his dinner guests would think of him, acquiesced to the crowd and went against his own thoughts and had John murdered at the request of his step-daughter who was coerced by her mother (v.8). Herod knew John was innocent but capitulated to the crowd in fear. Herod feared everything in life except the One he should have feared. Whether it was a woman, his peers, his reputation, or his position, Herod lost his soul because in all of his fear, he failed to fear God. What drives your decisions dear folks? Do you make decisions based on the Word of God and His truth or cultural pressures and expectations?

I can only imagine what John’s friends must have felt when they carried his headless body to the grave. We can assume they were deeply grieved and hurting at such a loss. The Bible tells us here that when Jesus heard about John’s death, He went to a secluded place most likely to grieve, to pray, and just to rest in the Father’s comfort for a little while (v.13). He was God, dear friends, but He was also a man. Beloved, John was the first one to die for Christ. Christ would be next and all of the disciples except for John, who was exiled, would lose their lives as well. How pitiful is the ungodly teaching that all suffering is bad and would be eliminated if we had enough faith. Prosperity gospel teaching is hellish in its goal and impact and totally wrong. It is likely that Jesus began to teach the disciples even more about what lay ahead. He did so by showing them and teaching them amazing truths about who He is and what He can do (vv.15-36). The intent was that we might be willing to put complete confidence and hope in Him – even unto death.